

**UNCONSCIOUS
INFLUENCE,
A SERMON**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649014057

Unconscious influence, a sermon by Horace Bushnell

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

HORACE BUSHNELL

**UNCONSCIOUS
INFLUENCE,
A SERMON**

UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCE.

A Sermon,

PREACHED

BY REV. HORACE BUSHNELL, D.D.,
OF THE UNITED STATES.

LONDON :
PARTRIDGE AND OAKLEY,
34, PATERNOSTER ROW; AND 70, EDGWARE ROAD.

1852.

100. 3. 69.

UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCE.

“ THEN WENT IN ALSO THAT OTHER DISCIPLE.”—
JOHN. XX. 8.

IN this slight touch or turn of history, is opened to us, if we can scan it closely, one of the most serious and fruitful chapters of Christian doctrine. Thus it is that men are ever touching unconsciously the springs of motion in each other; thus it is that one man, without thought or intention, or even a consciousness of the fact, is ever leading some other after him. Little does Peter think, as he comes up where his doubting brother is looking into the sepulchre, and goes straight in, after his peculiar manner, that he is drawing in his brother

apostle after him. As little does John think, when he loses his misgivings, and goes into the sepulchre after Peter, that he is following his brother. And just so, unawares to himself, is every man, the whole race through, laying hold of his fellow-man, to lead him where otherwise he would not go. We overrun the boundaries of our personality—we flow together. A Peter leads a John, a John goes after a Peter, both of them unconscious of any influence exercised or received. And thus our life and conduct are ever propagating themselves, by a law of social contagion, throughout the circles and time in which we live.

There are, then, you will perceive, two sorts of influence belonging to man; that which is active or voluntary, and that which is unconscious;—that which we exert purposely, or in the endeavour to sway another, as by teaching, by argument, by persuasion, by threatenings, by offers, and promises,—and that which flows out from us unawares to ourselves, the same *which Peter had over John when he led him into the sepulchre.* The importance of our

efforts to do good, that is our voluntary influence ; and the sacred obligation we are under to exert ourselves in this way, are often and seriously insisted on. It is thus that Christianity has become, in the present age, a principle of so much greater activity than it has been for many centuries before ; and we fervently hope, that it will yet become far more active than it now is, nor cease to multiply its industry, till it is seen by all mankind to embody the beneficence and the living energy of Christ himself.

But there needs to be produced, at the same time, and partly for this object, a more thorough appreciation of the relative importance of that kind of influence or beneficence which is insensibly exerted. The tremendous weight and efficacy of this, compared with the other, and the sacred responsibility laid upon us in regard to this, are felt in no such degree or proportion as they should be ; and the consequent loss we suffer in character, as well as that which the church suffers in beauty and strength, is incalculable. The more stress, too, needs to be laid on this subject of insen-

sible influence, because it is insensible, because it is out of mind, and, when we seek to trace it, it is not easily discovered.

If the doubt occur to any of you, in the announcement of this subject, whether we are properly responsible for an influence which we exert insensibly ; we are not, I reply, except so far as this influence flows directly from our character and conduct. And this it does, even much more uniformly than our active influence. In the latter, we may fail of our end by a want of wisdom or skill ; in which case we are still as meritorious, in God's sight, as if we succeeded. So, again, we may really succeed, and do great good by our active endeavours, from motives altogether base and hypocritical, in which case we are as evil in God's sight as if we had failed. But the influences we exert unconsciously will scarcely ever disagree with our real character. They are honest influences, following our character as the shadow follows the sun ; and, therefore, we are much more certainly responsible for them and their effects on the world. They *go streaming from us in all directions, though*

in channels that we do not see, poisoning or healing around the roots of society and among the hidden wells of character. If good ourselves, they are good; if bad, they are bad. And, since they reflect so exactly our character, it is impossible to doubt our responsibility for their effects on the world. We must answer not only for what we do with a purpose, but for the influence we exert insensibly. To give you any just impressions of the breadth and seriousness of such a reckoning I know to be impossible. No mind can trace it. But it will be something gained, if I am able to awaken only a suspicion of the vast extent and moment of those influences which are ever flowing out unbidden upon society, from your life and character.

In the prosecution of my design, let me ask of you, first of all, to expel the common prejudice that there can be nothing of consequence in unconscious influences, because they make no report and fall on the world unobserved. Histories and biographies make little account of the power men exert insensibly over each other. They tell how men have

led armies, established empires, enacted laws, gained causes, sung, reasoned, and taught;—always occupied in setting forth what they do with a purpose. But what they do without a purpose, the streams of influence that flow out from their persons unbidden on the world, they cannot trace or compute, and seldom even mention. So also the public laws make men responsible only for what they do with a positive purpose, and take no account of the mischiefs or benefits that are communicated by their noxious or healthful example. The same is true in the discipline of families, churches, and schools; they make no account of the things we do except we will them. What we do insensibly passes for nothing, because no human government can trace such influences with sufficient certainty to make authors responsible.

But you must not conclude that influences of this kind are insignificant, because they are unnoticed or noiseless. How is it in the natural world? Behind the mere show, the outward noise and stir of the world, nature *always conceals her hand of controul, and the laws by which she rules.* Who ever saw