

**MECHANISM IN
THOUGHT AND
MORALS: AN ADDRESS**

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Mechanism in Thought and Morals: An Adress by Oliver Wendell Holmes

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OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

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1871

INTRODUCTION.

It is fair to claim for this Essay the license which belongs to all spoken addresses. To hold the attention of an audience is the first requisite of every such composition; and for this a more highly colored rhetoric is admissible than might please the solitary reader. The check of a stage heroine will bear a touch of carmine which would hardly improve the sober comeliness of the mother of a family at her fireside.

So too, on public occasions, a wide range of suggestive inquiry, meant to stimulate rather than satiate the interest of the listen-

ers, may, with some reason, be preferred to that more complete treatment of a narrowly limited subject which is liable to prove exhaustive in a double sense.

In the numerous notes and other additions, I have felt the right to use a freedom of expression which some might think out of place before the mixed audience of a literary anniversary. The dissentient listener may find himself in an uneasy position hard to escape from: the dissatisfied reader has an easy remedy.

MECHANISM

IN

THOUGHT AND MORALS.

AS the midnight train rolls into an intermediate station, the conductor's voice is heard announcing, "Cars stop ten minutes for refreshments." The passengers snatch a brief repast, and go back, refreshed, we will hope, to their places. But, while they are at the tables, one may be seen going round among the cars with a lantern and a hammer, intent upon a graver business. He is clinking the wheels to try if they are sound. His task is a humble and simple one: he is no machinist, very probably; but he can cast a ray of light from his lantern, and bring out the ring of iron with a tap of his hammer.

Our literary train is stopping for a very brief time at its annual station; and I doubt not it will be refreshed by my youthful colleague before it moves on. It is not unlikely the passengers may stand much in need of refreshment before I have done with them: for I am the one with the hammer and the lantern; and I am going to clink some of the wheels of this intellectual machinery, on the soundness of which we all depend. The slenderest glimmer I can lend, the lightest blow I can strike, may at least call the attention of abler and better-equipped inspectors.

I ask your attention to some considerations on the true mechanical relations of the thinking principle, and to a few hints as to the false mechanical relations which have intruded themselves into the sphere of moral self-determination.

I call that part of mental and bodily life mechanical which is independent of our volition. The beating of our hearts and the secretions of our internal organs will go on, without and in spite of any voluntary effort

of ours, as long as we live. Respiration is partially under our control: we can change the rate and special mode of breathing, and even hold our breath for a time; but the most determined suicide cannot strangle himself without the aid of a noose or other contrivance which shall effect what his mere will cannot do. The flow of thought is, like breathing, essentially mechanical and necessary, but incidentally capable of being modified to a greater or less extent by conscious effort. Our natural instincts and tastes have a basis which can no more be reached by the will than the sense of light and darkness, or that of heat and cold. All these things we feel justified in referring to the great First Cause: they belong to the "laws of Nature," as we call them, for which we are not accountable.

Whatever may be our opinions as to the relations between "mind" and "matter," our observation only extends to thought and emotion as connected with the living body, and, according to the general verdict of

consciousness, more especially with certain parts of the body; namely, the central organs of the nervous system. The bold language of certain speculative men of science has frightened some more cautious persons away from a subject as much belonging to natural history as the study of any other function in connection with its special organ. If Mr. Huxley maintains that his thoughts and ours are "the expression of molecular changes in that matter of life which is the source of our other vital phenomena;"¹ if the Rev. Prof. Haughton suggests, though in the most guarded way, that "our successors may even dare to speculate on the changes that converted a crust of bread, or a bottle of wine, in the brain of Swift, Molière, or Shakspeare, into the conception of the gentle Glumdalelitch, the rascally Sganarelle, or the immortal Falstaff,"² — all this need not

¹ *On the Physical Basis of Life.* New Haven, 1870, p. 261.

² *Medicine in Modern Times.* London, 1869, p. 107.

frighten us from studying the conditions of the thinking organ in connection with thought, just as we study the eye in its relations to sight. The brain is an instrument, necessary, so far as our direct observation extends, to thought. The "materialist" believes it to be wound up by the ordinary cosmic forces, and to give them out again as mental products:¹ the "spiritualist" believes in a conscious entity, not interchangeable with motive force, which plays upon this instrument. But the instrument must be studied by the one as much as by the other: the piano which the master touches must be as thoroughly understood as the musical box or clock which goes of itself by a spring or weight. A slight congestion or softening of the brain shows the least materialistic of

¹ "It is by no means generally admitted that the brain is governed by the mind. On the contrary, the view entertained by the best cerebral physiologists is, that the mind is a force developed by the action of the brain." — *Journal of Psychological Medicine*, July, 1870; Editor's (W. A. Hammond) Note, p. 535.