

# **THE DISEASES OF THE WILL**

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The Diseases of the Will by Th. Ribot & Merwin-Marie Snell

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**TH. RIBOT & MERWIN-MARIE SNELL**

**THE DISEASES  
OF THE WILL**



THE  
DISEASES OF THE WILL

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## THE DISEASES OF THE WILL.

### INTRODUCTION.

IN recent years several authors, especially in foreign countries, have given a detailed exposition of certain branches of psychology according to the principle of evolution. It has seemed to me that there would be some profit in treating these questions in the same spirit, but under another form, that of *dissolution*.—

I propose, then, in this work to attempt for the will what I have formerly done for the memory; to study its anomalies, and to draw from this study conclusions regarding its normal state. In very many respects the question is less easy; the term *will* designates something more vague than the term memory. Whether one considers memory as a function, a property, or a faculty, it remains none the less a stable mode of being, a psychic disposition, regarding which all the world can come to an agreement. The will, on the contrary, resolves itself into volitions, each one of which is an element, an unstable form of activity, a resultant varying according to the causes that produce it.

Beyond this first difficulty there is another which may appear greater still, but of which we will not hesitate to summarily disembarass ourselves. Can the pathology of the will be studied without touching upon the inextricable problem of free will? This abstention—

—appears to us possible and even necessary. It is imposed not by timidity, but by method. Like every other experimental science, psychology ought to rigorously forbid itself all research relative to first causes. The problem of free will is of this order. One of the great services of the criticism of Kant and his successors has been to show that the problem of liberty reduces itself to the question whether one can go outside the chain of effects and causes so as to posit an absolute beginning. That power "which calls up, suspends, or banishes," as it is defined by a contemporary who has studied it profoundly,\* can be affirmed only on the condition of entering into metaphysics.

Here we have nothing of the sort to attempt. Experience, internal and external, is our sole object; its limits are our limits. We take the volitions as facts, with their immediate causes, that is to say, the motives which produce them, without investigating whether these causes suppose other causes *ad infinitum*, or whether there is added to them some degree of spontaneity. The question is thus placed in a form equally acceptable to the determinists and their adversaries, and reconcilable with either hypothesis. We hope, moreover, to conduct our researches in such a manner that the absence of any solution of this point will not even so much as once be noticed.

I shall try to show at the conclusion of this study that in every voluntary act there are two entirely distinct elements: the state of consciousness, the "I will," which indicates a situation, but which has in itself no efficacy; and a very complex psycho-physiological mechanism, in which alone resides the power to act or to restrain. As this general conclusion can only be the

\*Renouvier, *Essai de critique générale*, second edition, i, 395-406.

result of partial conclusions furnished by pathology, I will avoid provisionally in this introduction any systematic view; I shall limit myself to studying the will in its double mechanism of impulse and inhibition, and—in its source—the individual character—neglecting all the details which do not concern our subject.\*

## I.

The fundamental principle which dominates the psychology of the will under its impulsive form, in the healthy as well as in the morbid state, is that every state of consciousness always has a tendency to express itself, to manifest itself by a movement, an act. This principle is only one particular case, peculiar to psychology, of this fundamental law: that the reflex is the sole type of all neural action, of all relational life. Properly speaking, activity in the animal is not a beginning but an end, not a cause but an effect, not an initiation but a continuation. That is the most essential point, which must never be lost sight of and which alone explains the physiology and the pathology of the will, because this tendency of the state of consciousness to expend itself in a psychological or physiological act, conscious or unconscious, is the simple fact to which all the highest combinations and complications of voluntary activity are reducible.

The new-born child is, as Virchow has defined it, "a mere spinal being." Its activity is purely reflex, and manifests itself by such a profusion of movements

\* There will be found in Schneider's recent work, *Der menschliche Wille vom Standpunkte der neueren Entwicklungstheorien* (Berlin, 1882), a good monograph on the will in its normal state and from the point of view of evolution. We regret not to have made its acquaintance before this work was almost completed.



that the work of education will consist for a long time in suppressing or restraining the greater number of them. This diffusion of reflexes, which has its ground in anatomical relations, manifests in all its simplicity the transformation of excitation into movement. Though they be conscious or awaken a rudiment of consciousness, in any case they do not represent a voluntary activity; they properly express only the activity of the species, what has been acquired, organised and fixed by heredity; but they are the materials out of which the will is to be built up.

✓ Desire marks an ascending stage between the reflex and the voluntary conditions. We understand by desire the most elementary forms of the affective life, the only ones that can be produced so long as the intellect is not born. Physiologically they do not differ from reflex movements of a complex kind. Psychologically they differ from them only by the state of consciousness, often very intense, which accompanies them. Their tendency to express themselves in acts is immediate and irresistible, like that of reflexes. In the natural state, and in so far as it is yet free from all admixture, desire tends to satisfy itself immediately; that is its law, it is inscribed in the organism. Little children and savages furnish excellent examples of it. In the adult, desire is no longer in the natural state; education, habit, and reflexion modify or restrain it. But it often reasserts its rights, and history shows us that in the case of despots, placed by their own opinion and that of others above the law, it always retains them.

— Pathology will show us that this form of activity is augmented when the will grows weak, and persists when it disappears. It marks, however, a progress

beyond the first period, for it denotes a commencement of individuality. On the common ground of the specific activity, the desires outline vaguely the individual character; they reflect the mode of reaction of a particular organism.

As soon as a sufficient accumulation of experiences has permitted intellect to arise, there is produced a new form of activity, for which the epithet of *ideomotor* is most convenient, ideas being causes of movements. That name has, moreover, the advantage of showing its relationship with reflexes, of which it is only an improvement.

How can an idea produce movement? That is a question which very much embarrassed the old psychology, but which becomes simple when the facts are considered in their true nature. It is a truth now accepted in cerebral physiology that the anatomical basis of all our mental states includes both motor and sensory elements. I will not dwell upon a question which has been treated elsewhere in detail\* and would necessitate a digression. Let us simply remember that our perceptions, in particular the important ones, those of sight and touch, imply as integral elements movements of the eye or the members; and that if movement is an essential element when we see an object really, it must play the same rôle when we see it ideally. Images and ideas, even abstract, suppose an anatomical substratum in which the movements are in some measure represented.

It is true that, on pressing the point more closely, it might be said that it is necessary to distinguish two kinds of motor elements: those which serve to constitute a state of consciousness, and those which serve to

\* *Revue philosophique*, October, 1879, p. 371, et seq.

expend it ; the first intrinsic, the others extrinsic. The idea of a ball, for example, is the resultant of impressions of surfaces and of special muscular adjustments ; but the latter are the result of muscular sensibility, and, in this aspect, are sensations of movement rather than movements properly so called ; they are constituent elements of our idea rather than a manner of expressing it outwardly.

At the same time, this close relation established by physiology between the idea and the movement permits us in some degree to perceive how one produces the other. In reality, an idea does not produce a movement : that sudden and remarkable change of function would be a marvellous thing. The sudden production of a play of the muscles by an idea, such as defined by metaphysicians, would be scarcely less than a miracle. It is not the state of consciousness as such, but rather the corresponding physiological state which transforms itself into an act. In short, the relation is not between a psychical event and a movement, but between two states of the same kind, between two physiological states, two groups of nervous elements, one sensory and the other motor. If one insists upon making of consciousness a cause, all remains obscure ; but if it is considered as simply the accompaniment of a nervous process, which alone is the essential element, all becomes clear and the imaginary difficulties vanish.

This admitted, we can classify ideas roughly into three groups, according as their tendency to transform themselves into action is strong, moderate, or weak and even, in a certain sense, null.

— 1) The first group includes extremely intense intellectual states, of which fixed ideas may serve as a