

# SELF-DISCIPLINE

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## *Indisciplinatae animae erraverunt. Souls undisciplined went astray.*

An old Portrait. There is in the Republic of Plato a portrait of a very modern young man. Plato calls him the “democratical man.” He is, the philosopher tells us, one who values alike every pleasure be it good or bad. If one tells him that some are good and some bad, he will shake his head and say “nay,” but all are equal and to be honoured equally. And so he lives his life every day, satisfying the desire of the moment. Now he is steeped in wine and lapped in soft music, again he is drinking water and leading a simple life ; now he is keen on athletics, and again idle and caring for naught, and at times he is a philosopher ; and oft-times he is in politics and will jump up in the assembly and say or do what comes first into his head; he may rival the military man and he is on that tack, or the business man and he is there. There is no system or rule in his life, but he calls this life of his the pleasant and noble and happy life and lives it ever. Yes, he is a wondrous medley, chock full of many characters, a beautiful and varied fellow. Many men and many women would envy his life, for in it are all manner of politics and all manner of customs. His life indeed is all liberty and equality.

What is Discipline. Now it is perhaps unfair to say that this is a modern portrait, but it will certainly be agreed that it is a good sketch of the man who scorns discipline; and are we not now a little afraid of that word? It is a familiar word enough, but it has perhaps in many ears a harsh sound. It suggests ideas of Spartan simplicity, of rigidity, of order, of rule, that are not attractive, sometimes not even intelligible to the modern mind. We have almost succeeded in banishing the word from normal life and relegating it to the abnormal regions of sergeants and quartermasters. Well, at any rate there is still that sphere where it is omnipotent. So long as we have armies we must have discipline, and we recognise that the perfect army is that which is best disciplined. So it must ever be; but we should not thus limit its range. War is not the only use for discipline. No, but wherever a definite object is to be attained, the means to attain it must be organised, regulated, drilled, until all work as one perfect instrument towards the attainment of the end. And this is essentially what discipline means. The word means instruction and teaching. It implies a system, a scheme, an ordered train of action.

**Moral Discipline.** But we may grant that discipline has its place in army or navy and yet not see that it touches our individual moral life. And yet it does surely touch it, and most nearly. We know what is meant by the training of the athlete. He goes through a more or less rigid regime of food and exercise, to perfect his body for some trial of strength and endurance. He “refraineth himself from all things” to win his athlete’s crown. It is training adapted to a definite end. What is there like to this in moral discipline ? It is training, but not of muscles or sinews. It is for a definite end, but not to throw the weight or run the hundred yards. What is it then ? It is the training of our whole nature to fit us for success in the race of life. And that race, what is it ? It is a race that has its goal, not in any of the material objects that are commonly the ends of man’s ambition but in a further prize, a prize beyond this mortal life, a prize whose fruition is in eternity.

Herein lie its strength and its weakness: It is weak, for men demand to see and touch their prize. The aim of the athlete is obvious and palpable. The world can measure and understand it. It has even its cash value. It is present, immediate, imperative. Not so with moral perfection. It is remote and ideal. It has little value as an article of commerce. Indeed, the cynical view of the world is that it is rather a luxury. And the world is doubtful as to any ultimate end; or any but present values. So it does not command and it does not compel. You may speak of the beauty of the moral life, you may descant on the harmony of our nature, on living up to the highest that is in us. But few will listen, and, indeed, small wonder.

But if you can speak of another and very real end, if you have the Christian hope of the vision of God, then your morality is transformed. Then is the weak made strong. Then is your discipline strong with a strength given to no natural sanction, with the strength of the divine. So we take this much for granted. We pre-suppose this transcendent aim. We demand for life this infinite significance. And then we have the sanction of self-discipline and we see its necessity. It is an essential means to the end. We rational creatures can advance no other way. The brute obeys

instinct, nature, the law that God has given it : man has to be a law to himself. Herein lie his pre-eminence and his peril. We are free to choose, and on our choice depends our life. We cannot let ourselves drift-rudderless, aimlessly. We have to take firm hold of the helm and to steer through storm and difficulty. We have to shape our own lives. Perhaps much is already decided for us, our station in life, many obligations, many duties. But still the region of the free is vast, and even in that which is mapped our choice still rules and prevails. So we need discipline. We need to take up the work of directing and guiding our life, towards a definite end, with definite sure means.

**Self-Discipline.** Therefore is self-discipline all important. A parent, a pedagogue, a drill-sergeant may discipline a man. They may educate and train him to a definite habit and method of action. But in self-discipline the man himself does the work, takes the tools into his own hands, shapes his own life, is his own trainer. And indeed without it the other discipline will avail but little. It lies at the foundation, for it lays hold on the man himself. Every man is a centre of life and energy; He is a principle of action, independent, autonomous, so the life that he manifests must come from within, from the power that animates that body. It cannot be forced on him from outside, if he does not accept and embrace. You cannot mould him as the sculptor would the plastic clay. No, he himself must do the work, he must accept your action and make it his own. Only so is there real moral progress. Therefore self-discipline is in a pre-eminent degree the expression of the man's inner life, and is for him the all-important discipline.

How applied to man's faculties. How can a man train his moral nature? In the same way that he can train his body. In one body there are many members. In one person there are many faculties. They have to be organised, welded into one, made to act in harmony and unison. Some will need developing, some checking and controlling, until the whole man works as one perfect person towards the object of his striving. It is a commonplace of modern science that living bodies are made up of cells. These cells are centres of life and activity. They may even be said to have a sort of individuality of their own. But they do not live apart from the organism to which they belong. They are one with it. They contribute each its share of activity to the whole, each fulfilling its proper function. They are controlled and dominated by that whole. They are sunk and merged in it. So may we speak of the faculties of a man. Take his five senses. Each has a special function to perform. The eye must see, the ear hear, the mouth taste, and so on. But they work together in harmony. They are subject to the man. They serve his purpose and do his work.

So must it be with his spiritual faculties, divide them how you will. Take the old classification of memory, understanding, and will. It is obvious that they must work together, they must be in unison. We need not stop to decide what is their relative importance, how understanding stands to memory and both to will. But we see at one glance that it must be a relation of inter-dependence and co-operation.

**Man's powers.**—Now man, let us say, is body and soul. Man's soul, again, is intellect and will. But the man is one, a unity of various faculties working together as one whole. Let us not put any gulf between them, let us beware of putting them in an unreal opposition. Yet may we distinguish in the one this variety, and under the names of intellect and will we have a valid classification of two chief forms of conscious experience. What is the relation of these two? Again we say, it is one of reciprocal influence, of interaction, of co-operation. The powers are many, the man is one. Granted then this simple division, we may distinguish three spheres of discipline—a discipline of the body, of the intellect, of the will; but paramount, above all others, is the discipline of will.

**Will.**—What is will? It is pre-eminently the motive power. There is little need to define it. We know and we act. There are knowledge and action, these two; and the power that resolves, decides, determines, acts, is as familiar to us as the power of thought. It is will. Will is the most potent force in the world. Natural forces are strong. They are swift and sure and terrible. But will dominates the man and man dominates the world. He controls it, uses it, shapes it to his purpose ; and its mightiest forces are the obedient slaves of his will.

### **I.-Will Discipline Primary**

Yet his first work is with himself; himself must he first control. He has to harness the lightning of thought, to control the fierce blasts of passion, to stem the wild torrent of desire ; and from out this work there comes that power of powers and force of forces, the disciplined will. So self-discipline is first and foremost the discipline of will. Leave then on one side for a moment the intellectual powers, the powers that are concerned directly with the processes of thought; and consider the passions and desires of our nature, our nature on its appetitive, active, practical side. These

passions and desires are especially the stuff, the raw material of moral action.

It is not necessary for us to enter upon any elaborate discussion of passion and desire. That is the business of the psychologist; it will be sufficient for our purpose to give a rough outline of the matter concerned. The distinction already made between thought and desire is sufficiently clear. We all know the difference in our conscious experience between an idea or a course of reasoning and a desire or yearning of mind or sense. And in this latter appetitive element in our experience there is a further variety. There are desires which belong to the intellectual nature, as desires for knowledge, happiness, the higher pleasures of the soul; and accompanying these are various impulses, volitions, and emotions which with them deserve rather the name of intellectual than of sensitive appetites. But over against these with their corresponding emotions are the appetites of the sensitive part of our nature. There are the organic cravings, physical appetites, natural instincts, and the whole field of human passion. It is this body of appetite that is the special sphere of the volitional element in our composite nature, and it is this special sphere that we have to deal with in self-discipline on the side of will. Now it is impossible of course to take each particular appetite and discuss it separately. That would be a long and tedious business, and it has been done well and often by psychologists.\* But what we have to realize for practical use are certain general principles with regard to the education of the will in dealing with this raw material.

**Character and its elements.** Character is the sum of a man's intellectual and moral faculties. It is the expression of what he is intellectually and morally. It is the mould his life has taken. Towards its formation many influences conspire.

**Heredity.**-We are all born with certain natural endowments and a certain moral bent. This is a fact which we cannot ignore. We must give heredity its due, though we do not exalt it to the all potent force which our determinist physicists would make it. We do not join in the despairing cry, "How can a man escape from his ancestors?" For we know that our natures are still plastic, capable of direction, of cultivation, of much reformation, within the limits of the natural heritage. "You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," says the adage. True, but it can be turned to something useful. The machine can only produce that which it is adapted to produce, but it can turn it out well and truly made; it can be perfect in its own measure. And so we do not need to run our heads against a stone wall, we do not need to undertake the impossible task of changing our nature ; but we have to learn that nature, to know by self-knowledge the range and limits of our powers and capacities, and so to put forth our effort.

**Environment.**-Another powerful influence in the formation of character is that which is called environment. Men are much made by the circumstances of their birth and upbringing. The comic poet tells us that

"Ever little boy and girl  
That's born into this world alive,  
Is either a little Liberal  
Or else a little Conservative"

and all men acquire, with their earliest years, prejudices, prepossessions, customs, and habits that have much to do with the making of character. This influence again we are not able to control entirely, certainly not for our early life. It will be our business later to see that we get the best environment, to make our surroundings : but at first it is beyond our power. It is an influence that may be wholly good and salutary. It may contribute immensely to the making of a noble and perfect character. Who can overestimate the influence for good of a pure home with all its beautiful inspirations and touching, moving impulses to good? Or, on the other hand, what is not the terrible influence of a bad home and bad surroundings? But we are not the creatures of our environment any more than we are fast in the bonds of an inevitable heredity. The man can rise above his circumstances. The soul is not fettered by its trammels but can conquer and transcend.

**Effort.**-And so we come to the third constituent of our character, which is that with which we are most concerned—our own deliberate effort at self-education, self-training. Now, we must not begin with the mistaken idea that character can be manufactured; no, it is a growth and a slow growth. "Nemo repente fuit turpissimus" says the old proverb.—No one was ever a villain all at once. And it is equally true that no man can become a great and good character all at once. It is a matter of time, of slow dogged persevering progress. What we have to do is to work

\* *The writer would refer generally to the Psychology of Fr. M. Maher, S.J., to which he owes much.*

earnestly, deliberately, perseveringly. We see the result of constant disciplined effort in other spheres. How does the scholar come by his facility but by long years of unremitting study, when he

“Scorned delights and lived laborious days”?

How does the musician learn his art, train muscles of eye and hand, till they can bring forth beautiful harmony from infinitely complex movement, except by long years of hard toil, drudgery perhaps and unpleasant while it lasted, but justified in the perfect result? And so we have to train ourselves to play with that most difficult instrument, our moral nature, the strange symphony of life. If the cricketer who “hit with great freedom all round the wicket” has had years of careful and laborious practice first, and the pianist who “displayed delightful freedom in his handling of the difficult third movement” has spent seven hours a day at his piano for years, do we expect that we shall attain moral power, moral perfection, without some careful and laborious self-discipline?

**Habit the great secret.**-The secret of the success of the cricketer, of the musician, of the scholar, is habit. Habit is an acquired aptitude for some particular mode of action. It is a law of our being that repeated acts make habits, that “the organism grows to the mode in which it is exercised.” Practice makes perfect. It is true in every sphere of life, in every trade, art, profession. It is none the less true in the sphere of our moral life. The psychologist tells us that “all the knowledge which a man gathers, all the sciences of which he becomes master, the modes of thought which he cultivates, the feelings in which he indulges, are embodied as dispositions in his being. Every volitional act which he exerts, be it good or ill, is registered in the cells of his brain and leaves a ‘bent’ in his soul.” This being the power of habit, how important, how necessary it is for our moral life, for the formation of our character. It is said that “habit is second nature,” and that “man is a bundle of habits.” Here is something then of vast importance for our life and something that is in our power. We can enlist in our service this potent natural fact. We can make the laws of psychology fight for us, and our fight with such weapons is sure of success.

Form good habits, train nature to be your ally, and you will be developing a strong and steady facility, a readiness in correct action, a promptitude in just response, a smoothness in working, that go to make the perfect character, that will give you a personal force and power irresistible.

**Practical Psychology.**-The psychologists urge on us insistently the importance of habit. They bid us first start with a vigorous and decided initiative, set the end before us, determine on the habit we are going to acquire, specialise, concentrate, and let our energies never flag till the goal be attained. Professor James gives these three maxims for the formation of a strong personality: “(1) Make your nervous system your ally instead of your enemy: make automatic and habitual as early as possible as many useful actions as you can. (2) Seize the very first opportunity to act on every resolution you make. (3) Finally, keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. Be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test. The man who has daily inured himself to habits of concentrated attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things, will stand like a tower when everything rocks round him, and when his softer fellow mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.”

**Check evil habits.** “Resist beginnings” is the maxim of the Imitation. Repress evil tendencies; crush them at their first appearance. Let not the law of your organism grow into a deadly variance with the purpose and aim of your life. You may easily become a slave, but you can as easily be free. Only begin well, take on yourself the free yoke of voluntary good habit, and you will escape the galling servitude of vice.

**Concentration.** Take one fault at a time. “Fix on your goose and run him down.” The Emperor Caligula, in a moment of irritation with his subjects, is said to have wished that the Roman people had but one neck. We may feel that our lower nature too is many-headed and we may be embarrassed and be at a loss where to begin. But in reality our nature is more accommodating. “If every year we rooted out one vice,” says the Imitation, “we should soon become perfect men.” Yes, and not by the mere process of subtraction, for the very effort we make in overcoming that one, the moral exercise, the habit of concentration and restraint, the experience we gain, all discipline the character. In rooting out one fault we may rout the enemy all along the line. For we learn to fight, we have our baptism of fire, we flesh our weapons. The rest is easy.

**True Obedience.**-And as we aim at ruling our lives aright, so should we accept willingly such rule as is given our

lives by others. How important in youth the regularity of school discipline, how salutary if accepted and self-imposed. There we begin the work of moral training. There, in the class room and on the playing fields, the young and plastic nature is moulded into certain lines of activity. Habits of good action are formed. The moral virtues are cultivated and developed. But, for their strength and permanence, there must be the deliberate action of the person, the conscious willing acceptance and appreciation. Plato said that education was teaching men to "like the right things." Aristotle said that that man only was morally perfect who took pleasure in good action. So we must learn to love virtue.

"We needs must love the highest when we see it."

We have to know the beauty of the moral life. 'This love won in early years, and habits of self-discipline formed then, will prepare us for the struggle of life when we are left to ourselves and thrown on our own resources. Then there will be a strength within. We shall be independent, self-reliant, brave, persevering, and in the warfare of life shall acquit ourselves well.'

## **II.-Discipline of Intellect**

Let this be enough for the discipline of will. We said there was also a discipline of the intellect. Let us see what that means. "Nihil volitum nisi praecognitum" is a scholastic maxim. Will presupposes knowledge. First you know, then you will. "Will without intellect is blind" is another. There is no need to labour the point. The training of the mind then is of the first importance to the moral life. What is intellect? It is the faculty which thinks, reasons, judges. It is that in us which raises us above the material and brute creation, that by which we are specially men. Its discipline is all the more important and vital. "Sin is ignorance" said Plato. We do not say that, but we know that ignorance is certainly disaster, and it may be moral ruin. Therefore do men insist on education. They realize the value and importance of training this potent force; they know the evil effects of want of training, of neglect. Ignorance is the very seed plot of vice, and every rank and noxious weed grows in the mind that has been left fallow and uneducated. For thought is the spring of action. If our minds are not developed and trained how can we act aright, how can we function as perfect men? We need judgment, discernment, knowledge, the power of thinking, and the matter of thought, and all this we can get only by the discipline of the mind.

**True Education.**-Now, what is this discipline? It is not the mere assimilation of knowledge. It is not the gathering of information. We are not made to become encyclopaedias. An encyclopaedia is an entirely useless thing without the energy of a mind. If we swamp our understanding with masses of undigested knowledge we shall be worse than useless for the business of life. No, our work is first of all to train and develop the native energy of intellect, to teach ourselves to think, to reason, and to judge. It matters comparatively little what we learn provided that we achieve this end, to train the mental power. And this is where the fallacy lies in the common attack on "unpractical" education. It loses sight of the main work of education, which is not to fill the mind with facts but to train it to deal with facts. Information is a secondary matter. Technical training is a secondary matter. The first vital business is the strengthening of the instrument, and this is the true discipline of the mind.

**Does not end with the School.**-These words will perhaps be read by some who have gone through their course of mental training, who have, in common phrase, "finished their education." But is the work really finished? No, it is but begun.

"Though thou begin it with thy earliest years,

It were not finished with thy setting sun."

The discipline of the mind will always be with us, for it is progressive as our life and reaches out to the infinite. And so we must never relax our efforts, never slacken. We are already well provided against ignorance, but how are we as to positive knowledge? Perhaps we have learned to think and to reason, but not all the arrogance of youth will deceive us into believing that our reasoning powers are yet perfect or our judgment ripe and sure.

So we have to make much of the informal, unconscious education that we submit to after we leave school, through all the years of our mature life. Granting that our early training is good, the question for us is, how to complete it. The mind is memory, understanding, imagination. What can be done for each of these, and what should be done? With what do we fill our memories, what do we imprint on our imaginations, how do we exercise our understanding? Or is it the case that here all effort is abandoned, that once men are out on the world, engaged in some business or some

profession, they no longer seriously pursue their mental education? Is all given up to work and play? Are the few hours taken from work given to empty amusement? Of course there must be recreation, for nature demands it. But is there no place still for self-culture, for the discipline of the mind?

**Reading.**-All men find some time for reading. The age is an age of readers. Indeed in the majority it seems that the vigorous force of intellect is giving way to a helpless unoriginal assimilative action. Men are mere conscious sponges; they suck in their daily quota of news and gossip; their minds are too untrained, too weak and flabby, to react, to mould and shape what they receive, to develop and originate thoughts of their own. And yet they could train their minds to this. But so it is that the written word has now more power than ever it had, and reading can be a mighty force for our good, did we but direct it. We know how men's lives are influenced by what they read. There is a sense in which the Jesuit Order and all its splendid record was the outcome of that religious reading which the young soldier Ignatius undertook in his convalescence. Thomas á Kempis was never so happy as when he was "in a nook with a book," and he has left us the Imitation. Here then is a mighty force for good or ill. Use it well and it will work powerfully for us. Let a man select what he shall read and read this perseveringly. His nature will be "subdued to what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

He must choose and select. It is idle to try to keep up with the constant output of new literature. Every day the presses of the world pour forth the incessant stream. He is submerged in a veritable flood—papers, magazines, books. And he must select that which is in harmony with his purpose, reject all that conflicts with it. There are plague spots which must be avoided as very poison. There is a vast and increasing mass of literature that is merely idle, profitless, sheer waste of time. Here he must use economy, and give not up the time that should be spent in good solid reading to the scanning of futile trash. For his true place is in the realm of solid literature, in the King's Treasuries of which Ruskin speaks so eloquently. He has at his hand treasures of knowledge and instruction for the asking. Shall he refuse to use them? There is only need of some little effort, to utter the little "Open Sesame" of the tale, and there lie before him rich treasures of knowledge and inspiration; for all the classics are come to our doors in simple form, in easy price. We can commune with the great minds of all ages. We can steep ourselves in our own rich literature, in the lofty thoughts of our poets and prose writers; we can read the literatures of other peoples, the wise words of philosopher and moralist, of poet and historian.

And think what we shall gain from this reading. Not only will our minds be strengthened by the conflict with great minds, instead of with the paltry and facile leader-writers and paragraphers of the daily press, but they will be filled with noble thoughts and aspirations. All the loftiest ideals of the race will pass through them. We shall read of the great men and noble deeds that are the glory of our humanity, and, reading, we shall be brought in our own despite to imitate and to practise. Unconsciously, in our own despite the work will be done. The old philosopher insisted that the youth of his republic should be brought up amid noble sights and hear none but noble sounds. "We must seek out," he says, "those artists of genius who are able to track out the noble and the beautiful, that our young men may live as in a healthy region and be helped of all things, wherever from far works anything meets their sight or hearing, as a breeze bringing health from a healthy region, that so from boyhood up they may be drawn unconsciously into likeness and friendship and harmony with the beauty of reason." So is it with our reading. It will colour mind and imagination; it will mould character; it will ennoble and purify and strengthen. "Example," said Burke, "is the school of mankind; and they will learn at no other." We have to enlist this force, the force of imitation that is to us second nature, on the side of our noble purpose. Therefore must we choose our reading well and live with the noble and great. No matter what our lot in life may be, we are not shut out from that royal company. It is free to the artisan as to the peer. There is no bar, no ceremony, no qualification, no pass-word demanded, but the simple earnest pursuit of the good and the true.

**Our Faith.**-Nothing has been said of the study of our religion, but this will of necessity be first and last in all our effort. It alone gives our lives their meaning, gives our effort its sanction and value. It must be the framework of our minds, its promises and truth the substance of our ideals. And we have to learn the "obedience of faith." It is a fundamental point in our self-discipline; all that has been said implies it and demands it. Our moral life will teach us humility and self-repression. It should teach too the necessity of humility in the region of intellect, of restraint of the imagination, of curbing the wild extravagance of speculation. The man whose intellect is properly disciplined knows his faith well, understands and appreciates its evidence, and has the patient unbiased spirit that alone can harbour faith

and preserve it undefiled.

And how must we read? Not cursorily and carelessly, but earnestly, thoughtfully, reverently, for we are drinking from noble sources and quaffing sacred springs. "Not many things, but much" is the wise sentence of ancient wisdom. "I fear the man of one book" is another pregnant word. We must study and ponder and weigh.

**Self-Knowledge.**-And there is one book which we have not yet mentioned, but one that we must read and read often, and that is the book of self. "Know thyself" was the aphorism of the Greek sage. Pythagoras made his disciples every night examine the deeds of the day. "The life that is not examined is not to be lived by man," is the sentence of Plato. Self-knowledge is necessary to self-discipline; it is the basis of all true care of ourselves, of intellect or of will. "We must know what we are and what we can do, or we shall make infinite errors. Else we shall eat poison and not know it till its work is done; we shall be like mariners sailing an uncharted sea, where any moment may bring hopeless, unavailing disaster, and every day is full of unseen danger and deadly peril. So we must study our capacities, our tendencies, our weakness, and our strength. A gunner must know how far his gun will carry, or his aim is random and casual; a general must know where his line most needs defence, or the enemy has him at his mercy. This knowledge we can only get from some reflection and self-study. It does not need much; there is no need for a continual self-questioning and self-examination, which can only be morbid and dangerous and tend rather to the weakening of character and decision than to its strengthening. Some men are ever examining themselves with anxious introspection; they waste the opportunities of action in a morbid analysis of motive. Better almost the unthinking and impulsive nature that never stops to reflect, but acts on the inspiration of the moment. Yet the perfect character is one that knows when to apply the closure, to stop debate and to act. This is what we have to achieve. And this is gained by self-knowledge, combined with an understanding that is virile and well disciplined.

**Conscience.**-We have said nothing yet about conscience, the mentor of the moral life. Self-knowledge will teach us its law, self-discipline will train us to be obedient to its dictates. It is a natural light given us to guide our steps through life. It can be obscured, or it can be guarded and cherished till it grows luminous, strong, and clear. Every time we obey it we strengthen it. If we disobey, it is darkened and enfeebled. Sin sears it; neglect and idleness oppress and choke it; the weeds grow quickly. So we have to guard it from evil influences. St Bernard said a man should go through life as one who carries a light down a gusty passage, protecting it carefully from the blasts that would extinguish it: so must conscience be guarded, It must further be trained and exercised. "Do the right and you will know it" is a sentence of deep truth, for with exercise conscience develops. Aristotle said that a young man could not be a moral philosopher: he might be put with profit to mathematics, or any science that dealt with abstract theory; but prudence, moral judgment, the perfect conscience could only come from practice; and the actual experience of life.

### **III.-Discipline of the Body**

And now a word about the discipline of the body. Of this discipline much need not be said here. Ingrained in our national character is a healthy belief in athletics; but there is sometimes excess, and for the man with a true conception of his end athletics must take a strictly subordinate place. The old Greeks understood this very well. They were experts in the science of physical training, and no modern people has ever laid such stress on the proper culture of the body. It was with them a national gospel: but they knew that it had its limits, that the professional athlete tended to be a useless citizen. He was a perfect animal, an instrument well-fitted for his special function, but he was not a perfect man and his function was not the true human life. He was bone and sinew and muscle, but mind and soul were undeveloped, stunted, atrophied. He became positively unfitted for the ordinary business of life and could even stand its toil and fatigue less than the average man. And so they ridiculed and disparaged excessive physical training. Plato paints the athlete in amusing colours. " 'Tis a sleepy creature," he says, " and of precarious health. Have you not observed that they sleep through their life and if they depart but a little from the appointed regimen, at once they are quickly and seriously ill? " Therefore he demanded that gymnastics should be simple and not elaborate, and should be strictly subordinate to the life and duty of the perfect citizen.

**The instrument of the soul** :Well, that is the sort of training that we need. The body must be made a fit and efficient instrument for the soul. "*Mens sana in corpore sano*," a healthy mind in a healthy body, is a sound ideal. It must be ours. For we know how much mind depends upon body. Psychology and experience unite to tell us and to

drum the lesson into us that we cannot safely despise the body, that is despise it to any unreasonable degree ; for it will exact a penalty, inevitable and terrible for neglect and abuse. “ Natura nisi parendo non vincitur.” Nature to be controlled must be obeyed.

**Strength and Purity.**-There is necessary exercise, recreation, sleep. There is moderation and self-restraint to be used in the satisfying of natural appetite. Evil habits contracted through carelessness may ruin our lives certainly and swiftly. Many a young man has come to utter disaster from the want of this care and moderation: nay more, we shall need the knife, the peremptory cutting off of certain tendencies. Every man knows his own danger, here must be vigilance and watchfulness and determination to guard the body, to protect it against itself, to secure the citadel of the soul, to save the life. And if we insisted on knowledge before, we must insist again that it is supremely necessary here. We can no longer hope to secure innocence by ignorance. That policy is breaking down all round us, and if something be not done the field will be left to those who will give knowledge evilly. So we must recognise the imperative need of knowledge. Ignorance is not virtue, it is to be on the edge of a precipice. Knowledge is not sin, it is the only security. A man must know himself, the laws of his nature, the meaning of his organism. He must face physical fact and understand it, for only so can he hope to use his nature aright, to use it and not to abuse it. It is a mistake to let boys face the world without this knowledge, a mistake that may often be their ruin. And if we are left to ourselves we must get this knowledge. Get it, it is a duty. This does not mean that the young man must read impure filth or pollute his mind with a prurient curiosity. Still less does it mean that he must practise the bestial vaccination that John Bull calls “sowing his wild oats.” No, but a careful parent, a good confessor, a wise friend will serve his turn. From such can he get the pure knowledge that is purity, and the advice that will give the only safe innocence.

And we need not say anything of the positive ideal of purity enshrined for the Catholic in a stainless nature and a presence all-fair. For the love of purity sow no evil seeds, be temperate, be chaste, in thought and act.

“His strength was as the strength of ten  
Because his heart was pure.”

Reverence your body. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit; it is the wonderful and sacred instrument that God has given us with which to serve His ends. Treat it then with more care than the scientist treats his delicate instrument; it has a higher work to perform, the greatest of works. You see the chemist enclosing his delicate scales in a tightly closed case lest any dust should destroy their accurate balance. Your body has to be an instrument of delicate poise, of accurate adjustment. You would not let dust into the works of your watch, you are careful not to breathe into it. Let no dust of sin or moist breath of fleshly corruption touch the delicate mechanism of your body.

## CONCLUSION

**Discipline means constant effort.**-So for body and soul we need discipline. We have to work and not to neglect. “If you do not advance,” says an old maxim, “you will go back.” There is no such thing as a moral equilibrium. All life, some biologists tell us, has a tendency to degenerate, to fall from the higher to the lower, to revert. Constant effort, constant endeavour is the only security of permanence and of progress. First we learn ourselves gradually, and slowly but surely realize the tendencies of our nature, see the good that is in us and the bad. We must cultivate the one, repress the other , “If thy eye offend thee, pluck it out,” was spoken to urge the duty of peremptory checking of evil appetites, of evil desires and passions. There must be no parley with them, no half measures. They are evil, deadly; they will corrupt and destroy us if allowed to grow. They must be nipped in the bud, stifled, killed. There are others which are not so fatal, passions and desires which are good when reasonably indulged, but which in excess may be equally dangerous and pernicious.

**Mortification.**-Here there is need of the Christian rule of mortification, here is the place for asceticism, here must we “deny ourselves.” Not otherwise can we triumph over our lower nature, over the beast that is in us, over the law in our members that fights against the law of the spirit. If we do not take up this work, and resolve that we shall be masters in our own household, then we shall fall victims to our evil passions, or at best we shall be motley creatures, at one time striving to live well but often falling, and between constant falls and the distraction of conflicting passions, never really holding our lives in our own hands, never able to fill them with one purpose and to aim at one noble ideal.

So self-discipline must mean self-denial and mortification. All the moralists and all the saints teach us the same

thing. It was said by Burke that “there are no discoveries to be made in morality.” Man is the same now as he was when Our Lord preached the gospel of self-denial, and that gospel was never so real and true and necessary as it is in our own days.

**Limitation and Concentration.**—And there is something else. Some natures are so various and versatile that they are for doing a hundred things at once. Like the democratical man of Plato, they are one thing one day, another the next and nothing for long; they dissipate their energies over many aims and attain nothing. If this be our case what must be done? A wise writer has said “There is no securing the illimitable but by limitation.” It is the lesson of all success, concentration. Our energy must be stored and expended economically in the right direction. Some interests will have to go. Avenues that lead to variant ends will have to be closed, that we may advance down the one true path of our life and attain its end. We must in a very real sense be stern and narrow, for it is the only road to success. We have to regularize our lives, to become men of high moral ideals and for the sake of those ideals to submit ourselves to a rule, to a systematized life. Be not ashamed to live by rule. Estimate at their true value the cheap scoffs of the men who call you narrow and rigid, formal and square. You can afford to despise and ignore them. They should not turn you from your purpose, but they may make you careful that you do not embrace rule for rule’s sake, that you do not become a mere machine, very little better than any piece of clockwork for all that you are conscious. Do not lose sight of the fact that the “life is more than the meat, the body more than the raiment,” that all important as habits are, it is after all the will, the person that matters.

**Life and Rule.** The Bohemian is an interesting creature. He is an artist in life. He tells us that he is “seeing it whole,” tasting it in all its manifold beauty and richness that we should imitate him and give the rein to every natural impulse. To him all are good. Their naturalness is their all-sufficient sanction. Law and discipline, regularity and a definite purpose are to him the unforgiven sins. Or perhaps he is not so bad as this, but has only persuaded himself that he has no need of law, that he knows a higher and a better way. But in any case the good man is in his eyes a poor rigid formalist, a narrow bloodless creature, purblind and myopic, but half a man. And indeed it is often charged against those who preach the Christian doctrine of self-denial and self-discipline, that they preach an inhuman gospel, that they cast a gloom and a shadow over life; that they quench the glad light of genial naturalness, and instead imprison the man in a narrow cell, pure indeed and white-walled,—but still a cold and cheerless prison from which there is but one escape and that death. Better, say they, the happy carelessness of unthinking paganism, better the fierce ethics of the savages our ancestors, than this inhuman Christianity.

What are we to say to this? Can we admit its truth? Not for a moment. True there may be some who so misread the Christian Gospel, there may be some who with the fervour of fanatics darken the, “glad precincts of the cheerful day;” who trample on God’s gifts, and think they do a service to Him. But they are not the true Christians.

**The Manichaeon and the formalist.**—Heretics have held such doctrines and the Church has cast them out from her. But she herself remains untouched by them, holding up before the world the spectacle of a glad and joyful faith, of men living the life of the spirit, but not depreciating nature and nature’s gifts, cultivating every faculty of their bodies, which their faith teaches them to reverence and respect as the very temple of the Holy Spirit, and if they do them despite, if they control and check them, doing it of that very reverence and for that higher love. The mere formalist is as mistaken as the antinomian—he has pushed a truth to excess, he has damned where he ought to have blessed. Yet he may be safer. Some characters there are so made, that for them the only safety lies in rigidity, in the total absolute acceptance of one side of life to the exclusion of every other. Some men can more easily deny themselves all delights than use them well. But they are wrong if they act so without the true inspiration, if their life becomes a rigid observance unillumined by any ray of hope and love, if the soul has gone and but a dry husk remains. That is your true and desperate formalist. The other, whom the enemy of rule calls a narrow and sad formalist, is really not such. His critic does not know the joys of renunciation.

He knows not

“That Love and joy are torches lit

From altar fires of Sacrifice.”

He knows nothing of the life of the spirit, of a happiness that far transcends the pleasures of sense. He knows nothing of the fervour and love of the noble soul. To him the way of renunciation is only a way of sorrow and Calvary

nothing but anguish, defeat, and death. He cannot see the victory and the triumph.

**“In the Cross is Life.”**—And yet it is victory and is triumph. The pure and noble soul knows it is. Some people find the Imitation a depressing book, gloomy, and poignantly sorrowful. It gives them the “blues” they will tell you. But read the last chapter of the second book, on the royal road of the Holy Cross. Does it not read in its majestic cadence and solemn refrain like a triumphant paean and glad song of victory? It is the victor’s cry, not the cry of the defeated. It speaks of self-denial, self-conquest, pain voluntarily accepted, renunciation, mortification, death itself, but the burning words are instinct with the spirit of life, with the strange strong joy of Christianity, with an eloquence and compelling vigour, that carry us on as on the bosom of some mighty torrent.

It is the true philosophy of life, it is the Christian philosophy of life. “No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will sustain the one and despise the other.” “He that loseth his life shall find it.” “Deny thyself, take up thy cross and follow Me.”

**The motive power.**-There is one more thought and it is the sum of all. What is to be our driving force? We have spoken of discipline, of training of body, mind, and will, and much of what we have said has been negative, speaking of dangers to be avoided, of evils to be repressed and checked. It is necessarily so. Self-discipline is a sort of pruning, a cutting away of the rank luxuriance of our nature, or, better, it is the curbing and checking and directing of a torrent that would burst its banks and waste itself in wild extravagance. And so the impression may be left that our business is mainly a matter of pruning, of curbing, of restraining. And this mistake once made we may fall into the sad state of the mere formalist. But this is not our main business. It is only a necessary and inevitable condition of that which is all important. And what is that? Nothing but a strong and vigorous, good and pure life, a life directed to noble ends. To be alive, vigorous, active, consciously aiming at a goal—that is our main work.

**Life and Love.**-A modern philosopher explains all existence under the conception of a potent principle of life, ever pushing on, overmastering all obstacles in its course, striking out along different lines of evolution, checked and stopped here, but advancing irresistibly there, developing and creating. He does not tell us where it comes from, he does not know whither it goes, and he has only a faint hope that it will overcome death. But there it is, this mighty, vigorous principle of life. Now we know we are in better case than this. We are not pushed on in spite of ourselves by this natural force. We are not travelling to an unknown goal. No, we have a real end before us, and this it is that must be the potent force of our life. This must give it unity and vigour. Aristotle said of the universe that it was moved by God as a lover is moved by the object of his love. It is the same as St Paul’s, “for whom the whole creation yearned.” Such yearning, such love, is the open secret of life.

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