

Ques. Which exerts the greater influence in the formation of character. moral or physical causes" Oct 11/82

Believing it absolutely indispensable to the proper consideration any question, that it be distinctly understood, I will devote a moment to this enterprise. There are three points involved in the question that want particularly to be set forth & kept before the mind in the consideration of this subject. There is first, two distinct & opposite sets of causes to be understood & defined - there is the object on which these causes are to act, viz. character - there is the expulse between the two, the manner of this action, that is the influence that these causes exert in forming this character in moulding, shaping & consolidating character. The mind is such an incomprehensible, inconceivable creation, that there is necessarily much obscurity, that will attend us in whatever way we advance to the contemplation either of itself or associated subjects. Whenever we examine with the flickering lamp of human reason, our lamp shows us only the darkness around, & its rays are swallowed up as speedily, as the last light beam discharged from the bow of retreating day, into the bosom of advancing night. Though I am aware that other distinctions may be drawn yet the one that seems the most suitable to me, is to assign physical causes to the province of the mind itself, comprehending those distinctive features that the forming cause of nature has traced - & by moral causes all others. This seems to be the distinction that Dr Webster makes in his definition of character - which he defines as those distinctive qualities impressed by nature or habit on a person that distinguishes him from all others. This is the original meaning at any rate, as we can see by the derivation of the words, physical from "physis" nature & moral from "mos" habit. There are other causes that operate in the formation of character than

might be termed physical but these we will consider under the head  
of moral causes - Character has been already defined by a process  
of its derivation & application cannot fail to invest the word with a  
wider meaning - Though the Latin it comes from the Greek "xagasso"  
meaning "to mark" "to engrave" & in its metaphorical use it signifies  
the marks that are engraven on a man & distinguish him from other  
men - so that man cannot be said to have a character till these features  
have been impressed - Now the marking or engraving power of custom  
& habit over the mind is called the power of forming characters -

With these distinctions in view we will now venture upon con-  
troversial soil, with sea & land in harbor, out to coast along the shores  
of the mental ocean, to discover if possible its inlets & outlets -

Taking notice that our question is general in its application embracing  
the just & the unjust alike, presuming from universality of nature's functions  
that the same general principles apply to both -

From our meagre knowledge of human mind & our little in-  
crease of the origin & nature of thoughts & ideas & principles, we  
shall of course experience much difficulty in determining to what extent  
nature has carried her work & where habit has commenced hers, but  
in this we must trust to the lamp of reason, through which, till all we  
obtain - Our characters may be considered as another form of our  
material constitution in our physical existence, our characters are what  
we are before the minds of others, as the result or growth of our thoughts  
& actions, more especially the latter, for thoughts through the origin of all  
our actions, yet it does not seem to put on the stamp by which it is  
made visible - Character is our own, it is a collection of markings that have  
been made by ourselves or at any rate under our supervision & direction - It  
is in fact the results of our thoughts & actions either secret or expressed, in  
other words our characters are the actions of our thoughts & actions -

Can we then decide which most determines our thoughts & actions habit or nature we have then determined the greatest portion of our character - To recover the question still from us inasmuch as every action has its origin in thought we have left us only to decide what is the cause of our thoughts -

When reduced to this form it seems to me that nature must be said to be the most efficient cause in the formation of what we properly term character - All our thoughts must be suggested or original - If thoughts are suggested to us, they come as imitations of something that we have gained knowledge of or as a parallel or likeness to them - Now if these thoughts are imitations of others & even of our own actions & then these thoughts & actions are from their nature to the structure of our character, they will not form other qualities properly be called characteristics because they would be like the character in this respect - It seems to me then that what we imitate cannot be said to form a part of our character, because it does not exist with us long time we imitate, which seems to be necessary to personal character which we are now considering, a national character I am aware may be formed by imitation & is wherever it exists - but in the case that our thoughts are parallel or imitations from others that we gain knowledge of or are original to our own minds, then thoughts when expressed in action & transmitted to our characters, make distinguishing features or characteristics & are properly be said to form our character -

But there is a wider meaning generally attached to the word than this which is the narrowest sense - In this wider sense is embraced what we are by imitation & originality & to determine this question we are to decide whether we are more the creatures of imitation or originality - In deciding this point, in the general bearing of this question

we must decide that man in general as it now exists on the earth is the servant of imitation rather than the originator of his own character, though to this there are many & gratifying exceptions -

It seems to require independence of mind to the formation of one's own character, an independence rarely to be met with. There is a servitude of the mind more than any bodily slavery could be almost universally extended to our whole race. This servitude paralyzes the power of mind to bring forth her original features that would elevate the material world to a higher & superior position & proves that the world has never yet progressed. At present then it must be admitted that social causes, such as the much greater influence of family members than it is.