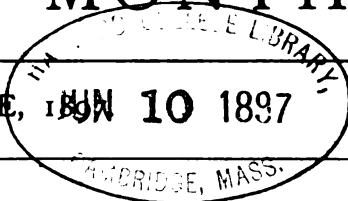


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*ORIGINALITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS.*

IT takes but a small experience of men and of literature to bring to our notice the fact that one of the most powerful enemies of effective originality, in conduct, and in artistic production, is the conscious wish and intent to be original. Yet any man who means to do good work desires to be original. Hence there arises, for every such man, a problem — a problem of self-conquest. It is easy to be commonplace. One has only to follow the crowd, to drift, to live from day to day. The ambitious man rebels at this destiny. He wants to be himself. He realizes the force of the one great command that the moral law addresses to the individual in regard to the individual's own self-cultivation. This command is: "Be unique, as your Father in Heaven is unique." All other moral commands tell the individual about the law of self-surrender. Such commands run: Sacrifice yourself,— be a servant,— find your office and fulfil its tasks,— be loyal to your ties,— in a word, give up your separate life. There remains, side by side with all these precepts, the other, the equally sacred commandment: Be unique. That is: Render your service as nobody else can render it; do your work as you alone can do it; fill the place that nobody else can fill. There is no inconsistency between these two aspects of the moral law. One supplements the other. Some unique form of self-sacrifice remains the individual's inalienable privilege. Therein alone can he fulfil his destiny. Well, all this the ambitious man feels. And to feel this introduces the problem of every noble youth: How shall I be original? Forthwith, however,

the problem deepens. To wish to be original is, as we have said, to come face to face with one of the principal foes to originality. Conscious, deliberate, intentional effort at originality is likely to involve one of two things : viz., either waywardness, or self-imitation. Waywardness is such trivial attempt at originality as depends upon following the passing mood of the moment. Self-imitation is the well-known besetting sin of anybody who has once observed himself saying or doing what he takes to be an uncommonly clever thing. Teachers, clergymen, and poets once past their prime, all share with self-conscious children the temptation to repeat their old successes by imitating their own once novel, pretty deeds. Thus, in these two ways, the will to be original tends to defeat itself. One must begin one's self-assertion, even in this its most sacred undertaking, by an act of self-conquest. And meanwhile there arises a certain purely theoretical question, namely : Why this strange conflict between originality and consciousness? Why is the best human originality so largely an unconscious product?

To this very natural theoretical question the present paper suggests some answer. The answer, so far as it goes, is founded upon a very simple analysis of our human type of consciousness. It is easy to indicate that the narrow field or span of conscious life in which you and I live is not large enough to permit the source and essence of our best and most individual processes to become directly present to us at all. Hence it is not so much the nature of originality as the accidental limits of the human type of consciousness which force us to admit that, for us men, our originality, whatever be its grade, must in general belong to the unconscious side of our life. On the other hand, such a study of the reason why human consciousness and originality are related as they are, may help us to suggest, in a measure, how to treat the practical problem with which we began, and how to show the way towards that self-conquest upon which the successful effort of an individual to mould himself to originality must depend.

Our conscious mental life is, as everybody knows, usually classified under three heads, the Intellect, the Feelings, and the Will. And one

may raise the question: To which one, if to any one, of these three aspects of our mental life, is the originality of any given individual,— say of a literary artist — to be attributed? This is of course an elementary problem of mental analysis. I regard it as of essential importance for the task before us.

In answer, I may first venture to point out one very simple, but not infrequent popular mistake as to the region of a man's mind in which we may most naturally look for originality. It is customary for popular moralists to exhort a man in a tone which pre-supposes that anybody can accomplish essentially original acts of conscious Will. The will is, in fact, often conceived as the most originitive aspect of mental life. "It lies with you," one says. "If you will, you can be — this or that — within your limits, of course, but still in an original way." It is thus supposed to be especially the will that, in the course of my life, initiates new fashions of conduct, and so transforms my destiny by virtue of its own spontaneity. My will and my "power of initiative" are often, in popular speech, identified. This, one may suppose, is often what those have in mind who identify genius with a "capacity for taking pains." Such may mean, by this expression, that, whereas a lazy man cannot invent and accomplish great and original things, a painstaking man, by persistently exercising his power of initiative, reaches results which, because they are the product of his individual will, have a special right to be novel, and so to embody originality of some higher grade.

But it is a serious mistake thus directly to identify voluntary activity with origination. Every voluntary act, just in so far as it is voluntary, must for that very reason possess no originality whatever. For I cannot will to do anything unless I first know what I am to do. This, however, I must have learned by previous experience of precisely such acts. And this, again, implies that every voluntary act is essentially identical, in so far as it is voluntary, with an act that I have already performed before. Hence, every voluntary act depends upon previous acts whose origin, in the first instance, must have been involuntary. One can illustrate this principle indefinitely; and it is of boundless importance

for the practical training of the will. Voluntary acts come to be such only after they have first been involuntarily performed, their origin lying in the realms of instinct, of imitation, of chance experience, and of passing impulse. Inner or psychological "power of initiative," so far as concerns the positive content of our actions, the will has none whatever. I cannot will to swim, unless I have first learned how to swim. I cannot learn, except by the gradual adjustment of inherited tendencies to environment, and of past habits to new situations. I can will to set about learning to swim; but when I will that, I will merely old deeds, such as walking in shallow water,—a process which I this time can choose to continue until I am beyond my depth. In that case the situation becomes at once novel enough; but the novelty is not now in me, but precisely in the situation; and what I thereupon do, namely, to struggle, to gasp, to try to obey the orders of the swimmer at my side, and so on, involves the reverse of conscious originality. If I at last learn to swim, that is because, after a time, I somehow involuntarily hit upon the right combination of movements, and get used to the strange situation. It is just so if I try to write anything novel. My will can lead me into the deep waters of literary effort. It cannot teach me what to do there besides kicking and gasping, as many poor poets involuntarily do. We imagine the will to be originaive merely because, very often, by repeating old deeds, we can get ourselves into unheard of situations. But it is life, in such cases, that contains novelties; it is not we who are original. The maiden says nothing original or novel when she says either No or Yes. Two lives happen just then to depend upon her word; but that has nothing to do with her originality. She is usually, in just such matters, an extremely unoriginal person, who behaves very much as the other women from time immemorial have behaved.

Volition, then,—and that, too, without the least reference to the question whether the will is free or not—is, as to the contents of our voluntary acts, a wholly unoriginal process. As for Intellect,—that, with respect to most of its factors and processes, constantly involves

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elements of novelty, but leaves at best a very sharply limited room, in all of its human *conscious* activities, for what can be called individual initiative. Why this has to be the case, it is easy to see. Novelty may be possessed to any extent by the facts of our external experience, or by the experiences due to our merely physical condition. But an experience of novelties in the outer world, or of novel physical states of our bodies, forms no part of our intellectual originality. A comet, an earthquake, an explosion, an attack of the grippe,—all these are novelties. But the one who experiences these things does not thereby become original or “creative.” In fact, it is just such extreme novelties that, so long as they remain novelties, confuse us, and help the intellectual life least. We know best what we best recognize; and that, while it has some novel features, is essentially like what we have known before; and is in so far not a new thing. Learning means assimilating; and the rate of our learning of novelties has to be comparatively slow, because we need gradually to assimilate them to one another, and to our own past. Hence most intellectual processes are conservative in type; and essentially novel ideas enter the conscious intellect only gradually. Most rapidly we get possession of hosts of new ideas when, as in childhood, we acquire them by direct social imitation of the preëxistent ideas of others, or when, as in later years, we get them from our fellows by processes of reading, of listening, and of watching the world’s ways. But all such externally acquired novelties are not our own in any origi-native sense. Moreover, in a large measure, the intellect is essentially and explicitly concerned in learning and in imitating the truth of things,—truth which we find, and which we do not make; so that there is a sense in which the normal intellect spurns many sorts of originality, even if they offer themselves, and professes itself as not merely by accident unoriginal and dependent, but also by choice devoted to submissive repetition of the truth. There is indeed, in all this, always room left for a certain sort of originality, but plainly, in the normal case, the possible range of conscious and fruitful intellectual originality is, psychologically speaking, very decidedly limited. The result so far is

that it is at least very hard to define what constitutes the realm that is still left open, in the conscious intellectual life, for genuine and valuable originality.

But the realm of Feeling still remains as the one region of mental life not so far considered. Here the scope for possible originality is much larger ; and, in fact, the most original literary men are obviously such, in a measure, by virtue of the strong individuality possessed by their characteristic emotions, interests, and tones of inner life. On the other hand, it must be insisted that mere novelty, or individuality of feeling, never by itself constitutes any independently valuable type of originality. The nervously degenerate, the "cranks," the acute nervous sufferers, know of a great variety of feelings, both agreeable and disagreeable, both transient and lasting, which are often marked, in particular cases, by very decidedly individual and original shadings, and which therefore give their subject, upon occasion, a strong and often not unfounded sense that he is very "different from common men." But such originality of feeling constitutes something very remote from original genius, unless, indeed, the abnormality gets precisely that union with the life of the intellect which does distinguish true originality in great minds. One is never a man of parts because of his novel feelings ; genius implies knowing how to use feelings.

The result so far is that, as a matter of analysis, the most characteristic processes of the conscious intellect are, in the main, imitative, assimilative, and in so far uncreative. The conscious will is similarly an unoriginal process. On the other hand, the feelings are a possible source of very manifold and individual mental processes, but as mere feelings they are not an obvious source of what is valuable about originality, since a perfectly useless degenerate may have countless feelings of the most novel and intense character without any happy or creative result. The question then becomes : What union of intellectual and affective processes is responsible for valuable originality ?

A step nearer we come to the answer to this question when we observe in what senses a mental creation, such as a work of literary art,

can possibly be novel at all. The truth of things an artist finds, but does not make. Even where a man of action creates new truth by voluntary processes, as a statesman or a conqueror creates, the activity, just in so far as it is voluntary, is, psychologically speaking, as we saw, decidedly unoriginal and unoriginative. And as fact, the greatest artists, however original, are also imitators,—imitators of artistic traditions, of the forms of their mother tongue, of life, of human nature, of truth; and, unless they were thus in a due measure imitative, they would be lunatics. Their creative power is an extremely relative thing, which must be confined within strict limits. But there are three ways in which sane originality can display itself. They are these: (1) One can be original in the style or form which he gives to his work; (2) One can be original in the selection of the objects which he imitates; (3) One can be original in the invention of relatively novel combinations of old material.

The first of these forms of originality exists, in some very limited degree, in the activities of even the most unartistic and commonplace people, in so far as they possess individuality at all. The voice of your friend, by which you recognize him in a crowd, the step, the bearing, the little tricks of gesture, the handwriting, of any individual,—these are features comparable in nature to those often indescribable characters which distinguish the style of one artist from that of another. In commonplace people these particularities of bearing, of manner, of personal quality, are of only domestic or neighborly interest. In great artists such features chance to appear extremely significant. One's individual style colors both one's purely physical activities, and one's mentally significant ways of expressing one's self. Such a style may be modified by conscious self-observation, but no voluntary process can ever transform it. In its mentally valuable phenomena it is commonly rather the embodiment of one's ruling tones of feeling, one's prevailing moods, than of any consciously voluntary or intellectual process. Intellect and will may toil to improve it, but beyond certain limits they toil in vain. Its origin is in the unconscious realm. Its originality is due to heredi-

tary factors. Its basis is something born and not made. It often constitutes, in artists, the most inscrutable aspect of their genius. Its value is due to our fondness for whatever most suggests fascinating individuality. Our æsthetic demands upon the individual are, like those of the moral law, paradoxical. We want an individual to do what his fellows do, to imitate, to follow custom; and yet all the while we want him to *be* something unique, to give us a fascinating personality that nobody else can show us. Thus we object to everybody whose deeds are unconventional; yet when a man is merely conventional, we despise him as a commonplace fellow. How then shall our neighbor please us? One answer is: He must in a large measure do the thing that everybody does,—he must follow the modes of the day, say the ordinary things, but he must do all this in his own unique way, in a style that is his own. Then, when he thus imitates inimitably, as a great actor does, we say, in case this his individual style chances somehow to touch our feelings, so that they surge up in sympathy with his own,—we say: What a manner he has! It is thus that the great artist impresses us, so far as concerns his literary style. Herein his personality gets an embodiment whose only directly conscious representative in mind is his prevailing way of feeling. But his way of feeling colors the form of all his intellectual work.

The second form of originality, named above, has a more obviously intellectual character. An artist's selection of his themes, of his ideals, of the characters, situations, and so forth, which he chooses to imitate, belongs of course amongst what we commonly call the labors of his intellect. Yet one must not misunderstand the true relations here. Consciously the artist may think, "What shall I choose? What shall I write about? What shall I depict?" But the best choices of anybody's life are made for unconscious reasons.

The third form of originality, that of the larger combinations of one's ideas and acts, is the highest, and, in its best forms, the rarest of all. Yet no artist has ever been able to tell us, with conscious truthfulness, how such originality of combination is accomplished. Nor do we



know in our own cases. The processes of combination are very slow. What it has taken you years to learn, may at last appear in its unity before you. At the moments when your mental combinations come to light, you may be getting what seems to be a bird's-eye view of an entire life. But how you came to get this view, your consciousness, which is of the moment, cannot tell you.

In sum, in case of all these three sorts of originality, you are dealing with a complex union of mental elements belonging to the feelings and to the intellectual life. But how the happy union takes place, how the valuable originality is acquired, your consciousness does not inform you,—and that for two reasons. First, your consciousness never lights up the depths of your personal temperament,—never shows you, at any moment, precisely why you feel as you do. And secondly, your originality, where it is important, has to do with the gradual organization of your life as a whole, while your consciousness, limited as it is to a very short span, flickers along from moment to moment, and never reveals the true meaning of your life-processes in their linkage, growth, and rationality. Hence your conscious moments show you little but dependent volitional and intellectual processes, which are powerless to reveal the secret of their own evolution. The feelings of the moment may be consciously original, but need not on that account be important. Your current consciousness interprets your true individuality, much as lightning at night shows the storm clouds. Whence the storm came, and whither it whirls, the lightning, like your passing moments of conscious life, is too brief to show. We men are always struggling to grasp eternity in a fleeting instant.

Yet of course our human type of consciousness, with all its flickering, is the best type that we have; and the practical problem remains: What shall I do consciously to direct myself towards my best type of originality in word and deed?

The answer runs thus: First, see why it is that your human sort of consciousness never can fully reveal to you, at any moment, what is best or most original about your own individuality. Seeing this, give up the

vain desire to seem, at any instant, consciously original. You could only deceive yourself by following that vain desire. What seemed to you most inevitable, and perhaps most commonplace, your fellows would often find the most original and the best about you. What pleased you as your most original product, others would see to be a poor imitation, or else a trivially wayward mood. For the rest, consciously to aim towards originality in your whole development, and in your organized individual self-expression, is not to aim at the momentary consciousness: "Just now I see myself as an originator." Your self-conquest lies in saying, "I will serve as if I were nothing but a servant, but all the while I will not fear to be unique in my form and plan of service." The best thing, then, that one can consciously do towards attaining effective individuality is to put down one's paltry Fears of being as original, in style and in expression, as fate, despite all of one's loyalty in service, chances to make one. Think, then, thus: "I have a right to be unique; I will not fear to be unique when, as a matter of fortune, I find myself so; but I will not at any moment try to feel as if I were just then in the least an originator. I will consciously serve and efface myself; but when my individuality chances, nevertheless, to express itself, I will rejoice in the happy accident of having unconsciously done what vindicates my right to be this individual." With this in mind, with this assurance that the effectively best about you must grow up in its own way, and must grow, so far as your human mind goes, unconsciously, devote your conscious life to putting yourself into a serious office, where plenty of wholesome experience will come of itself; and then wait for the outcome with assurance. Whatever originality is yours will then come as a matter of life. For it is Life, and not Consciousness, that, in us men, is the originator. Yet the conscious purpose to become original is not unwise, if it only takes the form of choosing to accept that sort of devotion to life which ensures the conscious dependence of our will and of our intellect, but the actual freedom of our individual temperament.

*Josiah Royce.*