

thing at a time. We may widen its field of vision, or we may narrow it; still this field never presents itself but as a unit. This field of view may have diverse elements in it; and when we look at all, we have one vision of all; the attention is spread over all. But the moment we turn the attention to any one element, the others are lost sight of, or they sink into the latent consciousness.

Latent Consciousness.

Latent consciousness is that intermediate state or phase of the mind between the active consciousness and insensibility, and is ever contemporaneous with active consciousness.

While we are actively conscious through the medium of the attention, latent consciousness acts behind the attention; and while capable of laying hold on the attention, it may also be influenced by it.

The latent phase of mind differs from the active, in being capable of comprehending more than one thing at a time.

A man may be actively conscious, having his attention occupied with some object of thought, and yet, at the same moment, be latently conscious of a thousand others. For instance, on calling on an intimate relative, while my attention is engaged with the object of my visit, I am latently conscious of myself, of all I know, my surroundings, and also of him as my relative, his late bereavement, and all his circumstances. To mention any of the facts of which I am latently conscious, would cause me no surprise, because I am latently conscious of them. The theme of conversation between him and me, or that which engages my attention or active consciousness at the time, is the great object of my mental picture; and all of which I am latently conscious at the same moment, lies diffused around, like the background or surroundings of a portrait. The object of attention glows before me in the actively conscious light; the surroundings are dim and indistinct in the latently conscious shadow.

The object of active consciousness is as the central figure in a landscape, on which I may specially fasten my eyes, while at the same moment I am latently conscious of all the hills, trees, etc., that surround it. I do not specially notice any surrounding feature of the country, but were a wonted hill or tree wanting, I would instantly miss it.

A workman, carrying his tools, goes forth to his work, with a companion with whom he may be actively discussing politics, turning all the street corners, and finally stopping at the right place, yet all the while with scarcely an actively conscious thought aside from the object of discussion.

The truth is, the walking, the carrying of the tools, the turns, and the final stopping, are all mainly the result of the latent conscious power which is insensibly controlling him.

A tradesman may have his whole attention actively engaged with a piece of work, but why does he hurry so much in doing it? Because, all the while, he is latently conscious that he promised to have it done in an hour.

A bereaved son has his actively conscious thoughts closely occupied with his work all the day; but why is he so unceasingly sad? Because all the while he is latently conscious of the death of his father. The shadow of this bereavement lies continually on his spirit, while his attention may be otherwise engaged.

In learning a complicated art (music, for example) it requires all our attention first to learn to play the piece; but when learned enough, the latent powers can accomplish it themselves, and we play from habit.

We can be actively conscious of but one thing at a time; yet the skilful musician may, by latent conscious power, play all the parts of a piece of music on his instrument, sing the air, and have his attention free to read the words.

It is the latent conscious power that enables a man to walk, play, or work, as we say, mechanically, leaving his attention free to converse with a friend. The moment a hitch occurs in the work, the latent becomes active, and commands the attention.

The latent conscious power not only retains ideas of things at the elbow of the attention, so as insensibly to make them act on, or be acted on, by it; but through it also, in precisely the same way, the common feelings and instincts insensibly prompt the attention, or are influenced by it.

The latent conscious power, though not memory, is an important sphere or medium of memory. Here memory lays up her stores, ready at the behest of the will, and from which near neighbourhood she prompts attention to them. Here habit deposits her skill and readiness. Through this medium memory flashes forth from the shadow ideas in their stereotyped shape to the full blaze of the attention, and imagination extorts from its twilight new comparisons and fresh and rare contrasts.

In the case of the writer or orator, the ideas in their latently conscious form cast their shadows before, and he becomes actively conscious of them the moment they pass to the pen or the lips.