

CAN CHARACTER BE MODIFIED BY EDUCATION? IF SO,
TO WHAT EXTENT?*

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CHARACTER is that combination of properties, qualities, or traits which gives to a person his moral individuality. Character is what a man is.

Education is the sum total of the experiences of this life.

Then the question before us is: To what extent can the experiences of this life, (education) change our moral individuality (character)?

Education in its true sense takes in everything in this world which affects us, the direct personal influence of those whose lives touch ours, the great thought-world, all animate and inanimate nature. Everything which affects us leaves its mark upon us.

And when we come to the term character, we deal not only with this world, but our thought reaches out to future eternity, that strange mystery—to past eternity, that even stranger mystery.

Within the limit of ten minutes I can attempt to draw from out of this vastness only a few leading thoughts, and I shall try to show that there is practically no limit to the modifying possibilities of education. Each individual child is born with certain latent powers, certain tendencies, certain character germs, if I may be allowed the term. It is useless for the purposes of this discussion to speculate how these got there, whether, as orthodoxy teaches, the child inherited them from his parents or grandparents, from some remote uncle or far-away, forty-second cousin, or whether he brings them into this world with him as something really his, fairly earned in

some previous life-experience. Suffice it to say that the baby in his cradle has certain distinctive character-germs or tendencies. Let us note two things about them. First: At no time in his life are these characteristics immovably fixed—they are at all times capable of growth and direction. Second: No one at his birth, at the time of his death, or at any intervening period is wholly bad or altogether good. The classification into sheep and goats, into black and white, is, perhaps, convenient, but it has the disadvantage of being not true. There is a Jekyll and a Hyde in everyone of us. We are not black or white, but grey, all of us—not sheep or goats, but rather what I might call moral alpacas, something between a sheep and a goat.

The divine spark, the God-in-man, is always there—we can crush and smother it towards, but not to, extinction, or we can fan it into a brighter, stronger, more heavenly fire—a fire so vivifying that it will burn up and destroy the baser part, the dross of ignoble desires. How is the child's character formed? individual character is developed in precisely the same way that national character has been formed.

In the infancy of the race man slowly discovered by experience (*i.e.*, education), that when he lived in harmony with natural laws, welfare and pleasure ensued—that when he broke them, he suffered. Reaping ever as he sowed, primeval man did right because it was expedient. Continued practice in right doing and living had its natural result,

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