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Charles Sanders Peirce: Published Works I. Electronic Edition.

Part One: 1869-1893

Volume 1

1890

50 (19 June 1890) 492-493: RIBOT'S PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTENTION

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The Psychology of Attention.

By Th. [Ribot](#) . Authorized translation. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company. 1890. 8vo, pp. 121.

CSP, identification: MS 1365; Haskell, *Index to The Nation*. See also: Burks, *Bibliography; List of Articles*.

Every educated man wants to know something of the new psychology. Those who have still to make acquaintance with it will begin with [Ribot's](#) little book on 'Attention,' which all who have made progress in the new science will certainly to read. It is the *chef d'œuvre* of one of the best of those students who have at length erected psychology into a science.

[Ribot](#) regards the doctrine of attention as "the counterpart, the necessary complement, of the theory of association." He means that attention is related to suggestion as inhibition to muscular contraction. Physiologists, however, would scarcely rank *inhibitibility* with contractility as an elementary property of protoplasm. Besides, though suggestion by association is likened to muscular action, how can the analogy be extended to the process of association itself, or the welding together of feelings? This welding seems to be the only law of mental action; and upon it suggestion and inhibition of suggestion alike depend. Attention is said by [Ribot](#) to modify reverie's train of thought by inhibiting certain suggestions, and thereby diverting energy to suggestions not inhibited. This makes the positive element of attention quite secondary. At the same time, we are told the sole incitement to attention is interest. That is to say, a preconceived desire prepares us to seize promptly any occasion for satisfying it. A child's cry, drowned in clatter of talk for others' ears, attracts the mother's attention because she is in some state of preparation for it. [Ribot](#), however, does not remark that to say the mind acts in a prepared way is simply to say it acts from a formed association, such action not being inhibitory. If interest be the sole incitement to attention, it is that the energy spent upon the interesting suggestion leaves none for others, rather than that a positive inhibition of the latter throws waste energy into the former. This only happens when attention is controlled for a conscious purpose. If, in the beginning of his inquiry, [Ribot](#) had discarded the unscientific word "attention," and with it his feeble antithesis of association and attention, the truth would have shone out that the main phenomenon is emotional association, aided in certain cases by acts of inhibition.

The most interesting and valuable parts of the book are those devoted to corporeal concomitants of attention. Evidence is given that in this act parts of the brain receive increase of blood. This must be due to stimulation of the vaso-motor nerves, belonging to the sympathetic system, under the influence of the desire in the interest of which attention is excited. Moreover, in intense attention breath is held, and in every case respiration is slackened. There are, besides, certain muscular actions: in external attention, the eyebrows and the skin of the forehead over them are drawn up, the eyes opened wide and directed to the

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object, the jaw more or less dropped, and the whole body held immobile in an attitude as if approaching the object. In internal attention the brow is contracted, the eyebrow lowered, the lid at least partially closed, the jaw clenched, the lips pursed up, the body usually immobile, preferentially in a sitting posture with the whole arms close to the trunk. There are, however, often motions, as walking up and down. These muscular states are indispensable conditions of attention. "It is impossible to reflect while running at full speed or climb steep ascent." "A child, seven years old," not able to breathe through its nose, owing to a tumor, "had succeeded in learning, during whole year, only the first three letters of the alphabet. Having been operated upon for its adenoid tumor, the same child in a single week learned the entire alphabet."

According to [Ribot](#), these muscular actions are not *aids* to attention, but constitute attention. The notion that we think with our muscles is very attractive to the whole new school. Ask why, and you are told, because "every act of volition, whether impulsive or prohibitory, acts only upon muscles and through muscles; any other conception is vague, incomprehensible, and chimerical." This little burst of emphasis signifies defective evidence. When positive evidence is at hand, it is calmly put in; where prejudices have to be addressed, warmth is in order. The truth is, all these physiological psychologists are "monists." For the connection of soul and body, they have struck a happy compromise between materialism and spiritualism, in holding that mind and matter are simply two aspects of the same thing. If the balance were really preserved between the opposing tendencies, the result would be a doctrine in harmony with philosophic pessimism, but not easily reconciled with observed facts. But is the balance even by the psychophysicists? They say, for example, that unorganized matter feels, if at all, very little. But when we expect the balance this by cases in which mind is barely, if at all, connected with matter, they insist, on the contrary, that the attributes of matter do not admit of augmentation and remission, and that soul only exists as an aspect of that which otherwise appears as corporeal. What is this but making mind to be a special determination of that universal substance which is generally known to us as matter?

And to make mind a specialization of matter would seem, metaphysical phrases apart, to be materialism. In our day, the charge being materialist will scare nobody; and all the facts of life show dependence of soul upon body. Yet common sense will never let that feeling can result from any mechanical contrivance; and sound logic refuses to accept the makeshift hypothesis that consciousness is an "ultimate" property of matter in general or of any chemical substance.

No philosophy will endure which does not freely allow to every reason, every fact, its full force. But this school is for ever exaggerating the resemblances of psychical and physical phenomena, for ever extenuating their differences. Ribot, for example, often speaks of the "mechanism of association," and even attempts to apply to it the physical distinction of potential and kinetic energy. But looking at the matter without prepossession, or with that of a student of mechanics, the analogy between the process of association and any mechanical motion does not appear to be very close. Both are operations governed by law, it

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is true. But the law of mechanics is absolute, prescribing (after two positions are given) the precise point of space where each particle shall be at each instant of time; while the force of association is essentially a gentle one (two ideas that have occurred together having a gentle tendency to suggest one another), and if it were made absolute, ideas would at once be rigidly bound together, and the whole phenomena of learning, or generalization, which is the essence of association, would be put to death.

Again, alike in the physical and the psychical world, we find trains of causation. In the latter, it is the past alone which directly and involuntarily influences the present by association; the future we only divine; and all our efforts are to make our present act conform to our idea of that future. In the physical world, on the contrary, regard being had to the law of the conservation of energy which denies any primordial force dependent on velocity, the past and the future are in relations to the present precisely similar to one another—a fact which appears from the circumstance that, in the equations of motion, the sign of the flow of time may be reversed, provided the signs of the velocities are reversed, the forces being unchanged, and still the formulæ will remain intact. I will not say that these distinctions between mental and mechanical actions are facts large enough to blot out their slight resemblances, for these latter should neither be overlooked nor disregarded; but the distinctions will certainly be prominent in a proportioned view of the subjects. Undoubtedly, there are physical phenomena in which gentle forces seem to act, and others which seem to violate the principle of energy; but these appearances are due to a principle different from a law of motion, namely, to the action of probability. The type of such phenomena is the viscosity of a gas; and the regularity of this, closely approximate but not strictly exact, is due to the countless trillions of molecules which are flying about in all directions with almost every rate of speed. That there is analogy between spreading of motion through a gas by viscosity and association of ideas need not be denied.

In regard to the doctrine that volition consists in, or is an aspect of, muscular contraction or inhibition, it is to be considered that considerable time elapses during the passage of the motor impulse down the nerve. During this interval we seem to be aware of a striving, like that of nightmare. At any rate, something has taken place in which the muscle had no part. The muscle might even be amputated before the impulse reached it. But if a motor impulse can thus be communicated to a nerve fibre to be transmitted onward, how can we be sure that this latter may not abut against a nerve cell instead of against a muscle cell?

Ribot's terminology sometimes seems open to criticism. Of the two forms of attention, that which is governed by the course of outward perceptions and that which is controlled from within by definite purposes, he terms the former *spontaneous* and the latter *voluntary*. Now, suppose a man in a sudden fit of anger blackguards another, can it be said that his speech was *involuntary* simply because it was not controlled? And if he wished to excuse himself on the ground of sudden provocation, would he say that his language was purely *spontaneous*? It would seem better to call every action which is subject to inward control *voluntary*,

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whether actually controlled or not, and to apply the term *spontaneous* only to those acts which are *not* reflexes from external stimuli.

The translation is sufficiently good, and the *Open Court* is doing useful work in publishing such books.

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