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COUE'S CURES

Into the American limelight steps a portly little gentleman recently arrived from France, Emile Coué. In point of appearance he is decidedly uninteresting: short, stout, in dark and baggy habiliment, and wearing a conventional French beard. For all of this matter-of-factness, however, he well supplies by the strength and attractiveness of his personality. He comes to us with something of the wonder-worker clinging to his name, though he roundly resents any such implication. After a month or so of charitable service, he travels back to his "chère patrie" feeling perhaps much as Caesar felt when he penned his immortal record of victory: "I came, I saw, I conquered."

Emile Coué may be a man of one idea, but he has so perfected his idea that everybody seems to know about it, and many are giving it a trial. Sixty-six years of contact with human nature under some of its most sickly aspects, have given him skill and insight in dealing with human ailments. Man is very largely a creature of imagination, and too often it serves him in bad stead. What he needs in the majority of his ills is not so much medication of the body as wholesome guidance and education of the mind and fancy. This fact Coué brings close to our attention with such persistence and singleness of purpose that thousands are now interested in his methods of cure.

Every good doctor is something of a psychologist; and many an insistent patient who fretted under some imaginary complaint has grown well on harmless sugar-pills and colored water. Discarding the make-believe remedy, Coué offers in its place a method of self-cure which he labels "Autosuggestion"¹—a very time-honored product with a new and attractive wrap-

¹v. The Practise of Autosuggestion, by C. H. Brooks. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1922. Pp. 199. \$1.25. A very readable sketch of the principles of Autosuggestion; particularly recommended by Coue himself, who says in a foreward, that Mr. Brooks "has skilfully seized on essentials, and put them forth in a manner that seems to me to be both simple and clear."

per. Ordinarily, the physician has no time to waste on those poor unfortunates who have persuaded themselves that they are going to die. If they are so firmly convinced about the matter, he simply lets them have their way. Coué, on the other hand, has succeeded in arguing, enticing, embarrassing many an afflicted person in the conviction that he is well. "Not so sick" he tells you with Macbeth's doctor, "as troubled with thick-coming fancies." The special excellence about Coué's whole theory is the fact that it works. The well-earned fruits of long years and patient industry find expression in the undying gratitude and benediction of those whom he has benefited. No matter how much we may quarrel with certain of his assertions, here is proof enough in living flesh and blood, in happy faces and blooming cheeks, to show the value of his methods.

There were others who studied in the field of autosuggestion before Coué, Bernheim for example, years ago gave the classic definition of autosuggestion when he called it the conversion of an idea into action. Liebault developed this principle into a famous school of hypnotism. Coué was a young man at the time, living in Nancy, and he became thoroughly interested in the phenomena of hypnosis. He was far from pleased, however, at results. Recognizing that the chief factor in trance-states and induced sleep is suggestion, he rejected all the trappings and strange meaningless artifices of Liebault's methods, and made a direct and open appeal to the imagination. This is the basis of the entire system of autosuggestion, which, in the hands of Coué, has received such definite shape and character.

Do you wish to feel well? asks Coué. Then fill your mind with ideas of health, courage, and interest in the glowing things of life; stock your fancy with images of new bodily vigor; affirm with faith the realization of your desires; and leave the rest to the work of nature.² The whole process may be crystalized in Coué's formula which has become for sufferers a sort of morning and evening prayer of hope: "Day by day, in every way, I'm getting better and better." Such is Couéism reduced

²v. Self-healing Simplified, by G. L. Perin. New York: Geo. H. Doran. Pp. 230. We can very well understand from his earnestness and simplicity how the teachings of Dr. Perin have done so much good. He develops his system of suggestion on what is called the "yes-idea" or the affirmation of that state of mind or body which we wish to possess. His book emphasizes the moral aspect of suggestion.

to essentials. Its secret, in native simplicity, is old and trite; but so novel is its dress that people find an attraction in it.

In setting forth the process of autosuggestion, Coué begins by describing the functions of the conscious and unconscious minds. These terms, let it be remembered, should not be taken to signify two entirely different minds in man, as Coué seems to imply. Rather do they serve to indicate that from one and the same mind, proceed activities of a double nature. Those mental processes to which we give our full and wide-awake attention are said to arise from the conscious mind; while those that are only vaguely heeded, or recognized in some dim and indistinct manner, as in dreams or reverie, are referred to the unconscious or subconscious mind. It is to this latter condition of mind that Coué directs his special study.

Really there is very little known about the unconscious mind since it seems so loathe to deliver up its mysteries. Coué calls it the residence of limitless possibilities, the power that controls all our organic functions. But this much is certain in the matter, that in the deep undercurrents of our mental life lie buried, in some residual form, the thoughts, memories, and impressions which we have experienced from infancy to the present. Often when asleep, we seem to release hidden forces within us; ideas flow with surprising facility, past happenings are recalled, our conversation is livelier than usual and less impeded. All this is a part of our mental being to which we give scant attention when awake; often it fades away entirely as we rise into consciousness. We cannot appeal to it directly, for it seems to elude any day-light analysis. Still it is not distinct from our conscious mental life, but rather a continuance of it.

Our conscious and unconscious psychic states are in constant interaction with one another. Every thought that finds expression in the full light of consciousness submerges itself into the region of the unconscious. If welcomed there it becomes an element of our lives, and plays its part in supervising and determining our mental and physical condition. Reach this fertile plain of the unconscious, plant it with ideas of health, water it with the daily formula. Soon the seed will sprout and grow under the heat of your imagination. Slowly or rapidly, as the case may be, the process continues, until at last you can say that you are either cured of your troubles, or greatly benefited.

How can the unconscious mind exercise such beneficial influence upon the physical condition, one quite naturally asks? That is hard to say; but the explanation which Coué offers is very interesting, even if it does not altogether satisfy. The unconscious mind, he tells us, is ever on the alert to what is passing within the body. It is the little servant, so to speak, that tends to the work of our most vital processes—a very faithful attendant indeed, and always ready at your slightest beckon. So impressionable is this “petit valet” that if you say or even think that you are well, it believes you, and straightway carries the good news to every nerve and muscle of your body. At once you begin to feel better. But should you be so unwise as to think or mention that you are unwell, your servant takes your word for it and hurries round to tell the different organs your extremely bad opinion of them. Then things will go wrong, and worst of all, you will have richly deserved your fate for having been so foolish.³ This transformation of an idea into a part of our being is what we mean by autosuggestion.

There is a strong presumption, however, that much of the unconscious activity just described is nothing more than the influence of imaginative impressions upon the body. The imagination is one of man's never-wearying faculties, the source of creation as well as lofty inspiration. Its vivid perceptions are continually besetting us, particularly in semi-wake or unconscious states. More than this, the imagination is a kind of registrar of all that goes on in body and mind, and leaves deep traces of its operations upon the physical organism. In this respect we may simply identify the functions of imagination and the unconscious self, as Coué himself does in more than one instance.

The entire system of autosuggestion rests upon the fact that ideas or images may at times actually transform our bodily states. Catholic philosophers have always taught that the body and soul of man are so intimately united that one vitally affects the other.⁴ Here then, in modern psychology, is full substantiation of Catholic doctrine. At this juncture it may

³v. Emile Coué: *the Man and His Work*, by Hugh Macnaghten. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. Pp. 53. \$1.00. A buoyant, somewhat overdrawn appreciation of Coué and autosuggestion. Also a brief story of the author's own cure.

⁴v. St. Thomas: *Summa*, Ia: q. 110: art. 2: ad lum.

be well to remark the repeated confusion of the terms thought and image in the writings of the autosuggestionists. In reality, thought and image are as distinct from each other as spirit is from matter. Thought is born of the intellect whereas the image, arising from the fancy, is but a material and sensible factor in our mental life. The mind and imagination work together, and their joint efforts are strong enough to determine pain, movement, and sensation.⁵ A slight indisposition or a temporary complaint may be overcome by simply ignoring its existence or by occupying ourselves with some pleasant duty. Again, if the cause of our troubles is nothing more tangible than an idea which has realized itself in the unconscious mind, then should we reasonably look to find the cure for such troubles in ideas of an opposite and compensating nature. One may see at a glance why neurotic patients, who are so highly imaginative and so delicately open to suggestion, should receive such special benefits from Coué's method.

It is interesting to note that many changes which were hitherto regarded as organic in basis, such as stammering, trembling, and stage-fright, have yielded to the forces of auto-suggestion. Of course when it is a question of organic lesions inflicted by deep cuts, or of the wasting of tissues through malignant growths like cancer, then recourse must be had to surgery or medication. But even in these cases, strange to say, suggestion has done marvellous things. Where it cannot cure it frequently relieves symptoms, and disposes the organism for healthy action and unbroken regularity. In all this we are forced to recognize how vast are the recuperative powers of nature when released from the choking grasp and inhibiting effect of noxious thoughts.

Coué seems to be very grudging in his compliments to the will, but extremely effusive in praising the imagination. Undoubtedly the imagination plays a heavy role in our lives. In fact, only too often people exert little or no voluntary control over its action, and as a result they become the slaves of whim and passion. Still, we must not lose sight of the function of the will in the practise of autosuggestion. Coué, in his system, lays greatest emphasis on imagination and thought as factors for cure. But at the same time he must, implicitly at

⁵ v. St. Thomas: De Potentia: q. 6: art. 3: ad lum.

least, acknowledge the force and value of the will as an agent in autosuggestion. For if the imagination is to produce a healthful effect upon the body, it must receive proper guidance. The will can set thought and image in motion, and under normal circumstances can also regulate their course. This may be done in either of two ways: by direct interference, when the will, immediately upon its bidding, changes the tide of thought or image-play into other channels; or through indirect attack, when it succeeds in introducing new currents of thought and imagery strong enough to check the old. Autosuggestion uses the force of will in both these ways to counteract the influence of harmful thoughts and impressions. When once the mind and fancy have been started in the right direction, then the will may become quiescent. In fact, at this point, it were better that the will withdraw from the scene in order to give mind and imagination full room for performing their parts. Before long, a man will have grown into the habit of wholesome thinking; in soundness of mind he will after a time find soundness of body.

A practical application of the theories of autosuggestion to mental and moral disorders has met with fair results. The possibilities of the new system have been laid before social workers and experts in diseases of the mind. Some of them welcome the idea with enthusiasm. It has been further shown what a factor for good the use of suggestion may become in the training of the child. The unconscious powers of youth are far more accessible than the adult's, the will bends easier, and impressions more readily realize themselves in internal and external action. These impressions form the very substance of the child's growing life, and if we supply faulty material the resultant structure will be unstable. All that applies to the development of body, pertains with equal weight and more consequence to the culture of mind and morals in the child. This is nothing else than the psychology of common sense.

Coué has enlisted many devotees in his cause and some are disposed to push his theories beyond reasonable bounds. With the method of self-cure as Coué advocates it we can find no fault; quite the contrary, one can bring a decidedly sane attitude toward the practise of autosuggestion. There is no necessity of submitting oneself to the hypnotic power of an operator who can unscrupulously use his point of advantage over his

patient. Nor must we delve into the mysteries of sex and psychoanalysis before we can become adepts in the new system of self-healing. Coué is hailed as one of our great benefactors. It is said that 40,000 sufferers pass through his hands at Nancy every year, and out of these nearly 39,000 are cured or noticeably bettered.

There is one application of the principles of autosuggestion to which every Catholic must take exception. We refer to the miracles of Christ. Coué believes that many of the miracles wrought by Our Saviour were the result of autosuggestion. We rebel at this thought. If by autosuggestion he means the gift of inspiring great faith and confidence, it is true to the core. But he hardly intends it this way. Rather he means to imply that many of those who were presumably cured by Christ were in reality cured by their own native powers through the force of suggestions thrown out by our Lord. It is the old story of animosity to Christ's divine character. First they made Him a fakir, then a hypnotist; now they say He used autosuggestion. Let us always remember that the trust which Our Lord inspired was not in any secret, unconscious, or imaginary forces of nature, but in Himself, to Whom "was given all power in heaven and on earth."

All new-devised systems have a tendency to swerve toward extremes. Time and experience will render their sober judgment on the merits of autosuggestion after they have subjected its theories to corrective influences. Couéism, however, will do no one any harm unless it is abused. Just at present it is on the high crest of a wave of popular enthusiasm—certainly not a very stable position. The kernel of truth that is to be found in Monsieur Coué's doctrines will be weighed, appreciated, and absorbed for future use. The unacceptable or unproved statements will be rejected. Perhaps before the volatile essence of Couéism has been fully caught, a quickly forgetting world, hailing the exponent of some new system, will be crying out to Coué as he bids his patients say to pain: "Ca passe, c'est passé," "It's going, it's gone."

—Bro. Edward Brennan, O. P.