The Science of Human Nature

A Psychology for Beginners
A Beginner's Guide to Understanding the Human Mind

by William Henry Pyle

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The Science of Human Nature

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Preface
Message to the Reader

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Introduction

Most books about the mind begin with a theory. An early example in this book considers a stone on a mountaintop. A person who walks past it sees a stone. A scientist sees a seabed, millions of years of sediment, and a crust that buckled and lifted. That small picture sets up the whole project of The Science of Human Nature: people can be looked at the same way, as events with causes that can be found, traced, and even predicted.

William Henry Pyle wrote it for high school and normal school students, which means teenagers and future teachers. His aim was to give them a working knowledge of the laws of human behavior, and he says plainly that no study is more valuable to a young person than self-study. The questions he lists on the first page are ones anyone might ask. Why do people act as they do? How can people change themselves? How can people change others? How can people become more effective?

The book is organized into ten chapters with a practical educational purpose, and it moves briskly from the foundations of psychology to memory, habit, thinking, and the testing of human abilities. It reads like a window onto a young science, written when psychology was still working out what kind of knowledge it was.

A Young Science Goes to School

Part of the pleasure of this book is its date. Psychology was a new academic subject when Pyle wrote, a few decades past the founding of the first laboratories devoted to it, and it was eager to prove that it was useful. Wilhelm Wundt opened his laboratory at Leipzig in 1879, and students from many countries carried his methods home with them. William James published his Principles of Psychology in 1890. Within a single generation, the study of the mind had begun to move out of philosophy and

into laboratories, lecture halls, and schools. Pyle shares that eagerness. He argues that knowledge of human nature belongs in every field where someone needs to understand why people do what they do: teaching, choosing workers for jobs, the courtroom, advertising, medicine.

Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon published their scale for measuring children's intelligence in France in 1905, and Lewis Terman issued his Stanford revision of it in 1916. Measuring minds was a fresh and exciting idea in those years, and it shaped what teachers and school boards hoped psychology could do for them. Several of those uses are now familiar parts of the modern world, and seeing them sketched as bright possibilities is oddly moving. During World War I, psychologists examined well over a million army recruits with written tests. That was a scale of use that nobody in 1900 could have pictured. A book from the years just before and during that effort catches the field at the point where hope was running highest.

The book also gives a clear view of questions that are still alive. How much of a person is inherited and how much learned? How does a habit form? What makes one mind differ from another, and can the difference be measured? Hugo Münsterberg, born in Danzig and working at Harvard, published On the Witness Stand in 1908, a study of how reliable human testimony really is. He followed it with a book on psychology and industrial efficiency in 1913. Pyle's list of practical uses grows out of exactly this kind of work, and he draws on it freely.

Pyle was an American educator and psychologist, and his book belongs to the movement that made psychology a central subject in teacher training. His preface names the writers he leans on most, Titchener, Pillsbury, and Münsterberg, who were leading figures in the psychology of his day. Normal schools, which trained teachers, had existed in the United States since the first public one opened in Massachusetts in 1839. By the early twentieth century, a course in psychology was becoming a

standard part of preparing to teach. Pyle wrote for a classroom that was only then taking shape.

He does not pretend to offer a complete textbook. He chose the topics that young students could study with interest and benefit, and the choice shows in the plain, practical way he handles each one. Pyle calls the book a manual. Before the first chapter begins, he speaks separately to the teacher and to the student, which shows how firmly it was built for a classroom, with a person at the front of the room guiding a group through each topic.

The book also holds an unusual mix of authority and humility. Pyle insists that a person cannot learn human nature from a book. Students must check each claim against their own minds and the behavior of their neighbors. In his view the exercises are the most valuable part of the book, and the psychological attitude, the habit of looking for causes, matters even more than the facts. He limits the reading list on purpose. Many of his readers had no library nearby, and he fears that wide reading would confuse beginners who have not yet formed a point of view of their own. Only the strongest students, he says, will gain much from the references.

Pyle's Stone and the Pin

The setup is simple. A teacher and a room of young students are about to begin the study of themselves, and Pyle offers himself as the guide. The question he raises is whether human conduct can be studied as steadily and as lawfully as the motion of planets or the behavior of chemicals.

The voice is that of a patient schoolteacher, clear and direct, fond of homely examples. He explains the difference between a person and a table by imagining a pin pushed into the leg of each. He compares the scientist's trust in nature's regularity to the chemist's confidence that an element will behave tomorrow as it did today. Sentences are plain, definitions come early, and each idea is laid down before the next is built on it.

The first two chapters ask the most of a newcomer, and Pyle says so. They set out what science is, then describe the long development of the human race and of the individual. Those who find them dry can take them as a foundation and move on, since the later chapters on habit, memory, and thinking are more concrete and closer to daily life. The book ends with a list of references for class reading, a small guide to the sources that shaped it.

Causes, Choice, and Education

Pyle announces that human action has causes and that a person's behavior can in principle be predicted. The argument moves by definition and example, in short paragraphs. Pyle often pauses to restate a point in slightly different words before going on, as a good teacher does at a blackboard. The pace is steady rather than dramatic, and the tone is earnest and hopeful, with very little irony. What will he make of the sense that personal choices feel free? His account raises the problem of the gap between observing other people's behavior and knowing one's own mind.

A second thread is the line between inherited characteristics and abilities acquired through learning. He sorts actions into those that are unlearned and those that are acquired. How firm will that line turn out to be, and what does it mean for anyone hoping to change themselves? Technical words such as stimulus, sensation, and habit are defined on the spot, usually in a single sentence, so no background in science is needed. The book assumes only curiosity and a willingness to look at oneself and at the people nearby.

A third is his large hope for education. He lists four questions the science of education must answer, beginning with its aim and the nature of the child. The numbered list of four questions shows his habit of marking each step so that a class can follow along and discuss the points one at a time. He also addresses the

student directly, often with the phrase let us, to bring the reader along through each stage of the reasoning.

Which of his answers still sound right, and which show the assumptions of his time? Some of the science belongs plainly to its day. He speaks of vibrations in the ether affecting the eye, a phrase that physics later dropped. These dated touches give the book much of its charm, and the clear, practical manner keeps it easy to follow.

Few textbooks reveal so openly what a young science believed it could do for the person holding the book.

Author's Preface

This book is written for young people in high schools and normal schools. No knowledge can be more useful to a young person than knowledge of oneself; no study can be more valuable than self-study. This book aims to study the laws of human behavior.

What is human nature like? Why do we act as we do? How can we change ourselves? How can we change others? How can we become more effective? How can we make our lives more worthwhile? This book is a manual intended to help young people gain enough knowledge of human nature to answer these questions.

I have not tried to write a complete textbook on psychology. Many such books already exist, and some are good ones. I have chosen to cover only topics that young students can study with interest and benefit. I have tried throughout to keep in mind the practical value of the subjects discussed and the ability and experience of the intended readers.

To the Teacher

This book can only serve as a guide for you. You are to help your students study human nature. To some extent, you must be a psychologist yourself before you can teach psychology. You must be a careful, scientific student of human nature yourself. Foster in your students a spirit of inquiry and investigation. Teach them to look to their own minds and their neighbors' actions to verify the text's statements. Have students answer through observation and experiment the questions and problems raised in the text and exercises. The exercises should prove to be the most valuable part of the book. The first two chapters are the most difficult, but they should be read before the rest of the book is studied. If you think it best, simply read these two chapters

with the students, then return to them for careful study after finishing the book.

In the references, I have provided related readings, mostly from Titchener, Pillsbury, and Münsterberg. I have deliberately kept the references limited, partly because many readers may not have access to a library, and partly because young students are likely to be confused by extensive reading from different sources before they have developed some kind of system and their own point of view. Only the most capable students in a high school class will be able to benefit much from the references provided.

To the Student

You are beginning the study of human nature. You cannot study human nature from a book; you must study yourself and your neighbors. This book may help you know what to look for and understand what you find, but it can do little more. It is true that this text gives you many facts learned by psychologists, but you must verify its statements, or at least understand their significance for you, or they will be of no value to you. However, properly understood and absorbed, the facts discussed here should prove very valuable. Perhaps even more valuable will be the psychological frame of mind or attitude you should develop. The psychological attitude means seeking to find and understand the causes of human action, and the causes, consequences, and significance of the processes of the human mind. If your first course in psychology teaches you to look for these things, helps you develop some skill in finding them and using the knowledge once you have it, your study should be worthwhile.

W. H. Pyle.

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