

Law of Mind

1891 | The Architecture of Theories | W 8:104-5; CP 6.21-3

The one primary and fundamental law of mental action consists in a tendency to generalization. Feeling tends to spread; connections between feelings awaken feelings; neighboring feelings become assimilated; ideas are apt to reproduce themselves. These are so many formulations of the one law of the growth of mind. When a disturbance of feeling takes place, we have a consciousness of gain, the gain of experience; and a new disturbance will be apt to assimilate itself to the one that preceded it. Feelings, by being excited, become more easily excited, especially in the ways in which they have previously been excited. The consciousness of such a habit constitutes a general conception.

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The law of habit exhibits a striking contrast to all physical laws in the character of its commands. A physical law is absolute. What it requires is an exact relation. Thus, a physical force introduces into a motion a component motion to be combined with the rest by the parallelogram of forces; but the component motion must actually take place exactly as required by the law of force. On the other hand, no exact conformity is required by the mental law. Nay, exact conformity would be in downright conflict with the law; since it would instantly crystallize thought and prevent all further formation of habit. The law of mind only makes a given feeling *more likely* to arise. It thus resembles the “non-conservative” forces of physics, such as viscosity and the like, which are due to statistical uniformities in the chance encounters of trillions of molecules.

1892 | The Law of Mind and Our Glassy Essence | W 8:129

...if the law of habit were absolute, there would be no room for the formation of new habits; now precisely all that psychical law does is to regulate the formation of habits.

1892 | The Law of Mind | W 8:136; CP 6.104

Logical analysis applied to mental phenomena shows that there is but one law of mind, namely, that ideas tend to spread continuously and to affect certain others which stand to them in a peculiar relation of affectibility. In this spreading they lose intensity, and especially the power of affecting others, but gain generality and become welded with other ideas.

One of the most marked features about the law of mind is that it makes time to have a definite direction of flow from past to future. The relation of past to future is, in reference to the law of mind, different from the relation of future to past. This makes one of the great contrasts between the law of mind and the law of physical force, where there is no more distinction between the two opposite directions in time than between moving northward and moving southward.

In order, therefore, to analyze the law of mind, we must begin by asking what the flow of time consists in.

Let me now try to gather up all these odds and ends of commentary and restate the law of mind, in a unitary way.

First, then, we find that when we regard ideas from a nominalistic, individualistic, sensualistic way, the simplest facts of mind become utterly meaningless. That one idea should resemble another or influence another, or that one state of mind should so much as be thought of in another, is, from that standpoint, sheer nonsense.

Second, by this and other means we are driven to perceive, what is quite evident of itself, that instantaneous feelings flow together into a continuum of feeling, which has in a modified degree the peculiar vivacity of feeling and has gained generality. And in reference to such general ideas, or continua of feeling, the difficulties about resemblance and suggestion and reference to the external cease to have any force.

Third, these general ideas are not mere words, nor do they consist in this, that certain concrete facts will every time happen under certain descriptions of conditions; but they are just as much, or rather far more, living realities than the feelings themselves out of which they are concentered. And to say that mental phenomena are governed by law does not mean merely that they are describable by a general formula; but that there is a living idea, a conscious continuum of feeling, which pervades them, and to which they are docile.

Fourth, this supreme law, which is the celestial and living harmony, does not so much as demand that the special ideas shall surrender their peculiar arbitrariness and caprice entirely; for that would be self-destructive. It only requires that they shall influence and be influenced by one another.

Fifth, in what measure this unification acts, seems to be regulated only by special rules; or, at least, we cannot in our present knowledge say how far it goes. But it may be said that, judging by appearances, the amount of arbitrariness in the phenomena of human minds is neither altogether trifling nor very prominent.

1893 | Grand Logic 1893: Division III. Substantial Study of Logic Chapter VI. The Essence of Reasoning | CP 7.467

A concept is the living influence upon us of a *diagram*, or *icon*, with whose several parts are connected in thought an equal number of feelings or ideas. The law of mind is that feelings and ideas attach themselves in thought so as to form systems. But the icon is not always clearly apprehended. We may not know at all what it is; or we may have learned it by the observation of nature.

1898 | Cambridge Lectures on Reasoning and the Logic of Things: Habit | RLT 241; CP 7.515

The most plastic of all things is the human mind, and next after that comes the organic world, the world of protoplasm. Now the generalizing tendency is the great law of mind, the law of association, the law of habit taking. We also find in all active protoplasm a tendency to take habits. Hence I was led to the hypothesis that the laws of the universe have been formed under a universal tendency of all things toward generalization and habit-taking.

1902 | Uniformity | CP 6.101

The hypothesis suggested by the present writer is that all laws are results of evolution; that underlying all other laws is the only tendency which can grow by its own virtue, the tendency of all things to take habits. Now since this same tendency is the one sole fundamental law of mind, it follows that the physical evolution works towards ends in the same way that mental action works towards ends, and thus in one aspect of the matter it would be perfectly true to say that final causation is alone primary. Yet, on the other hand, the law of habit is a simple formal law, a law of efficient causation; so that either way of regarding the matter is equally true, although the former is more fully intelligent.

1902 | Minute Logic: Chapter II. Prelogical Notions. Section I. Classification of the Sciences (Logic II) | CP 1.269-270

Mind has its universal mode of action, namely, by final causation. The microscopist looks to see whether the motions of a little creature show any purpose. If so, there is mind there. Passing from the little to the large, natural selection is the theory of how forms come to be adaptive, that is, to be governed by a *quasi* purpose. It suggests a machinery of efficiency to bring about the end - a machinery inadequate perhaps - yet which must contribute some help toward the result. But the being governed by a purpose or other final cause is the very essence of the psychical phenomenon, in general. [—]

But under this universal law of mind, there are other laws, it may be equally ubiquitous yet not so abstract. There is, first of all, the great law of association (including fusion), a principle strikingly analogous to gravitation, since it is an attraction between ideas. There are, besides, other general phenomena of mind not explicable by association.

1902 | Minute Logic: Chapter II. Prelogical Notions. Section I. Classification of the Sciences (Logic II) | CP 7.368

...according to the law of dynamics, no change of motion can take place except through accelerations which are dependent exclusively upon the mutual positions of particles or parts of matter; and according to the law of mind, no idea can arise except by virtue of an association. These propositions cannot properly be said to be proved; but they are postulated; and for the sake of argument we may admit that they are strictly true.