

CHAPTER 8

The Natural Inertia of Human Habits

The birth of our scientific age came when Galileo and Newton abandoned the old habit of attempting to study natural phenomena by reading old textbooks. They started putting questions directly to nature by making experiments and observations. The most important fact disclosed in this way was the Law of inertia which will always remain one of the basic laws of nature. Galileo's law of inertia, as formulated by Newton, stated that every material body remains in its state of rest or uniform rectilinear motion as long as no forces are acted upon it. The value and usefulness of this law can be recognized by the impact on society exerted by science based on Galileo's and Newton's physics.

In the same way perhaps it might help you to understand yourselves and each other when you realize that an analogous or similar law seems to be valid for human activities too. Both the inertia of rest and the inertia of motion can be observed in human habits and trends. The inertia of rest is shown by the general tendency to retain habits, attitudes, and patterns of thought under wholly changed external conditions. Failure to change or adapt to realities can be observed in the relations of the individual to his environment. You should remember that what was right yesterday is not necessarily right today. A great many people retain their childhood and act accordingly long after physical maturity has been reached. When the middle-aged matron dresses in the manner of her teenage daughter, her biological and psychological maturity obviously have not developed hand in hand. The fifty-year-old pramster who is the eternal youth is another example of inertia of rest shown by his heraloss tendency to retain childish habits.

Our customs and our ways of life as well as our mode of thinking, our conceptions of right and wrong, decent and indecent, are the results of gradual adaptation of human society to its environment. In the long run changing conditions will produce changes in our habits, but natural inertia causes any adequate adaptation to lag behind. This phenomenon of lagging, or missed adaptation, belongs to those psychological facts which you may observe in individual or group behavior. The grown-up juvenile, already mentioned, forgets that he is no longer a teenager, and makes a fool of himself by acting like an adolescent. His inertia has kept him from adaptation to change.

In contrast to these relatively harmless examples, the missed adaptation or inertia of rest of larger groups or entire nations is much more serious. Far back in history the classic war ideology made sense when small civilized communities were threatened by nomads or predatory neighbors. In those days the moral conception of good citizenship gave top priority to bravery, to soldierly spirit, to blind obedience for the defense of the endangered community or nation. Since then, however, the radical change in weaponry has shifted the emphasis from that of conquest and glorious victory to deterrence or discouragement through fear of consequences. Today the idea of armaments and weapon technique is no longer their possible use but rather the prevention of the necessity of using them.

This complete change in military technique is unfortunately not paralleled by an adequate change in attitudes. In the minds of many individuals, military ambitions, vanities, ideas of heroism and good citizenship are nearly the same in the atomic age as they were during the Grecian wars, or the Crusades, or our Revolutionary War.

Besides the mental inertia of rest, you can observe both in individuals and also in groups the inertia of motion. Let us take, for example, the story of a man called Joe. He was born in a family which lived under conditions of extreme poverty but was a highly-gifted boy who turned out to be one of the best pupils in his classes at school. Usually poorly clad, however, and unable on account of his parents' poverty to share any of the pleasures and amenities of his school friends, he feels frustrated. He feels this frustration even more because he sees clearly that these boys of wealthy parents are much less gifted than he. It is, therefore, quite understandable that in a boy like Joe the drive is aroused to free himself from the problems caused by poverty and to break away from the misery of his parental home into a better life. With this force behind him, Joe the bright young man gets a job in a firm where he can make the best of any opportunity offered. He soon succeeds in becoming an efficient business man until he is made the chief executive of a large corporation. So far it looks as if this were a very simple and commonplace story. Joe has reached his goal and may feel satisfied and happy. Observing the case closer, we find the sordid side of the matter. Joe's goal to emerge from his unhappy life was attained when he became a well-to-do employee of a good firm with a normal amount of work and a normal burden of responsibility. But at this point with sufficient income to lead a comfortable and good life, Joe's activity once under way does not stop. The inertia of motion takes precedence. To earn money — originally the means for leading a full and significant life — becomes an aim in itself. He is like the fanatic who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his goal. The endeavor to ascend further into the sky among the very wealthy is continued, irrespective of all other implications in Joe's career. His income is far higher than he needs for his and his family's life. Instead of being a blessing, it becomes a curse. His wife and

children become idlers, and Joe himself will have no opportunity at all to enjoy his wealth because his life is filled with conferences, travel, meetings. The result of the constant overstress is the inevitable executives' disease. Joe suffers the sad fate of the man who during the better part of his life wastes his health earning money and during the rest of his life wastes his money in the vain attempt to recover his health. Superficially his goal of becoming rich has been reached; practically the underlying aim of leading a happier life has failed.

Frequently any collective or single action, any political or religious movement, sensibly though it may have begun, is subject to the temptation to roll on once it is under way. This is how mobs develop. This is how the force or action or intellectual trend may move forward until damage is done or the exact opposite of the original aim has been attained.

More details and examples of this topic will be given you when discussing false attitudes and thinking habits and degenerating efforts, a consequence of inertia.