

HEALTH AND HYGIENE

A Revolutionary Thesis

"WE are fearfully and wonderfully made." The fact should be borne in upon us to-day, when a myriad cults and cures assert their pretensions to the direction of our bodily or mental well-being as never before. Curiously, most of our mentors tend to concentrate their attention on one aspect of our dual being or the other. It has apparently not occurred to either party to seek to combine both needs. Similarly, the majority of us accept the Psalmist statement with complacent acquiescence.

In the meantime our physical deterioration as a race continues—or so it is dinned into ears from all sides.

I am vexed by these considerations after reading a book written by a man who has had the courage and the determination to think and reason for himself. Like most men who insist on thinking for themselves and not in the groove hollowed out by orthodoxy and authority, he is uncomfortable because his book jerks its reader from his accustomed mental rut. It gives him to think, and to think for ourselves on matters that concern us most nearly is precisely the effort most of us, by training and temperament, are at pains to avoid.

In many respects Mr. Alexander's brochure (so he calls it himself), "Man's Supreme Inheritance,"* is revolutionary. It runs tilt against most of our authorised conceptions; against our accepted philosophy of life. Its assault is so vigorous, its challenge so urgent, that it leaves the reader for the moment a little dazed. Then the lucidity of its style and the insistent logic of its

argument prevail, and he begins to study it and to wonder. Then he begins to hope for an opportunity of studying the fuller work which the author promises.

In the meanwhile this instalment is enough to go on with. Its significance seems to me to lie in the fact that it is the first attempt on scientific lines to bring the conflicting methods of physical and psychical therapeutics into harmony, to substitute co-operation for antagonism between the often incompatible claims of physical and mental treatment.

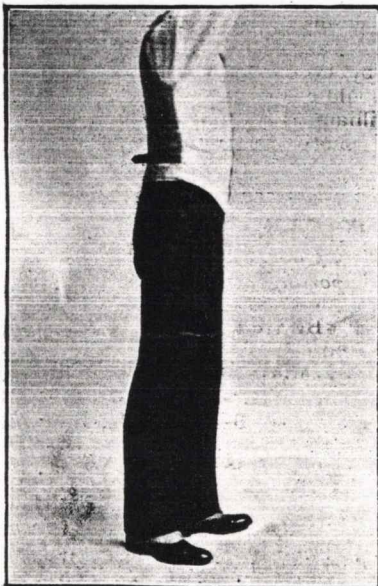
Mr. Alexander has been in practice in London for several years. His treatment has won the endorsement of many medical men of repute. I have at first hand accounts of the remarkable benefit derived from his treatment in most unpromising cases. These considerations would probably not have affected me over much if I had not had the opportunity of studying the theory and the principles on which his treatment is based for myself. In publishing this book, its author has taken a bold step. In accordance with the highest ethics of the medical profession—which many regular practitioners seem fonder of preaching than of practising—he has given the essentials of his methods to the world in plain intelligible language for him who runs to read. By this action he has absolved his practice of all suspicion of charlatany.

To return for a minute to the cardinal thesis on which the whole of the author's theory and practice depend. In a word, he claims that civilised man has to-day stepped, as it were, outside of the cycle of evolution. It is a stupendous claim, yet its author urges it with arguments that challenge attention. By virtue of the development of its intellect, the human race, he claims, has in many respects shaken itself

free from the laws evolution impresses on the rest of the natural world. The safeguards of his artificial civilisation are so strong that they tend in his case to modify and adapt many of the natural laws of selection, so far as we understand them. His existence to-day is "out of tune" with Nature, however far it may please him to revert to the "simple life" of his nut-eating ancestors. Herein lies at once his peril in the present and his hope for the future. The danger is that he has lost his physical equilibrium, the pose, the just balance that Nature maintains in the material world; the hope that the same mental force that enabled him to advance to this vantage point of perilous isolation, may show him the way to adapt himself to his strange conditions. Literally, he no longer knows how to maintain himself in stable equilibrium on his own feet. He has to learn it afresh.

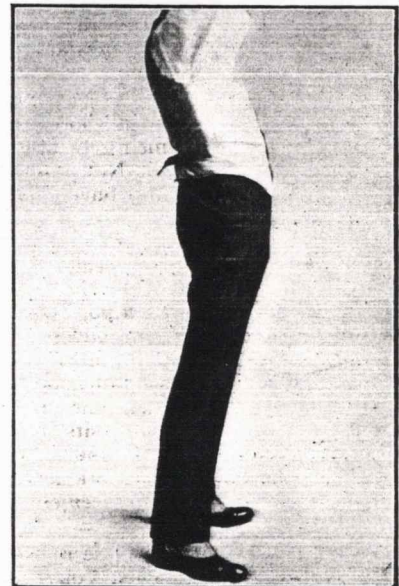
In place, therefore, of physical culture or purely psychic therapeutics as a safeguard against the deterioration engendered by an artificial existence, Mr. Alexander's theory indicates a system of what I can only describe as psycho-physiological treatment, whereby the conscious intellect or will power may be trained to control the sub-conscious functions of mind and body. It is, indeed, a big proposition. But the application of this theory to practice is so fascinating and suggestive that I hope to have an opportunity of referring to it again.

* "Man's Supreme Inheritance." By J. Matthias Alexander. (Methuen.)



Correct

The photograph on the right illustrates the pose of faulty equilibrium due to standing with the heels slightly apart and the toes out, which the ordinary civilian habitually adopts, or with heels together, our military training insists on, and the Board of Education inculcates in our schools. Physical deterioration is clearly indicated in the protruding abdomen and the hollow back. The figure on the left shows the physiologically correct position of the feet for perfect equilibrium, which secures the desirable poise of the body and pose of the chest, and therefore makes for health and the minimum of effort in movement.



Incorrect

[Photos by R. Haines

HEALTH & HYGIENE

A Plea for Re-education

THE value of any theory, scientific or otherwise, depends upon its application to practice, and daring in its challenge as Mr. Alexander's thesis of "Man's Supreme Inheritance" may be, its importance, less to this perhaps than to succeeding generations, lies in the conclusions he has drawn from it, and on which he has based the principles of his practice.

To recapitulate briefly, the author claims that the human race has, with the advance of civilisation, stepped by sheer effort of conscious will outside those great general laws of evolution that govern the rest of the universe. As the author of "The Golden Bough" has finely phrased it, the curtain has been rung down on savagery for ever. The iron laws of the survival of the fittest and of natural selection no longer obtain, or, rather, the issues they present are specialised. Herein lies at once the danger and the hope of mankind. By easing, so far as civilised man is concerned, the task of providing for his daily food needs, by mitigating in some cases—as, for example in small-pox and the plague—by eliminating the ravages of diseases which used to decimate whole nations, we inevitably tend to perpetuate a breed of the less fit.

It was a danger that Malthus foresaw, and was hooted at for his pains. Now, in its most sinister aspect of physical deterioration, it confronts us in every street of our great towns. Ricketty infancy leads up to a youth in which bad habits are, if not positively confirmed, not counteracted, and this, in turn, conduces to a debilitated physique at adult age. But in the same source from which the danger arises lies the hope of its remedy. The same power of conscious will—which, if I read him aright, is what Mr. Alexander has in his mind, when he speaks of "Man's Supreme Inheritance"—that was powerful enough to raise the human race above the main drift of evolution may, if properly directed, prevail to check and to remedy the physical deterioration it has brought about.

In other words, the danger is that which inevitably attends the transition from one great phase of development to another.

Granted that the human race, by conscious effort of the will, prevails to check and control physical deterioration attendant on advanced civilisation, then new horizons open up for the future of the race. The safeguard lies in the development and supremacy of the conscious will. Just as the will to live, the

primeval instinct of self-preservation, has before now kept death at bay for the individual, so the will to achieve physical fitness may prevail against the threatened danger of physical deterioration.

To understand the author, who has a lively dread of embroiling himself in any metaphysical side issues, it is necessary to consider his argument at this point a little more closely in detail. Every action of the human mechanism is dictated by the will. All exercise of the will is either conscious or, to use a convenient word without prejudice, subconscious. When you, for example, extend your hand to dip your pen into the inkpot, the will dictates the action to the brain, which consciously transmits it to the muscles of the arm and hand involved in the action. But there are many functions of the human body which are exercised subconsciously, in the sense of without conscious effort of the will. For instance, the action of the heart, of the lungs, and of the digestive tract are well-known examples. Yet in all of them considerable muscular action is involved. Mr. Alexander's argument is that, under careful training, the will can inhibit and direct the subconscious functions of the body, just as it controls its conscious actions. As a case in point he cites the case of a Hindoo who, by conscious control of the cardiac muscles, could stop his heart beating.

The inter-relationship of mind and body, and the control the mind exercises over the body, which Mr. Alexander, without boggling overmuch about the niceties of terminology, seems to include in the will, is nowadays one of the accepted truisms on which all the variations and permutations of mental or psychical therapeutics are based.

Physical deterioration is, in the minds of the vast majority of people, associated with enfeebled muscular development. It is, of course, not necessarily anything of the kind. A man, for example, may often be—deteriorate in such vital functions as the proper equilibrium of the body, or in the vital functions of the respiratory system, and still be muscularly a model to delight a sculptor's eyes. The whole of the fallacy of what is known as the "physical culture" vogue lies in attaching undue consideration to the development of certain groups of visible muscles. Physical culture is, in fact, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, an attempt to correct misapprehended defects by irrational methods.

Yet its rationale is plausible

enough. It is true that any muscle—in fact, any part of the bodily mechanism—that falls into disuse tends to atrophy. Consequently, it sounds reasonable that the man or woman who, owing to a sedentary habit of life, is muscularly feebly developed should have recourse to the more or less hard muscular exercises enjoined by the several systems of physical culture to remedy this weakness. Perhaps one of the most important passages in Mr. Alexander's work are the pages he devotes to exposing this fallacy. As he has no difficulty in illustrating in the hypothetical case of John Doe, spells of severe muscular exercise and otherwise entirely artificial and sedentary conditions of life are incompatible and antagonistic. John Doe's physical make-up becomes thereby a house divided against itself, and therefore cannot stand.

Infinitely more important towards the attainment of physical fitness than any muscular development is the correction of those deep-seated defects, such as faulty equilibrium in the habitual pose (as was illustrated by photographs in our issue last week) and wrong methods of breathing—defects due in the first place to the artificiality of the conditions of civilised life, but unfortunately confirmed and inculcated by educational methods, ignorant or reckless of the most elementary knowledge of the mechanism of the body. These bedrock defects, in their turn, affect all the vital organs which we have come to regard as exercising their functions subconsciously—for example, the lungs, the heart, and the digestive apparatus.

It is against these more deep-seated and unrecognised defects that Mr. Alexander directs his efforts, and his methods have, in practice, been endorsed by the more enlightened and liberal section of medical opinion.

The vital question is whether physical deterioration, arising from wrong habits engendered and confirmed by the practice of a lifetime, can be inhibited or corrected. The author confidently asserts they can be; that in his own practice, extended over a considerable number of years, he has, by a system of what he terms re-education, eliminated and replaced them by new and correct ones. This he has effected by appealing to and re-educating the conscious will to enable it to assert its mastery and control over the subconscious.

But this aspect of Mr. Alexander's system seems to me to be fraught with such far-reaching results and splendid possibilities—for it involves the supreme issues of race culture and the proper training of the rising generations—that its consideration must be postponed until a future occasion.