

Title	James Sully and the development of British psychology, from 1877-1886
Sub Title	
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Publisher	Centre for Advanced Research on Logic and Sensibility The Global Centers of Excellence Program, Keio University
Publication year	2011
Jtitle	CARLS series of advanced study of logic and sensibility Vol.4, (2010.) ,p.397- 405
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	Part 5 : Logic and Informatics
Genre	Research Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=KO12002001-20110331-0397

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James Sully and the Development of British Psychology, from 1877–1886

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Introduction

This paper aims to clarify the character of the human mental development theory by James Sully (1842–1923), a pre-Freudian British psychologist, by examining *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology*, one of his most successful publications. While Sully was the author of *The Human Mind* (1892), a vade mecum for the psychologists of his time, he also wrote many textbooks and practical guides for school teachers, including *Outlines of Psychology* (1884), *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* (1886), and *Studies of Childhood* (1895). *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* was so successful that it quickly went through several editions and was reprinted until 1925. In spite of his success, studies on Sully are yet scarce, with an entry about him by Lyubov G. Gurjeva first included in the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004. Although Gurjeva paid attention to *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology*, she introduced it as a simple manual for psychology amateurs, ignoring its theoretical importance. This paper examines the vision of human mental development carried in *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology*. In so doing, one aims to clarify the cultural and theoretical characteristics of Sully's impact on the British psychology amateurs of his time.

I. Sully's Psychology in *Pessimism* and the Influence of Herbert Spencer

The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology was written not only as a practical guide but also as a theoretical improvement of Sully's vision which was deployed in his earlier work *Pessimism* (1877). In *Pessimism*, Sully explains how human mental development is comparable to the physical evolution of animals, as follows:

The careful and deliberate action by which a man protects himself against distant evils [i. e., by moral activity], is in its essential features analogous to the purely reflex action by which a decapitated frog withdraws its leg from the irritant applied to its nerve. Similarly that which nature or mechanical contrivance has effected for collective mankind in the unreflecting stage of their existence, they may afterwards effect for themselves by conscious thought and effort. (Sully *Pessimism* 389–90)

This passage reminds us of Herbert Spencer's insistence several years prior to Sully's *Pessimism*. According to Spencer, his idea of morals is 'the experiences of utility ... which become registered, not as distinctly recognized connexions between certain kinds of acts and certain kinds of remote results, but those which become registered in the shape of associations between groups of feelings that have often recurred together, though the relation between them has not been consciously generalized' (Spencer 'Morals' 338). This idea echoes Sully's 'conscious thought and effort,' including morality, which is derived from 'the unreflecting stage of their existence' featured by 'the purely reflex action.' Thus the most highly conscious activity of the human mind, that is, moral agency, arises from automatic physical reactions to avoid harm, by bypassing reasoning and stimulating ambiguous associations of feelings. Sully added the function of the reflex action as an associator of feelings to Spencer's concept of 'the experiences of utility.'

Sully connects the function of the reflex action to the Darwinian concept of natural selection and insists that the former has benefited animals in 'the full energetic action of the struggle for existence and natural selection' (Sully *Pessimism* 384–85). A paradox is created here. Because 'the capacity of

moral feeling and sympathy limits the action of natural selection,' the survival of the weak or inferior is enabled in morally-developed human society (Sully *Pessimism* 390). The principle of natural selection is thus undermined by its own offspring which, 'even if first called forth by natural selection, tend[s] to grow indefinitely both in intensity and in extent by the mere force of exercise or habit' (Sully *Pessimism* 390). Does the deviation continue infinitely, then? Sully denies it, affirming the view that the principle of natural selection intervenes and begins correcting the deviation at a special moment. He states as follows:

I do not mean to say that natural selection will ever cease to be a co-operating factor in progress [i.e., the development of morals]. ... [I]t will exist simply as a potentiality, as a latent force ready to leap forth, and do its work if at any time organised human effort fails [in the law of the survival of the fittest.] (Sully *Pessimism* 392–93)

This vague statement reflects another of Spencer's influences on Sully; the former maintained that, while human beings have the tendency to progress in morality, they are doomed to be hampered when progress grows beyond their society's capacity for moral integration. What is the social capacity for moral integration? Spencer explains this by introducing a principle in his theory. According to him, the world is governed by the law of equilibrium which consists of evolution and dissolution, that is, the process of integration and disintegration. When 'the quantity of matter... [and/or] motion' in activity reaches a certain level, including moral development, evolution stops and is displaced by the process of dissolution and, therefore, equilibrium is achieved (Spencer *First Principles* 251). As a tool to maintain balance, the natural selection system 'leap[s] forth, and do[es] its work,' in Sully's words, by cancelling the 'organised human effort' of moral activities which has grown too much. Once the cancellation is complete by degrading society to a primitive level such as warfare, the natural selection system begins re-stimulating mental evolution, that is, moral development, by inducing a mental deviation from the physical principle in the struggle for survival through the function of the reflex action.

A question comes to mind here. If moral integration is a quantity matter, and therefore, its excess can be judged in a quantitative manner, does a

person who has achieved extremely high morals necessarily experience the moment when his moral sense begins to deteriorate? It must happen, if the law of equilibrium governs the world and '[a]ll things are growing or decaying' in '[t]he processes thus everywhere in antagonism' (Spencer *First Principles* 252–53). However, counterevidence is easily found in our daily observations; people with high morals can attain an even higher sense of morality, while those lacking morals do not always have the impetus to develop it. After all, the law of equilibrium cannot embrace the idiosyncrasies of individual moral life. How is it possible to salvage a personal trait without frustrating the common physical principle which provides the foundation for evolutionary theories? In order to challenge this opinion, Sully revised his idea in *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology*, by installing a unique device in his theoretical framework, as will be shown in the next section.

II. Sully's Originality in *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* and His Adaptation of John Hughlings Jackson

The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology begins with an argument similar to the one Sully made in *Pessimism*, while his focus shifts from an examination of the overall linkage between human beings and animals to an explanation of how the human mind develops from babyhood to infancy. First, he insists, as he did before, that a human being initiates a process of reflex actions to recurrent physical stimuli experienced during babyhood, so that he can deal with them as efficiently as possible. Just as animals instantly develop reflex actions to avoid irritants or toxins in order to survive natural selection, 'the reflex or non-voluntary' attention to physical stimuli also develops in a human baby, which enables him to avoid danger and ensure security as quickly as possible. 'Thus by directing his attention again and again to bright objects, as the candle, the infant is preparing to direct it ... to the mother's face' as swiftly as possible (Sully *Teacher's Handbook* 92). Giving priority to promptness, reasoning is bypassed in the reflex, and the causal link is lost between the physical stimulus and response to it. Thus, for example, the accompaniments to what is physically pleasant begin to acquire a borrowed or derived impression of pleasantness in a baby's mind. 'In this way the infant tends to watch the movements and doings of his nurse,

mother, &c,’ that is, their caretakers, whose behaviours, in general, he associates with a sense of security and pleasure (Sully *Teacher’s Handbook* 93).

The association of pleasurable feelings increasingly develops as the baby grows, and when it reaches a certain level, this mass of associations of feelings turns into emotion; the pleasurable feelings surrounding his caretakers generates affection, while the feelings of pain caused by his isolation or other unfavourable circumstances engender fear or hatred. When emotion accumulates to a certain level in a baby’s mind, it ‘acts as a force in arresting the attention [of the baby himself] and keeping it fixed for an appreciable time’ (Sully *Teacher’s Handbook* 87). Thus, in Sully’s view, ‘interest’ as self-consciousness arises primarily during infancy as an observer of the infant’s emotion (Sully *Teacher’s Handbook* 87–89).

After its birth, self-consciousness tries to understand emotion and make it manageable each time emotion demands its attention. In the beginning, each time it arises, self-consciousness attempts to sort out emotion by will but ‘[t]he growth of voluntary attention means a continual reduction of the difficulty of attending to objects. The law that exercise strengthens faculty applies to attention’ (Sully *Teacher’s Handbook* 94). What is meant by an ‘exercise’ strengthening ‘faculty’? As was the case from the very onset of human mental life, it is the creation of a reflex mode of attention to recurrent phenomena. In the past, the object of attention was physical stimuli; now, it is emotion which repeatedly calls for attention. The mental reflex skips examining the precise cause of the emotion it manages, in favour of achieving promptness. As a result, positive emotions originally incited by the caretaker’s behaviour begin to be associated with other people’s similar behaviours, even if they do not directly benefit the infant. Morals or the sense of ethical goodness are integrated with self-consciousness in this manner, repeating the process in which the instinct installed the first reflex to sort out the physical stimuli.

The idea of the emergence of self-consciousness and mental reflex is newly added to Sully’s theory in *The Teacher’s Handbook of Psychology*. In *Pessimism*, the physical reflex was entitled to produce morals without help from the self-consciousness and mental reflex. Considering that the new device appears to repeat the same process with the physical reflex system which was inspired by Spencer’s idea of utility, what was the point of Sully adding yet another reflex system produced by self-consciousness to his

theory?

A close reading of *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* reveals that the new device enabled Sully to differentiate himself from Spencer on the point that, although the mental reflex is created in the same manner as the physical reflex, it is not a function installed automatically or instinctively in accordance with utility, but on purpose by self-consciousness. On the basis of past memories of success in managing physical stimuli, self-consciousness *chooses* to apply the same process to efficiently deal with emotion. A contradiction introduces itself here. Following Spencer's footsteps, Sully generally insists that the inertial progress of the associations of feelings and their subsequent deviation from the physical principle is the cause for human mental development. If self-consciousness performs a deliberate, self-referential act to consult past memories and adjust the manner of mental development, it is not compatible with the idea of the inertial development of mentality by itself. What is it that made Sully logically consider that mentality can make a reversal approach to its original physical state and use it by creating the new reflex system in accordance with the physical principle? To understand this, it is necessary to review the theory of John Hughlings Jackson, a British neurologist who influenced Sully as much as Spencer did.

Himself being an ardent disciple of Spencer, Hughlings Jackson set himself the task of applying Spencer's evolutionary doctrine to mental diseases. According to him, the human brain consists of two types of nervous centres: simple and automatic, and complex and voluntary. Evolution follows the course from the former to the latter, and because of its complexity, the voluntary nervous centre is less organised and more fragile than the automatic one. Therefore, when it suffers a severe shock, the voluntary nervous centre is damaged first, gradually affecting the automatic nervous centre, which is the solidest. This is how mental illness progresses in Hughlings Jackson's view, and because it is the reverse process of evolution, he regarded it as dissolution (Hughlings Jackson 'Evolution' 2:45). However Hughlings Jackson was not a mere practitioner of Spencer's vision. He insisted that dissolution can happen at any time when certain conditions are fulfilled and not always when evolution reaches a certain quantitative limit. Thus, the entire vision is freed from the boundary of the Spencerian law of equilibrium, while the logic of the physical origin of human mentality is still preserved. Sully utilized this idea of Hughlings Jackson to let highly developed mental-

ity gain more plasticity, with regard to its distance from the body. While mentality is the fruit of association under the physical principle, Sully insists that it can revert to its original bodily state at any time. In contrast to Hughlings Jackson, however, he maintains that the mental approach to the bodily state can be caused by the will of the mind, which has developed into self-consciousness, and not by an external power, like severe shocks. Here is the crucial difference between Sully and Hughlings Jackson's visions: although Hughlings Jackson admitted that 'the statement, "to undergo dissolution" is rigidly the equivalent of the statement "to be reduced to a lower level of evolution,"' thus the function of the voluntary nervous centre is not always nullified in the process of dissolution (Hughlings Jackson 'Evolution' 2:46), he did not admit that mentality exerts itself on the function of the automatic nervous centre, that is, the physical system, in the process of dissolution. Instead, the voluntary centre weakens and deteriorates in the process: thereby what prompts mentality to revert back to the bodily state cannot be mentality itself but some severe external shock. This is not the case with Sully. He regarded self-consciousness as a pseudo-external power which works on the body despite its physical origin, because it emerges as a careful observer of emotion, that is, the result of the work of the physical reflex. Considering that the distance between the observer and the observed is always already preserved, mentality cannot weaken and dissolve itself into a physical state when it reverts to the bodily state; thus, it can exert itself in the process and create the new reflex for its own benefit. This peculiar vision of the genesis of self-consciousness enabled Sully to preserve the otherness of the mind from the body, and alter the issue of dissolution in Hughlings Jackson's theory with that of the free accessibility of mentality to the physical. In this way, the sovereignty of the mind over the body is upheld, while the idiosyncrasy of the human mind is also reserved; in the sense that, what causes moral development, the creation of the mental reflex, depends on the will of self-consciousness to consult the bodily principle, and not on some forcing, external power, such as Spencer's law of equilibrium or Hughlings Jackson's severe shock.

Conclusion

Sully's psychology was originally nothing more than an imitation of Spencer's grand vision of equilibrium, to which he added the idea of the physical reflex system as an associator of feelings. Aware that his theory could not embrace the idiosyncrasy of the human mind, Sully revised his argument in *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* from the grand vision of evolution to the human mental development theory from babyhood to infancy. In so doing, he achieved the following. First, the explanation in *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* became much more amateur-friendly, avoiding academic ideas such as Spencer's law of equilibrium and dissolution which Hughlings Jackson adapted into his theory. Second, the idea of the emergence of self-consciousness as an observer of the physical principle facilitated Sully to keep *a priori* distance between the mind as the observer and body as the observed. Thus, the dissolution of the mind into a physical state, which necessarily occurs in the vision of Spencer and Hughlings Jackson, is avoided in Sully's view, therefore, presenting the will power of the mind over the body. In this way, Sully's psychology subsumes the idiosyncrasy of the human mind and differentiates his vision from those of Spencer and Hughlings Jackson. In other words, Sully's effort to narrow the theoretical focus for amateurs in *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* enabled him to be a unique thinker. The popularity of *The Teacher's Handbook of Psychology* propagated Sully's peculiar vision among British amateurs in the *fin de siècle* and the early twentieth century, with its first publication in 1887 and its reprint continuing until 1925.

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