The Human Machine
by Arnold Bennett

Training the Brain
We control the most complex machine ever created.

QUICK OVERVIEW

In this day and age, we operate any number of machines, from cars and motorcycles to computers, fax machines, cell phones and BlackBerrys. But in 1908, when Arnold Bennett first published The Human Machine, people weren’t so technologically equipped. Still, each person has always had at least one machine—his or her own body, controlled by the brain.

Although times change, people generally haven’t. Each person should control his own brain, but Bennett points out that, too often, this isn’t the case. Instead, people are often driven by impulse or external stimuli. Bennett explains that success in any endeavor comes from harnessing the power of the brain, and thus the body—thoughts drive actions, actions drive results. He encourages readers to train their brains and realize that they control the most amazing machine: the human body. While some of his examples are dated, his commonsense approach to training the brain is as applicable as ever.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE

We know our thoughts control our actions, but poor habits indicate that we don’t always have enough control over our brains. That can and should change. In The Human Machine, Bennett explains that we can train our brains to control our actions, even our instincts. The brain, when trained correctly, is a diplomat, talking down the impulses that could lead us deeper into difficulty and helping us extricate ourselves. But it must be taught obedience, and Bennett tells readers exactly how to do that.

We must impose our will, by sheer force, on the brain and we must exercise willpower to stay within the guidelines we have set. We need to talk to our brain, leading it in the right direction. After that has been done consistently, the brain will have good habits, which will lead an individual to his highest standards.
Bennett writes that a person’s character is the sum total of his habits of thought. In other words, a person is kind because he thinks kind thoughts. A person is industrious because they apply their thoughts to being busy and efficient. What are you thinking about?

The body is a machine, complex and capable of quite extraordinary efficiency, for travelling through this world smoothly, in any desired manner. My aim is to show that only an inappreciable fraction of our ordered and sustained efforts is given to the business of actual living.

It is not as if, in this business of daily living, we are seriously hampered by ignorance. With all our carelessness about living, we arrive pretty soon at a fairly accurate notion of what satisfactory living is, and we perceive with some clearness the methods necessary to success.

The brain, the brain—that is the seat of trouble! “Give us more brains, Lord” exclaimed a great writer. Personally, I think he would have been wiser if he had asked first for the power to keep in order such brains as we have. We indubitably possess quite enough brains, quite as much as we can handle. The supreme muddlers of living are often people of quite remarkable intellectual faculty, with a quite remarkable gift of being wise for others. The pity is that our brains have a way of “wandering,” as it is politely called. Brain-wandering is indeed now recognised as a specific disease.

I conceive the brain of the average well-intentioned man as possessing the tricks and manners of one of those gentlemen-at-large who, having nothing very urgent to do, stroll along and offer their services gratis to some shorthanded work of philanthropy. They will commonly demoralise and disorganise the business conduct of an affair in about a fortnight. They come when they like; they go when they like. Sometimes they are exceedingly industrious and obedient, but then there is an even chance that they will shirk and follow their own sweet will.

And you all say to me: “My brain is myself. How can I alter myself? I was born like that.” In the first place you were not born “like that,” you have lapsed to that. And in the second place your brain is not yourself. It is only a part of yourself, and not the highest seat of authority. Do you love your mother, wife, or children with your brain? Do you desire with your brain? Do you, in a word, ultimately and essentially live with your brain? No. Your brain is an instrument. The proof that it is an instrument lies in the fact that, when extreme necessity urges, you can command your brain to do certain things, and it does them.

The first of the two great principles which underlie the efficiency of the human machine is this: The brain is a servant, exterior to the central force of the Ego. If it is out of control the reason is not that it is uncontrollable, but merely that its discipline has been neglected. The brain can be trained, as the hand and eye can be trained; it can be made as obedient as a sporting dog, and by similar methods. In the meantime the indispensable preparation for brain discipline is to form the habit of regarding one’s brain as an instrument exterior to one’s self, like a tongue or a foot.

**THE FIRST PRACTICAL STEP**

The brain is a highly quaint organism. Let me say at once, lest I should be cannonaded by physiologists, psychologists, or metaphysicians, that by the “brain” I mean the faculty which reasons and which gives orders to the
muscles. I mean exactly what the plain man means by the brain. The brain is the diplomatist which arranges relations between our instinctive self and the universe. The brain fulfills its mission when it provides for the maximum of freedom to the instincts with the minimum of friction. It argues with the instincts. It takes them on one side and points out the unwisdom of certain performances.

In the matter of its own special activities the brain is usually undisciplined and unreliable. We never know what it will do next. Or it may be that we have suffered a great disappointment, which is definite and hopeless. Will the brain, like a sensible creature, leave that disappointment alone, and instead of living in the past live in the present or the future? Not it! Though it knows perfectly well that it is wasting its time and casting a very painful and utterly unnecessary gloom over itself and us, it can so little control its unhealthy morbid appetite that no expostulations will induce it to behave rationally. Or perhaps, after a confabulation with the soul, it has been decided that when next a certain harmful instinct comes into play, the brain shall firmly interfere. “Yes,” says the brain, “I really will watch that.” But when the moment arrives, is the brain on the spot? The brain has probably forgotten the affair entirely, or remembered it too late; or sighs, as the victorious instinct knocks it on the head: “Well, next time!”

The brain must be put into training. It is the most important part of the human machine by which the soul expresses and develops itself. And it must learn good habits. Primarily, it must be taught obedience. Obedience can only be taught by imposing one’s will, by the sheer force of volition. And the brain must be mastered by will-power. The beginning of wise living lies in the control of the brain by the will; so that the brain may act according to the precepts which the brain itself gives. With an obedient disciplined brain a man may live always right up to the standard of his best moments.

To teach a child obedience you tell it to do something, and you see that that something is done. The same with the brain. People too often cite childhood conditioning as the reason for reacting to events in certain ways. Bennett explains that if early experiences trained us to handle things one way, we can train ourselves to handle them differently. “Human nature does change,” he writes. “It changes like everything else.” In other words, habits that cause problems in the workplace or at home or in one’s self-development can be replaced by habits which eliminate or lessen those problems. It’s a matter of accustoming the brain to a new idea, through daily concentration.

Our brains may be our servants, but that doesn’t mean they always do our bidding. And when there’s a problem, though it’s easy to blame the world around us, the real blame should be assigned back to us. “You can control nothing but your own mind,” Bennett writes. What does that mean? It means that everything that’s in your brain is there because you gave it permission to enter.

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Human nature does change. Nothing can be more unscientific, more hopelessly medieval, than to imagine that it does not.
Simple as it may appear, this is the way, and it is the only way. As for there being nothing in it, try it. I guarantee that you will fail to keep your brain concentrated on the given idea for thirty seconds—let alone thirty minutes. You will find your brain conducting itself in a manner which would be comic were it not tragic. Your first experiments will result in disheartening failure, for to exact from the brain, at will and by will, concentration on a given idea for even so short a period as half an hour is an exceedingly difficult feat—and fatiguing! It needs perseverance. It needs a terrible obstinacy on the part of the will. That brain of yours will be hopping about all over the place, and every time it hops you must bring it back by force to its original position. You must absolutely compel it to ignore every idea except the one which you have selected for its attention. You cannot hope to triumph all at once. But you can hope to triumph. There is no royal road to the control of the brain. There is no complicated function which a plain person may not comprehend. It is simply a question of: “I will, I will, and I will.”

Let me resume. Efficient living, living up to one’s best standard, getting the last ounce of power out of the machine with the minimum of friction: these things depend on the disciplined and vigorous condition of the brain. The brain can be disciplined by learning the habit of obedience. And it can learn the habit of obedience by the practice of concentration. Disciplinary concentration is the basis of the whole structure. This fact must be grasped imaginatively; it must be seen and felt. The more regularly concentration is practised, the more firmly will the imagination grasp the effects of it.

**HABIT-FORMING BY CONCENTRATION**

As soon as the will has got the upper hand of the brain—as soon as it can say to the brain, with a fair certainty of being obeyed: “Do this. Think along these lines, and continue to do so without wandering until I give you leave to stop”—the perfecting of the human machine may be undertaken. The tremendous possibilities of an obedient brain will be perceived immediately we begin to reflect upon what we mean by our “character.” Now, a person’s character is, and can be, nothing else but the total result of his habits of thought. A person is benevolent because he habitually thinks benevolently. A person is idle because his thoughts dwell habitually on the instant pleasures of idleness. It is true that everybody is born with certain predispositions, and that these predispositions influence very strongly the early formation of habits of thought. But the fact remains that the character is built by long-continued habits of thought.

The more closely we examine the development of original predispositions, the more clearly we shall see that this development is not inevitable, is not a process which works itself out independently according to mysterious, ruthless laws which we cannot understand. For instance, the effect of an original predisposition may be destroyed by an accidental shock. A young man with an inherited tendency to alcohol may choose to adamantly abstain because of the shock of seeing his drunken father strike his mother; whereas, if his father had chanced to be affectionate in drink, the son might have ended in the gutter. No ruthless law here! It is notorious, also, that natures are sometimes completely changed in their development by chance momentary contact with natures stronger than themselves. “From that day I resolved to….” You know the phrase. Often the resolve is not kept; but often it is kept. A spark has inflamed the will.

**Regard yourself constantly, and in minute detail.**

After but a few days of honest trying in the exercise, you will perceive its influence. You will grow accustomed to the idea of the brain being external to the supreme force which is you, and being in subjection to that force. You will see yourself in possession of the power to switch your brain on and off in a particular subject as you switch electricity on and off in a particular room. The brain will get used to the straight paths of obedience. And—a remarkable phenomenon—it will, by the mere practice of obedience, become less forgetful and more effective. It will not so frequently give way to an instinct that takes it by surprise. With a brain that is improving every day, you can set about the perfecting of the machine in a scientific manner.
The Preliminaries of Living

Are we living or just preparing to live?

Bennett argues that we spend most of the first 50-plus years of our lives preparing for the next thing. We go to school for more than a decade to prepare for college, go to college to prepare for a time in which we can start really living. Instead, our focus shifts to getting a job, earning enough money for food and other necessities, and finding a place to live. Then, we start applying ourselves to finding a mate, always keeping our eyes on the next focal point.

All of that is in contrast to what Bennett considers actually living, which involves delving into the use and training of the machines that are our bodies. He calls that the science of living and says that too many people don’t even start thinking about it until they are near retirement, and then it’s almost too late.

The brain is the most important part of the human machine by which the soul expresses and develops itself.

But if a grown man’s character is developing from day to day (as it is), if nine-tenths of the development is due to unconscious action and one-tenth to conscious action, and if the one-tenth conscious is the most satisfactory part of the total result; why, in the name of common sense, henceforward, should not nine-tenths, instead of one-tenth, be due to conscious action? What is there to prevent this agreeable consummation? There is nothing whatever to prevent it — except insubordination on the part of the brain. And insubordination of the brain can be cured, as I have previously shown.

All who look into their experience will admit that the failure to replace old habits by new ones is due to the fact that at the critical moment the brain does not remember; it simply forgets. The practice of concentration will cure that. All depends on regular concentration.
ACTION STEPS
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned to your life. Here are a few questions and thoughts to get you started.

1. Bennett suggests that we “tend” to our brains, much like one would tend to a garden. Write down three ways you can “tend” your brain.
3. The direction in which we focus our brains is the direction in which we go. Each morning, wake up and write down what you want to concentrate your energy on that day.
4. In the workplace, friction between individuals is inevitable. Bennett says that a well-toned brain is better able to recognize whether or how such friction can be mitigated. Can you think of a time when you reacted to such friction instinctively, rather than reasoning out possible solutions? How could you have handled it differently?
5. What habit does your brain have that causes friction in your life? Identify it and invest time every day in forming a new habit in your brain.
6. The next time you’re in a stressful situation, step back, get your thoughts in a good place and then finish the conversation.
7. How much time do you spend on thinking about living, versus actually living? Write down three ways you can shift this balance so that you are actually living. Then go do what you’ve written.

About the Author
Arnold Bennett was born in England in 1867. He decided early in life to become a writer and moved to London at 21 where he took a job as the assistant editor for a magazine called Woman. There, he started writing syndicated fiction. Four years later, he published his first novel and became editor of the magazine. After a decade in the magazine world, Bennett became a full-time writer, focusing primarily on novels. Eventually, he branched into nonfiction work, where he also found success. During World War I, he served as Minister of Propaganda for France, but refused a knighthood at the end of the war. He is perhaps best known for The Old Wives Tale, which was published in 1908.

Recommended Reading
If you enjoyed The Human Machine, check out:
The Game of Life and How to Play It by Florence Scovel Shinn
The Power of Your Subconscious Mind by Joseph Murphy
The Dynamic Laws of Prosperity by Catherine Ponder