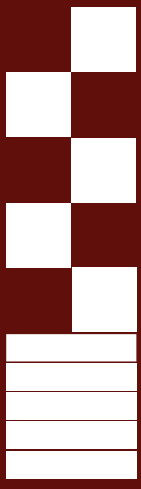
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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Published by:
mediastudies.press
414 W. Broad St.
Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

Copy-editing: Emily Alexander

Cover design: Mark McGillivray

Landing page: mediastudies.press/early-media-effects-theory-the-suggestion-doctrine

Public Domain series - issn (*online*) 2770-2480 | issn (*print*) 2770-2472

isbn 978-1-951399-28-3 *(print)* | isbn 978-1-951399-26-9 *(pdf)*

isbn 978-1-951399-29-0 *(epub)* | isbn978-1-951399-27-6 *(html)*

doi 10.32376/3f8575cb.f1e0489e | lccn 2024931261

Edition 1 published in December 2024

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CHAPTER THREE

The Imitative Functions and Their Place in Human Nature (1894)

Josiah Royce

Century Illustrated Magazine *48, no. 1: pp. 137–42.*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In an age when US scholars frequently received training at the major universities of Europe, the impact of Le Bon and Tarde, and concern about the potential social power of suggestion-imitation, was felt domestically even before their works were translated into English. Josiah Royce (1855–1916) offers an early example. Royce was a major figure in American philosophical thought and a leading proponent of Hegelian Idealism. He took a BA in Classics at the University of California in Oakland (1875) and a PhD at Johns Hopkins University (1878). He studied for a year in Germany and, following his doctorate, taught English composition and literature at the University of California at Berkeley before moving to Harvard University in 1882. There he befriended William James, his long-time intellectual sparring partner, and eventually took over as chair of the Department of Philosophy.

While known primarily as a philosopher, Royce also studied psychology and integrated it into his larger work, writing a textbook on the subject in

1903 (*Outlines of Psychology*, New York: Macmillan) and serving as president of the American Psychological Association in 1902. Tarde's conception of the role of imitation in human interaction was central to Royce's psychology, as demonstrated in the following article from *Century Illustrated Magazine*. It is included here as one of the earliest published English language pieces on suggestion-imitation (along with the Sidis excerpt below). And it provides a reminder that this view of communicative influence was gaining academic speed in the United States even before the turn of the century. Published in the popular press, it is, further, an example of suggestion-imitation as a popular, as well as academic, topic. In fact, over the following decades, suggestion theory as an explanation for communication influence would come to exert significant sway over public thinking, and public policy, with respect to both state and commercial propaganda.

The excerpt below, then, is to some extent a heralding review of Tarde's *Laws of Imitation*. While Royce takes as common knowledge the human tendency to imitate, especially in children, he enters a long list of early research questions: is imitation an instinctive or a learned behavior?; "how, in the growth of the individual, do these imitative functions arise?"; and "when and in what order do [the imitative functions] appear" in child development?

Following Tarde, he examines the importance of, and prior research on, hypnotism as a tool in psychology, extending the process to the influence of existing social belief systems on the "waking man," who "usually believes, concerning politics, concerning the state of business, concerning religion, whatever the people of his party, or set, or faction, or profession, or sect, declares to be the truth; and he supposes, nevertheless, that his mind is his own." Here we also see, for one of the first times in the published record, the use of the term "social suggestion" to describe the operation of various social forces on the formation and alteration of attitudes and perceptions.

Royce notes, at the same time, that the effect of the imitative functions and social suggestion is as complex as it is fascinating and may work as much to the benefit of society and the individual as to its detriment. "It is on these accounts," declares Royce, "that I deem the study of the imitative functions probably the most important task in the psychology of the immediate future."—*P.P.*

The Imitative Functions and Their Place in Human Nature (1894)

I HAVE been led of late, in connection with certain philosophical inquiries, to begin the study of a subject the general interest of which, for teachers, for students of any region of art, and for lovers of human nature at large, seems to me so considerable, that I am now disposed to ask for the cooperation of a larger public in the pursuit of the research. At the same time, I may as well take the opportunity which this paper affords to explain, as well as I can, why I have begun this task, and why I see so much reason to hope for good results from the further consideration of the matter.

I.

THE object of this study is, directly speaking psychological, and relates to the nature, the scope, and the significance of what may be called, in general, the imitative functions of mankind. No functions are, in one sense, more familiar. None are more frequently interesting. We all are aware that children are imitative, that both among children and among adults virtue and vice alike are, under favorable circumstances, "catching"; that fashion has, in certain matters, an irresistible sway; that not only commercial panics, and mobs, and "fads," but also great reform movements, and disciplined armies, and such historical events as the conversion of nations in the old days from heathenism to Christianity, all illustrate, in their several ways, the potency of imitative tendencies; and that art itself, at least according to Aristotle's famous definition, is essentially imitation. We know that there are sometimes epidemics of crime or of suicide. We know that the doleful prevalence of the current popular melody is due, not to a love of music, but to the insistent force of the imitative tendency. Turn thus, which way we will, the familiar presence of the imitative functions in human life impresses itself upon us.

"Verily," says M. Tarde, an eminent French sociologist, in his remarkable book, "Les Lois d'Imitation"—verily, "*La societe, c'est l'imitation,*" or as one may freely translate, "Imitation of imitations," saith the professor, "in society all is imitation." In this extreme form, of course, the assertion does indeed remind us of many qualifications; but of these we shall speak further on.

Were I anxious, then, for mere illustrations of the frequency of the imitative functions in the life of man, I should indeed have no trouble in getting my fill of them, without other aid than that of my own eyes. But with the

mere confirmation of their frequency, the question of their real significance is first brought really to the front. And along with this question there come before us a vast number of others, all interesting to the student of human nature. How, in the growth of the individual, do these imitative functions arise? Are any of them truly instinctive, or are all of them, as Alexander Bain has contended, acquired functions, due to experience? Or, in other words, does man learn to imitate because he is brought up in a social environment; or, on the contrary, is he capable of life in a social environment only because he is first, by nature and instinct, an imitative animal? What is the history of the imitative functions in childhood? When, and in what order, do they appear? How are they related to the growth of the childish reason, conscience, imagination, insight, skill? Of what use can the imitative functions, at any age, be made for the development of the child's intellect and will? Such are the first psychological questions that come to one's mind in this connection. It may already, in general, be clear how serviceable the study of such problems can become both to teachers and to all others interested in the psychology of childhood.

II.

BUT a wider scope still has of late been given to the psychological study of the imitative functions by the results of research in the domain of hypnotism. How deep-seated the imitative functions are, it has needed hypnotic research not so much to demonstrate as to illustrate, and to bring, through illustration, to our clearer scientific consciousness. The principal positive value of hypnotism for psychology, up to the present time, has consisted in the fact that the apparently marvelous, and, at first sight, even miraculous-seeming, phenomena of the hypnotic state have served to make the familiar facts of the prevalence of imitation in human life look, for the time, in these singular illustrations, unfamiliar; so that, in consequence, the attention of psychologists has been attracted to the matter in a new way and from a new side. That this is the principal service rendered by hypnotism to psychology was first pointed out at some length by the aforesaid M. Tarde, who herein, I believe, followed up a suggestion of Taine's. In a paper first published in 1884, early in the history of hypnotic research,—a paper which was later incorporated into the book called "Les Lois d'Imitation,"—M. Tarde asserted and developed the interesting formula that what the individual hypnotizer is to his sleeping and abnormally plastic subject, such, almost precisely, is society to the waking and normally plastic man.

The hypnotized subject believes what the hypnotizer says, and supposes this belief to be his own conviction; does what his hypnotizer suggests, and believes, or may believe, that he does this of his own freewill; has suggested hallucinations of taste, sight, smell, or suggested emotions, and believes these to be his own independent and individual experiences. Well, just so the waking man usually believes, concerning politics, concerning the state of business, concerning religion, whatever the people of his party, or set, or faction, or profession, or sect, declares to be the truth; and he supposes, nevertheless, that his mind is his own. The waking man, moreover, as to all the endlessly numerous deeds of convention and custom, does what his portion of society declares to be the proper thing, and fancies all the while that he is choosing of his own free will. Finally, the waking man's emotions—as, for example, his esthetic emotions—are usually at the mercy, or, at all events, deeply under the influence, of social suggestion; and even his sensations and perceptions are not exempt from this influence.

Illustrations are here easy. What is beautiful in decorative art the community at large learns by social suggestion. Esthetic tastes as to domestic interiors, and as to the architecture of private dwellings, are subject in every generation to changes which work upon individuals in almost precisely the same way as hypnotic suggestions made to sleeping subjects work during experiments in hypnotism. One hears that this or this is admirable in the way of house-building or of decoration. Society declares the fact; and forthwith one perceives with one's own eyes, if one is but an average man, that this is indeed beautiful, just as the people say; and one is naively unaware that if all the people had said that it was ugly, one would equally have observed that fact instead. Even so, too, as to our sensations, or, at all events, as to our immediate reaction of liking or of dislike in presence of our sensations. Everybody has many acquired tastes. Some people, to be sure, have liked olives from the first taste of them; but many have not. Yet, as the saying goes, if you eat in succession seven olives, you will henceforth like them. It would be more psychological to say that after you have received seven quasi-hypnotic social suggestions from your neighbors, each suggestion being strong enough to make you try to behave toward olives as the rest do, then, at length, your immediate sensations may yield, and henceforth the olives will taste as the other men say that they taste—namely, good. It is in such a fashion that one becomes a connoisseur in the world of mere sensations of taste and of smell, just as before in the world of art. The connoisseur as to wines, teas, perfumes, dinners, and other such sensory experiences, is a person of fairly keen native

sensory discrimination, whose actual discriminations, and expressions of like and dislike, have been subjected to a long course of quasi-hypnotic social training. His tastes are never purely, or even largely, his own, although it is his game, as connoisseur, to pretend, and often his fate, as social bondman, to believe, that they are his own. Were they, however, original, he would not be reckoned as a connoisseur, but as a barbarian.

Such are some of the possible illustrations of M. Tarde's interesting thesis. In bringing them forward here in my own way, and with my own choice determining their selection, I am of course well aware that there are other factors at work besides the conventional or suggested factors, and that, too, even in the most conventional regions of life—factors which, despite all our imitativeness, determine our individual varieties of taste. We never reach perfect agreement with our neighbors as to these things of convention. A certain stubborn variety of individual caprice consciously forms a pleasant social contrast to our more imitative judgments. And so for the rest, despite all conformity, there are many social conventions which themselves require of the individual, within certain limits, a certain degree of individuality and of nonconformity.

But here is only one of the many cases where the imitative functions become, as we shall later more fully see, beautifully, and almost inextricably, entangled with the "temperamental" varieties of function in the individual. And it is this entanglement, as we shall find, that constitutes the very soul of the significance of the imitative functions, which, when properly developed, do not lead at all to the suppression of originality, but may actually form the condition of the growth of individuality, and of the only true independence of opinion and of ideals that is possible to man. But of this hereafter. Moreover, it is this same endless entanglement of imitative or "suggested" factors in taste and in belief with individual factors that makes the psychology of the imitative functions of man so complex and fascinating a problem for the student of human nature.

If the social phenomena in themselves, considered thus, serve to indicate by their universality, as it were, the breadth, the extent, of the imitative functions of humanity, certain of the well-known phenomena of hypnotism, viewed apart, tend especially to bring to mind the depth, the inner potency, of these functions in the life of each individual. It is true, as we have seen, that, viewed on the whole, the plasticity of the hypnotic subject is not something essentially novel, but insubstantially the normal social plasticity of a man set at work under somewhat abnormal conditions. It is, however, also

true that, under these abnormal conditions, there appear some unexpected special consequences of the general imitativeness of man—consequences that startle us by the indications which they give of the depth to which the imitative tendency reaches in its influence upon our unconscious, yes, upon even our lower physiological, life.

That by suggestion you can make a man notice what he would otherwise overlook is a strictly normal and familiar fact. Much, if not all, of that marvelous acuteness of senses which is often shown by hypnotic subjects seems, in the opinion of many observers, to be only a case of this directly or indirectly suggested concentration of attention upon his own fainter experiences on the part of the hypnotized subject. And so far the anomalies of hypnotism would seem to be related only to the peculiar conditions under which the hypnotic subject is influenced, and to the extraordinary source of the influence, which is here not, as normally, the authority of society in general, but the voice of his hypnotizer. Yet, in addition, it is indeed true that, in case of hypnotism, there also appear certain other aspects of the imitative functions aspects which, in the case of the normal social influences, may also be present, and which probably are present, but which are there masked by their more obvious and conscious accompaniments; while, in case of the hypnotic subject, these other aspects come to light. Hypnotic suggestion, namely, is found to influence not only the acuteness of one's perceptions and the course of one's conscious habits, but the performance of a good many bodily functions that usually seem to have small relation to the will. Circulation, digestion, and general functional nervous conditions of a decidedly manifold sort, have been found to be more or less subject to hypnotic suggestion. To be sure, this sort of influence is seldom without very decided limits, which vary endlessly from person to person. But the fact remains that, in a given person, the imitative plasticity which leads him to follow out so faithfully the ideas which his hypnotizer suggests may lead him also to alter relatively deep and unconscious organic functions, such as he has never explicitly learned to influence by his will, and such as, normally, neither he nor his fellows would be aware of influencing. Yet, as many considerations make probable, what the hypnotic experiment thus brings to light cannot well be anything new in kind. Doubtless our organisms are at all times deeply plastic to suggestions; only this plasticity, on account of the complexity of our normal functions, remains masked until the hypnotic experiment, working upon a much simplified state of affairs, brings it to light.

But if our imitativeness thus actually extends far beyond the region of our conscious and voluntary life, one sees at once that one has to do with functions the basis of which probably lies deep down among the inborn and instinctive tendencies of our nature. And of such probably instinctive and original imitativeness childhood gives us many indications. For children often appear to sympathize imitatively with the expressed emotions of their elders even when there is no adequate basis in the previous childish experience for the emotions in question. A young child, taken unkindly to a funeral, or forced by unhappy fortune to witness one in the family, has suggested to him, in the faces and behavior of his elders, emotions of a depth and intensity for which his own experience can give no basis. These elders themselves know why they sorrow. The young child knows very dimly, or perhaps realizes not yet at all, why death is what it is, and means what it does. Yet sometimes he shows on such occasions an overwhelming sense of the horror of the situation, a sense which people usually refer to his direct and inborn dread of death and of his surroundings. There is, in fact, probably present some such original instinct concerning death; but very likely this instinct does not account for the whole of the child's horror, or yet perhaps for the larger part of it. This larger part is probably due rather to a contagion of emotion, the origin of which lies in another instinct—that of imitation. The child, without consciousness of the reason, assumes, by instinctive imitation, the expressive bodily states and attitudes of his elders, and accordingly, since our emotions are, in part at least, the results rather than the causes of our bodily states of emotional expression,[1] the child, having imitated the organic expression, consequently in some measure imitates the emotion, without at all well comprehending why the emotion ought to be felt. If everybody else at the funeral conspired with his fellows to seem gay and to talk merrily, it is unlikely that the child's own original instincts about death would be enough to terrify him. He would then very likely look at the corpse rather with wonder than with horror.

Just so, too, it is in youth, or even throughout life, so long as we retain any freshness of sympathetic experience. With the aid of certain deep and instinctive tendencies to assume imitatively the bodily attitudes or the other expressive functions of our fellows, functions which may be in part internal as well as external, we are able to share the emotions of others even when these

[1]To this fact Professor James has recently given an expression in his now well-known theory of the emotions—a theory according to which "we do not cry because we feel sorry, but feel sorry because we cry." This theory, in its extreme form, may be inadequate. There can be little doubt that it expresses an important part of the truth.

emotions relate to matters that lie far beyond our own previous experience. When one first witnesses a serious accident, or attends another through a painful illness, or sees a friend suffering from some tremendous personal grief, one gets a sense of what this calamity means—a sense which may far transcend one's power to recall similar experiences in one's own life. There are some people, to be sure, who sympathize, like the maids of Andromache when she parted from Hector, or like the comforters of Gudrun when she sat tearless over Sigurd's body, or like Polonius himself, only by recalling, in the sufferer's presence, their own present or past griefs. "Truly, I in youth suffered many things of love—very near this." But such sympathy is not the only sort or the most spontaneous. The emotions of the theater carry the sensitive spectator, especially when he is young, far beyond any memory of his own experiences. Notice such a spectator, and you will see him imitating unconsciously, by play of feature, or possibly even by gestures of hands, arms, or body, the actor whose skill absorbs him. But meanwhile, through this imitation, he is experiencing something of emotions before unknown to him—the sorrows of *Lear,* the remorse of *Macbeth,* the agony of *Othello.* To him these experiences seem as novel as if they had been original happenings in his own life. Such are the quasi-hypnotic suggestions of the stage. They often give us, as we say, wholly new insights into life.

As for other instances of the depth of such imitative emotions, there will be known to many of us cases of sensitive young women who, at the sight of accidents, or bodily ailments (say in elder women), misfortunes the causes of which they themselves have never yet experienced, are quite capable of feeling suggested internal pangs, or serious, if temporary, physical derangements, of the imitative, and at the same time partly instinctive, character of which there can be little reason to doubt. Nor are women alone in such imitative sufferings. Many men have felt such, and have been surprised at their vigor. The emotions of mobs, moreover, have the same character of imitative contagion, going much beyond the previous personal experiences of many, or perhaps, most members of the mob. In an important sociological monograph, entitled (in its French translation) "La Foule Criminelle," an Italian criminologist, Signor Scipio Sighele, has recently treated at length the problem of the psychology of mobs, and has dwelt much on the analogy between these phenomena, and those of hypnotic suggestion. It seems impossible to interpret such cases without supposing that the imitative functions of man have a very profound instinctive basis, and are by no means as purely secondary and acquired functions as Alexander Bain has supposed.

So much, then, for the lessons derived from hypnotism, and from daily life, concerning the depth and significance of imitation in man.

III.

But now, as regards the uses and the results of the imitative functions in human life, the foregoing general indication of their breadth and their depth is only the merest beginning of a comprehension of the part they play in our education and in our consciousness. It is not because they are common, or because they are, in deepest origin, partly instinctive, that I lay such stress upon them. It is because they are, in their proper and almost inextricable entanglement with our individual or temperamental functions, absolutely essential elements of all our rationality, of all our mental development, of all our worth as thinkers, as workers, or as producers; it is, too, because this value of imitation as the necessary concomitant, and condition and instrument, of all sound originality is still so inadequately understood by teachers, by critics of art, by students of human nature generally—it is on these accounts that I deem the study of the imitative functions probably the most important task in the psychology of the immediate future. The mental relations of the imitative functions are what I therefore have, next, briefly to indicate. This I may here do in the most summary form, thus:

It is a commonplace that most of our rational thinking (some psychologists incorrectly say, *all* of our rational thinking) is done in language. Well, language is very obviously a product of social imitation; is, therefore, a case of human imitativeness in every individual who learns it. So, then, without imitativeness, no higher development of rational thought in any of us. Only the imitative animal can become rational. So much for a beginning. But the fruitfulness of the imitative functions does not cease here. It is, in the second place, well recognized that our social morality, whatever else within or without us it implies, is in one direction dependent upon our regard for the will, the interest, the precepts, or the welfare of our fellows. Now such regard is, in its turn, dependent upon our power, by imitation, to experience and to comprehend the suggested will, interest, authority, and desires of those about us. So, then, without imitativeness, no chance for the development of the social conscience. The imitative functions, in combination of course with other functions, but still with essential significance, as factors in the whole process, are thus at the basis of the development of both reason and conscience. Nor yet is this all. Reason not only uses language as an instrument, but it aims at a certain well known goal; it aims at the imitation

in conscious terms of the truth of things beyond us. Reason thus not only depends upon imitative functions; it is explicitly imitative in its purposes. Just so, too, conscience is not only based, as to its origin, upon social imitations, so that you educate the childish conscience through obedience and through authority; but conscience, too, is in its goal explicitly imitative. It sets before us ideals of character, and then bids us imitate them. These ideals are, in general, personal. Conscience says: Such and such a self, thus and thus employed in reasonable service, is the right sort of self for you. You conceive such an ideal self. Now, in your practical life, imitate this conception. One imitates the ideal—precisely as, in childhood, the little boys imitate the big boys. Man the imitative animal is thus at the very heart of man the rational and man the moral animal, no matter how high in the scale the developed man may rise.

Yet the psychological importance of the imitative functions is not even thus to be exhausted. It is an odd fact, and one of vast significance, that all of us come by our developed personal self-consciousness through very decidedly imitative processes. Of this fact a later discussion may give a fuller account. It is enough now to remind observers of children how full of proud self-consciousness is the little boy who drives horse, or who plays soldier, or who is himself a horse, or a bird, or other creature, in his play. To be what we call his real self is, for his still chaotic and planless inner consciousness, so long as it is not set in order by his imitativeness, the same as to be nobody in particular. But to be a horse, or a coachman, or a soldier, or the hero of a favorite story, or a fairy, that is to be somebody, for that sort of self one first witnesses from without, or finds portrayed in the fascinating tale, and then imitatively assimilates, so that one thereupon conceives this new self from within, and rejoices in one's prowess as one does so.

Nor does this process of acquiring one's selfhood vicariously, as it were, cease with childhood. My various present social functions I have, in the first place, imitatively learned. Others, my guides and advisers, first showed me the way to these functions; for it was thus that I learned to move in company, to speak, to assume the outward forms of my calling, to conduct myself as just this particular kind of social organ. Now I myself, as what the psychologist calls an "empirical ego," am just now, for myself as well as for my fellows, the man who possesses, among other things, such and such a calling, position, office, rights, and aptitudes. Of all these things I had no knowledge in childhood. I had to learn my whole social trade; I learned it by imitations. But now that I have got such a calling and place, my knowledge of it de-

termines for me, all the while, my current notion of who I am. I am what my profession and my social relations define me to be. Thus it is actually true that just as my social guides—my parents, teachers, advisers, friends, critics—together gave me, through my love of imitating them and of being influenced by their characters, by their conduct, and by their ideals—just as they, I say, gave me a knowledge of my calling, so too they have furnished me with the very material of my present self-consciousness. Self-consciousness itself, in each one of us, is a product of imitation.

Reason, conscience, self-consciousness—these are significant possessions. Yet without imitativeness we should never have come by any one of them. They are results, and, as they stand, are even now embodiments of imitation. Such is my present thesis. Nor is this statement itself more than the beginning. As a fact, I hold that far more specific mental products than have yet been named—for instance, specific beliefs of reason, such as the so-called "axioms" at the basis of science—can be explained as determined in their nature by the special conditions under which the imitative functions of mankind have been developed. But herewith, indeed, I reach topics that lie far beyond the scope of the present paper, and within the domain of the deepest problems of philosophy. […]