

F **EMILE COUÉ**
AND HIS LIFE WORK

CHARLES BAUDOUIN

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EMILE COUÉ
AND
HIS LIFE-WORK

By The Same Author

SUGGESTION AND AUTOSUGGESTION
STUDIES IN PSYCHOANALYSIS



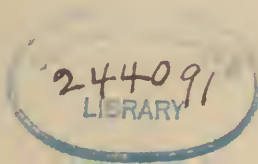
Emile Coué

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Emile Coué *Frontispiece*

Coué conducting a clinic . . . *Page 19*

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THICK-SET; somewhat short. Quiet, compact strength. A remarkably high forehead; hair brushed back, a little thinned out and perfectly white for a number of years already, as also the short pointed beard. And set off by this white frame, a sturdy and youthful face, ruddy-cheeked, full of the love of life—a face that is almost jovial when the man is laughing, almost sly when he smiles. The eyes with their straight look reflect firm kindliness — small, searching eyes which gaze fixedly, penetratingly, and suddenly become smaller still in a mischievous pucker, or almost close up under concentration when the forehead tightens, and seems loftier still. His speech is simple, lively, encouraging; he indulges in familiar parable and anecdote. His whole appearance is as far removed as possible from affectation; you feel that he is ready at any moment to remove his coat and

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give a helping hand. Such is the impression made on those who have seen Mr. Emil Coué, and Heaven knows they are legion, for no man under the sun is more approachable . . . and approached.

He is the type of what is known in England and especially in America as the self-made man. He never denies his lowly origin, and you feel that he loves the masses with a sympathy that may be called organic. Born at Troyes in 1857, on the 26th of February—he has the same birth date as Victor Hugo—he grew up in no more than modest surroundings, his father being a railroad employee. But the young man was gifted and he was able to pursue his studies, at Nogent-sur-Seine, until he took his B.A. degree. Then, having a leaning for science, he began to prepare unaided for his degree of Bachelor of Science—in itself a fine proof of perseverance. His first failure did not discourage him; he tried again, and won out. We next find him at Mont-

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médy, where his father had been sent by the railroad. It is easy to imagine the boy's childhood, tossed about from small town to small town of the same country, in the environment that is characteristic of railroad employees in Eastern France, among modest and kindly people, obliging, humble, without ambition, laborious, conscientious, of sterling honesty—in a word, good likable folk. And now that the master has earned a reputation that borders on fame, it is a fine thing to find unaltered in him those same traits, the solid and sober virtues of the lower middle class. "Mr. Coué is first and foremost the type of the worthy fellow" were Mr. Fulliquet's words the other night when he was welcoming him at the "Vers l'Unité" Club. And when later he described his work as "admirable," Mr. Coué could not understand, he could not for the life of him understand—and no sincerer modesty can be found than was his at that moment.

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While still a growing boy, Mr. Coué had decided to take up chemistry, but life's necessities prevented this. He had to earn his living, his father reminded him, and we sense the struggle between a scientific vocation and material needs, a struggle that ended by a somewhat unexpected compromise: the father persuaded his son to study pharmacy, which in its way is utilitarian chemistry. But that side of chemistry could not fully satisfy the seeker. Here we come upon an instance of "transference" or "compensation" such as to delight the soul of a psycho-analyst. We can picture the young man in the laboratory of his store at Troyes, a would-be chemist but a druggist in reality, knowing that he lacks everything to become a real chemist—special studies, experimental material and so on—instinctively turning to another chemistry that does not require costly equipment, the laboratory for which we all carry within us: the chemistry of thought and of human action. In

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Mr. Coué there is a "repressed" chemist, who has "expressed" as a psychologist. It is well to remember this in order to understand one of the characteristic aspects of his psychology: it is atomic, in the old way; it represents mental realities as material, solid things, in juxtaposition or opposition or superposition in the same manner as substance or atoms. When he speaks of an "idea" or of "imagination" or of "will-power," he speaks of them as if they were elements or combinations or reactions. He remains alien to an entire psychological current of his time, to that notion of continuity introduced by James and Bergson. His psychology, from a theoretical point of view, remains voluntarily simple, and intellectual snobs are apt to turn their noses up at it.

But he certainly returns the compliment: he has a severe contempt—a surgeon's contempt—for theory. The splitting of intellectual hairs does not suit him—rather would he

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pull it out by handfuls! His strong plebian nature is the nature of a man of action who does not care for pure intellectualism. That chemistry attracted him is due to the fact that it is a science that calls for actual handling. And here I am led to think of Ingres' violin: in his leisure Mr. Coué is something of a sculptor and he has modeled several heads; in him there is the need of handling matter. And it may be said that he handles psychic matter in just the same way as modeling clay: in thought he sees above all a force capable of modeling the human body. So his "Ingres' violin" did not to any extent turn him aside from his line, which is rigorously simple: *his psychology is ideoplastic*, and that is its great originality.

Now Bergson himself has said: If mind is continuity and fluidity, it must nevertheless, every time it wishes to act upon matter model itself on matter, adopt its solidity, its crude discontinuity, and think of itself as

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if it were space and matter. It was natural therefore that an essentially practical psychology should be this brief psychology I have spoken of. Thus, Mr. Coué's great predecessor, Bernheim, gave of "idea" and of "suggestion" somewhat crude and controvertible definitions ("Suggestion is an idea that changes into action"). With Mr. Coué, this aspect is even more marked. But while we point out here his limitations, we must not deplore them too much. They are the very limitations that thought imposes upon itself in order to become more powerful action.

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It was in 1885, when he was twenty-eight, that the small druggist of Troyes met Liébeault for the first time. And that meeting decided his entire life.

Between the two men there were remarkable affinities. Liébeault was merely a country doctor, unpreten-

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tious and without ambition, who happened to be also a genius. He was the first to show clearly the phenomenon of suggestion, and he almost performed miracles. He finally established himself at Nancy, where he was to find in Bernheim the disciple and theoretician through whom his ideas were to be made known to the world. Now, Emile Coué's history was to be somewhat similar. He has conducted himself with the same modesty; he has never sought out men but allowed men to seek him out, at first a few neighbors, until now, every week, several Englishmen cross the Channel for the sole purpose of visiting him at Nancy. With that native simplicity of honest and great men, he is always surprised at this, surprised to see that his idea is conquering Europe.

After assisting at some of Liébeault's experiments, he began to study and practice hypnotic suggestion. Instantly he perceived its possibilities, but as practiced by Lié-



Emile Coué conducting a clinic in his home at Nancy, France

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beault he found in it a vagueness that hindered his work: "it lacked method," he would say. His positive and concrete temperament, his need of "touching" and "handling" were ill at ease confronted by a reality that was still elusive and capricious. While he was waiting for an experimental and practical method, he gave free vent to his gift for observation, which is of the highest order (it will be realized how great when it is remembered that one fine day this man discovered in himself a talent for modeling heads without any previous plastic training). He is as observant as he is practical. He found the most novel, the most pregnant part of his doctrine in simple every-day observation. And this should be a lesson to us; this should remind us that the gift, artistic in a certain sense of every-day observation, is for science a rich field that should not be under-estimated; other processes must be added, but cannot take its place. Too often, far oftener than is sup-

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posed, official scientific training remains scholastic: it teaches how to reason and makes one forget how to observe. We may mention, too, what the instigators of the "new schools," from Rousseau down, have perceived, to wit, the bond between manual activity and observation. A training that develops the intellectual side of man to the exclusion of the practical side, runs the risk of jeopardizing the gift of observation, which is the very basis of intellect.

So once again perhaps we have to thank fate for its hard knocks: it is those very knocks that make it educational. We have possibly cause to rejoice, not to deplore, that Mr. Emile Coué's studies were cut short at an age when they should normally have continued—to rejoice that in those years of full vigor of the mind, he learned more through playing truant than by covering the customary university programme. At every step his science plunges into the very heart of life, and it is a very real pleasure

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to follow him into that wholesome, invigorating nature bath—a pleasure, truth to tell, which people boasting of too barren an intellectualism no longer appreciate.

And so Mr. Coué went on observing with that penetrating, mischievous and kindly eye of his. Making the best of things, he found in his work an unlimited opportunity for observation. The capricious action of remedies, the effect of a well-placed word with the bottle of medicine, the cure of some obstinate disease by means of an innocuous compound, all these things, ordinary as they are, held meaning for this great observer; they registered on his mind during all his youth and within that subconscious whose praise he was to sing later, they were preparing the elaboration of his future thesis: auto-suggestion.

* * *

Meanwhile, the ideas of the Nancy school had spread. In America they were being exploited and popularized

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with all the claptrap and noise that accompanies bluff. In that mass of very uninteresting literature, Mr. Coué thought there was perhaps something to be found, and his merit lies in having been able to extract the strong, vital principle from all that trash. In one of those American pamphlets which he describes as "very indigestible," he at least found indications of experiments which he had the patience to try out, and in which he believed he saw the necessary basis for the "method" he had been seeking ever since his meeting with Liébeault. This brings us to 1901. The "method" he started to apply at that time leads the subject to hypnosis by means of a series of graduated experiments in suggestion in the waking state. Mr. Coué was then using hypnotism.

But little by little the ideas which were to be his own personal contribution crystallized. They are the result of the encounter between his methodical experiments and those

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simple, every-day observations he had been storing up for years. What explained the capricious and unexpected action of remedies was of course the patient's "imagination." Possibly it might be that same imagination, methodically directed in the graduated experiments, that develops the strangest suggestions and hypnosis itself? And might not the passiveness, the incapacity to resist shown by the patient subjected to suggestion or hypnosis simply be the sign that when will and imagination are in conflict, imagination has the upper hand? Now this is not merely seen in cases of systematic suggestion and hypnosis. In every-day life we constantly note the same conflict and the same failure; and this happens every time we think "I cannot refrain from" or "I cannot help it."

Here we have the germ of the two fundamental ideas of Couéism. The first is that in the last analysis all suggestion is auto-suggestion, and auto-suggestion is nothing else but the

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well-known action of "imagination" or of the "mental," but acting in accordance with certain laws and immeasurably more powerful than was formerly believed.

The other idea is corollary to the first: Since, in suggestion, it is not the one who suggests who is acting but solely the imagination of the subject, it follows that the violent and very real conflict that all practitioners have noted in suggestion and hypnosis is *not* the conflict of two wills but the conflict within the subject himself of imagination and will. Will is overcome by imagination.

This second idea, it would seem, is the essential idea of Mr. Coué and his most fruitful one. He has studied it thoroughly, with singular acuteness, and has formulated this law, which I have called the law of converted effort, according to which will is not only powerless against suggestion but only serves to strengthen the suggestion it seeks to destroy. Such is the case of the embryo bicycle rider who

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sees a stone, is afraid of falling on it, makes a desperate effort to avoid it, and only succeeds in landing on it with masterly precision. The same may be said of stage fright, or giggling, which increases with every effort to check it.

Undoubtedly this law could be expressed more broadly still by saying that in the conflict between the subconscious and conscious will, it is always the former that carries the day: Will can only triumph over the subconscious by borrowing its own weapons; and that is exactly what takes place in methodical auto-suggestion.

Having recognized in the imagination of the subject the great lever, Mr. Coué was led to give up hypnotism, and then to teach the subject how to use suggestion on himself. While doing this he proved that he was on the right track, for the results of suggestion so understood exceeded the usual limits. Thus he ascertained the action of suggestion in organic cases, which was also noted

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in independent research by Dr. Bonjour of Lausanne (falling off of moles through suggestion).

In 1910, the system formed a compact whole, and from that date started what is now known as the "new" Nancy school. At collective sittings which constantly increased in size (even the war only showed a slight slowing down) Mr. Coué obtained surprising results, and today one refers to the "miracles of Nancy." More remarkable still, this man, whose life has been a hard and laborious one, gratuitously distributes health and joy to the thousands of human beings who flock to him as to a savior.

More and more, in this great work of charity, Mr. Coué has adapted himself to the people, the simple-minded ones of the earth whom he loves and feels akin to. It is both his glory and his limitation. He lets others adapt the expression of his ideas to the needs of the more delicate-minded. If, year by year, he has

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simplified that expression, if he has given it that childish and commonplace appearance that disappointed so many in the course of his recent lectures, it should be understood to what praiseworthy tendency in him this fault is due.

Mr. Coué has also been reproached with constantly repeating the same thing. Well, he does. I doubt whether he may be expected to change now; I am not even sure that it would be desirable. He has an idea, two if you like; I do not believe he has three, but then he would not know what to do with a third. The two ideas he has, he really possesses; he holds on to them and he attaches great importance to them. He knows how weighty they are. He also knows—none better—the value of that concentration, that singleness of idea, which alone allows an idea to become a suggestion, a force. He also knows the value of that monotonous and obstinate repetition that he recommends for practice in sugges-

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tion. One is reminded of old Cato: by dint of repeating each day in the tribune: "Carthage must be destroyed." he destroyed Carthage. That obstinacy, too, is a limitation, but it is also a force.

It is quite true that Mr. Coué's manner cannot appeal to everybody. In Geneva, especially, where everybody is so "refined," this French easy, good-nature, carried to an extreme rather shocked them, it would seem. The very tumult of success, the sort of popular wave that follows Mr. Coué wherever he goes, frightened away the mannerly and prudent. They saw in it display, quackery almost. What a misconception, and how disheartening to those who are aware of the modesty and self-denial of this great and good man! One might as well claim that the magnet makes a noise in order to attract steel, and I am sure that if Jesus himself were to return among us, trailing through the humbler streets of the town with his retinue of poor,

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the "well-bred" would cover their faces and exclaim "Quackery!" But Mr. Coué quietly goes on his way, knowing that he cannot please the world and his wife.

One might wish of course for more suppleness, a greater faculty of adapting himself to his various audiences. But it is best to take him as he is: a rough diamond, a kind of natural force.

If he confines himself, by temperament and choice, to action on the masses, he knows that he can do so without harm. His disciples are there, particularly his disciples the doctors, and their action can reach where his does not. Let us mention Dr. Vachet and Dr. Prost of Paris, and Monier-Williams, who after coming to study auto-suggestion at Nancy, opened a clinic in London for the application of the method. It is in England that physicians and intellectuals have best understood the powerful originality of "Couéism" (they coined the word). In France, and

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elsewhere too, most people refuse to understand. First the whole thing was called absurd; now that the idea has made itself felt and can no longer be ignored, we are told: "This is all very well, but we have known about it a long time; under another name it is our old friend suggestion." These are the first two stages through which according to Mr. James every truly novel idea passes: first, it is extravagant, then it is true but commonplace. Shall we soon be ripe for the third stage, that of understanding? Generally, official science's chief reproach is that Mr. Coué is not a physician, and official science tries to ignore the nucleus of doctors who are daily increasing the numbers of the Nancy school. But it should be remembered that the ideas of that school are called upon to spread elsewhere besides medicine. To the fields of education, ethics psychology and sociology they offer new points of view. No one who is interested in the human mind can remain indif-

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ferent where they are concerned. A few churchmen have understood this remarkably well. Not to mention the sermon preached at St. Paul's Cathedral in London on June 10, 1921, by Canon E. W. Barnes, we have numerous instances among the Geneva clergy of a fine open-mindedness which scientific men would do well to emulate.

This attitude is not surprising. Although Mr. Coué's doctrine remains absolutely neutral in metaphysical matters, it does meet on common ground with religion in its affirmation of the power of mind over the body. As for the life of the master, there is none that more closely conforms to the true Christian idea. To give of one's self as he does is more than rare; it is exceptional, and if there were at Nancy no other "miracle" than that one, it would be enough and more than enough to make us bow our heads in respect. That miracle is the mainspring of all the rest.

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