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FEATURE

**SEVEN SECRETS OF MENTAL POWER IN
THE WRITINGS OF ELLEN G. WHITE**

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***Abstract.** Despite the vast research done by the theologians and educators of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is always a necessity to compare the concept of mental power explicitly presented in the writings of Ellen White with the contemporary science. That is why this theoretical paper aims at addressing the above-mentioned need by means of comparative literature analysis. The examination of the “seven secrets” has shown that the revelations given to Ellen White regarding the concept of mental power are practical, scientifically reasonable, and, in general, ahead of her time. Moreover, contributing to the growing body of research on Ellen White, this project may inform future studies in the field of education from the philosophical, theological, psychological, and mental health perspectives.*

Keywords: mental power, Ellen G. White, learning performance, cognition, education

Introduction

The only distinguishing characteristic that makes humans different from the rest of the living beings inhabiting the planet Earth is mind. Self-consciousness, appreciation of beauty, humor, the perception of time, ability to speak and ask questions about the meaning of life, moral awareness, discernment and wisdom, judgment, and most importantly, love, are among the known and already discovered attributes of mind unique to a person. Thus, trying to delve into the mentioned above human capabilities, for centuries since the creation of the humans, people have been developing a mental power concept.

The mental power concept is not new for educators. Moreover, it has received different annotations in different periods of time. That is why this paper will start by discovering mental power from the philosophical point of view. Then it will continue with the 19th-century educators and their perspective on the topic. Finally, it will arrive at the writings of Ellen White, the most influential author in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination (Knight, 1996). The messages she left regarding the concept of mental power will be compared with contemporary science. In particular, seven randomly selected mental enhancement principles, which are found in her manuscripts, will be related to the knowledge of the 21st century.

The design of this theoretical paper is comparative analysis. Thus, it synthesizes the relevant literature on the mental power concept in the body of the manuscript. In its nature, the work does not attempt to fill the gap in medical science. It also does not intend to present the widely known ideas expressed by Ellen White concerning health. The rationale for this analysis, however, is to compare the specific extracts, where Ellen White explicitly talks about mental power, with the contemporary scientific knowledge making it possible to see the relevance of her 19th-century writings in the context of the 21st-century research.

Historical Perspectives

The search for intellectual faculty has been a long-term topic since the beginning of the world. According to White (2015c), "For four thousand years the race had been decreasing in physical strength, in mental power" (p.117). From the very beginning until the very end, earthly creatures are destined to suffer because of the sin committed in the Garden of Eden. The very creation of the human can be entitled as a sparkle of the Heavenly mind in the human body. Based on the Biblical narrative, the first woman, standing in front of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, intended to help obtain the power of the eternal mind disobeying God (Gen 3:6). Since then, humanity has been showing an authentic interest in mental topics. For example, picking up on the Aristotelian-scholastic ideas of intellectual faculties of the soul, early modern thinkers were preparing the philosophical ground for the contemporaries of Ellen White. They have continued with the critique of the works developing and creating brand new concepts as they have been trying to answer the eternal question of how to delve into the mind of God.

In his theory of consciousness, Spinoza argues that "every individual mind truly is an idea in the mind of God," while in the case of Leibniz, "one's own attitudes and beliefs play a central role in creating quite a literal metaphysically moral fabric of the world" (Boccaccini & Marmodoro, 2017, p. 440). Opposing the rationalists, Hume, a famous empiricist and denier of the reality of the immaterial soul, conflicted with the idea of consciousness as a type of mental

power. He names it a powerless conscience (Greko, 2017). Later on, Kant, reconciling two philosophical schools, provides the idea of multiple mental powers in his *Subjective Deduction and the Second Paralogism* (Tester, 2017). Finishing the ideological lineage of the modern period, John Dewey (1997), a respected American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, argues that philosophy may be “defined as the general theory of education” (p. 22). In his mind, education should not be symbolic, verbal, or arbitrarily dogmatic; rather, it has to be practical and an inspiring progress and growth. That is why, the first step toward improving education is a modification of “mental attitudes” striving toward freedom of mind as “mental power capable of independent exercise, emancipated from the leading strings of others, not mere unhindered external operation” (Dewey, 2017, p. 64). Making a path for contemporary educators, he believed that they would embrace the wind of pragmatism becoming the living bodies of mental revolution.

In the *Journal of Education*, King (1893) exhorts not only to develop the power of the mind, but also to act upon others, setting the “minds in motion” (p. 139). In addition to such a move, his colleague, thinking about instruction for children, asserts that it is not right to give “knowledge without training their intellectual faculties, knowledge without mental power; teaching them precepts instead of establishing principles” (Smith, 1893, p. 156). Echoing the same though, Dr. White (as cited in Harris, 1897) claims that “It is clear that the developing of power should be the leading aim of teaching. Knowledge is necessary to enlighten and guide in all human effort, but mental power gives acumen, grasp, strength, poise, inspiration, and these are winners of success” (p. 288). Finally, Edson (1902) considers mental power as “a reserve force acquired through training and discipline which enables one to accomplish certain desirable results. This endowment is manifested in attention, concentration, thoroughness, accuracy, originality, and self-reliance” (p. 99). He later provides four ways how a teacher can best improve mental power: (1) by active thinking, (2) by attention to the right conditions for study, (3) by cultivating good expression, and (4) by using good teaching. There are, probably, some other ways of mental power development; yet, the most important question is why one should do it. With an appropriate answer, Ellen White writes that “If the individual is possessed of large talents of mental powers, he will find in the Oracles of God treasures of truth, beautiful and valuable, which he can appropriate. He will also find difficulties, and secrets and wonders which will give him the highest satisfaction to study during a long lifetime, and yet there is an infinity beyond” (1958, p. 945).

It is important to note that, writing her messages, Ellen White did not have a formal education as her above-mentioned contemporaries. Because of the poor health from the early childhood, she did not have any academic degree at all

(Knight, 1999). However, the messenger of the Lord loved reading books and “amassed a personal and office library of more than 1000 volumes” (p. 63). Yet, the main source of her “scientific” writings was an inspiration, as God gave her approximately 2000 visions and dreams (White, 2000). The following section will introduce some of such inspired passages and their contemporary scientific grounds.

How to Get There

From the previous section, it is evident that the topic of mental power has been popular enough through the ages. The time of Ellen White is not an exception as well. Yet, the contemporary educators, scholars, and scientists did not realize the whole potential of God-directed instruction regarding the powers of the mind. While they were doing their own research, the Heavenly Hosts were working on their chosen people who had to prepare the whole world for the second coming of Jesus Christ. That is why the secrets of mental power were unfolded right before the eyes of Ellen White. These very secrets have been analyzed, properly systematized, and presented on the pages below.

The First Secret: Think

The first secret of mental power that was revealed by God is an intensive thinking activity. To educate the mind to think is one of the most important and challenging tasks in pedagogy. As it is sharply stated, “Those who wish for stronger minds can gain them by diligence. The mind increases in power and efficiency by use. It becomes strong by hard thinking” (White, 1999, p. 99). In another place, Ellen White reinforces the previous idea by saying that “the mind must invent, work, and wrestle, in order to give hardness and vigor to the intellect” (White, 2004, p. 294). Clearly, this excerpt is stirring up an average person toward the development of brain muscles. Yet, the genuine aim of a Christian student is not just to achieve gigantic intelligence, it is to “meet the mind of [the biblical] God” (White, 1999, p. 3). Along with the general development of thinking power, it is necessary to develop “other mental powers” (White, 2016b, p. 230). Considering such evidence, it is clear that the hard thinking concept that positively influences mental power has been discussed in the Seventh-day Adventist church since the end of the 19th century. Moreover, it was neither gender-oriented nor discriminative in terms of social stratification as the prophethood would make appeals to both men and women.

Today, in the beginning of the 21st century, empirical research has shown that the concept of hard thinking has a renewed vigor. Moreover, it is true for men and women, adults and children. For example, a study on grown-ups has shown that “practice with reasoning problems led to improved performance on an unpracticed

task of relational integration” (Mackey, Miller, Wendelken, & Bunge, 2017, p. 16). Another study “examined the effects of a one-on-one cognitive training program on memory, visual and auditory processing, processing speed, reasoning, attention, and General Intellectual Ability (GIA) score for students ages 8-14” (Carpenter, Ledbetter, & Moore, 2016, p. 815). The result proved that different types of memory, processing, and reasoning were significantly improved after the special cognitive training.

Thus, as it is indicated in the writings of Ellen White, “the more we use our knowledge and exercise our powers, the more knowledge and power we shall have” (White, 2015a, p. 354). In other manuscripts, she discusses specific mind processing techniques such as divergent and convergent thinking, meditation, concentration, and pattern recognition (White, 2011, 2016b, 2016c). All these methods of mental improvement are on the cutting-edge research and publications in the present day educational psychology (Kahneman, 2015; Oakley, 2017).

The Second Secret: Eat Well

The next secret of mental power relates to a dietary mindset. Regarding the general dietary principles that are healthy for the whole organism and mind, in particular, Ellen White recommends food that is worth eating, good for the body and supportive of mental activity. Binding this idea with the previous topic, it is interesting to notice that “the mind does not wear out or break down so often on account of diligent employment and hard study, as on account of eating improper food at improper times” (White, 2016c, p. 172). Moreover, Ellen White continues to discuss the Biblical principles concerning the nourishment provided by the Creator at the beginning of the world. As one may know from the Bible, there were three stages of food introduction. The first human diet consisted of nuts, fruits, and grains (Gen 1:29). After the Fall, the green plants were added to the ration (Gen 3:18). Then surviving the Flood, the human family was provided with clean fish and flesh meat of clean animals (Gen 9:3). The final amendment was introduced by the inspired writings of Ellen White and focused on the abstinence from flesh meat. Regarding the fish, it was still on the human menu. For example, writing to her non-Adventist niece in 1896, Ellen White (that was 52 years after her first vision), explains:

I came to the conclusion that there was danger in using the flesh of dead animals, and since then I have not used meat at all. It is never placed on my table. I use fish when I can get it. We get beautiful fish from the salt water lake near here. [...] I cannot but practice that which I know to be best for my health, and my family are in perfect harmony with me. You see, my dear niece, that I am telling you matters just as they are.
(Douglass, 1998, p. 315)

There are many more quotations on the relevant dietary topic that might be explored in further study of the writings of Ellen White. It may shed light on some challenging and contradictory issues that may appear as a result of personal or cultural bias. However, the principles related to food given by God in the 19th century should be considered today.

Though diet has different facets of consideration, it is important to mark out the influence of certain stimulants. In the *Testimony Studies on Diet and Food*, Ellen White claims that “tea, coffee, and tobacco, as well as alcoholic drinks, are different degrees in the scale of artificial stimulants” (White, 1996, p. 145). Further, she insists that “a professor of religion who loves these stimulants, and accustoms himself to their use, never grows in grace” (White, 2007, p. 433). It becomes clear from the mentioned passages that some eating and drinking habits do harm not only to the body of a person but also to the mind first. It is fundamental for a Christian, especially in the context of meeting the mind of God where the long-term focus is not on performing “well” in some temporary mental activities stirred up by the above-mentioned drugs, but on confidently running for eternity. Ignoring those principles, a person “becomes gross and sensual; the animal passions control the higher powers of the mind, and virtue is not cherished” (White, 2005, p. 33). This is the inspired part of the practical message.

In turn, the scientific studies of the 21st century related to diet and cognition are under close scholarly scrutiny of the contemporary intellectual world as well (Attuquayefio & Stevenson, 2015; Otaegui-Arrazola, Amiano, Elbusto, Urdaneta, & Martínez-Lage, 2014; Parrott et al., 2013; Tussing-Humphreys et al., 2017). For example, in the research related to cognitive performance and dietary choices, scholars concluded that “it is becoming quite clear that intellectual status early in life effects good or poor food choices and therefore body weight status which, in turn, effects cognitive performance” (Chrichton, Elias, Davey, Alkerwi, & Dore, 2015, p. 11). Another work regarding food and mental health shows that the nutrients “can assist in brain function” (Parletta, Milte, & Meyer, 2013, p. 725). It further highlights the need for human intervention in the research of healthy-style diets.

Competing with the healthy eating pyramid, Harvard University offers its healthy eating plate (“Healthy Eating Plate, 2012). What they promote is to fill half of the plate with vegetables and fruits, while the other half should be reserved for whole grains and healthy proteins. It does not include red meat, cheese, and processed meats. Also, they recommend the intake of healthy oils, water and the avoidance of sugary beverages. Finally, Harvard teaches that people should stay active as it is important for weight control (it was shown before in the text that weight status negatively affects cognitive performance). For those who study the writings of Ellen White related to eating practices, Harvard’s food habits may not reveal much.

The Third Secret: Workout

The third secret of mental power presented in the writings of Ellen White is linked to physical exercises. In *Messages to Young People*, she declares that “right physical habits promote mental superiority” (White, 2007, p. 29). Moreover, she states that the nature of God will not interfere with the process of violating physical laws. “The excessive employment of the brain power and the neglect of the physical creates diseased conditions of the system,” she continues (White, 2016d, p. 198). So, there is no supernatural way of getting healed or mentally energized for those who neglect God-given principles and laws of a healthy lifestyle.

A systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted by the group of researchers. They studied the effect of physical exercises on human cognition (Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2017). The result has shown that “PA [physical activity] benefits several domains of cognition and metacognition in youth. Curricular physical education interventions and programs aimed at increasing daily PA seem to be the most effective” (Álvarez-Bueno et al., 2017, p. 740). Another study showed that “promotion of physical fitness and vitamin D supplementation should be key components of interventions to prevent cognitive decline with normal aging” (Jeong-Deok Ahn & Hyunsik Kang, 2015, p. 729). One more requirement related to the mental health is the necessity of a proper oxygen supply. As noticed by the research, “cardiorespiratory fitness may be an important therapeutic target for achieving cognitive benefits” (Vidoni et al., 2015, p. 1). Thus, from the empirical scientific inquiry, it is clear that the importance of physical activity is unquestionable in regards to human cognition.

The Fourth Secret: Abstain

The biblical story about Daniel and his friends is a good example of abstinence that resulted not only in the personal benefits of the young Jews as they appeared to be “ten times wiser” (Dan 1:20) but also in the incredible manifestation of the glory of God. “Intemperance of any kind benumbs the perceptive organs and so weakens the brain-nerve power that eternal things are not appreciated, but placed upon a level with the common,” says Ellen White (White, 2003, p. 12). In another place, talking about intemperance in work, she probably challenges some people in the 21st century:

Intemperance in eating and drinking, intemperance in labor, intemperance in almost everything, exists on every hand. Those who make great exertions to accomplish just so much in a given time, and continue to labor when their judgment tells them they ought to rest, are never gainers. They are expending force that they will need at a future time. When the energy which they have so recklessly used is called for, they fail for lack of it. Physical strength is gone,

and mental power is unavailable. Their time of need has come, and their resources are exhausted (White, 2016a, p. 99).

Basically, what Ellen White is trying to convey by the message of temperance is that the human nature should control animal instincts. The sinful body desires to be satisfied despite the laws and wisdom of the Creator of the universe. That is why the messenger of the Lord states that “abstemiousness in diet, and control of all the passions, will preserve the intellect and give mental and moral vigor, enabling men to bring all their propensities under the control of the higher powers” (White, 2007, p. 63).

Regarding the empirical research, it proves that intemperance in eating, drinking, and laboring negatively correlate with cognitive performance. For example, one study “showed a protective role of family dinner consumption against mental disorders” encouraging “a healthy lifestyle at home” versus intemperate eating somewhere else (Haghighatdoost et al., 2017, p. 223). Another series of studies found close relationships between cognitive dysfunction and poor sleep (Könen, 2015; Maltese, 2016; Soykök, 2015), showing the benefits of temperance in labor. That is why the ancient wisdom given to humanity by the Creator of the universe through God’s messenger is still relevant. Those who believe and keep it will benefit not only in this life by gaining the physical health and mental power but also in the life to come.

The Fifth Secret: Get Charged

It is not a secret that today, the whole world depends on electricity. It will be, therefore, not surprising if the contemporary life on Earth will suspend only because of the poor power supply. It might be yet a surprise for someone to hear that the human body absolutely depends on the same electric power. In the book *Education*, a diligent student can learn that “the electric power of the brain, promoted by mental activity, vitalizes the whole system, and is thus an invaluable aid in resisting disease” (White, 2016, p. 60). It simply means that a human brain is nothing but a power generator that keeps the whole body alive. Further, Ellen White continues that most human sicknesses “originate in the mind and can only be cured by restoring the mind” (White, 1977b, p. 396). Finally, what is more important is that “the brain nerves which communicate with the entire system are the only medium through which Heaven can communicate with man and affect his inmost life” (White, 2015b, p. 148). Thus, if there is something that hinders the circulation of the electric power, it affects the nervous system and lessens the powers of the entire organism, which results in the deadening of the mind.

Contemporary research is now focused on the brain issue. Yet, it is not that easy to deal with the subtle part of human body, which gets in touch with the

invisible world. Scientists today are interested in such topics as neural bioelectricity, chemical, and biophoton signaling. The latter is the study of light signals in the neural system (Tang & Dai, 2014). Perhaps humanity will one day come to the point of understanding that everyone is sustained by the light that is God's life-giving power. In the Bible, for example, Jesus Christ is associated with some kind of light too (John 1:4). What is interesting is that such kind of insights regarding electricity, brain, and body were not just open for discussion in the writings of Ellen White during her time, but carried the instructional and educational functions, even sometime before Nicola Tesla's discoveries.

The Sixth Secret: Contemplate

To contemplate the beauty of God's creation is natural to a human being. Some people enjoy observing the streams of water running from the high rocky mountain or to see how birds fly together in the flock. It is pleasant to meditate upon the beautiful flowers of the field and look at the tender living creatures studying the contours of God's fingerprint. However, nothing can be compared with the beauty of the Word of God. The following statement shows how Ellen White is lifting up the most sacramental topic in her life:

The mind occupied with commonplace matters only, becomes dwarfed and enfeebled. If never tasked to comprehend grand and far-reaching truths, it after a time loses the power of growth. As a safeguard against this degeneracy, and a stimulus to development, nothing else can equal the study of God's word. As a means of intellectual training, the Bible is more effective than any other book, or all other books combined. The greatness of its themes, the dignified simplicity of its utterances, the beauty of its imagery, quicken and uplift the thoughts as nothing else can. No other study can impart such mental power as does the effort to grasp the stupendous truths of revelation. The mind thus brought in contact with the thoughts of the Infinite cannot but expand and strengthen. (White, 2016, p. 124)

Wisdom, poetry, history, and the most profound philosophy can be considered as some of the characteristics of the Word of God that quicken the mental power and strengthens the intellect (White, 1977a). "It is His purpose, by the elevating, sanctifying power of the truth, [...] that other minds may be drawn into harmony with His mind" (White, 2009, p. 17). Obviously, for a diligent student of the Bible, the most desirable expectation is meeting the mind of God. The secrets are hidden, and at the same time, accessible as anyone can come and contemplate the Word.

The Seventh Secret: Receive

The last secret of mental power is nothing else, but the pure grace of God that He imparts to everyone who seeks Him. They "will be constantly receiving a new

endowment of physical and mental power. The inexhaustible supplies of heaven are at their command. Christ gives them the breath of His own spirit, the life of His own life. The Holy Spirit puts forth its highest energies to work in heart and mind” (White, 2015, p. 49). Ellen White continues that “The same grace that came from Christ to Paul and Apollos, that distinguished them for spiritual excellencies, will today be imparted to devoted Christian missionaries” (White, 2017, p. 149). Finally, she reaches the culmination in this series stating that “Communion with God through prayer develops mental and moral power” (White, 2008, p. 27). It is the only way to receive the grace that will supernaturally change not only the way people think but also the whole life.

Conclusion

Both the empirical research evidence of the 21st century and the writings of Ellen White have shown the common trend in mental power development. This fact not only makes one think that the Ellen White was a leading voice of progressive education, psychology, medicine, and other scientific fields of the 19th century, but also points at the divine nature of her inspiration and revelation. Since the seven mind enhancing principles have been discussed in the paper as they were presented both in the writings of Ellen White and current scientific research, it is time to conclude that mental power is a gift of God. Since the Fall and from the early stages of development, everyone in this world has a guaranteed opportunity to unfold the seven secrets delivered in the present article. Starting from the ability to think, digest food, physically enjoy the world, the Creator of the universe constantly teaches everyone the secrets of temperance, contemplation, and absolute union with the life-giving Father.

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