



# Exploring the Depths of the Human Mind: An Analysis of Walter S. Athearn's "An Introduction to the Study of the Mind"

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## Book Review

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## Abstract

Walter S. Athearn's "An Introduction to the Study of the Mind" delves into the essence and functions of the human mind, exploring its immaterial, unitary, self-active, self-conscious, and abiding attributes. Athearn emphasizes the mind's immortality and constancy despite bodily changes, underscoring the importance of effective study habits and emotional management for cognitive efficiency. The work highlights the significant impact of early experiences on mental development and stresses the need for balanced growth in knowledge, appreciation, and conduct to prevent mental disorders. Through insightful examples and practical guidance, Athearn provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the mind's role in shaping individual destiny and the importance of listening to the voice of conscience.

**Keywords:** Mind; Psychology; Immortality; Emotional Management; Study Habits

## Introduction

Walter S. Athearn's seminal work, "An Introduction to the Study of the Mind," offers a profound exploration of the mind as an entity capable of thinking, feeling, and willing [1]. Athearn identifies five key attributes of the mind: immateriality, unity, self-activity, self-consciousness, and abiding nature. He posits that the mind's constancy, despite physical changes, signifies its immortality. Effective study habits and emotional management are highlighted as crucial for cognitive efficiency and academic success. Athearn also stresses the significant influence of early experiences on mental development, advocating for balanced growth in knowledge, appreciation, and conduct to foster a well-rounded and resilient mind [1]. This review aims to dissect Athearn's insights, elucidating the critical elements of his study and their implications for educators, parents, and individuals.

## Attributes and Immortality of the Mind

In Lesson 1 on the book, Athearn describes the mind as an entity that thinks, feels, and wills, comparable to electricity in that it is defined by its behavior. Psychology, the science of the mind and its behavior, encompasses all our knowledge about the mind [1]. According to Athearn, the mind has five key attributes: it is immaterial, unitary, self-active, self-conscious, and abiding. The mind is immaterial, meaning it is not physical matter; it has no weight, does not follow gravitational laws, and is unaffected by physical forces or objects. It is unitary, signifying that we have a single mind that performs the functions of thinking, feeling, and willing, rather than multiple minds [1]. The mind is self-active, able to change its behavior and initiate or discontinue activities independently. It is self-conscious, aware of itself and capable of introspection, allowing it to say, "I think," "I feel," and "I will." Lastly, the mind is abiding, retaining its

identity throughout life's changes, unlike matter, which loses its identity when modified. Athearn also states that the mind is immortal. While the body's cells constantly change, the "I" remains constant throughout life. The sense of self persists regardless of bodily changes, mutilations, or even death. My own personal experience further illustrates the unity of mind to me, particularly in how emotions affect academic performance. High emotional engagement reduces the mental energy available for thinking, which impedes study effectiveness. Athearn emphasizes that mental energy is finite; excessive emotional tension leaves less energy for cognitive tasks, hindering students' ability to study well. This highlights the importance of managing emotional states to maintain optimal cognitive function and academic performance [1].

### Human Composition and Mental Influence

In Lesson 2 of the book, Athearn supports the claim that humans are composed of the earth's elements by noting that all chemical elements in the human body are found among the seventy elements in the "dust of the ground." He points out that while chemical laboratories can detect substances on distant planets and penetrate flesh to reveal hidden tissue structures, they cannot record the growth of ideas or emotions in the mind [1]. This limitation provides conclusive evidence that humans are more than just "dust of the ground." Through a remarkable living process, humans became "a living soul," yet this soul inhabits a body made from the earth's dust. The brain and spinal cord, along with sensory and motor nerves, make up the central nervous system, from which all mental life emanates. Within this system resides the mind, the immortal "I," which has the power to change its environment and shape its destiny. Athearn emphasizes that humans are architects of their fate and can overcome adverse circumstances, as illustrated by examples of individuals who pursued their passions despite challenging situations. Athearn further illustrates that the mind and the immortal "I" can guide individuals amidst life's conflicting interests by listening to the voice of conscience [1]. This inner voice, along with knowledge of growth laws and heredity, helps maintain the body as a fit dwelling place for the spirit, which in turn directs human conduct. For example, from my own experiences when I was in school, a girl desiring to study history overcame her parents' strict expectations and changed schools to follow her passion, ultimately succeeding in her chosen field. Similarly, a boy pursued his passion for painting against his parents' wishes and the discouraging environment, achieving happiness and success in his artistic endeavors. These examples demonstrate that it is the mind, not physical constraints, that commands change and drives individuals toward their goals. The voice of conscience, when heeded, guides human conduct amidst challenges, ensuring that actions align with

one's true self and the image of the Creator.

### Balanced Development

In Lesson 3 of the book, Athearn asserts that a balanced individual engages equally in three realms: knowledge, appreciation, and conduct. An imbalance occurs when one realm is prioritized at the expense of the others, leading to a one-sided and incomplete mental development [1]. An overly intellectual person might neglect emotional appreciation, becoming an "intellectual freak," while an artist may neglect intellectual and behavioral development, excused as having an "artistic temperament." Likewise, an individual dominated by will act impulsively without thought or emotional consideration. To counteract this imbalance, educational systems introduced majors and minors to ensure well-rounded development. Students focusing on intellectual majors must choose minors in emotional and will-related subjects, and vice versa. Athearn emphasizes the importance of a harmonious development of all mental faculties to prevent disorders caused by conflicting motives and impulses [1]. This concept is exemplified by Jim Carrey's struggle with depression, attributed to the conflict between his true self and the persona he portrayed. In various traditions, such as the religious practice of touching elders' feet, balance between ego and humility is fostered. Christianity, Athearn argues, supports whole-mindedness by integrating knowledge, emotional worship and willful obedience to God, fulfilling man's triune nature as a thinker, feeler, and willer. Neglecting any of these aspects leads to spiritual starvation and incomplete development.

### Intellectual Faculties

In Lesson 4, Walter Scott Athearn identifies six faculties of the intellect: Perception, Memory, Imagination, Conception, Judgment, and Reason. Perception is the mind's ability to translate sensory input into knowledge, with a percept being the impression of a single object [1]. The richness of a child's experiences contributes to a larger variety of percepts that shape their adult thought life. Memory involves recording, retaining, recalling, and recognizing previous mental experiences, governed by the law of association—things experienced together are recalled together. This is reinforced by the laws of repetition (frequent associations are easily recalled) and emotional preference (pleasant associations are more memorable). Imagination is the mind's ability to create images without sensory input. A concept differs from a percept in that it refers to a class of objects, while a percept refers to a single object. Judgment involves comparing concepts to form conclusions, such as "Iron is a metal." Reasoning extends this by comparing judgments, illustrating higher-order intellectual processes.

## Emotions

In Lesson 5, Athearn defines emotion as the mind's capacity to feel, with "feeling" referring to less intense experiences and "emotion" to more intense ones. Emotions, though accompanied by physical reactions, are primarily mental experiences [1]. They are categorized into egoistic emotions, which center on the self (e.g., love, friendship), and altruistic emotions, which extend towards others (e.g., sharing happiness, pity). Emotions add personal value to objects and experiences, aiding self-realization, fostering personal relationships, and enhancing responsiveness to the environment. They can also disrupt old habits by discovering new values, thus aiding the reorganization of the mind around a larger personality, such as in religious experiences. Emotions thrive through expression and deteriorate when suppressed, leading to mental health issues. Athearn outlines five rules for controlling emotions: 1) Encourage positive emotional responses rather than suppressing negative ones. 2) Foster pleasurable responses that are desirable. 3) Promote altruistic responses to enhance empathy and personal growth. 4) Develop a balanced emotional life, incorporating music, art, literature, social interaction, and humor to serve the highest interests of the soul. Emotions are crucial in connecting man's life with God's and in shaping a balanced, fulfilling life [1].

## Will and Faith

In Lesson 6, Athearn defines will as the mind's power to act, where the mind perceives itself as having control over others or objects [1]. Will is egoistic, while faith is altruistic. When will shifts focus from itself to another dominating force, it transforms into faith. Belief is when will is directed towards an impersonal end. There are two forms of will: involuntary, which acts without reference to time or place, and voluntary which is directed towards a future objective and involves decision-making between multiple ends [1]. For the will to act, the end must be real, future-oriented, and dependent on the will's actions. Athearn provides two rules for training the will: 1) Select significant, worthwhile goals for your life. 2) Commit to smaller, worthy actions that lead to these larger goals. The difference between will and faith is that will involve control, while faith is free from this controlling force. A life surrendered to Christ exemplifies a victorious and purposeful existence, with Christianity offering Christ as the ultimate end for the will of man.

## Habit Formation

In Lesson 7, Athearn discusses habit formation and types of habits. He defines a habit as a behavior that becomes easy, routine, and more certain through repetition. This "set" of the mind and body makes certain actions easier

and others harder. Good habits free the mind from focusing on minor details, allowing attention to be directed toward more important matters [1]. Habits become ingrained in the nervous system through repetition, pleasurable associations, and acts of will. A democratic state recognizes the necessity of common habits for communal living, such as communication, cooperation, and patriotism. However, certain habits, like reverence and honesty, must be taught by religious institutions. Habits form naturally in children, influencing speech, posture, industry, and study. Schools and training systems aim to shape these habits positively during youth, when individuals are most receptive [1]. To form new habits, Athearn advises: 1) Initiate new habits with strong determination, 2) Avoid exceptions until the habit is well established, and 3) Act on resolutions and emotional prompts immediately to reinforce desired habits.

## Study Habits

In Lesson 8, Athearn emphasizes the critical importance of developing good study habits. He asserts that effective study habits are essential for acquiring knowledge and forming valuable mental routines. Proper study habits are increasingly recognized in educational circles [1]. Key conditions for effective study include a healthy body, freedom from fatigue, and a quiet, pleasant environment free from disturbances. A student's efficiency improves when they study for personal achievement rather than for the teacher's approval [1]. Skilled teachers should present study motives that engage students' interests and initiative. Athearn's ten study commandments are: maintain study conditions, choose a study place, choose a study time, study diligently, consciously remember what you learn, adopt a systematic study method, memorize by wholes, make study periods long but avoid fatigue, outline and memorize books, chapters, and lectures, and apply knowledge practically as soon as possible.

## Infancy and Development

In Lesson 9, Athearn discusses the significance of infancy, highlighting that this period is crucial for forming habits, ideas, and ideals that will guide the child's future conduct. The graded public and church schools are designed to meet the developmental needs of children at various stages [1]. To cater to these needs, a graded curriculum is essential, considering the mental capacity and religious training required at each developmental stage. The three necessities for a graded school are a graded curriculum, organization and appropriate building and equipment. Child psychology, distinct from general psychology, focuses on the laws of mental growth. Athearn identifies ten periods of human development: early infancy (up to age 3), later infancy (ages 4-5), early childhood (ages 6-8), later childhood (ages 9-11), early adolescence (ages 12-14), later adolescence

(ages 18-23), early adulthood (ages 23-34), middle age (ages 35-64), and old age (65 years to death). The graded church school requires specially trained leaders who can apply psychological principles to the Church's educational programs [1].

### **Professional Dynamics**

In the final lesson of "An Introduction to the Study of the Mind," Walter Scott Athearn explores the dynamics of various professions, identifying four essential elements: human needs, special knowledge, special tools, and professional skill [1]. He classifies occupations based on the nature of their raw materials, distinguishing between artisans who work with natural forces like steam and electricity, horticulturalists who work with plant life, educators who deal with human consciousness, and religious teachers and preachers who address the relationship between the human mind and the divine [1]. Athearn recommends six books for understanding the mind, including works by William James, George Betts, Mary Calkins, Frederick Tracy, Guy Whipple, and Harry Kitson. Athearn emphasizes that religious education fulfills a fundamental need and is evolving into a significant profession equipped with technical tools like scorecards and tests [1]. There is a growing demand for professionals who can apply this knowledge to the minds of children and youth.

Teachers and religious workers provide the ideas and ideals that are essential for holding society together, as civilization depends on these principles. The current need is for religious teachers, preachers, educators, and social workers to focus on high-level ideas and ideals. According to Athearn, the only hope for civilization lies in a dedicated army of volunteers committed to these principles.

### **Conclusion**

Lastly, it can be said that Walter S. Athearn's Book "An Introduction to the Study of the Mind" explores the mind's immaterial, unitary, self-active, self-conscious, and abiding nature, emphasizing its immortality and the impact of early experiences. The book highlights the importance of effective study habits, emotional management, and balanced development in knowledge, appreciation, and conduct. Athearn's insights into the mind's role in shaping destiny and listening to the voice of conscience provide a valuable guide for educators, parents, and individuals seeking to nurture a resilient and well-rounded mental life.

### **Reference**

1. Athearn WS (1921) An Introduction to the Study of the Mind. Boston: Beacon Press.