Editorial.

PSYCHOLOGY AND MEDICINE.

Attempts to explain certain phenomena in medicine by psychological conceptions are found far back in history, but with the advent of scientific method these attempts were shouldered off the field, because it was thought that psychology was unable to satisfy the requirements which science demanded. This objection was later removed, partly by a better understanding of the real nature of science, and partly by a reform in psychological procedure, which freed it from the alien influences which had long crippled its development and allowed it to conform whole-heartedly to the rules of scientific method. Psychological conceptions then began to be systematically applied to medical problems, and encouraging results were almost at once achieved. During the past half century the attack along these lines has been vigorously pushed forward, and in certain spheres of medicine, notably in the psychoneuroses, psychological conceptions have enabled us to attain a degree of understanding and of therapeutic control incomparably greater than that before possessed.

Psychology has therefore unquestionably succeeded in establishing a place for itself in medicine, but the validity of its methods, the limits of its sphere, and its relations to other modes of dealing with the problems of disorder are still subjects of dispute and confusion. The question is debated, for example, whether the psychoneuroses are essentially psychogenic or physiogenic, and there would seem to lie behind this the implication that one theory must necessarily be valid and the other invalid. The question in itself has a definite meaning, but the implication behind it is false and due to a confusion of thought.

The aim of science is to construct conceptions which will enable us to explain and to predict the sequences of observable phenomena. We are at liberty to construct these conceptions either in physical or psychological terms, provided in either case that the method of science is rigidly followed, and that the test of utility is satisfied. By utility is meant precisely that
capacity to explain and predict phenomena, or in other words to achieve command over our experience, which constitutes the aim of science.

Hence in such a sphere as the psychoneuroses the question of psychogenesis or physiogenesis can only mean an inquiry as to which method of attack is better adapted to explain the phenomena of the psychoneuroses, and the answer must depend upon the ability of conceptions couched in these two modes to satisfy the fundamental test of utility. Each can lay full claim to scientific validity, and it must be emphatically stated that the issue is not one of 'either—or' but of 'both—and,' save only that in so eminently practical a matter as therapeutics there must be a leaning towards that mode which is more profitable.

It can hardly be doubted that, so far as the psychoneuroses are concerned, the psychological method of approach is at present more fruitful. Since the latter years of the nineteenth century, when it was first consistently applied in the work of Janet, it has cast an increasing light upon the phenomena formerly called functional nervous disorder. The conceptions which it has built up have enabled us to obtain a considerable understanding of the genesis of those phenomena, and hence to devise methods of treatment which have achieved a large measure of success.

If this statement is justified the validity of the psychological attack is established beyond question. This does not mean, however, that an attack from other angles is thereby put out of court. The physiologist, for example, cannot be expected to admit that a whole section of medicine is to be placed outside his purview. On the contrary he is bound to endeavour to push his method into every field of action of the human organism. He must maintain that, given a sufficient increase of knowledge, he should be able to explain, in physiological and neurological terms, every sequence of human behaviour, not merely pathological events, but every process from the simplest reflex to the most complicated train of speculative thought. He may agree that so far he has not been able to contribute much understanding or practical help in the sphere of the psychoneuroses, but this can only be an incentive to further investigation, and not a proof of the unsuitability of his method.

Moreover the physiologist may legitimately claim that, in spite of his present lack of success, his method has great advantages over a psychological approach. It is more capable of objective verification, and its hypotheses can therefore be easily
proved or disproved in a way which psychology, with its multiplicity of divergent schools, has obviously failed to achieve. Again it can be integrated with chemical and physical methods of attack, and indeed with all scientific methods except the psychological and perhaps the biological. In other words it belongs to the group of the mechanistic sciences, and gains immense strength from the solidity of its companions, and the common aims which it possesses with them. Hence even a small advance in the understanding of the psychoneuroses achieved by a physiological method may be of great importance, because it means ground won for the group of mechanistic sciences, the group which constitutes the most efficient and productive weapon yet achieved by man.

It is therefore clear that the physiologist must be encouraged to pursue his researches into the phenomena of the psychoneuroses along every possible avenue. If he should meet with any considerable measure of success it is likely that the psychological approach, though not rendered in the least invalid, would be largely superseded, because of those advantages in the physiological method which have just been enumerated. In the meantime, however, the psychologist must push along his own road and claim the right to explain all he can.

It may be added that, although the physiologist cannot submit to any arbitrary limitation of his field, there is always the possibility that mechanistic science may ultimately prove to be applicable to only a portion of our experience. Certain phenomena, purposive action for example, show a resistance to inclusion within its structure, which may be insuperable, and it is worthy of note that in the psychoneuroses a factor akin to purposive action is clearly demonstrable. It is permissible to speculate, therefore, that some aspects at least of the psychoneuroses may finally be found to lie outside the field of mechanistic science. The psychologist may therefore comfort himself with the thought that, although the physiologist and after him the chemist and the physicist may take over much of the road which he has built, there may always remain a sphere permanently inaccessible to those other workers, but in which he can continue to add to our knowledge and power.