Critical Review.

THE NEUROPATHIC INDIVIDUAL AS A SOCIAL UNIT.

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THAT medicine is not only concerned with individual therapy, but has its wider social aspects, is a fact which is obtaining increasing recognition. An infectious patient is isolated, not merely that he may obtain adequate treatment, but also to prevent the spread of the infection to those with whom he comes into contact. Mental disorder may be considered from a somewhat similar standpoint. Every individual by his behaviour exerts some influence upon those with whom he is associated; and this influence is either beneficial or the reverse. If we are to define what is meant by a normal personality, we can only do so in terms of his behaviour or reaction to life. The man is normal whose conduct is in the main creative, helpful to others, and productive of useful social results. In contrast to this, the conduct of the moron, inadequate personality, misfit, crank, and neurotic is ineffective, obstructive, futile, and non-productive. And the results of such ineffectual reactions to life are not confined to the abnormal person, but exert a widespread influence upon the actions, happiness, and mental attitude of others. For this reason much attention is now being paid to the social aspects of psychiatry, and in this review some directions in which this tendency is now finding expression may perhaps be usefully indicated.

In America the psychiatric examination of the army recruits revealed the existence of a surprisingly large number of inadequate personality types who, if they had been retained in the army, would have made a poor adaption and would, of necessity, have been a drag on their units and a constant source of anxiety. It is recognized that these people must be equally inadequate in civil life, and in the main, as social units, unproductive. The relation of these abnormal types to the community is therefore receiving much attention, and the mental hygiene movement has brought the psychiatrist into close contact with the vital social problems of the time, with the result that the literature in regard to social psychiatry is already

voluminous. The campaign for industrial efficiency has led to detailed investigations on unemployment, and such writers as Southard¹ and Adler² have shown that many habitually unemployed are of the inadequate, paranoid, or emotionally-unstable types of make-up. These people do not fit in anywhere, they only remain a short time in one place, they inflict much hardship upon their dependents, and are a drag upon the industry during their periods of unemployment.

Then there is the question of 'mental contagion'. It is well known that an unbalanced personality will unfavourably influence other people by the mechanism of 'mass suggestion'. This applies to panics, religious revivals, and strikes. Thus, referring to the psychology of the strike, Lloyd writes³: "One idea acting on large masses of men is its distinguishing feature. It is a manifestation of the instinct of the herd, when stampeded, to go in one direction without heed to the dangers incurred or the obstacles to be overcome. It thus becomes an obsession, leading men to clamour for self-aggrandizement while ignorant of economic realities and indifferent to the claims of society at large. . . . It is pathological because it partakes of the nature of a pandemic psychosis. It is a sort of *folie communiquée*—an example of mental contagion on a large scale. There is an underlying paranoid state, a sense of persecution, which leads to acts of resentment and violence." More detailed investigations upon this subject have also been made which support such statements as the above, and it has been shown by Ball⁴ that episodes of industrial unrest may sometimes be traced to individuals whom he had previously classified as definitely psychopathic in type.

There is, however, a more subtle and intimate side to this question of mental contagion, viz., the influence which the neuropathic subject exerts upon those with whom he is most intimately associated, that is to say the home circle or family group. A recent paper by Pierre Janet has done much to illuminate this all-important question⁵. In this paper Janet first takes his *psychasthenic group*, and with keen clinical insight analyzes the social characteristics of his patients. He shows that the two fundamental instincts which determine the abnormal social reactions in these cases are the desire to dominate the family and the desire for love and affection.* Such individuals do not possess the qualities, either strength of character or charm of personality, which entitle them to control others or gain their affection; but they succeed in gaining their ends by means of their neurotic

* Do we not see here a possible point of contact between this conception of the neuroses and those of Adler⁶ and Freud? The former has formulated a theory of neuroses founded upon the instinct of power—the neurotic uses his symptoms to gain the upper hand—and there are of course the Freudian theories in which the love impulse plays the preponderating rôle.

symptoms (inferior mental operations). They dominate by means of preposterous exactions; give meaningless orders without reference to their utility or value; control, watch, supervise, and interfere with every trivial action of others; treat the family as children; permit no contradictions; establish inflexible and ridiculous rules; resent being left alone; need constant reassurance as to their health; require the constant gratification of every whim. They make incessant demands for love, but give nothing in return. They are often sexually frigid, and their constant demand is to be 'loved for themselves'—that is for inherent qualities which cost them nothing and do not involve any expenditure of psychic energy. They expect and require constant flattery, eulogy, and commendation. They are abulic, incapable of any efficient action, and need constant stimulation and excitement. If thwarted, they lament, threaten, raise objections, exhibit crises of agitation, develop illnesses, faint, moan that they will die, create interminable scenes, tease and annoy, sulk, and make every one feel uncomfortable and in the wrong. Jung has well described the domestic atmosphere in these situations⁷: "Whoever has had a pronounced case of neurosis in his immediate environment knows all that can be 'effected' by a neurosis. In fact there is altogether no better means of tyrannizing over a whole household than by a striking neurosis. Heart attacks, choking fits, convulsions of all kinds, achieve enormous effects that can hardly be surpassed. Picture the fountains of pity let loose, the sublime anxiety of the dear, kind parents, the hurried running to-and-fro of the servants, the incessant sounding of the call to the telephone, the hasty arrival of the physicians, the delicacy of the diagnosis, the detailed examination, the considerable expense; and there, in the midst of all, lies the innocent sufferer, to whom the whole household is even overflowingly grateful, when he has recovered from the 'spasms'."

It is obvious that the atmosphere of a household which includes a case of this kind must be one of intense discomfort, and the situations which arise must be responsible for much domestic unhappiness. And more than this. Janet goes on to demonstrate by numerous clinical examples that the influence of such a case is, as it were, parasitic; the nervous invalid absorbs the psychic energy of other members of the group, who therefore tend to develop various forms of neurosis themselves. He calls this the *neuropathic group*, and states that in his experience an isolated psychasthenic is rare, but that around the case are almost always found others who themselves show evidence of nervous symptoms which are the expression of lowered psychological tension. Janet shows that the explanation of these cases on the lines of heredity is often inadmissible, in so far as there is no blood relationship between the affected individuals. Thus

a bright normal girl may develop a neurosis after her marriage to a man with an obsessional neurosis, or a child with a neuropathic step-father may develop a neurosis when her mother marries a second time and she comes into contact with her new father. Neither does he consider that the occurrence of these cases is explicable on the basis of suggestion and imitation; such a theory, as he shows, being superficial and totally inadequate.

Janet explains the occurrence of these cases by the application of his theory of psychological tension. He develops the view that the social characteristics of these psychasthenics demand an increase of psychic energy on the part of those who are in constant contact with them. Their abulia and indecision render them incapable of doing anything useful, and this involves increased strain and responsibility on the part of the other members of the household. Then their habitual demand for caresses and thanks, their complaints, gloomy and discontented outlook, ingratitude, interference, useless orders, capriciousness, constant criticisms, attacks, scenes, and the like, create a situation which demands an extremely complex and difficult adjustment on the part of those with whom they are associated. Such situations are exceedingly exhausting, they deplete the psychic energy, and may be described as costly to the personality. It is the fatigue of this prolonged effort at adaptation which results in depression and neurosis in other members of the family. It produces a condition of lowered psychological tension of which these nervous symptoms are the expression.

In the light of these observations Janet raises the question as to how far it is justifiable to use the term *mental contagion* in respect to these cases. He points out that if by this term direct suggestion is implied, it would be unsuitable in so far as the neuroses are secondary to the social fatigue which arises from the situation. Since, however, the term serves to emphasize the fact that intimate association with certain persons frequently determines the occurrence of a neurosis in others, and that these persons by their presence and demands profoundly modify the conduct of those in contact with them, he would advocate its use.

Here, then, is a factor in the production of neuroses which would seem to merit more general recognition, especially as Janet, with his unique experience and undoubted authority, states that such 'contagion' occurs with great frequency. Furthermore, its recognition would seem to be of extreme importance, because it prevents an undue emphasis upon inborn, constitutional, and hereditary factors in determination of the neuroses. These cases are psychogenetic in origin; they are the result of circumstances, situations in life, and influences which are capable of removal if their significance is under-

stood. A frank understanding of the situation on the part of all concerned, and rearrangement of the domestic *ménage*, with possibly actual removal of the source of the 'infection' to another atmosphere, will result in recovery, or at any rate will afford an opportunity for a mental readjustment to take place, on the part of the other members of the group. As Janet says, an understanding of these cases will enable the physician to apply isolation as a therapeutic measure with much greater precision than would otherwise be the case. Many of these cases are not regarded as abnormal, either by themselves or by the other members of the family, and the diagnosis has not been 'officially' recognized. It may be said that some of these abnormal types of personality have been left to the analytical novelists to discover.

It cannot be said that the psychological explanation here given by Janet is complete, satisfying, or altogether adequate. It is, in a sense, too mechanical, and it ignores the dynamic and instinctive elements in the psychological situation. It is doubtful if the 'contagious' neuroses—or, indeed, any neuroses—are explicable on the grounds of chronic mental fatigue produced by the mere complexity of the situations to which these individuals are forced to make an adaptation. Such situations as Janet depicts must be profoundly disturbing to the deepest and most fundamental instinctive elements of the personality. Without entering upon any detailed discussion of the subject, must not the psychological explanation be found along the lines of a pent-up libido in which the mechanism of regression comes into play and is responsible for the appearance of the various nervous symptoms? A child with an authoritative, obsessional parent would be thwarted in every direction; there would be no outlet for his libido, interest, psychic energy, or instinctive trends. Every natural and spontaneous impulse would have to be repressed and curbed; there would be no opportunity for self-expression; the whole personality would have to be subservient to the caprice and will of another; the impulse of love and affection would find no normal expression, and unconscious feelings of hatred to the parent would inevitably be created in the mind of the developing child. Such conditions must of course be most unfavourable to the mental health of the child, and, as has been shown in other directions, they are exactly those factors which determine a neurotic reaction to life.

It may be that in the realm of psychopathology at the present time there is a certain degree of chaos; there are various opposing theories and premature generalizations. And it must obviously be so in a subject which has only recently been intensively studied, and which may be approached from so many different angles. The one fact which seems to be gaining confirmation on all sides, however, is

the enormous part taken by the home environment and the parental influence in the development of the mental life of the child and in the determination of his future habits of reaction. There is a growing body of opinion in favour of the view that the more this question is understood, and the more the child is able to grow up in an atmosphere favourable to his mental development, the less is he liable to develop neuropathic traits. This important contribution to social psychology by Pierre Janet should do much to emphasize and confirm these views.

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