

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOCIETY

BY TRIGANT BURROW, M.D., PH.D.

ALL great scientific theories sooner or later filter through to the masses of mankind, modifying their opinions, altering their conduct, shaping their lives. It has been so with the theory of evolution throughout all its implications upon the side of organic variation and development; it will be so with this theory as regards the aspect of evolution that concerns itself with the modification and growth we call functional. For the lineal, developmental, historical point of view of evolution is common to the psychological as well as to the morphological sphere of biology. In the latter the mind of man is reflected upon his own structure. He looks back upon the course of his organic development and presumes to study his physical descent. In the study of genetic psychology mind becomes reflected upon its very self and man makes bold to discover the origin of his soul and to reconstruct from genetic sources the components of his own ego. Thus the genetic position applies equally to psychology as to morphology and the method of biology becomes throughout supreme. Accordingly there is no element of experience, whether mental or non-mental, but may be submitted to biological analysis.

The psychoanalyst, therefore, who is a consistent student of mental life is not less committed to the genetic viewpoint in his study of the factors entering into the determination of the modifications and reactions we call mental, than is the student concerned with the analysis of phenomena occurring within other spheres of biology. Accordingly, man is as much the product of evolution in respect to his mental as to his anatomical make-up. For the psychic, no less than the physical organism is subject to inevitable genetic laws and mental phenomena stand in rigid conformity to evolutionary principles which it is the task of psychoanalysis to retrace.

Virtually, psychoanalysis, being the application of Darwinism to the psychic sphere, represents essentially the obverse of organic evolution. As its concern is with biology

in its functional aspect, psychoanalysis is but the extension of biology into the realm of consciousness; so that in explaining mental phenomena it invokes the same principles to which biology is throughout committed. For in the regressions of function characteristic of the neuroses we recognize an analogy to the retardations of development occurring in the organic world. As in these organic involutions of type there are presented the rudiments of an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic process, so in the homologous psychic regressions there is instanced a reversion to a remote, primitive, biological mechanism appearing originally in ethnic as well as in individual development.

Darwin ascribed various emotional reactions to a primitive, instinctive mechanism tending toward the amelioration and the preservation of the individual, such as the defensive reaction of pallor and other vasomotor reactions subserving the purposes of emotional escapement; similarly Freud converts the phenomena of hysteria and allied states into biological terms and reconstructs its symptoms upon the basis of primitive, defensive mechanisms inherent in the race.

The distinctive feature of psychoanalysis then is its revival of apparently extinct trends, such as constitute a common ethnic possession and have their seat in the mental protoplasm, so to speak, which we describe as "the unconscious." Thus the unconscious is the repository of an obsolete past, the reliquary of an early, archaic existence. For there reside in the unconscious the propitiatory superstitions of savagery; the teleological mechanisms of hallucination and projection in which are based the religions and mythologies of the race. It is in the unconscious that the neurotic enacts the secondary rôle into which he withdraws from the scenes of actuality, and it is here that the harassed mind indulges the delusions through which it abates the poignancy of reality and escapes into the fantastic world of the psychoses.

Such a biological interpretation of mind as is necessitated by the analytical method is fraught with far-reaching significance to society. For in thus reducing to their ultimate, genetic components these various manifestations of the human soul, with its deepest aspirations, its tenderest yearnings, its most sacred affections, we are destroying the springs of

those primitive sentiments which have actuated all that is best in human conduct. For psychoanalysis is subversive of those forms of religious belief upon which society is founded and in which it subsists, annihilating the conventional incentives so strong in the life of man to-day. Beliefs which the world has held most sacred are reduced to the level of "psychological mechanisms," and are ranged upon a common ground with other biological phenomena. The conception of creation is such a mechanism, having its ontogenetic counterpart in the familiar, distorted birth-fantasies characteristic of childhood. In the light of psychoanalysis the narrative of the Book of Genesis shows strongly the influence of the inevitable incest conflict. The conception of a Heavenly Father becomes an unconscious "projection" mechanism whereby the childhood of the race seeks to perpetuate its human progenitor. The heaven of tradition is but an unconscious wish-fulfillment representing the early dream symbolism of primitive man. The triune personality of the Deity traces its source to an unconscious sexual symbolization. Again and again throughout religion and mythology we meet representations which in the light of mental evolution are to be interpreted as residues of the same symbolic impulses that led to the ancient phallic worship. Thus the traditional beliefs in which man is sustained to-day become mere recrudescences of unconscious mechanisms originating in the infancy of the race — mere survivals in the process of man's psychic descent, traceable in every instance to the dynamic instinct of perpetuation. While psychoanalysis has no bearing upon the realities underlying the symbols of religion, yet the above considerations have unhappily led to the conclusion that philosophically psychoanalysis becomes a name for the utter abrogation of religion and the apotheosis of sex.¹

¹Since psychoanalysis is concerned with the biology of the instinctive, infantile, organic mental processes generically subsumed under the rather ineptly named category of "the unconscious," and with the bearing of these dynamic impulses of the primal mind upon prevailing sociological tenets, the present paper is logically as innocent of complicity in questions of philosophy, metaphysics, or religion as, let us say, a dissertation on the photochemic reaction of amœbæ. There is, however, in the present discussion, because of its formal juxtaposition

Parallel to these social implications there are the analogous deductions in respect to the individual. For since psychoanalysis interprets neurotic disorders as consisting solely in the distortion of the psychic demands of sex into symbolic equivalents through the patient's repudiation of this primal instinct, it is but natural to expect that the logical therapeutic procedure in these conditions lies in reconverting such fruitless substitutes into their original trend through recourse to sexual indulgence. One would expect that conditions due to blocking of an outlet were to be relieved through clearing the outlet. But we need distinguish very carefully between the aspect of sexuality that is somatic and that which is psychic and clearly recognize that the affections which come within the province of psychoanalysis are essentially *psychological* disharmonies, and that their treatment depends therefore upon resort to psychological and not to somatic agencies. Else, were normal sexual indulgence the panacea for neurotic disorders, how are we to account for the existence of a neurosis in individuals indulging regularly in the sexual relation? How are we to reconcile the presence of a neurosis in patients who in their sexual lives are veritable Don Juans? There appears to be some discrepancy here, for evidently in these cases indulgence fails to meet the demand. Therefore, it seems to me highly pertinent to inquire how far, if at all, the certificate of indulgence is essential to the psychic health of the neurotic and to view the social and moral aspects of the situation confronting us in this connection.

with these domains, at least an *implicit* likelihood of misconstruction, which it were, perhaps, wise to avoid.

Let it be said then that the writer would on no account wish to be understood as failing to distinguish between abstract philosophical truth *per se* and the concrete form in which such truth finds its pictorial embodiment. Such a method of reasoning were indeed a gross philosophical fallacy. While psychoanalysis shatters the image, it leaves unimpaired the *essentia* whereby it is animated. Though it efface the symbol, there remains the reality discernible behind it.

Let it be remembered then that psychoanalysis is concerned alone with the lower mental forms presented in the instinctive reactions we call *unconscious*, while on the contrary the concern of philosophy is precisely with the later psychic modes expressed in the higher intellectual processes we call *conscious*, and that at no point do the two spheres unite.

Now that psychopathology is outgrowing the dark age of neurological superstitions it recognizes that there is a psychology as well as an anatomy of disease. We now know that psychic disorders are not essentially neural, but moral; that these conditions reside not in the cortex, but in the conscience. In other words, the morbid process confronting us is essentially a disease of the totality we call the soul; consisting of divided elements at war with one another, the one trend autoerotic, infantile, egoistic, *unconscious*; the other moral, social, altruistic, *conscious*.

In a formal way at least psychopathology has always recognized this inherent opposition in the psychic life of the nervous invalid. It has also recognized the possibility of converting the more confined, individual trend into the broader social outlet of collective interests and of group activities generally.

This transformation of primary, unconscious trends into maturer, more intellectualized conscious expression, a process of which Ernest Jones has recently given us a most ingenious account, is one of the most important chapters of Freud's psychology. Among the collected essays of the "Neurosenlehre" there is one in which he speaks of the definite correlation between certain infantile, sexual trends and the characterological traits into which these trends issue in the process of sublimation, and he has elsewhere discussed the pedagogic import of this relation in determining the appropriate direction of sublimation in a given individual.¹ The sublimations afforded in general through artistic pursuits are only too familiar to us all. How adequately the sexual instinct may be sublimated through the religious life is also a matter of common observation, society having attested its recognition of the complementary positions of religion and sexuality in its injunction of celibacy upon the priesthood.

Now as the nature of a neurosis is a moral conflict in which the patient is torn between the contrary impulses of right and wrong, that is, of reason and instinct, and as through recourse to repression and substitution such an individual has resolutely declared in favor of the latter, that

¹Recent observations of Brill's tend to add corroboration of Freud's view.

is of loyalty to self-imposed command and resistance to the gratification of self, does it not follow that the appropriate avenue of sublimation for the neurotic in general lies in the direction of renunciation, of character, of the moral ideal? In other words, does it not seem that the logical sublimation for *unconscious* repression is *conscious* control?

Every psychopathologist witnesses daily the characteristic conscientiousness of the neurotic patient — his fidelity to purpose, his devout conviction of duty, his deep, respectful sense of his obligations. The neurotic individual is essentially a moral individual and the neurosis which represents the struggle of the higher self of reason and will against the lesser self of instinct and brutality is thus the very essence of character-building. For character is respect for the permanent, the ulterior, and the social as opposed to the immediate, the limited, and the personal. In a word, it is loyalty to the social ideal. Though psychoanalysis may show this ideal to be of very humble biological origin, though it be proven the mere reaction to repressed sexual fixation, it is the ideal still, and as such presupposes the sacrifice of the individual to the larger social weal.

The question is then, shall psychoanalysis seek to cure the neurosis through the shattering of the social ideal? Are we to say to the men and women who are made aware through analysis of the sexual complexes underlying their onerous ideals, "Let your ideals go! Ideals are fantastic, neurotic. Obey your instincts and so be at unity with yourself?" Well, it is one way of deciding the issue. But it is the way of mediocrity and concession. It is the selfish, personal, and impermanent way, not the way that looks to the larger social interest.

The men from whom the world has drawn its inspiration have always been characterized for their devotion to the social ideal; they have been men who have ever scorned to accept personal comfort at the detriment of the body social, who have ever refused whatever advantage was not attainable upon high, honorable terms. It is such men who by their conduct have elevated biology to a conscious, social level, who have raised the plane of society and improved the condition of the race.

The conflict embodied in the neurosis is one which will continue while life lasts, for the infantile, instinctive demand is ever present and insatiate; but while admitting its importunities into consciousness and even into conduct if medically the need be, it seems to me the duty of the psychoanalyst to recognize and to take sides with the splendid power of resistance, so strong in the neurotic, against life's cruder demands, and by converting it into a conscious, open, reasonable resource to assist him in the attainment of a higher manhood. He does not silence the lesser, instinctive need, but at least he is contributing to the production of a higher, more conscious type.

Perhaps from the viewpoint of therapeusis alone the attitude here taken is not the most immediately rewarding, but my position is that psychoanalysis is responsible not alone to the individual but to society as well, that it has to take cognizance of the civil as well as of the personal issues entailed.

It seems to me therefore that to seek to remove unconscious repression through the sublimation afforded in conscious control is not only logical, but is ethically the only attitude for the psychoanalyst who is fully sensible of the deep social significance presented in the drama of the neurosis.

I trust that my attitude will not be construed as an overture to the *sentimentalizing* spiritual adviser or mental healer. Contrary to such a concession, it is here maintained that as ethical principles are genetically but the sublimated reactions to factors which are ultimately biological, these broader social and ethical issues are as essentially the problem of the psychopathologist as the more immediate non-mental factors to which tradition has hitherto restricted him, and that, therefore, the condition of society is most to be assisted when its obligations to psychopathology are most fully recognized.