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ON NEURASTHENIA AS A DISINTEGRATION OF PERSONALITY.

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To those who have studied neurasthenia in its multiform variations, and have attempted to penetrate beneath the surface of its purely phenomenal manifestations, the inadequacy of present conceptions regarding it must have become apparent. And this inadequacy must have been rendered doubly impressive when the attempt has been made in actual practice to identify the living, breathing patient before us with the abstract, inanimate descriptions of him current in the textbooks. Having listened to the story of his thousand ills, and having catalogued him in the conventional fashion, we cannot but have experienced the feeling, vague it may be, but none the less real, that somehow we had not gotten to the root of the matter, that there was an intangible something which had eluded us, and which may have been, we suspect, the very essence of the thing we were seeking to fathom. Such a feeling, when one reflects upon it, must be not uncommon, and has led to the present attempt to take a wider survey of the subject and to bring to its discussion certain of the facts and principles which the more recent psychology has furnished. It is, perhaps, a sufficient commentary upon the futility of the purely anatomical conception of neurasthenia to note that its only contribution to the pathology of the disease consists in the rather apologetic reproduction of some illustrations of nerve cells in a state of fatigue,—

studies inaugurated some years ago by Hodge. Regarding the phenomena, as phenomena, I shall have little concern, but shall endeavor to go behind them, and to study them from the point of view of their interpretation. I wish to discuss the functional theory of neurasthenia,¹ having for my purpose to show that it is in reality one in kind, though, of course, different in degree, with hysteria, multiple personality, and other types of dissociated consciousness; that it is, in a word, a condition of disintegrated personality.

The mere enunciation of such a theory may possibly appear to many to be unduly novel and to savor strongly of metaphysics, hence, to surrender that intimate dependence upon empirical fact so dear to the modern medical mind. But upon further consideration it will be obvious that this conception not only does not forsake experience, but that rather it has to offer an interpretation of the facts of experience which would seem to be more philosophic and more practically useful than any which has hitherto been suggested.

Since in the discussion which follows we are about to approximate more closely certain clinical types of disease, hitherto more or less distinct, since, furthermore, in maintaining that they are in truth but varied and particular expressions of the working of one fundamental psychophysiological principle, we are leaving the beaten path, it may be well if first we disabuse our minds of some traditional notions. As every one knows, the words we employ to denote abnormal conditions of mind or body have been transmitted to us in large part as an heritage, and to these words custom has attached a more or less definite, distinct meaning. It is not, therefore, surprising that unless we

¹ For an able presentation of the functional conception of nervous phenomena see, "The Value of the Physiological Principle in the Study of Neurology," James J. Putnam, M.D., *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, December 15, 1904; also, "The Problem of Psychiatry in the Functional Psychoses," Edward Cowles, M.D., *American Journal of Insanity*, Vol. LXII, October, 1905.

The recent work of J. Grasset, *Les Centres Nerveux*, Paris, 1905, treats the whole subject of neurology from the functional point of view.

are forewarned we are prone to take it for granted that different names signify in reality different things, the more so if authority in matters medical lends its weight to such belief. Thus does our thinking become permeated with a fallacy which makes it difficult to alter our opinions, and to perceive that despite a difference in nomenclature there may be an essential identity in the actual things in themselves. This has been shown to be true by Myers, Janet, Prince, Sidis, Breuer and Freud, and others, as regards hysteria and multiple personality; there is reason to believe it can be shown to be true as regards neurasthenia also.

It may be said, I think, without fear of dissent, that there is no word used in medicine which has been so loosely and withal so vaguely applied as this very word, "neurasthenia," — a fact in itself suggestive of a certain mental haziness regarding it. But the point to which attention should be particularly directed is this, namely: that, influenced by the mechanical symbolism of the day, and actuated by the belief that for every pathological manifestation there must be an underlying, definite "disease-process," many of us have come to look upon neurasthenia as a distinct, more or less stereotyped morbid entity, having an uniform symptomatic expression. Such a view is, I am sure, altogether erroneous; for neurasthenia, in any adequate conception of it, is not, and indeed, in the very nature of things, cannot be, a stereotyped affair like this, — a sort of pathological picture, each copy of which is identical with every other. It is a name used to describe a condition in which constantly varying factors produce a constantly varied result; or, to put it another way, a condition of psychological and physiological instability whose outward and visible sign is the neurasthenic symptom-complex. And just as every man has his own individual personality, so it may be said that every man has his own neurasthenia, which is nothing more or less than this same personality under altered conditions.

The problem of neurasthenia being, then, the problem of personality in a state of disintegration, it becomes nec-

essary to describe what is to be understood as constituting personality, and having done this, to show how its disintegration will have objective expression in the group of symptoms called "neurasthenia." It may be said at once, by way of reassurance, that by personality I do not mean a mere verbal abstraction existing in some metaphysical brain, but I do mean that living, unitary, self-conscious, mind-body mechanism which brings us in relation with the outer world of men and things and which we call "myself." Now personality in this empirical descriptive sense is a very complex product in whose elaboration many factors play their parts. Let us study these factors briefly, and to make the matter clear, let us take a concrete example. We will assume a man in the vigor of health who is living content and happy in a perfect community, — some modern Utopia. What constitutes his health and what makes him content and happy? Evidently there are two aspects to the problem: first, his own subjective feeling of comfort, stability, and power; and secondly, the agreeable, easy action and reaction taking place constantly between himself and his environment. As the psycho-physiological fundament of this feeling of comfort and power we find the great group of organic sensations, which are marked by the absence in the individual sensations of definite and local character. In Höfding's description of them the organic sensations "are lost in a general feeling of comfort or discomfort which, as it were, constitutes the result in the brain of the excitations received from different parts of the organism. We have here a feeling of our existence in general and of the general course of the vital processes. The property and quantity of the blood, the vigor of the circulation, the tension of the fibers, (the tonicity), the abundant or scanty secretions of the glands, the relaxation or tension of the muscles (voluntary and involuntary), the quick or labored respiration, the normal or abnormal process of digestion, — these all help to determine it without any one of them having occasion to stand out alone. The general sensations constitute a chaos which receives its

stamp through the contrast between comfort and discomfort, and the special variations which are from the nature of the case determined by some one organ playing an especially prominent part without being always expressly known to consciousness as the source of the sensation.”¹

The fundamental mood produced by the pleasurable flow of the organic sensations is one of freedom, energy, comfort, — in a word a normal cenesthesia, such a feeling as once caused a reclaimed neurasthenic patient of mine to exclaim, “I feel as though I could annihilate a regiment!” On the other hand, any disturbance of these organic sensations will result in feelings of anxiety, fear, helplessness, and discomfort. Filled as we assume with the feeling of well-being, — a normal inner life, — our Utopian finds that when he approaches his environment, the outer life of relation, he is able to adapt himself to it with facility, both because of his subjective stability, and because this environment in the ideas, sensations, and emotions which it evokes is agreeable, making no demands which he is not able to supply, and furnishing him with conscious material whose feeling tone is pleasurable. His personality, therefore, composed of a unitary synthesis of diverse elements, is characterized by what I may term an adaptive stability, by reason of which it is able to consummate the myriad demands made upon it from hour to hour, and from day to day. Now each adaptation requires a rearrangement, possibly also an augmentation of conscious content, what Sidis has called a different “moment-consciousness”; and hence there results a constant ebb and flow, certain psychic elements dropping below the threshold of the personal consciousness, while others rise to enter into the new conscious state. In the language of recent psychology, what was supraliminal has become subliminal, subconscious, or, better, dissociated. Thus in the normal personality, by which is meant a personality psychologically and physiologically adapted and adaptable to its environment,

¹ *Outlines of Psychology*, Harold Höfding, New York, 1904. *Les Sensations Internes*, H. Beaunis, Paris, 1889.

there is a continuous process of integration and disintegration, of synthesis and katalysis, which is carried on without friction or any marked evidence of instability. A man in this condition is in the platonic state of *mens sana in corpore sano*; he is or should be an optimist, and we describe him as being possessed of perfect health.

Thus far we have considered personality in its genesis and have looked upon it as adaptable to its environment. If now we return again to our Utopian and observe the actual process of this adaptation we come upon a series of phenomena which are still consonant with health, but which under certain conditions pass over into disease. I refer to the phenomena of fatigue. The series of events produced by bodily and mental fatigue is an excellent illustration of the disintegration of personality, the weakening of psychological synthesis in a state of health. Fatigue is more than muscular and cerebral exhaustion due to the depressing influence of toxic products of activity. Such may very well be, and indeed, according to our best knowledge, really is, the physiological substratum; but this view of it as an interpretation is altogether incomplete unless we go further and include its psychological aspect, its affect upon consciousness. And here again, as in so many other instances, the impossibility of separating a living man into mind and body asserts itself. The separation, if made at all, should be understood as being merely methodological, since it has no objective justification. A physical change as being merely physical cannot produce any effect unless it acts upon a conscious being, and consequently physical changes are in their last analysis psychical; they necessarily affect personality in the sense we have already described. Ask our Utopian what are the conscious results of his daily activity and he will answer, "I feel tired and weary; I experience a sense of general discomfort; my head aches, my appetite is poor, my memory unreliable; my mind has lost its grasp upon reality and I find difficulty in concentrating attention for long upon what I am doing. Little things trouble me and I am irritable, while it seems to me I have

not the energy or volition to do things as well as when I am not fagged out." All this is true, and while the symptoms of fatigue will vary in different persons and in the same person at different times, the explanation is probably to be sought in diversities of anatomical structure, which will, of course, eventuate in varieties of physiological and psychological expression. As Sir William Gowers remarks, "Precise observation is, however, much baffled by variations in the sensory susceptibility of individuals. It is probable that these depend upon differences in the actual constitution of the nervous tissue, — more minute than we can well conceive and yet causing effects that are obtrusive. In different persons there may exist diversities of tissue which give rise to great differences in the products of action, rendering these much more harmful in one person than in another. The same diversity may render the sensory structures far more prone to disturbances and to more distressing disturbances. Thus an original variation which, if it could be discerned, would be minute beyond conception, may entail a profound difference in ultimate effect. Such considerations may help us to conceive the way in which the effects of fatigue are manifested, although they constitute little addition to our knowledge.¹

Dr. Gowers here enunciates the anatomical variations underlying the phenomena of fatigue, and upon this hypothesis he explains the difference in results observed in consciousness or, as we would express it, upon personality. These results are those of disintegration and weakened synthesis. Fatigue, whatever its anatomical or chemical cause may be, is psychologically a feeling of exhaustion and discomfort; and this brings it under the rubric of the great class of organic sensations whose part in the formation of personality we have seen to be very great. Given this perturbation of organic sensibility, we can very well conceive how the intellectual, emotional, and volitional inefficiencies will follow, since the personality has become

¹ "Fatigue," W. R. Gowers, *Quarterly Review*, London, 1904, CC, p. 57a.

unstable and so unable to make an easy adaptation to environment. So far as personality is concerned, stability stands in direct ratio to ability.

A great deal has been said in the previous pages about personality, its stability and its instability, and about weakened syntheses of consciousness. It is pertinent to inquire what is meant by these words. In the first place, we must distinguish sharply between facts and their interpretation. The former we know, the latter we speculate about, and the history of philosophy contains the record of these speculations. We do not know the intimate nature of the mechanism of stability of personality or of synthesis of consciousness, but reasoning from the facts we observe, we are compelled to postulate such a mechanism. Drawing an illustration from physical science we may compare a stable personality to a stable chemical compound, with this qualification, however, that personality is not merely passive, but also active, and that the combination of elementary psychic materials produces a unitary conscious state. Just as we believe a certain tension to exist between the atoms and molecules of a chemical compound, so we assume a certain neural tension as the physiological substrate, its psychological counterpart being stability of personality, or, in other words, a firm synthesis of conscious states. When such tension is maintained at a normal level we have a stable, healthy person; when for one cause or another this tension becomes lowered we observe its outward expression in a condition of disintegrated, unstable, weakened synthesis, which, in our view of it, is in its mildest expression, neurasthenia, and in its more intense grades, hysteria and dissociated or multiple personality.

Enough has been said, I think, about personality and its disintegration in the normal state of fatigue to enable us more clearly to comprehend what may be said about it in a condition of abnormal disintegration, namely, neurasthenia. The questions to be considered in the functional interpretation of neurasthenia are those of dissociation and automatism. Discoursing upon this subject, Dr.

Morton Prince expresses himself as follows: "Abnormal psychological phenomena, as phenomena, may be divided into two great groups, according as they are manifestations of (a) dissociations or weakened syntheses of conscious states, or (b) of automatism. These two classes (a and b) bear a reciprocal relation to one another, in that *pari passu* with the development of a weakening of the power of synthesis, or of a complete dissociation, the remaining restricted elements of the personal consciousness, or the dissociated elements, respectively, tend to take on automatic activity; as an example, take the obsessions of psychasthenia confined entirely to the personal consciousness, and the hysterical attack due to the automatic activity of dissociated (subconscious) memories of past experiences. And, *vice versa*, the development of automatism with its abnormal syntheses tends to induce dissociation, as when an artificially induced idea robs the personal consciousness of its sensory perceptions (anesthesia) or produces retrograde amnesia. Thus in any particular syndrome, such as the hysterical state, or the psychasthenic obsessions, we have combined the manifestations of dissociation or weakened synthesis with those of automatism."¹ In the particular syndrome of neurasthenia with which we are at present concerned these two processes, weakened synthesis and automatism, are found working side by side. With the lowering of psychological tension and consequent disintegration there is a tendency to the rearrangement of the unstable psychic elements after a different pattern; there is the formation of abnormal (in the sense of disagreeable) associations, the so-called "association neurosis"² which make life miserable for so many neurasthenics. These are the abnormal syntheses, the automatism, of which Dr. Prince speaks, and they may involve syntheses in the intellectual,

¹ "Some of the Present Problems of Abnormal Psychology," Morton Prince, M.D., *Psychological Review*, XII, p. 119.

² "Association Neuroses," Morton Prince, M.D., *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, May, 1891. "Three Cases of Association Neuroses," John E. Donley, M.D., *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* November 3, 1904.

emotional, volitional, sensory, or motor (musculo-motor, vaso-motor, or secreto-motor) spheres of personality, appearing either separately or in combination. The patient expresses it thus: "I feel all broken up," "I can't hold myself together," "I feel as though I would fall apart," — these feelings resulting from weakened syntheses of the personal consciousness. Again he says, "I can't get such or such an idea out of my mind," "I can't control my thoughts or feelings," "When I am alone a distressing feeling of terror comes upon me and I tremble like a leaf," — these being abnormal syntheses exhibiting automatic activity, and, because of deficient power of inhibition, incapable of being suppressed.

Neurasthenia is, then, to be looked upon as a disintegration of personality and as an effect consequent upon some causative factor, which causative factor or factors may act upon it from within or from without. In the former group of causes would be included the products of faulty metabolism, the toxins of bacteria, and such poisons as alcohol, lead, mercury, and copper; the disturbances of organic sensibility originating in disease of the various tissues and organs would be also classified here. In the second group, causes acting from without, we would include all those factors which produce their effect directly upon consciousness, and here we find the important class of emotions, such, for example, as terror and fright (traumatic neuroses), anxiety and fear. Whether acted upon from within or from without, or, as frequently happens, from both sides together, the effect is the same, first, a lowering of neural tension, and secondly, as a result of this, a condition of psychological instability and automatism; briefly, neurasthenia.

Pursuing our original purpose of studying personality objectively, let us return again to our Utopian. And to the end that we may not complicate description by the introduction of too many examples at one time, let us relate biographically, as being his, the experiences of a patient actually under observation at the present time.

After several years of ecclesiastical professional work, extraordinary in its variety and extent, he suffered a severe nervous breakdown and has been a victim of neurasthenia ever since. There are the usual periods of severe mental and physical exhaustion, intermingled with days of comparative, though not complete, comfort. Muscular fatigue, psychasthenic obsessions of homicidal import, morbid fears of possible insanity, vaso-motor flushing over the whole body, a "corkscrew" sensation arising in the pit of the abdomen and spreading to the head, a lack of mental concentration and grasp, together with a tendency to emotional depression and insomnia,—these are the main symptoms which, combined in various fashion from day to day, enact their several parts in this neurasthenic drama. He is continuously self-conscious and introspective; and as he very aptly expresses it, "I feel like the captain of a steamer who has to keep his eye on everything aboard ship." Like the poet who hears a voice in every brook, our patient scents disaster in every perverted sensation. As illustrating the working of an unstable personality in its endeavor to adapt itself to its environment, a social experience of his is instructive. Having accepted an invitation to dine with a friend, he set out with a great deal of trepidation and arrived at his destination feeling insecure about his ability to remain there. During the early part of the dinner he suffered from dizziness, flushings, and a general feeling of instability, while his obsessions and fears swooped down upon him with such intensity that it was with difficulty he remained at the table. Recalling to mind, however, what I had told him about neurasthenia being a disintegration of personality, in the sense we are discussing it in this paper, he decided to stick it out and to present a solid front to his obsessions, fears, and other sensations. The result was that gradually he regained a fair degree of control, so much so, indeed, that his witticisms evoked a great deal of laughter. He says that he felt like his old self again. This condition of personal stability obtained until some time later in the evening, when, in his

friend's study, the conversation turned upon certain saintly visions as being examples of subconscious mental activity. At this point the recollection of his own obsessions came to him, and immediately the same train of flushings, fears, and lack of control recurred as before; he was compelled to return home, followed, as he describes it, by "a thousand devils," who caused him a most uncomfortable night. Now, as I conceive it, there is but one explanation of this experience. It cannot be explained upon purely anatomical grounds, and must, therefore, receive a psychological interpretation as the oscillations of an unstable personality. The difficulty of adaptation to its environment caused the feelings of discomfort in the early part of the evening. With the gradual establishment of self-control, this adaptation became easier and more free; in other words, his personality had reached its highest point of stability, which it maintained until the discussion upon visions set off a train of automatic abnormal syntheses (association neuroses) whose activity resulted in the disintegration of personality which followed. With this psychological cleavage we must, of course, assume some perturbation or lowering of physical neural tension as its physiological counterpart. The same fluctuation of personal stability may be observed in certain cases of traumatic neurosis, where a neurasthenic or hysteric individual, who previous to a trial in court exhibits evident signs of disintegration, will undergo the strain of the witness stand with apparent self-control, only to go to pieces when she reaches home. No more convincing demonstration of the dependence of neurasthenic symptoms upon weakened syntheses of consciousness and automatism can be found than the case of Miss Beauchamp recorded in the recent volume of Dr. Morton Prince.¹ Miss Beauchamp was a young woman in whom several personalities became developed as the result of various causes. Each of these personalities was possessed of a different character and each exhibited a different state of health. "Not the least

¹ *The Dissociation of a Personality*, Morton Prince, M.D., Longmans, 1906.

interesting of the curious nervous phenomena manifested, are the different degrees of health enjoyed by the different personalities. One would imagine that if ill health were always based on physical alterations, each personality must have the same ailments; but such is not the case. The person known as B I has the poorest health. B IV is more robust, and is capable of mental and physical exertion without ill effects, which would be beyond the powers of B I; while B III is a stranger to an ache or pain — she does not know what illness means.”¹ Here we observe these various personalities using the same body, and yet each of them presenting a different condition of health, the change from one state to another taking place sometimes in the twinkling of an eye. “Not the least remarkable of the phenomena following the transformation of B I or B IV into the real Miss Beauchamp (a synthesis of all the personalities) is the sudden disappearance of the neurasthenic state. It will be readily understood that when disintegration occurs, neurasthenic symptoms — fatigue, insomnia, and general instability — return. A suggestion of health is given to B II, and, with a snap of the finger, so to speak, she wakes and becomes Miss Beauchamp, buoyant with health. Such experimental phenomena have great significance in connection with the problem of neurasthenia. Neurasthenic symptoms are an expression of disintegration.”

From the vantage ground of our present position, we are able more clearly to estimate the value of the different means employed in the treatment of neurasthenia. In a general way we may include them all under the groups of the physical and the psychic. If our theory of the condition be true, the exclusive use of either of these is inadequate, and as in other things, the *via media* is the proper one. It is by the combination of both these methods and their judicious adaptation to the requirements of the individual case that the best results are to be obtained. Many of the failures in the treatment of neurasthenia are due to the exclusive use of physical or of psychic methods;

¹ Prince: *loc. cit.*, p. 17.

or, if used in combination, to their improper employment in a given case. Obviously it is useless, so far as results are concerned, to prescribe glycerophosphates for a neurasthenic, if we allow him to leave our consulting room with the same ideas, emotions, and feelings with which he entered. By physical methods, we can give him a normal cenesthesia, the physiological basis of personality, but this is not enough. By psychic methods we should teach him properly to evaluate and to assimilate his conscious material, and by so doing to maintain a condition of adaptive stability in relation to his environment.