THE IMAGINATION IN RELATION TO MENTAL DISEASE.¹

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In this latter day, when psychology is in its transition from metaphysical bias to physiological basis, one must needs, at the threshold of his subject, define his position. Accepting it in the scientific sense, we shall find it to the purpose to examine first a few general principles, so far as it may be necessary to elucidate our thesis.

Modern views do not justify the ancient assumption that the different elements in conscious states are independent, separate parts or faculties of the mind. The threefold division into intellect, feeling and will is the classification that has generally prevailed for many years. The first and last divisions have been followed since the time of Aristotle, but not until Kant had accepted feeling as an intermediate link did the tripartite division become universally adopted. But modern psychology is not willing to admit this unnatural abstraction of conscious states, chiefly on the ground that tracing the phenomena back to different "faculties" does not render the complexity of mental elements more intelligible. It is contended that these several conditions only imply a difference between certain states of consciousness. It is not the phenomena of consciousness, or the states of consciousness themselves which are grouped and classified, but the elements which, on closer examination, we find in them. When intellect and feeling are studied, the contrast between them can but mean states with preponderating ideational elements and states with preponderating feeling elements. At the same time, there is a clear contrast between states in which the will so powerfully occupies consciousness

¹ Read before the American Medico-Psychological Association, May 24, 1899.

that the wave of feeling is but faintly perceptible, and states in which the intense stirring of the emotions suppresses the circum-spect action of the will.

The most elementary consciousness would be one in which there was only a rhythmical alteration of pleasure and pain together with the accompanying simple sensory and motor sensations. But in accordance with a law of mind it is found that consciousness has the power to combine earlier with later sensations and experiences in forming apperception. The psychological process which here takes place may be described as the fusing of a reproductive and an actual sensation. I need not stop to tell how these implicate representations become free thought under the law of association of ideas. As the young mind grows into maturity, more numerous become free representations that separate themselves in a measure from the passing sensations of the moment. Thus an independent field of ideas, a world of memory and imagination, becomes the content of consciousness. The analogy of the blood to the rôle of ideation is an apt one. In both instances it is formed out of nutritious matter obtained from the outer world, and becomes capable of leading, to some extent, an independent life. We cannot, of course, completely isolate ourselves from the external world. Sensations are received at every moment, even when the mind is chiefly occupied with free ideas. Even in sleep we receive sense impressions. And every sensation has a tendency to arouse implicate as well as free representations. Hence, it may be said that there are always two streams in consciousness, as Hoffding has pointed out, of which one now prevails, and then the other; one flows in the current of sensuous perception and the other in that of representative consciousness, *i. e.*, in the current of memory and imagination. Between the two currents, the presentative and representative, and also between the two elements in the latter, memory and imagination, there is an inverse ratio. They strive to check or suppress one another. The more energy one element claims, the less, from the nature of the case, remains for the rest. Both streams and both elements are present in every state of consciousness, but in different degrees of strength. If they are equally strong, a rhythmical alternation occurs, so that now the perceptive, and then the representative, has the ascend-

ency. An equilibrium between them would presuppose that they both were presented with equal clearness in consciousness—a thing that is impossible, for consciousness, like the point of most distinct vision in the retina, is always concentrated in one special direction. In some moments we are almost wholly under the control of sensations and percepts; in others, buried in ourselves, in memory and in imagination. As the relation between the two currents and between the two elements of representation is different in the same individual at different times, so too is it different in different individuals. The tendency with some is to give themselves up entirely to the play of sensations, while others live mainly in free ideas, in memory and in imagination.

The harmonious blending of these two opposite tendencies is requisite for the building of a symmetrical character, for the best powers of imagination should be joined to quick perception. There is, thus, the danger of the busy man getting so engrossed in the details of work as to think but little of high ideals, and of the man who spends his time in cherishing vast conceptions becoming so absorbed that when he is brought to the test of practical action he effects little or nothing. Every character needs these two elements, high resolve and earnest labor—the lofty imagination and the patient care of each detail; the thought of the inquiring mind and the labor of the diligent hand. Energy in action must not be less honored than conscious purpose, or the cherished idea less emphasized than industry in work. These two extremes in the well-balanced mind should work together, just as night succeeds day, and the fullest success of either one can only be attained by the co-operation of the other.

The want of balance may be seen in the unwholesome tendency to idle day-dreaming, exhibited in the degenerate mind. A productive source of mental inefficiency, which, sometimes eventuates in actual breakdown, is due to this excessive exercise of that form of the imagination that is familiarly known as fancy. The ideational states of consciousness, as before stated, are made up of memory and imagination. Memory-ideas, being partly under the control of volition, are revived with advantage, and may, for the most part, be bad only when bad in nature; on the other hand, ideas which flow from the imagination are of two kinds, passive and productive, and their activities are beneficial

or the contrary according to mutable circumstances. The ideas which belong to the productive imagination are generally healthy in tone, while those of the passive imagination may be of doubtful utility, and if extravagantly indulged in, especially by the youthful mind, become a cause that may encroach upon its integrity. The higher form of the imagination, the productive, is a noble faculty which is only found in its perfection in the higher order of minds. By the vigorous exercise of this power the greatest achievements in human annals have been wrought, and to it the world owes much of its material good in the civilizing influences of mankind. The passive, or the lower state, known as fancy, prevails most in brains that are weak and of low grade, in which degenerative inherited tendencies are rife. In these indolent minds this form of ideation is most common; the thoughts, by no effort of attention, are allowed to drift hither and yon by the automatic association of ideas. Allusion here is not made to the common vice of developing a prurient imagination, either by unclean books or by evil associations, which is inculcated in moral teaching, but to simple, innocent day-dreaming, that is so potent in its baneful influence upon the mind, in forming enervating habits of thought, as to cause offensive egotism and to warp the judgment. Ray, in treating of day-dreaming, says: "No form of intellectual activity is so common as this. Under all degrees of refinement, . . . it is equally obvious, varying only in the objects to which it is applied. . . . It begets a distaste for exact knowledge, for that is the fruit of laborious study; it indisposes the mind to habits of continuous thought, and quenches all thirst for intellectual excellence. The pleasures of the imagination are always accessible, and they can be enjoyed with little of that preparation which is needed in the case of other intellectual pleasures. This would be bad enough if the evil stopped here, but it extends much further. It actually incapacitates the individual for those intellectual efforts that are required for the great purposes of life, and circumscribes the sphere in which he can move with any degree of credit to himself or good to others. An imagination thus indulged, and feeling none of the checks and balances which the cultivation of other faculties would afford, easily wanders into devious paths that lead at last to helpless and hopeless derangement. Life becomes a dream,

and that dream needs only the favoring circumstances to be converted into delusion." . . . "I think it may be stated as one of the results of modern observation," he adds, "that the man who enters upon life with no habits of serious and connected thought, with no taste for investigating the causes and effects of the countless phenomena passing around him, with no practical object clearly set before him and worthy of the pursuit of a rational creature, whose joys and sorrows, whose principles and motives, whose ends and aims are fashioned by the plastic touch of his own busy imagination, cannot promise himself exemption from mental disease, if at all predisposed thereto."

We have all seen the day-dreamer, and the baneful results of his castle-building. Observe him in his work or at his studies, carry on a fanciful romance in which the hero is himself, and around this figure he weaves all manner of pleasant and delusive incidents that feed his egotism and excite his pleasurable emotions. Besides wasting much time and dissipating mental energy the youth is apt to form a distaste for the rigid duties and responsibilities of life. The evil effects of this habit react unfavorably on the character of the individual; it weakens the will, it warps the judgment, it affects the emotions and leads the victim into false notions of his relations to others. The absent-minded apprentice, who dreams of the advantages of idleness in luxury, rather than giving heed to the task before him, turns out in the end a poor mechanic, and attributes his failure to causes based on an erroneous estimate of society. The slovenly accountant, who dreams listlessly over his books, instead of applying himself thoughtfully to his work, continues through life a tread-mill drudge; or grieving over his misfortunes, the natural fruit of lax ways, he drifts over the border-line of healthy mentality and ends his days as he began them in the hopeless profligacy of dreaming. The young girl led into the habit of revery by idleness and novel-reading weaves into her imagination fancies that inspire ideas totally at variance with the stern realities of her being, and thus she may be led into vanity, extravagance and folly, which open eventually into the maelstrom that ends in mental ruin. These are instances, familiar enough, of the results of an unhealthy exercise of the imagination.

In thus speaking of the undue exercise of the fancy, it must

not be supposed that all activity of this function is unwholesome and prejudicial to mental health. In youth and health it gilds the future with tints of joy and hope, in middle life it sustains the soul through many trying seasons of disappointment and pain, and in old age serves to clothe the comforting promises of religion with the glorious anticipations of future reward. In every station and in every period the normal activity of the imagination tends to relieve the monotonous commonplace events of every-day life with inexhaustible sources of pleasure and recreation. Like all of our powers, it is given for wise and good purposes; and if judiciously used, it will insure desirable results.

Historically, as well as psychologically, there is abundant evidence that the imaginative powers in man lie deep in his constitution. Before the higher intellectual endowments are manifested, the imagination of the child is displayed in a wealth of prodigality. "Childhood," says Sully, "is the age for dreaming, for decking out the as-yet unknown world with the gay colors of imagination, for living a life of play or happy make-believe." In old age, too, when the powers of the mind grow dim and there is a return to the childlike period, this tendency to yield to the pleasures of fancy becomes a ruling passion and is exhibited in the aged by a desire for quiet reverie and dreaming. The analogy between the different ages of human life and the periods of the world's history is often striking and complete. This semblance may be seen here. As the imagination is intimately bound up in the life of the child, so in the childhood of the world, the myth and romance impulse was dominant. The mystic development of religion and philosophy of those early times was based very largely on the speculative tendencies of the primitive mind.

This similarity may be traced among the insane, in whom frequently the mental characteristics correspond to those of the child. In the reduction that takes place in mental disease, especially in cases with an hereditary taint, the traits of the child become conspicuous in the process of involution. When the mind is deprived of the regulating checks of its higher and late-developed aptitudes, then it is that the more fully organized functions rise to the surface and make themselves apparent by exceptional language and conduct. In the whole range of peculiarities of the insane, none are more notable, as a type-distinction,

than the many-sided expressions of fancy. They may be seen in the buoyant output that the imbecile child lavishes in play on its simple toys; in the hebephreniac smiling and laughing to himself as his emotional nature is stirred by flitting fancies; in the passive musings of the chronic dement and in the rambling incoherence of maniacal excitement, where sense-impressions of involuntary attention are overlaid by vivid images. A further example is found in psychoses in the propensity to pun, to rhyme and to the use of metaphor. In cases of hereditary insanity this is a common observation. These patients form, always, a distinct group, as an interesting and amusing feature of the institution; and among their bright sayings can be collected rare bits of wisdom and humor, in forms of witticism and chance specimens of poetic invention. Again, the normal function of the imagination may be so disturbed by mental disease that the conceptions take on an unwonted buoyancy and exaggeration, as found in maniacal states, when distorted views of religion are seen or excessive hope, attended with delusive fancies of an exalted type, precipitates the victim upon a course of pitiable extravagance and folly; or, as seen in melancholia, the ideas become cheerless and painful beyond the utmost limits of misery and want. And thus it happens, that a sentiment, intended, beyond most others, when properly trained and guided, to promote the present and future happiness of man, is turned into a source of woful misfortune.

We have seen how the world of sense may be suffused by illusions of fancy. The play of the imagination in its illusory apprehension of objects has a vitalizing and personifying element, especially when violent emotion, as fear, gives preternatural intensity to the feelings. Science is beginning to aid us in understanding better the mechanism of the mind. Through it we are led to see more clearly that the whole imaginative life of the insane may be specially colored by the preponderant vividness of certain orders of images. In the case of one group of patients—by far the most numerous—the imaginative bent lies in the realm of visual illusion; another, in a world of sounds; while again, in a smaller class, the illusions of taste and smell occupy the attention. The difference in the elementary composition of the imagination doubtless turns in great measure on temperament, tone of feeling

and preponderant direction of the emotions. Imagination is closely allied to the feelings. Hence the familiar fact that in some patients the imagination broods by preference on gloomy and terrifying objects; in others, on religion; and in others it selects what is bright and gladsome.

There is another domain of imaginative activity in persons of the insane diathesis that is a well-certified fact. It may be seen in a tendency to pervert the truth, either in exaggeration or senseless falsifying. This perversion is not due so much, as it would seem, to the blunting of the moral sense, as it is, on the contrary, to a lively realizing imagination that too readily confounds the representative ideas with sensuous perception, so that the victim fails to distinguish often between fact and fiction. To be sure, this condition may be found in all degrees of intensity in healthy persons, more particularly when under the influence of mental excitement. Lawyers, understanding the defects of human testimony, are liable to suspect fraud if the detailed stories of interested witness too exactly corroborate one another. But with due allowance for defective observation, reference is here made to a wider departure from the truth than ordinarily occurs among persons of mental integrity who are able to give comparatively faithful accounts of their experiences.

It may, also, be remarked that the capacity to form quickly and clearly half-illusory pictures out of things is the outcome of a strong bent to this imaginative activity, which is found in its completeness in those actually insane or thereto predisposed. Such persons readily detect the semblance of a human or animal form in the irregular lines of a figured ceiling, in the lineal design of a carpet, in the outlines of the clouds, or in the dark shades of a thicket.

Having surveyed in this imperfect way its wonderful scope, let us, in conclusion, glance for a moment at it from another point of view, and see how the imagination has been a mighty force, a basic factor, in the history of insanity itself.

When the revival of learning took place in Europe, following the darkness of the Middle Ages, the metaphysical mysticism that pervaded all disputations of philosophy was applied with equal zeal to form the theories relating to insanity. It was an age when fancy was rife and the imagination was employed in form-

ing vague hypotheses for the interpretation of scientific problems. Instead of observing the phenomena of nature and studying her laws, the inquiring mind, following this principle, sought in speculation to obtain its conclusions. This condition equally held sway in religious matters, and to the prevalent ideas of monastic teaching can be traced the deplorable state of the insane when the great reform movement swept over the civilized world at the beginning of the present century. When irrational theories of insanity that ascribed it to some supernatural power, divine or diabolical, made way for more exact knowledge, when scientific research demonstrated that insanity was due to disease of the brain, then a better day dawned for this afflicted class. We see, then, that the imagination, in the guise of mysticism, was the forerunner of knowledge, as it has been, and still is, in all evolutionary progress.