THE GENETIC CONCEPT IN PSYCHIATRY.*

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I will begin by telling you briefly the story of a case communicated to me by Dr. Gregory. The patient was a young girl who lived in the country not far from New York City. Financial straits of the family made it incumbent upon her to leave her home in the country and betake herself to New York to earn a livelihood. Upon the eve of her departure her parents, solicitous for her safety, warned her against the lures of the great city. They told her to be careful and not to be deceived by suave strangers who might approach her, and by no means ever to permit herself to yield to an invitation to take any alcohol, and they told her about knock-out drops; if she needed information to ask an official, a policeman—never a stranger. This was the time, too, when the papers were filled with accounts of the exposures in the white slave traffic, and she had read of this.

Shortly after her arrival in New York she was able to secure a position at a salary of \$15 per week, got a boarding place, and everything went well. After a while, however, her employer came to her and told her that matters had not been going well with him in a business way and that therefore he would be forced to reduce her salary to \$8 per week. This necessitated a readjustment on her part, and the first effort she made was to see if she could not get another position that would pay her as well. This, however, she was unable to do and finally had to realize that she must go on at the reduced compensation. This required that she should cut down expenses and live cheaper. To that end she secured a room in a cheaper German boarding house on the East Side.

Hardly had she settled in her new quarters than one evening at dinner she was begged to have a glass of beer; the boarders being German, beer was commonly served at the table. She refused and resisted, but finally yielded and drank a little beer.

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While sitting at the table she overheard two of the men opposite talking, and one said to the other, "I think it can be done for \$50." This alarmed her considerably, and after leaving the table she went into her room and shut the door and went to bed. She heard constantly, however, footsteps about the house, and she felt convinced that something wrong was going on; that evil designs were in the minds of some of the boarders, and that they were preparing to invade her in her room. About this time, too, the little beer that she had drank disagreed with her, made her stomach feel bad, and she was afraid that it had been doped. She became more and more frightened, and finally arose, put on her things, hastily left the house and sought a physician. He made some examination of her and looked at her tongue, and then, according to her story, said that he thought she had been poisoned. This was the last stroke. She rushed from the physician's office, shrieking into the street, and was shortly taken up by a policeman and sent to the Bellevue Pavilion. Here she was in a wild state of excitement, absolutely inaccessible for two or three days, and then finding that her environment was a friendly one, that they were trying to do things for her and not to injure her, she gradually calmed down, and at the end of approximately three days she quite recovered from the episode, had full insight, and could leave the hospital.

We are dealing here quite evidently with an hysterical episode of very acute onset and rapid subsidence, but how are we to explain, to understand, the symptoms? I have cited the case because it would seem that here we have quite a simple illustration of the general concept that I wish to give you in this paper.

In order to understand the mechanisms here involved we must realize first that this girl had had certain warnings from her parents on starting for New York. These warnings had been received, understood at the time, and then practically at least, laid aside and forgotten after she arrived in the city and adjusted herself to the new conditions, secured employment and settled down in the new relations. Now a difficulty arises; she has to make a complete readjustment which involves a considerable sacrifice of her comfort, and this is a difficult thing to do. In her attempt to deal efficiently with reality she is not successful altogether. Now the interesting thing about her lack of success in

dealing with the problem of her new adjustment shows itself by a psychosis that is easily seen to be nothing more than a realization, a coming to life, as it were, of all the possibilities suggested by her parents warnings. How can we understand this reanimation and reactivating of things which have gone before and been left behind?

In order to explain this psychosis it is necessary to enter the realm of hypothesis. It will be seen that the psychosis can be understood if we first postulate some form of psycho-physical energy which has the capacity under certain circumstances of flowing back, as it were, and re-animating old experiences. This is the theory of the introversion of the libido, or if the term libido is not liked, of the psycho-physical energy, or whatever name you wish to give. An elaboration of the theory is to the effect that the individual is constructive, creative, mentally healthy, so long as this energy is flowing outward in interest upon the external world of reality; that when it flows backward within the individual himself, then disorder of mind is the result. The occasion for a flowing backward of the energy or an introversion, as it is called, is some difficulty met with in effectively dealing with reality; a difficulty arises and adjustment is impossible; the flow of the energy outward is impeded; it is dammed up, and it flows backward. In this way old channels are reanimated as in the case I have cited.

The application of the theory of a psycho-physical energy, the dealing with the mind in terms of energy, enable us to understand the case cited I think very clearly. The following out of this theory, however, has certain wider applications, which are the particular ones to which I desire to call your attention.

In the first place, if we bear in mind that man is what he is at any particular moment only because of all that has gone before; that his mental life is one of constant growth and development, one of constant accretion, of adding to from below upward, then we can understand that a regressive libido, a libido flowing backwards, will reanimate successively lower levels and bring into the foreground mental qualities that are more and more childlike in proportion to the depth of the introversion. My paper is essentially a theoretical one, and for that reason and also because of temporal limitations I cannot enter into elaborate illustrations

to show this. However, you are all familiar with the childlike qualities that are exhibited in many of the psychoses. The hysteric, for example, almost invariably impresses you as childish, the playfulness of the manic case is proverbially childish and many of the traits of the *præcox* are also. We see here, therefore, the importance of child psychology to an understanding of the psychoses; the importance of the genetic principle as applied to the interpretation of the childlike characteristics that we see so frequently in mental disorder.

Still a further implication follows: If man at any particular time is an end product of all that has gone before, all that has gone before implies very much more than his own individual life. If it has been possible for you and me to-day to attain a certain height of intellectual development it is only because we have been able to stand upon the shoulders of the generations that have preceded us. The development of the mind, like the development of the body, has had its history through the ages, and the mind like the body carries along within it evidences of its history. We could not possibly understand the appendix or the *ligamentum nuchæ*, or a thousand other specific things in the anatomy of the human body, if we were not acquainted with comparative anatomy and knew their individual histories. And so there are things in the human mind that are inexplicable unless we know their histories.

Whereas the general statement that the mind has had a history just as the body has may be accepted, it is another thing and a more difficult thing, to understand how there may be vestiges of that history preserved in the mind showing the sources of present-day structures. We think of the mind as something intangible, of something incapable of being formed and preserved from generation to generation. The comparison I have given I trust will help to make this possibility clearer. However, I feel that it is not yet clear, and I would say in addition that I do not mean by any manner of means that ideas, definite concepts, actual memories, if you will, are handed on from generation to generation; that I do not mean, but I do mean that such a structure of mind may exist in a given individual or under given conditions of disease that corresponds to the structure at a lower cultural level in the history of the race, and that when this correspondence

occurs then, with certain variations of content, we get the same general results in the way in which the individual thinks and feels and comes into contact with the world of reality and of experiences.

The introverted libido, therefore, will not only reanimate progressively lower levels in the history of the individual, but it can also reanimate progressively lower levels in the history of the race. So that a given mental disease may reduce the individual first to a condition resembling his childhood and then to a condition of mind resembling a lower cultural level in the history of the race. This is the theory upon which we are attempting to explain certain so-called archaic modes of reaction which are found so frequently in cases of dementia præcox, although they may be found not only in other conditions, but in people who are practically free from mental disease, but in which these types of reaction crop out in phantasy formation, more especially in dreams.

A simple illustration at this point may serve to make what I mean somewhat more clear. An old gentleman dreamt that he was two logs of wood, separated in different places and that he could not get together. The meaning of the dream was quite clear. He felt himself split into two opposite tendencies. He had always desired in his life to go one way, but circumstances had forced him another, and so there was a continuous conflict throughout his life between what he desired on the one hand and what he was forced to do on the other. The principal question is, Why should this man represent himself in his dream as wood. His associations to wood were three: namely, fire, food, and ashes. If we will go back to the history of primitive man and realize the tremendous importance that wood had for him, particularly as being the carrier and container, in accordance with his way of thinking, of fire which was of such vast importance and so difficult to create, we begin to see that our dreamer is giving an importance to wood that is commensurate with the importance which primitive man gives it and in somewhat the same way; because, does not the wood contain fire, and is not fire life? We have plenty of examples of the use of fire as meaning life. We speak of the flame of life, the heat of passion, and have many other similar expressions, and so wood contains the fire or the life just as the mother contains the child and the flame and the fire comes

forth from the wood and the child comes forth from the mother. Primitive man also believed that the food that was cooked over the fire absorbed the qualities of the fire, and so if the fire was a god then the food absorbed the divine qualities. And finally ashes mean death. The dreamer was very much afraid of death. He realized that he never could attain to union with himself in this life, and so ashes would signify the only way in which he could obtain this union, namely, in death. The ashes are the residue of the wood after burning and so the woman is looked upon not only as the source of life, but the source of death. She not only creates a new life, but passes her own life on into the new, and therefore dies in giving birth.

All of these symbolisms group about the symbolism of wood as representing the individual. You will see now what I mean: wood, fire, food, ashes, were all naturally within the experience of the individual, but he uses this material—he uses these experiences, in an archaic way; he gives them turns of meaning that correspond to the meanings given by primitive man; he looks upon them from the standpoint of a lower cultural level. The split in his life had come very early; it had gone very deep; it involved his most profound thinking and feeling, and so it went way back to those early types of reaction which I have designated as archaic.

In the few minutes at my disposal I have only been able to give you a mere outline of what I mean by the genetic concept. You will see how pregnant it is of possibilities, and at least I hope you may appreciate that this is a concept that must be reckoned with from now on until it has been properly evaluated and taken its place definitely as an interpretative formula for psychiatry.