THE RELATION OF GENIUS TO INSANITY.¹

SOCIOLOGY deals with all that concerns individuals having necessary relations with one another and living together in a community. It has been defined as the science that treats of the origin and history of society and of social phenomena. But it deals also with the progress of civilisation, with educational ideals and efforts, as well as with the nature and development of the laws controlling human intercourse.

The cause and origin of insanity is a subject for sociological study, as is also the relationship between different mental conditions in so far as these may depend upon the manner of life, the custom, the ancestry, and the habits of individuals belonging to a social organism. It may not be inappropriate therefore to discuss under this heading the origin and the relationship of certain mental states or qualities when these are found to bear a direct influence upon the efforts and the actions of others living in the same social group. It is acknowledged that conditions such as the environment do exercise an important influence upon social humanity. If the environment were incapable of influencing the organism, then life would be a mechanism governed by the laws of statics. On the other hand the effect of Mendelian research has been to show that variations in a species may occur irrespective of environmental forces. The kindling of interest through any regenerative cause awakens knowledge, not only in the sociological field, but also in biological, ethical, and psychological directions.

The fact that variations occur in mental endowments was the theme of study a generation or more ago by Sir Francis Galton. He regarded men of genius as sports, for he maintained that no one can acquire, or make himself, or gain by education, the peculiar insight which characterises the creative powers of a great artist, poet, or discoverer. The powers possessed by these are correctly described as "gifts," and they might be considered to be innate characters or intuitions, *i.e.*, mental instincts which, though capable of being developed and strengthened by education or cultivation, are never thus originated *de novo*. The fact that among the inmates of asylums are found, not a few but many, persons who are endowed with rare mental ability, if not with genius itself, has justified Dryden in the lines :

Great wits are sure to madness near allied
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

1. A paper read before the Social Psychology Group of the Sociological Society, April 28, 1914.

Pascal also remarked that an extreme mind (genius) is akin to extreme madness, that the "bound" was a thin partition. The specific nature of these bounds affords material for a fruitful study, but no writer of note—among British alienists at any rate—has contributed any serious addition to our knowledge in regard to genius, talent, or distinction as related to insanity. Max Nordau, together with Lombroso, contributed some important literature in regard to the degenerate class; whilst J. F. Nisbet, Havelock Ellis, W. H. Mallock, Mark Baldwin, and others, have studied the subject from the psychological and historical side. It would appear from the experience of alienists that the border territory between genius and insanity, or between the sane and the insane, is often very narrow and ill-defined, although, naturally, well-marked and prominent cases are very definite and distinct. Nothing for example, is easier than to classify the extreme degenerate on the one side as against the richly endowed mind on the other; but when cranks and oddities, inspired poets and mono-ideists, anarchists, and misanthropes, and eccentric persons, have to be considered and classified, it is difficult at times to exclude some of them from the types of inscrutable and subtle persons who are best described as having "kinks in their minds" or "bees in their bonnets," or who are, as the East-Enders would have it, "balmy on the crumpeet," and for whom the Lunacy Act provides convenient and suitable accommodation. The eccentric person is only an example of the predominance of some factors of the mind whereby an alteration has occurred in the process of association, or one in whom there is a tyranny of certain emotional states, or where there is a defect of voluntary attention or the predominance of automatism causing a want of harmony between the individual and his environment. It is on the borderland of insanity and often is seen in the genius. Upon the assumption that blanks in our knowledge are worse than superfluous information I have attempted to supply some suggestions, but no one will deny that the task is difficult, and most will agree that it is one of great interest as well as of curiosity. My daily rounds through the wards of one of the largest Metropolitan asylums

. exempt from public haunt
Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything;

and this is the inspiration of my paper. Many of my readers will doubtless be familiar with much that I have to say, but it may be better that a few should meet with what they know rather than that the rest should miss what they may have a wish to learn.

As an alienist I do not claim an exclusive right to consider the complex problems of mind. They are quite as much the domain

and study of the teacher, the spiritual adviser, or even the politician, as they are that of the scientist, the psychologist, or the mental specialist, and as the brain is the organ by means of which we are enabled to exercise mental powers, so the body is the organ by which these are expressed, and observations in regard to the mind not infrequently resolve themselves into those of bodily movements, gestures, or positions. Mental states and habits are imprinted upon the eye or the mouth, or upon general bodily attitudes. St. Paul is probably the best known exponent of Christian philosophy, and he was a psychologist as well as a teacher. In his psychology he taught the tripartite division of body, soul, and spirit, but he nevertheless considered the soul and spirit to be one independent whole, although exercising a double function—this being manifested on the one hand in the department of the mental life, and on the other in the department of the moral and religious. Bergson considers that the body is to the mind what the point of the knife is to the knife itself: it enables the mind to touch reality. The interactionists fail to demonstrate the creation of material energy by conscious processes, and Shadworth Hodgson, as representing the materialists, can hardly claim support when he states that we or our spirit or our mind is at the mercy of material happenings. We cannot yet resolve consciousness into physical and chemical changes in brain cells, of which the calculating American considers there are over 9,000 millions in an averagely developed brain cortex. Although we take shelter to-day in parallelism, there is a growing tendency to revert to the Pauline doctrine, and to regard body and mind as independent actors. Much that has been written of late postulates a mental energy independent of bodily or material energy.

In order to comprehend more fully the title of this paper it is necessary to recall how the brain acts, and by this acting how the mind grows. The moment a child sees or hears something, rays of light or waves of sound have already impinged as impressions or stimuli upon a specially prepared outer organ such as the eye or the ear. These impressions travel along nerves very rapidly in their journey to the brain. The moment they reach the brain they are registered and are transformed so that rays of light are seen as objects and waves of sound are heard as music, voices, noises, etc. In this way the sensations are perceived and they then become perceptions or percepts, which can be revived in memory as concepts and these again as images or *recepts*. The same process occurs with the information conveyed by touch, smell and taste. These then are the operations of the mind in definite order. When the outward stimulus caused by objects has been removed and has ceased to act, the mind has the power to recall in memory the original picture or parts of the percept, and a second picture, a concept or an idea—

weaker, of course, than the first picture is presented to the mind. Some great portrait painters have exhibited this power inasmuch as they have painted their pictures after the sitters had gone. William Blake is an instance of great power in this direction, for he had aural and visual ideas—correctly described as hallucinations—of historical figures from which he painted very remarkable pictures. The mind tends to associate the presentation of the original object with all its combining qualities—a rose may be remembered as of a certain colour and of such a pleasant scent, worn by the object of one's adoration and associated with the sweet words breathed in the intervals of a dance or during the entr'acte—so that when a rose is again encountered all the former pleasant associations tend to be revived in idea at the same moment. It is the same with other ideas that occur to the mind; there tends to be an association of the different presentations and combinations of these which can all be revived in memory. Now it is the possession of this association by similarity to an extreme degree that accounts for the ability to create something new out of these ideas, and this is the necessary basis of imagination and the true explanation of genius. Minds which possess unusual energy in association by similarity are exceptional. The flash of similarity between an apple and the moon or between the rivalry for food in Nature and the rivalry for man's selection could only occur to a Newton or a Darwin. William James considers there are two types of genius, one where similarity calls up cognate thoughts—the analysts or abstract thinkers, for instance—and the other where these thoughts are noticed and acted upon—the intuitionists, such as artists, poets, writers, or critics. When an *outward* recollection is revived the term "fancy" has been used for the revival, but when the reference and combination is an *inward* weaving the term "imagination" has been employed, but this is an artificial distinction, and both points arise in considering the essence of genius. Genius is original and inventive; it creates and improves, and its product is the effect of great and unusual power to form new combinations and new ideas or imagery. The man of genius has a clearer perception and reaches this with quicker steps and more rapid strides than the ordinary mortal, who is slower and less brilliant. The person of genius possesses insight—or, as it is called, "inspiration"—and gets to the heart of things and to the very essence of reality without a purposive end independently of training. Training, in fact, tends to extinguish genius, which does not necessarily imply or connote superior intellectual powers; on the other hand, genius is an indication of abnormality, of instability, or of dis-equilibrium, and this is the subject of my thesis. A "mute inglorious Milton" lies in many a churchyard.

I should like to raise the point for discussion at this Society, of which some distinguished psychologists are members, whether genius is controlled by voluntary action. John Stuart Mill used to say that the occupation of the mind was not thinking but dreaming, and George Eliot stated when she wrote a "not-herself" took possession of her. It has been stated that ideas arise spontaneously or automatically in the mind, but that the will fixes the attention upon them and they thus become the absorbing central focus for meditation and reflection. The difficulty in analyzing genius is partly due to the fact that persons who are geniuses are rarely capable of mental introspection and psychological description. Wordsworth, however, describes his own mind and states that his creative power depended upon continued meditation upon themes he had set before himself acting with the influences surrounding him, but neither reflection nor the environment could have made Wordsworth a poet. The faculty he possessed was an inborn gift working either automatically and spontaneously or through the mechanism of the will. It has been stated that the power which Wordsworth acquired was original with Shakespeare. In some this intuition appears to be original and spontaneous, in others to be the result of rigorous and painstaking training. Are we justified in considering the latter to be genius? We know the *will* cannot help us to recollect something forgotten, and that the best way to recollect anything is to go back and dwell upon the idea most likely to suggest it by association. Neither can the will suggest ideas for the imagination, although it can withdraw the attention from ideas which cognition or judgment can make use of. Scott often asserted that the writing of good verses was an act separate from volition, and Shelley stated that the finest passages of poetry could not be produced by labour and study.

Thus it is that the ideas of the creative genius may be controlled, "set going and kept going" by the will, but they must arise automatically and spontaneously, and so the will may do much indirectly in the work of the creative power of genius. Further, it has been stated that genius has an ethical or an æsthetic end, that there is Truth, or Beauty, or Goodness to be considered. Praxiteles, for instance, is said to have combined the most beautiful parts of the most beautiful figures for his statue of Venus for the people of Cos. Great architects produce their designs in the same way and with the same object, and the great engineers have done the same. Whether the constructive imagination is entitled to be considered in the same class with the creative is a matter for discussion, but great writers like Sir Walter Scott can hardly be excluded from the list of geniuses. Another point which this Society might consider, as it is well able to do, is the effect upon a

community of men of genius, and the influence of great social or political events upon individuals. We know the great height to which men rose in the fifteenth century, whether their appearance was due to the great need of the occasion, and whether an environment can create its own geniuses. I only suggest these points for consideration. Is the imaginative faculty cultivated, invigorated, and developed to the fullest expression by the needs of the time? or are those right who state that genius is unsummoned, involuntary, and spontaneous?

The ironical definition of genius as "the infinite capacity for taking pains" confuses genius with talent; and is a "sop to the minnows"! Talent connotes the possession of special aptitudes for some purpose, and implies education. It is very much the result of memory and, as in Macaulay, it was the ready and responsive reaction to education and training. A person may have a talent for the kind of business to which he has been trained but such is not a genius. A carpenter may be talented, but he is not a genius; a musician may be talented, when he is the clever exponent of another's work; but a musical genius is a creator or an originator. A diplomatist may be talented because he is a good tactician, but he is a genius only when he has propounded some great and clever policy which redounds to his country's credit. Talent implies discrimination and a talented person is usually clever, and of good judgment; a genius is often erratic, unreliable, unstable, and irresponsible—George Morland, Robert Burns, Byron, Chatterton, Edgar Allan Poe are cases in point. Many of these and others of their kind betray a real want of equilibrium. They are dreamers and persons incapable of appreciating circumstances at their proper value and incapable of finding opportune adaptations. I am not contending that genius is a morbid neurosis or a neurotic phenomenon, but I do maintain that there are considerable resemblances between the highest mental activity as evidenced in genius and the disordered mind of the insane; both are departures from the normal type, and the territory of the imagination is the common province of both. The conduct and character of any individual, whether sane or insane, is the resultant of his ideative processes, his emotions or sentiments and his attentive or volitional power, and the predominance of one or the defect of another mental activity is reflected in behaviour and conduct. In the genius as in the insane person there is a want of co-ordination of conduct for the end in view, and there is a defect in the proportional relationship between thought and action, with frequently in them an incapacity which in the one case brings the person into the asylum, the other by accident remaining free. In the conversation and declamations of a person in

acute mania the imagination is extraordinarily active; images crowd each other in such rapid succession that words fail to be uttered fast enough to describe them. Like genius, insanity is as impatient as it is highly sensitive. Novel suggestions and situations present themselves so quickly that the rapidity of the conceptual and associative products are those of extreme mental brilliance, ability, and power. In acute insanity, as in genius, the perceptions are quicker and the associations keener. Wagner, for example, composed some of his best music when suffering from melancholia; Ruskin is stated to have been more interesting, as well as writing better prose, when suffering from sub-acute mania, and Cowper wrote "John Gilpin" when suffering from acute depressive insanity. I have played billiards for three hours continuously with a university don suffering from sub-acute mania, and during the whole of this time his conversation was brilliant and epigrammatic. He composed and recited stanzas of poetry which were most apt, correct, and striking. The hearing in some cases of acute mania shows an abnormal perception for sounds, and, in many cases, the whole of the mental faculties appear to be quickened and brisker. The antithesis of acute maniacal excitement is the state of profound melancholia, when there is an intense emotional state of sadness and reserve. In this state persons are often timid, apprehensive and self-depreciating, and it is the state into which many men of genius have found themselves. Aristotle described all men of ability as being of the melancholic temperament and some of them in this state have made attempts upon their lives. They have become introspective and suspicious, overcome with the fear of others. Erasmus Darwin, Clive, Romilly, Cowper and Collins as well as Chatterton were of this order. I knew a clever novelist who to avoid mortal ken concealed himself in a boat moored for weeks to an uninhabited island. Some men of great mental power have felt obliged to give up their adopted professions from an overwhelming fear and an apprehensive horror of having to appear in public, and Sir Thomas Browne is stated never to have overcome the act of blushing at the slightest emotional change; and many men of genius have experienced a dislike almost amounting to fear in regard to social life. Of all forms of insanity probably the class described as paranoia is the nearest allied to genius. Those of this type are strong-minded, often extraordinarily able, but irreconcilables and quite "impossible" persons. They are the material out of which canonized saints, martyrs, prophets, inventors and cranks of all sorts are recruited. We are all familiar with the fantastic ways of very clever people, with their personal appearance, their style of clothing, their hair, and their style of writing. We know the professed spiritualists, the rabid anti-vivisectors, the collectors of useless

objects, and those who devote their lives to fantastical strivings; conditions not infrequently associated with the presence of unusual mental ability. Maudsley states that there has hardly ever been a man of genius who had not insanity or some form of nervous disorder in his family tree.

Indeed insanity is known to occur with unusual frequency among the relatives of men of genius. Life, however, is a matter of compensation and equilibrium, and if great development occurs in one direction there is a compensating defect in others. All are familiar with the so-called calculating boys, who are usually infants of prodigious memories but no "minds." I knew a man who could recite *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* from cover to cover, yet his mind continued to be of the nursery type and he did not understand what he dramatically recited. I knew another who would play upon the organ any music he had previously heard, and this without notes—of which he knew nothing—to remind him. Another person visited the *Great Eastern* steamship and he afterwards constructed from memory an accurate model of it, yet he possessed only the mind of an inordinately vain and egotistical child. It is known that genius is frequently associated with a deficient moral sense, being found with drunkenness, prodigality, crime or immorality, as well as epilepsy or insanity. On the one hand the psychic wave rises to a great height, whilst on the other it falls below the level of what society can tolerate and the certificate of insanity is called to limit the "bound." Every person who has walked through the wards of an asylum must have realised the vivid imagery and the creative fancy of some of the inmates and could not fail to be reminded of the flights of genius on the other side of the "bound." Such an association tends to persuade any observer that genius and insanity are both products of a morbid instability and that the partition between the two is both narrow and ill-defined.

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