

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE ALCOHOL PROBLEM.

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THE most hopeful feature of the situation in the study of alcoholism at the present time appears to be the complexity of the problem, and the recognition of the fact that all narrow, ethical, and dogmatic religious attitudes toward it, and the equally restricted psycho-physiological views, are inadequate. This promising broadening of the horizon is due, mainly, to the development of the psychological and sociological sciences upon an evolutionary or genetic basis. The enlarged scientific outlook enables us for the first time to throw light upon fundamental questions regarding alcoholism and other similar medico-sociological problems.

It seems plain that the basic factor in the alcohol problem is that of *motives*. So long as we begin with an assumption that the habit of intemperance is due to the "evil" in human nature, or to an "appetite" for alcohol, we shall never proceed very far. It is precisely to discover the nature of this appetite, its relation to other desires and traits, that we need most of all to investigate the alcohol question scientifically. It is the function of psychology to interpret just such phases of human life, to apply its genetic and analytic methods, and to tell us *why men use alcohol*; to substitute for a loose and general or erroneous notion a precise formula, based upon data having historic perspective, and in accord with the general truths and assumptions of the sciences of human nature.

It is not the purpose of this brief paper to present the evidence for any positive interpretation of the nature of the intoxication motives, considered from the psychological standpoint, but merely

to suggest the scope of the problems aroused, when, from the psychological viewpoint, the fundamental question of temperance is thus stated : *Why do men use alcoholic intoxicants ?*

Psychology undertakes to determine the origin, the genesis, the constituents and conditions, of the intoxication motives, and their relation to fundamental instincts and processes of the organism. It is now evident that these motives are deep and tenacious. It is not likely that they are accidental and uncaused, or that they stand out of all relation to everything else in life. From the scientific point of view such an assumption would not be tolerated. Obviously enough there are three different, though interrelated, groups of causes of the persistence of alcoholism in human society, and therefore three definable groups of *problems* of intemperance, which for the purposes of a rough survey may be classified somewhat as follows :

First, there are causes existing in the constitution, physical and mental, of the human organism ; factors which presumably have relations and conditions in the process of evolution of the human type. This problem may be attacked by several methods. It is open to historical investigation. We can bring before us sufficiently the whole course of man's use of intoxicants, both in the primitive state and in civilized times. We can investigate the habits and dispositions of animals in regard to intoxicants, and the relation of their instincts and desires and their physiological processes to the intoxication motives. Next, a remarkable deposit, so to speak, of the intoxication motives is ready at hand for the psychologist in the literature and mythology of drink, and in the language of slang, so rich in terms for intoxication. Next, we may investigate the lives of individual drinkers in order to discover precisely what the inner mechanism of the habit of intoxication is. Here there is a coarser and a finer method—both promising. We may describe the whole course of the habit in an historical way, and, by an analytic method, we can penetrate the deeper layers of consciousness, and examine the early experiences, and the subconscious mechanisms of the mind. We can also profitably make use of statistics in regard to the more external aspects of drinking, using data from many cases. Finally, the state of intoxication itself is open to observation and investigation, by accurate methods, both of analysis and measurement ; and by examining the *effects* of alcohol upon the body and the mind, we can determine, presumably, what it is the drunkard desires and seeks.

The *second* group of problems of intemperance, considered psychologically, may be defined roughly as problems of conditions. There are fundamental traits in human nature, at all times threatening to lead individuals and communities into the intemperate life; but there are always conditions which play upon these motives in various ways, differing from one community and time to another, and increasing in complexity and importance as social life becomes intricate. We must investigate the effects of hygienic conditions, of vocations, industrial conditions, educational practices, the recreational life of the people, the national temperament, and the relations of intemperance to other social evils. In general, all factors of progress and of deterioration in both physical and mental qualities must be studied in relation to the intoxication motives. Some of these factors are easily detected and measured; some are subtle, readily overlooked, or minimized.

The *third* group of problems arises from the fact of the existence of conscious motives on the part of men for perpetuating the use of alcohol by their fellows. Here enter the motives of organized business, playing upon and increasing the desires upon which the business thrives. There is also the relation between the traffic in alcohol and the institution of prostitution. The customs and codes of drinking, the conscious perpetuation of drinking in all lines of activity in which the social instincts of man are exploited for gain, the political reasons for keeping alive the custom of drinking, the tendency of one generation to teach to the next its habits and customs—all these are definite problems of temperance.

These three groups of problems, taken together, constitute the central problem of intemperance. Answers to these problems will in time become a body of data, which will constitute the reply of psychology to the question, *Why do men drink alcohol?* Both our ethical judgments about the use of alcohol and practical means of controlling intemperance rest largely upon these psychological conclusions.

It is not the intention of this brief review of the psychological aspect of temperance to enter into special problems. It is sufficient to say that already our facts afford us a far broader and sounder view of the situation than the naïve, ethical judgments and the data of common experience can give. We can say that psychology has already thrown sufficient light upon the whole intoxication

movement to warrant some practical conclusions. These conclusions are not, and perhaps never can be, in the form of definite *laws* or *principles*, but are of the nature of safe working hypotheses, outlining certain experimental attitudes that may be taken—sound within a high degree of probability. The contributions of the mental sciences to great practical issues are naturally of such an experimental nature. Practical situations are complex, and ignore the logical divisions of the sciences. It is likely that we shall never have a wholly scientific way of treating the far-reaching habit of intemperance. Psychology, by asserting that the intoxication motives are deeply embedded in the mind of man, prepares for a broad and tolerant practical treatment of the problem; and we can at least declare that these motives can never be conjured away by religion and sentiment, or legislated away by an Act of Government.