

MENTAL CONTAGION.

La Contagion Mentale. A. VIGOUROUX et P. JUQUELIER. Paris, Octave Doin. 1905.

Under the title of mental contagion it is proposed to study the contagion of reflex actions, of emotions, feelings, perceptions, voluntary movements, ideas and beliefs, *i. e.*, of all the manifestations of the activity of the cerebro-spinal cord. Mental is taken in this large sense because the higher functions of the cortex depend by slight gradations upon the lower functions of the medulla. Mental contagion implies the existence of a passive subject liable to be influenced, and also of an active subject exercising that influence. The first is unconscious of the influence he exerts, the second of the influence which he undergoes. Contagion can thus be considered as a variety of imitation, but the latter is involuntary. Imitation is differentiated from suggestion by spontaneity. There is imitation, if the initiative of the repetition comes from the subject who repeats that manifestation; there is suggestion if the same comes from the subject by whom the manifestation is repeated. The majority of the voluntary acts consists in the appropriation of a reaction upon the perception of an object without express deliberation. In mimetism the influences exerted are solely physical; in contagion there is a psychic element, although the initiative of the repetition is unconscious. Contagion is characterized by unconsciousness and irresistibility.

All the manifestations of psychic life are contagious; reflex actions, simple or complex, have a tendency to be reproduced by perception; affective actions are contagious by means of organic manifestations. Ideas are contagious in so far as they have an affective value; so also are the most of our actions called voluntary, because they are nothing but the resultant of affective states whereby the contagion can make its influence perceived. But contagion differs from such suggestion as is exemplified in hypnotism, in so far as the latter is willed by another and is called out by a conventional process. Yet this unconscious communication, so sudden and irresistible, is not a large distance intercerebral activity, a psychological electrization (Tarde). Every such psychic activity has a motor equivalent, and is transferred outwardly by muscular movements; it is, in a word, psycho-motor induction (Féré). In the contagion of movements and acts, the voluntary becomes rapidly reflex; habit and memory are nothing but the faculty of accomplishing, in a reflex fashion, acts primarily voluntary. Thus many of our motor reactions are conscious and provoked

by a sensation, without being properly called voluntary, *e. g.*, the imperfect contagion in the rhythmic imitations of dancers.

As to the mechanism of contagion in affective states, the means of expression by which the affective states of one subject become irresistably those of another are not those of magnetic action, of neural fluid, but of psychic automatism. The organic state is the basis of the emotion (James); organic sympathy conduces to the receptivity of imitative movement (Ribot); while the imitation is a sensorial excitation having the particular characteristic of being a cyclic activity, the muscular reaction reproducing its stimulus (Baldwin). Voluntary activity is inhibitive, and generally prevents contagion. On the contrary all the conditions which favor the disaggregation of personality, which leave to themselves the automatic centers, favor mental contagion; such are distraction, agglomeration, certain sociological conditions, and pathological conditions acquired or hereditary (intoxication, neurosis, degeneration). All the organic modifications which accompany the state of desire and the affective state resulting from the satisfaction or non-satisfaction of a desire are contagious. This includes the four groups of emotions, religious, moral, æsthetic and intellectual. Here normal persons, with sufficient powers of inhibition, are not generally subject to contagion, are not exposed to reproducing the pathological manifestations of cerebral activity; whereas the neuropathic, intoxicated, and degenerate are subject to the contagion of convulsions, of impulsive acts, of obsessions and manias of all kinds.

In the contagion of ideas there must be a motor element; hence, pure abstractions are the least contagious, while the ideas and thoughts of the mob form a bundle of psychic contagions essentially produced by physical points of contact. Thus masses of the public may undergo contagion, as in the recent Dreyfus case, or in race hatreds. As to the contagion of acts considered as voluntary, between the perception and the motor reaction is intercalated the volition, the idea of the ego as cause of the act performed. Yet in these conscious acts there is a substratum of the unconscious or an ancestral residue or various secret reasons, justifying the expressions epidemics of murder, of duelling, of suicide. When the reaction is aroused by symbols such as newspapers or books, the contagion is indirect, and its appearance depends upon a disaggregation of the personality, more or less pronounced. There are three cases: (1) The normal individual may find himself momentarily and accidentally in a state of disaggregation caused by distraction (psychological condition). (2) The same may be caused by

the environment, exterior circumstances, or in particular by a real or purely psychic contact, *e. g.*, crowds, or newspapers (sociological condition). (3) Acquired organic modifications, especially under the influence of intoxication and alcoholism, independent of exterior circumstances, render the individual liable to undergo with great ease a momentary or lasting psychic disaggregation. This is especially true of organic congenital conditions such as neurosis and degeneration (physio-pathological, abnormal organic condition).

The contagion of morbid movements is exhibited in the symptomatology of certain nervous affections and especially in the neuroses of morbid motor reactions, the convulsive crises of hysterics and epileptics, the choreas and tics of the neuropathic. Among children the convulsive epidemic is propagated with the greatest rapidity, while the view of a spasm of one afflicted with chorea is especially contagious. So also perverted instincts and appetites may be contagious, *e. g.*, sitiophobia and dipsomania. In the contagion of morbid forms of fear and of ideas of melancholia, in hallucinations of persecution, in hypochondria and the like, there must be a predisposition of heredity or of morbid organic conditions. Morbid anger is contagious like the state of mania. Both are manifest in criminals who imitate either other criminals or those who are unbalanced. Morbid contagion of tenderness is seen in excessive fondness for animals and in nostalgia. Among the anomalies of personal sentiment, self-feeling has two forms, the positive in pride and vanity, whether collective or professional, the negative in suicide. The latter may be the result of reflection, committed after a struggle against the instinct of self-preservation, or it may be a morbid act consequent on maniacal thoughts, committed by one weary of struggling against an obsession. Impulsive suicide, prepared for by melancholy, hypochondria or lowering of the vital functions, is extremely contagious, and relatively frequent with children.

The perversions of moral sense may be either passive and apathetic or active and impulsive. The causes of the loss of moral feeling are epilepsy, hysteria, apoplexy, dementia, and traumatic lesions. Heredity renders further subjects a fit soil upon which the influences of education, example, and excitement, in a word, contagion, may produce the maximum effect. It is under the influence of such contagion that the timid, the discontented, the neurotic and especially the hysterical commit acts legally reprehensible. Such acts, together with the morbid forms of the religious sentiment, imply a neuropsychopathic predisposition; that being given, the mechanism of

involuntary imitation does not differ from that found in affective states and non-pathological ideas. In religious mania there are forms of elevation or depression, the latter depending on primitive emotions of fear or on the lowering of self feeling. Demonopathia has been succeeded by spiritualism, visual and auditory mediums by mysticism; in all these, psychic automatism plays its part.

Æsthetic feelings are contagious among normal individuals; it is for this reason that every great artist has his fanatical admirers and detractors. Among literary decadents and seekers after subtle virtuosity mental equilibrium is unstable. According to Lombroso they are the mattoids who group themselves by a sympathy of interest, and especially by a hatred of the common enemy, the man of genius. Contrasted with this is what Ribot calls scientific mysticism, a systematic doubt which would substitute demonstration for belief. This is essentially a malady of the understanding, but the truly pathological doubt which concerns itself not only with ideas, but with perceptions and acts, the state of mind in which a subject comes to discuss the reality of his organism, of his existence, of his activity, need not be considered as actually contagious.

This last statement of the joint authors exposes their failure to take account of recent investigations in the psychology of morbid religious movements. Otherwise they point out the probable trend of investigation in their closing statement that it is in the study of the phenomena of the unconscious and of psychological automatism that it is possible to explain the transmission or contagion between individuals of reflex movements, affective states and ideas.

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BOOKS RECEIVED FROM FEBRUARY 5 TO MARCH 5.

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- La Philosophie naturelle intégrale et les Rudiments des sciences exactes.* A. RIST. 1^{re} Partie. Paris, Hermann, 1904. Pp. vi + 181.