

ALCOHOLISM AND A PRIORI BIOLOGY.

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MY attention has been called to a recently-published work by Dr. Archdall Reid,* in which that author is good enough to devote several pages to criticizing a book which I wrote some years ago on the subject of alcoholism.† From the tone of Dr. Reid's remarks, and from the liberal use he has made of those uncomplimentary adjectives on which it is his wont to fall back on the very frequent occasions when arguments fail him, I gather that the facts set out in my modest volume are unfortunately somewhat discordant with Dr. Reid's theories. I do not know whether it will in any way soothe his feelings if I assure him that the offence was less intentional than he thinks, and that my study of alcoholism was not written, as he naively imagines, with the idea of attacking these theories, but for quite other reasons ; indeed, to confess the truth, it had not occurred to me that the special hypothesis Dr. Reid refers to could be treated seriously. As I, perhaps, owe him some apology for that frivolous attitude, I am glad that his strictures have given me an opportunity of referring to his views in a more becoming spirit.

Dr. Reid maintains a theory which, to avoid any injustice to him, I will give briefly in a series of extracts from his last volume : "There can be no doubt that some people are so constituted as to be more tempted by drink than others, and . . . that all really excessive drinkers are drawn from their ranks . . . (p. 294). Alcohol is an agent of stringent selection. It must tend to

* "The Laws of Heredity," by G. Archdall Reid, M.B., F.R.S.E. London : Methuen and Co., Ltd. 1910. Price 7s. 6d. net.

† "Alcoholism : A Study in Social Pathology." London : Nisbet. 1907. Price 5s.

eliminate especially people who are most susceptible to its charm. . . . As in the case of a prevalent and lethal disease, every race is resistant (*i.e.*, temperate) in proportion to the length and severity of its past experience of the poison" (p. 297). As illustrative instances, we are referred to the English upper classes and the "South Europeans" as "races" which have become temperate through natural selection, while the English lower classes and the "North Europeans" have not yet acquired "immunity from drink." According to this theory, then, the incidence of alcoholism is determined by the distribution of the innate susceptibility to the charm of alcohol. This is deduced from the fact that "men differ in the degrees in which they are tempted by alcohol," a "vitally important fact" which, Dr. Reid informs us gravely (p. 289), "was hardly recognized until very recently"; and it appears from a footnote on the same page that this epoch-making discovery was revealed to the world in a work of Dr. Reid's, published in 1896. Such a proof of Dr. Reid's daring originality prompts one to hope that he may be encouraged to pursue his inquiries into other susceptibilities, when doubtless he may be able, in time, to formulate a splendid generalization on this subject, and startle humanity by announcing that tastes differ. For the moment, however, we are only concerned with the illuminating application of Dr. Reid's deductive method to the explanation of the facts of alcoholism; and, as an example of its working, we may, perhaps, consider those facts regarding the relation of alcoholism to industry, which were the special matter of my essay. It was pointed out in that essay that in England the distribution of drunkenness differed widely from that of alcoholic mortality and of other evidences of chronic alcoholism, and, further, that the incidence of the latter set of phenomena appeared to correspond with certain industrial conditions. For a variety of reasons, which I need not refer to here, I attributed this fact to differences in the character of the labour in the different forms of work, and to various direct and indirect consequences of these differences. In taking this view, I have been guilty, I regret to find, of "absurdity," of "amazing inferences," of "dreadful thinking," all of which I might have avoided if I had remembered Dr. Reid's magic formula. I should then have understood that the correct interpretation of the facts—the interpretation reached by "the thinking which is founded on a discovery of causes"—is, of course, that certain industries have a high alcoholic mortality because they contain a correspondingly high proportion of individuals with an excessive "inborn suscepti-

bility to the charm of alcohol. Amongst iron-workers, for instance, the proportion of such individuals must be twice as large as amongst coal-miners. Dr. Reid does not tell us why the susceptible individuals are distributed in this particular manner; perhaps it is that coal-miners and iron-workers are distinct "races," like "the upper classes" and "the lower classes," and that they have undergone different degrees of alcoholic selection. And, indeed, when one thinks of it—"thinking," of course, in Dr. Reid's sense—one sees that this must be the explanation; and then one begins to perceive the dazzling possibilities in social science which are opened up by this brilliant discovery that modes of social action and microbic diseases are facts of the same order, and that you catch criminality or intemperance or suicide as you catch measles. Take, for instance, this very question of industrial occupation. What can be more obvious to the "trained thinker" than the "fundamental truth" that, if people differ in their avocations as they differ in their drinking habits, it must be in "ultimate analysis" for the same reason—namely, because of an innate difference in their susceptibility to the charm of this industry or that. And see how pregnant of practically important results is this marvellous method! How wonderfully it enables us "to realize the past and anticipate the future"—the future, shall we say, to take a concrete instance, of coal-mining! Coal-mining, as we are but too often reminded in this country, is a frightfully dangerous industry, which takes heavy toll of human life. Clearly, if anyone, in spite of these risks, adopts such a trade, "it is reasonable to conclude" that he is greatly tempted by coal-mining, that he has, in a special degree, the innate susceptibility to this sort of activity. And this essential fact once grasped, the course of evolution is plain. Instead of being frightened, as we used to be some years ago, by gloomy prophecies of the approaching exhaustion of our coal-supply, what we have really to prepare for is the extinction of our miners through the elimination by natural selection of people with a susceptibility to the charm of coal-mining. This prospect of a failure of fuel is very alarming, but perhaps readers who glance through—or at—Dr. Reid's bulky volumes will think that the outlook is, after all, not utterly dark. Nature, "always taking the most direct course," as Dr. Reid says, will find a remedy; and it is, doubtless, in view of this impending arrival of "a race immune from" coal-mining, that she has of late years provided such a liberal supply of a certain type of pseudo-scientific literature, the use of which would not otherwise be very obvious.