

PSYCHOLOGY—AN ALIBI FOR SIN?¹

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I WONDER whether the subject which is under discussion could best be tackled by the psychiatrist, the lawyer, the philosopher or the moral theologian, for it seems to me that it is only the old question of determinism versus free will over again, even if it is presented in somewhat modern dress. Therefore, to prevent the discussion developing on too abstract lines, may I assume that free will can never be *proved* philosophically, any more than can the existence of God, for instance; but that, unless it be admitted as a valid operative factor in the human situation, the whole debate would become woolly?

Our Common Law depends entirely on the axiomatic acceptance of the principle which accords a large measure of freedom of choice in matters of conduct to adult members of society not deemed to be insane or grossly mentally defective.

Is the whole appletart to be upset because certain psychologists of the unconscious come along and say that our behaviour is ineluctably determined by the emotionally significant experiences occurring in the first four years of life? In other words, is the modern psychiatrist, especially the psychiatrist with a psycho-analytical bias, undermining society by destroying man's belief in his capacity for making moral choices? Or is he perhaps to be regarded as an angel of enlightenment bearing a new concept of justice by relieving man of an intolerable and crippling load of guilt which he has carried unnecessarily over the millenia of his organized existence? It seems to me that both points of view have something to be said for them; nor are they necessarily mutually contradictory.

In order to clarify our ideas, it is important from the start to understand what is meant by the term 'psychological determinism'. Is there in point of fact so much difference between psychological determinism and other factors which, as would be universally accorded, limit the operation of free choice? Let us, therefore, now consider some of these forms of 'determinism', if you agree

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to the term, starting with bodily or 'somatic' determinants or possible determinants of behaviour-patterns. If my brain-cells become infected with the micro-organism responsible for syphilis, I may become grossly deluded, forgetful and irresponsible and commit anti-social acts arising from the resultant pathological world-picture. Clearly moral responsibility is from the forensic point of view very greatly reduced.

If I harbour a certain type of gene, inevitably by the time I reach my forties or even earlier I begin to exhibit involuntary movements resembling those occurring in St Vitus' Dance, and my mental faculties deteriorate eventually to the level of imbecility or idiocy. This is an example of genetic determinism.

If I belong to a society which believes it to be right and proper to bury aged parents alive and execute a ritual dance over the grave, my behaviour will be the result of cultural determinism.

If from an early age, I am apprenticed, as it were, to a modern Mr Fagin, I will pick pockets with a good conscience and be mainly concerned with my professional efficiency. This would be an example of psychological determinism, my reactions having been over-influenced by the psychological environment of my formative years.

No one would dispute these various types of determinism; and there are many others. The only novel element introduced into the situation by Freud, Jung and other psychopathologists of genius is the assertion that many of these psychological determinants are unconscious. Nevertheless, it cannot be asserted categorically that moral choice is inevitably destroyed thereby.

I may, for example, have a psychologically determined fear of heights, combined with a desire to precipitate myself from on high, but whether I in fact destroy myself in that way, so long, that is, as I remain merely neurotic rather than positively insane, depends on my choice. Moreover, many of the psychological explanations of conduct put forward by enthusiasts are highly speculative and debatable; nor are they necessarily explanatory in a *causal* sense. At their best, they establish part-causes only, in so far as they can disclose previously unconscious psychological antecedents. Good hypotheses are always spoilt by enthusiasts. Thus, if a psychiatrist were to get up in court and state under oath that John Smith is not responsible for having set fire to Farmer Giles's haystack *because* he (John Smith) was rejected as a

child by his overstrict father who was identified unconsciously with Farmer Giles, he (the psychiatrist) would be doing his kind of psychiatry a disservice and at the same time would bring the whole of psychiatry into disrepute. What psychiatry can do—and, with increasing knowledge, will be able to do more and more efficiently—is to help to establish to what extent free choice, and hence moral responsibility, are limited by such antecedent factors. Nor must it be forgotten, as I have already indicated, that it is not only psychological antecedents which must be taken into account when assessing moral responsibility in the case of anti-social acts. Thus a man, in one of his recurrent fits of violent rage, inadvertently kills his wife. These fits of rage, combined with severe headaches and epileptiform attacks, followed a severe head-injury sustained some years previously—somatic or bodily determinism. Again, a woman gasses her two children and attempts suicide by the same method, influenced by the melancholic delusion that life is so awful that it would be wrong for her to allow her children to continue to face its horrors. This was not her first attack of melancholia which had come on out of the blue, let us say. This would be a case of the operation of constitutional determinism.

It is clear, then, that, if a psychiatrist can soberly and scientifically indicate the various ways in which the operation of free choice may be restricted, thereby limiting moral responsibility, he is performing a useful service. He can help a judge or magistrate—or, in the case of a capital offence, a jury—to decide as to the best and most equitable method of disposal: should the man be sent to a mental hospital, sentenced to imprisonment, placed on probation, or disposed of in another way, both with regard to the best interests of society and the offender himself? On the other hand, if half-baked psychological theories are so influencing the climate of modern thought as to lead men and women to think that they are the sports of fate in one form or another, psychological medicine, with which these wild theories may well come to be identified in the public mind, may be deemed to be mischievous. In any case, however, any scientific discipline which helps to reveal the hidden sources of human behaviour in relation to society, leads in the long run to enlightened understanding and sympathy and discourages smugness, self-righteousness and brutal intolerance.