

THE TOUCHSTONE OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY¹

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ONCE gave a talk to sixth-form boys in a Catholic public school about delinquency, and at the end of it one of my audience remarked: 'with all due respect, sir, I think you have been talking nonsense. I think that human beings are responsible and if they do wrong they should be punished, unless they are mentally defective'. That is a perfectly reasonable and refreshing statement concerning the freedom of the will and the essential simplicity of human action. At the other extreme we find the elaborate analyses of human motivation made by sociologists and psychologists, which appear to deny all freedom of choice and responsibility.

The subject of delinquency is indeed nowadays a touchstone for everybody's opinion—expert or not, and the trouble is that they are all in the right—in varying degrees. Every general statement needs qualification and particular application, but so often we get nothing but the general statement dogmatically pronounced.

For example we are told that the main causes for the alleged increase in juvenile delinquency are to be traced to the lack of religion, with the consequent decline in the stability of family life and in respect for authority. But, for argument's sake, a State could be imagined where there was no family life or religion, as we conceive it, but in which the social sanctions against theft were so stringent that delinquency of this type would be practically eliminated. We have no proof that in the Middle Ages or in Victorian England, there was less minor delinquency such as pilfering, than we get now. We have only exact figures for the past half century or so—a period which has seen two very major wars—themselves both a symptom of man's fallen nature, and the causes of further depravity and lawlessness in Society.

If we narrow this general framework somewhat and consider the decline of parental authority as a main cause, we have again to elaborate, distinguish and expand the idea, to make it reasonable and applicable to the subject, otherwise it remains a mere formula.

¹ *The Young Lag* by Sir Leo Page. (Faber and Faber; 18s.). *Delinquency and Human Nature* by D. H. Stott. (Carnegie Trust Report).

Parental authority like other authority, is mediated through a person; it is accepted and acted upon if that person is loved and respected, otherwise it is merely a code imposed by force and fear, leading to rebellion and evasion, not made part of the self. A child, especially, goes for a person rather than an ideal or a law, just as we accept the laws of God in the fullest sense because we love the Person of Christ. A parent who has no real love or understanding for his child may have a strong sense of the moral law—in a narrow sense may teach it and enforce it through the sanction of fear, but we need not be surprised if the child not only does not accept it but rebels against it; or he does accept it, but suffers in the unfolding of his character in so doing. Therefore this matter of parental authority and discipline is seen to be one of personal relationships within the family; affection, security, mutual respect are essential. But the way in which these feelings operate at different ages, and in different individuals and families, is infinitely varied and subtle; which is where the psychiatrist and psychologist come in.

Delinquency may be found in families where there is too much or too little in the way of authority, and still more where it is divided; this means in effect that it occurs through a faulty emotional relationship between parent and child, of which authority is one aspect. To elucidate just where this breakdown in relationship has occurred is not to excuse the delinquency but to understand its nature, apply the appropriate remedy, and try to prevent its recurrence; if possible to catch it very early and seek to prevent it from becoming chronic, as we try to do in Child Guidance Clinics. Thus it would seem the psychologist joins hands with the stern upholder of more general and indispensable principles. We shall examine later how the apparent contradiction between the moralist with his free will, and the 'social scientist' with his psychological determinism, may be resolved. Now, however, it is necessary to raise a further question which the common-sense reader may well ask, and one which will bring us to the heart of our subject and to a consideration of two recent books. Are we not making too much of a mystery and a muddle of what is essentially a simple matter: one, to repeat, of simple disobedience of definite laws, such as those against property—simply requiring sterner methods of punishment by parent, teacher and, where necessary, the Court?

The answer once more is that we are talking about something multiple as if it were singular, about something of great variety as though it were all of a kind. After all, delinquency merely means an offence against the law, which may range from breaking a window to breaking into a bank, which includes sexual misbehaviour and continual truancy. So that really one should speak of 'the Delinquencies'.

Again there is no such person as 'the Delinquent': there are numerous children and young people of a tremendous variety ranging from the 'normal' to the defective and psychopathic, coming from all types of home (though mostly not too good).

It is only those who have had intimate personal contact with delinquents who can speak about them with authority, and there are two recent books on the subject which merit attention, written from very different points of view, and just happening to coincide in the time of publication. Sir Leo Page, a magistrate, bases his book on interviews with twenty-three 'young lags', mostly round about the age of twenty, who were considered likely to become persistent offenders. All of them have had a series of convictions and a variety of sentences—mostly ending up in prison or Borstal.

The author in one chapter gives a composite portrait and tells us that. . . . 'we are dealing in the persistent offenders of this age group, not with an abnormal person but with a perfectly normal young man who has gone wrong'. Yet, he tells us; 'this type of young man is below the ordinary standard of intelligence and knowledge'. Again: 'his whole mental development and outlook is often still at the adolescent stage': 'even when he grew up with his parents in his formative years they seldom exercised any influence which was not bad'. Can it be said that a young man of this type is 'perfectly normal'? Surely his character is deformed, his intelligence unformed, his emotional relationships with his fellow-beings undeveloped and unsocial? If we consider the formative influences in the earlier years of these lads we find that in at least three quarters of them the homes have been broken or unhappy—often grossly so. It is therefore not going too far to conclude that the vital factor in the formation of delinquents lay in the early influences in the home, and that it is not so much the lack of didactic moral training as the absence of security, affection, and interest, which is to blame. Sir Leo is describing what is

practically a finished product, when the delinquent character is formed and fixed; may it not be better, then, to tackle its beginnings? This is in fact what psychologists and psychiatrists, are trying to do. Not, as Sir Leo suggests, in the 'laboratory and consulting-room', but in the Clinics for mothers and children, in Remand Homes and Approved Schools; and the most important field of work at present, I would claim, is the Child Guidance Service.¹

Here are seen the beginnings of delinquency, before cases get into Court; here are studied in close detail those families which form the seed-bed of crime and psychopathy; at this stage attempts can be made to save the child from becoming a delinquent character, while still reacting to a situation which perhaps can be altered (for example by the work of Family Service Units and other forms of intensive social work) or from which the child can be removed, if this proves inevitable. The kind of family situations which produce delinquency have been described recently in a book by a psychologist, Mr D. H. Stott, who has lived for a period of years in an Approved School, and acquired an intimate knowledge of the earlier history and background of these boys. There are a hundred and two of them, described in over three hundred large pages, and the reading is a formidable task.

Mr Stott found with remarkable regularity a series of family situations such as some form of separation, anxiety over health of the mother, insecurity through threats of desertion, and so on, which cause states of such emotional tension that the result is a kind of breakdown into delinquency. There is also found in many cases a precipitating traumatic factor such as bombing experience. By grouping his cases he finds, too, that certain typical reactions occur of which the symptom is delinquency. The commonest of these he calls 'avoidance-excitement' which is in effect an effort by means of thrills and escapades to avoid the poignancy of anxiety. Other motives were: resentment or spite, delinquent-attention, inferiority-compensation, and the second most frequent, a wish, mainly unconscious, for removal from home.

¹ Sir Leo Page, while appraising the work of some psychiatrists, has some hard things to say about others. Psychiatry has certainly been over-sold to the public and deserves criticism, but this is not the place to go into all that. Mr Stott on the other hand, like some other psychologists, is apt to rush in where even psychiatrists fear to tread. One cannot help suspecting that his fertile mind has found more in his delinquents than was actually there, but he is extremely stimulating.

It would be possible to criticise these groups of motivation, particularly the last (which is based on the attitude of not caring whether they were caught or not; but this is not equivalent to a desire to be removed from home, even 'unconscious'; it is much more a case of becoming 'bloody-minded'.)

A more general criticism might be made that we do not know whether, by taking a similar group of non-delinquents and asking them questions on the same lines, we might not find the same emotional situations—which have not led to delinquency in their case. Mr Stott is aware of course of this, and does not claim that he is proving cause and effect—which most people find all too easy to do for their own theories. There are however other pieces of research which corroborate much of Mr Stott's observations. Apart from the now classic book by Sir Cyril Burt, 'The Young Delinquent', there is a study by Dr J. Bowlby: 'Forty Juvenile Thieves', which appears to demonstrate that early separation from the mother had been productive of what he terms the 'affectionless' type of delinquent in a very large proportion, as contrasted with an equal number of non-delinquent controls, where this factor was not found. From whatever angle we study the problem, one main conclusion seems to be clear: unhappy homes breed delinquency. But we find too that in a family which is relatively happy and stable, one particular child may turn delinquent, because that home is unhappy *for him*. He may be less wanted, less clever, less popular than the others. So we are led to find the immediate causes in the bosom of the family, but as the family is not an isolated unit (though nowadays it has tended to become so, especially in new housing estates of large cities), we have to see the family against the background of the structure of Society: its morals, customs, religion and culture. These are the social 'causes' of delinquency, from over-crowding and cinemas to absence of Faith; they all hang together.

However much the individual is conditioned by his make-up and his environment, and his behaviour determined thereby, he still remains responsible (unless he is mentally incurable). In return for the fellowship and security which he needs, in the family and in Society, he has to give co-operation and obedience to the laws and sanctions of his fellows; it is part of the treatment of the delinquent to demand that of him in proportion to his capacity. Here the moralist and the psychologist can agree.

(There may even be a place for retributive punishment in this contract between man and his nature; because while punishment is only deterrent and reformatory to the present-day reformer (as it is to Sir Leo), to the philosopher it has an element of restoration of a sense of order which has been disturbed, and the psychologist might call it the 'restitution-principle'.)

I have not attempted to review the two books mentioned in the ordinary sense, because the bulk of both of them consists in description and discussion of cases, but the varying points of view are implicit in my remarks. Each of the books will please those who already agree and annoy those who don't, but the catholic-minded Catholic should regard them as complementary and not exclusive. We all have a great deal to learn from each other, and we should not allow the juvenile delinquent—our little brother in Christ—to become the whipping-boy of our prejudices.



NOTICE

The December number of BLACKFRIARS will contain 'ERIC GILL: A RETROSPECT' by Desmond Chute, and articles on the Colour Problem by Finbar Synnott, O.P. and Raymond Devas, O.P., as well as the usual features.