

Original Communications.

Mans Moral Responsibility viewed from a Scientific Standpoint. By Henry Howard, M.D., M.R.C.S., Eng., Medical Superintendent Longue Pointe Lunatic Asylum. (Read before the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Montreal December 3rd 1795.)

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,

The subject to which I beg to draw your attention this evening is, I consider, one well worthy of your consideration. *Man's Moral Responsibility Examined by the Light of Science*, in other words, how far man is obligated to obey that Moral law which governs the universe, that great unwritten law, stamped upon the soul of man by the hands of its Creator, but which, through physical defects, the creature does not always recognize. It is a very easy thing to say that every man is morally responsible for his acts, but it is quite a different thing to prove the assertion. I believe that, under certain circumstances, man is morally responsible for the greater part of his acts; under other circumstances he is not morally responsible and that, under no circumstances, is he morally responsible for all his acts. To assume that a man was thus responsible would be to assume, not that every man had a free will, for that every man has, but that every man was so organized, mentally and physically, as to direct his will and make all his thoughts, acts and deeds subject to his will. Now this we know is not by any means the case: every man from his own experience knows that he cannot always, indeed that he very seldom can, control his thoughts. We frequently think of the very thing we do not wish to think of, and cannot think of what we would wish to think of. A horrible sight attracts our notice, we would feign forget it, but our thoughts haunt us with it night and day, and no force of our will can enable us to forget it. How many thousand occurrences of our past lives would we not all willingly forget, but we cannot do it,—the most simple occurrence, brings the past into our thoughts, with the greatest vividness, without any action of our will. On the other hand, how often do we will to remember the most simple thing, such as a word or the name of a person, and by no act of our will can we think of either the one or the other. Again, take the passions arising from our emotional organization—love, joy, grief, jealousy—none of these are at all times under the control of the will; we may conceal them to a great degree, but we cannot always control them by any force of the will. Thought and desire, then, is, to say the least of it, not always under

the control of the will. Are our acts to do or not to do, always under the control of the will? I think not. We all know how many things we will to do, and cannot do from one cause or another; and I believe that it is the experience of nearly all men that, at some period of his life, from an internal force, he was impelled to act contrary to his will. Again, no matter how much we will it, we cannot always control or change either hereditary or acquired movements of our body, or peculiarity of action. It is a truly scientific fact that every man has a free will, and it is simply nonsense to talk of any one in the world controlling the will of another. Our acts may be controlled by external circumstances contrary to our will, but no external power can control our will, though a man may be so situated that he is powerless to obey his will. An other important scientific fact, the comprehending of which is necessary for the well-being of man himself in particular, and society in general, is that the will itself, unless it is properly instructed through the organs of sense, cannot be a guide to our physical organization, and, unless that the mental organization is healthy and well-balanced, the will can only act upon it by directing it wrongly, as it does the mental organization of the idiot, the imbecile, the lunatic, and the morally insane, which causes them all to be irresponsible for their acts. Again, no matter how well instructed the will may be, and how strong may be a man's reasoning powers, if he is born a cripple he is not responsible that he cannot run, nor if he be a paralyzed man that he does not escape from a burning house.

There are very many circumstances over which we had, or have, no control—that lessens our moral responsibility. None of us had a choice of parentage, the time or place of our birth, our early education and surroundings; we came into the world without our will, and we will leave it whether we will it or not.

A man's moral, as well as his physical, nature is made for him; whether that moral nature be good or bad, he is indebted to his progenitors for it; it is his inheritance, as much as is the colour of his eyes or the shape of his features. The mental and physical organization being one, mind and body constitute one animate man, inseparable and indivisible: both are the act of procreation, from the moment man is conceived in his mother's womb.

Locke, and the philosophers of the Utilitarian school, taught that there were no innate principles in the human understanding, no primary notions, stamped upon the mind of man. He would not have fallen into this error had physiology and pa-