

The Ethical Problems Under- lying the Social Evil

By

PETER H. BRYCE, M.A., M.D.

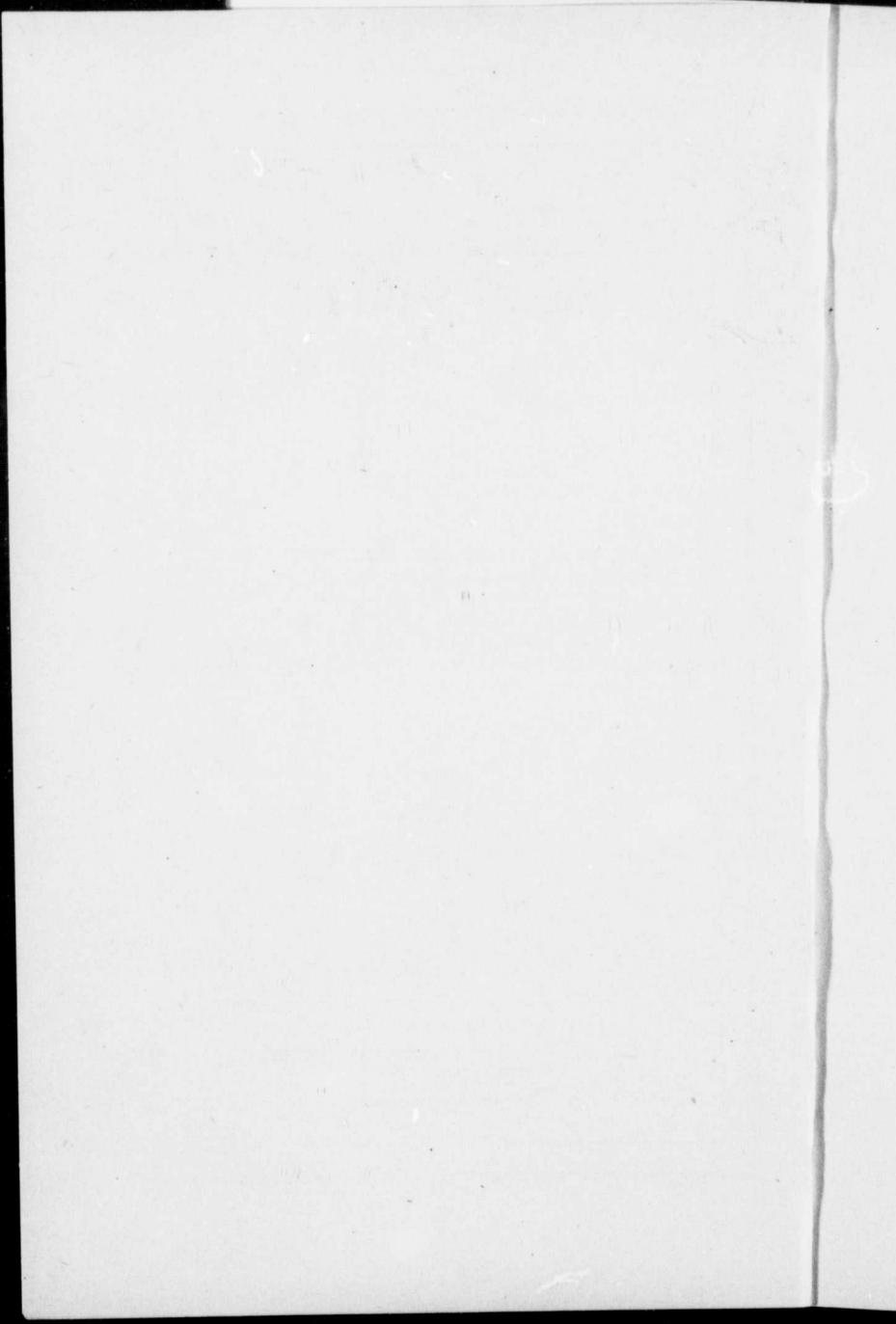
Chief Medical Officer Department of Immigration, Ottawa



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THE ETHICAL PROBLEMS UNDER- LYING THE SOCIAL EVIL

BY PETER H. BRYCE, M.A., M.D., CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION, OTTAWA.

IN complying with the request of your Society that I address you on some topic appropriate to its objects, I have considered how best I could compress into a short paper some remarks which might be of practical value, when volumes have been written without in any degree exhausting the subject. This is, of course, due to the fact that in the term "ethical" is included the whole attitude of man toward Life, as exemplified in his every word and act.

What, then, do we mean by the word "moral" or "ethical"? Essentially it means: pertaining to those qualities which distinguish man as a moral being and which relate to his habits and modes of thought and action as distinct from the lower animals. The status of a nation is essentially measured by the ethical plane upon which the great majority of its people are to be found. That of Canadians will be measured by the quality of our acts, personal, social and political, which gives character to our people as a whole. Where, then, regarding such, shall we begin—with the individual or with the nation? Surely with the individual, since Society is but a microcosm, made up of its units, combined into a living whole. Shall we start with the child at birth? Surely even prior to this, for in the child is to be found the germ of all qualities, physical and mental, of its parents, and even grandparents. Clearly then the qualities of the parents and the sanitary environment in its broadest sense of the mother are of inestimable

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value and importance to the future of the child and of the nation.

Everyone to-day is familiar with the fact of living organisms, whether plants or animals, being built up from the individual cell and of how this divides and multiplies infinitely, each cell being nourished or impeded in its development by its environment, according as this is favorable or the opposite. Evidently then as the plant or animal is constantly influenced by air, sunlight and food, so must the tissue cells, whether pre-natal or post-natal, be daily, even hourly, influenced by their surrounding fluids. But there is much more than this. As the infant obtains its physical pabulum from without, so only by external impressions do its most complex cerebral cells receive their impressions from without through the special senses, which serve to develop what we call mind; and upon their receptivity, the quality of these impressions and the clearness and frequency of them will be the extent and degree of intelligence and of what we call character. What then to me at least is perfectly evident, is that the education of the individual in its widest sense is the postulate, once granted, upon which we must base our attempt to solve the problem of social and personal morality.

Time will not permit us to enter greatly into the details of what this education implies; but it is important to remember that every aberration from the normal is associated with the quality of the cerebral tissues, which receive impressions, whether constitutional or affected temporarily by internal or external influences, and that every outward act, whether spoken, written or performed, produces its definite effect upon persons or society, quite measurable were our instruments of experiment sufficiently delicate and accurate. Can anything, then, be of more importance than that the mother of the life yet to be, or which is, shall have every influence surrounding her, whether physical, mental or moral, of the highest, purest and most wholesome character in order that the effects upon her offspring may be productive of the happiest results. Are these, then, not the most potent of reasons why the mothers of our people should fully realize that the duties of motherhood become in a peculiar sense those of patriotism in the sense under-

stood by the Spartan mother, who, when asked how it was that the women of Lacedemon rule the men, replied: "Because we grow men."

I have thus far spoken regarding the mothers of the race; but what shall we say regarding the fathers of the people? Referring to the "Social Evil" an acute writer says: "Society condones man's moral lapses . . . but society demands that the mother be without taint or blemish of immorality" "Differences in environment due to occupation multiply the opportunities leading to man's temptation." "Modern industrialism is one of the most potent factors." "America is rapidly becoming urban. The occasional contact of the sexes found in rural districts has given way to practically constant contact in the cities. Woman's sphere in the world has ceased to be domestic and every day finds her invading some occupation heretofore filled by man." Extending his observations to the immediate causes of immorality the same writer gives lack of occupation as of the idle rich and inherited wealth, lasciviousness in papers, books and plays, erotic pictures and suggestive styles of dress and abuse of alcohol. But I need not illustrate further the immediately causative factors in our problem. We know many of them and they vary with time, place and circumstance. What we must endeavor to recognize is that there is a real distinction between the *original* or *initial* and the *immediate* or *proximal* factors in the problem, and that in any attempt to find a real solution we must discriminate between essential causes and the superficial phenomena of immoral conduct. From what has been stated in a previous paragraph it will be understood that to me it is of the utmost import to fully investigate the original causes of the moral disease. I recall correspondence with a prominent English physician regarding specific disease in the child of a family purposing to come to Canada in which as an argument for its admission he stated "That if we were to refuse admission to Canada of every syphilitic then three-fourths of the English immigration would be stopped." Making every allowance for exaggerated statement we are forced to enquire: What have been the most potent causes making such a statement possible? While we recognize the profligacy of

courts and the licentiousness of the great who in past centuries looked upon their inferiors as the natural servants of their pleasures, yet we have only to study the social history of Great Britain in order to realize that the great middle classes dominated by the teachings of a severe theology, engaged as they were till toward the end of the eighteenth century largely in agriculture and the handicrafts of innumerable village communities, lived under conditions which ensured a physical, mental and moral vigor which it has taken a hundred years and more of urbanization to break down or dissipate. On this continent until half a century ago, the older States of the American Union and the Provinces of Canada were largely agricultural, and the Puritans of New England, like settlers of other communities, practised a stern morality, which has only broken down under those demoralizing influences which have grown up with the rapid growth of industrialism, the congregating of immense populations in cities and the insidious and degenerative influences attaching to the rapid accumulation of centralized wealth in the hands of millionaires. These with modern facilities have ushered in a period of unparalleled luxury and vulgar ostentation which have permeated all modern society until moral values have become obscured by a hedonism and love of pleasure as potent as it is vicious and which has made wealth and what it will procure the almost sole standard which governs man and nations to-day. Its effects on the home are seen in the statistics of divorce, which in some States have reached one in every eight marriages, while both in England and Canada the newspapers retail daily accounts of marital unhappiness almost always the result of moral delinquencies. But bad as these notorious lapses are, they are only the eruptive evidence of the moral malady within the body politic. To me the most serious results of this debauch of luxury are seen in its effects upon the young men of our urban communities. Accustomed to conveniences, pleasures and luxuries in their homes, unknown even half a century ago to the rich, the logical effect has been to delay marriage long beyond what was formerly the custom or what the laws of nature teach, because of the lack of the income to maintain the social standing which such a man is accustomed to and which the social needs of his

prospective wife—not helpmeet—seem to demand. I asked a prominent clergyman, active in the moral reform movement, if in his church or in any of the fashionable churches he knew of any serious crusade against the luxury of the so-called Christians being made, and whether he did not think it idle to expect the young men of to-day to control their sexual instincts when everywhere they moved in an atmosphere where the gratification of the senses is the natural occupation of society. Accept the evidence of a criminal episode brought out in the courts concerning the æsthetic libertine on the one hand and the aberrancies of a moral degenerate on the other in the Thaw case, and multiply such examples indefinitely and we begin to realize the intimate relationship between effects and causes and which it is absolutely essential that we comprehend as regards their far-reaching influences if we are in any measure to understand the real causes of the "Social Evil."

At the moment of writing this page I was travelling in a Pullman on Sunday and had impressed upon me the ennui of two commercial men who, the previous midnight, had been stupidly intoxicated, and were again finding in the bottle from the valise their only relief. One may ask, if the habits formed and thus illustrated must not logically result in the danger of such becoming victims of disease, due to the gratification of their desires and which cause twenty per cent. of the inmates of our asylums and whose associates are the abandoned class of our cities? Reading in a Montreal paper on the same train I found an article on "The girl and her liberty," in which was the following: "Such a number of young girls seem to find their way into the courts through being left to exercise a liberty for which they have not been fitted in any way. Owning no one's authority, least of all that of her parents, and with no training in self-discipline, the girl follows her own will or the example of companions as ill-trained as herself, until she comes up suddenly against the consequences of her own folly. The natural guardians, where there are such, having in so many cases failed to look after those of their household and see to it that they did not get into wrong courses, the courts step in."

The immediate reason for the article was the news item that at one session of the Delinquents' Court of that city some fif-

teen girls from twelve to eighteen years appeared for improper conduct on the streets. The sad stories were told of girls having no home occupation or entertainment, of their going to cheap theatres with young men, then, later, supper with cheap wine, intoxication, and then the court. The writer of the article quoted from leading English novelists on the subject of "the girl's liberty," and these seemed to agree that "No amount of liberty will spoil an innately nice girl"; but the conclusion arrived at was that "To make a man or woman fit for liberty they must first be disciplined to control themselves." One does not need to give examples, which we all could cite indefinitely, to show, whether amongst the more ignorant classes or in the higher circles of society, that it is just to this lack of moral education and self-discipline, which can only be learned in the home, school or occupation, that the greater part of the moral evils which we deplore are primarily due.

Hence we turn in our enquiry to some of the practical means of securing what we all recognize as essential if we expect to see the "Social Evil" seriously lessened.

Dr. Lewellys Barker, before the Conference on Mental Hygiene in New York last November, speaking on "Unsoundness of Mind a National Handicap," said: "The number of children born into the nation with defective brains could be diminished. Social and educational conditions could be improved so that the sum of the influences acting upon the nervous system of children, adolescents and adults would be more favorable to brain and mind than now." . . . "Idiocy and imbecility, due to the imperfect development of brain, may be the result either of bad heredity, or of serious disease in the earliest period of life. The form of insanity which occurs later in life may also be due in part to bad heredity, in part to bad environment." . . . "Again, many people seem ignorant of the fact that mind includes not alone intellect, but also the affections and the will."

At the same meeting Dr. J. V. May, of the N. Y. Hospital Commission, stated: "That 18 per cent of the insane cases admitted into New York State hospitals in one year were due to syphilis, 22 per cent. due to alcoholism, and 27 per cent. due to insanity in the family"; or together these three causes accounted for nearly 75 per cent. of the total admissions. It

will, of course, be apparent that behind hereditary insanity must in too many cases lie the other two diseases in the ancestors. "It is also clearly obvious that of the enormous number of persons who as a result of hereditary transmission are susceptible to a nervous breakdown, many could be saved by proper assistance during the developmental stages." Dr. May, by *prevention*, is speaking especially with reference to alcohol and syphilis; but it will be apparent that behind this we must seek in the home, in our systems of education, in moral and religious teachings, and in our social customs and in legal enactments for the real preventive measures.

Dealing with the problem of education, Prof. G. T. Canfield, Vice-President of the State Charities Association of New York, says: "Neglect of childhood, child labor, improper housing, tuberculosis, inebriety, insanity, feeble-mindedness and other conditions of this sort all of them invoke so much of suffering and crime, and all of them impose such a heavy financial burden . . . upon the more thrifty members of society, that the old remedy of dealing with these evils has become entirely inadequate:"—meaning sentimental philanthropy and the distribution of charitable relief. Dr. May then points to the means of education, indicating that each of us as individuals require to educate ourselves, our families, relatives and the community in personal habits and self-control. Then follows the education of the community and the creation of an effective public opinion as regards social customs, as in the matter of the use of alcohol and the control of the social evil and of such amusements as are distinctly demoralizing.

I was much struck with the remarks of Dr. S. M. Gregory, alienist to Bellevue Hospital, with regard to "Social Service" in the prevention of nervous breakdowns. Passing over cases actually in institutions, the speaker told of the large group of people outside who are neurasthenic, psychopathic, alcoholic and so-called nervous people, and the odd, eccentric, and the so-called artistic temperament, and then points out that the social worker must endeavor to make a complete analytical study of such, and his environment, his physical, religious, sexual and educational life, his inherited tendencies and bringing up, his tastes, his longings and his disappointments, and his

erroneous viewpoint of life. These the social worker will seek to correct, and especially by assisting the physician in dealing with such cases. He points to the nurse trained especially in psychopathic clinics, as being peculiarly fitted for this work, and illustrates by cases what has been done for, especially, women in their homes. He further advocated that these workers go out from several social centres in the larger cities, while these keep in touch with the social service branch of the hospitals. What room there is for this work was indicated by the fact that 12,000 such neuropathic cases are annually discharged from Bellevue, nearly all of whom need such assistance.

Dealing with syphilis and insanity, Dr. G. H. Kirby, Chief of the Service at Ward's Island, N.Y., takes up the question of education in relation to syphilitic disease, and points out that 75 per cent. of the insane admitted to hospitals for insanity due to syphilis have been married men, most of whom were infected as young men. He adds: "The peculiar tendency of the syphilitic germ to remain quiescent for years, while all obvious symptoms of the disease disappear, served to keep us long in the dark regarding the true cause of some of the most serious nervous and mental troubles with which physicians have to deal." To-day the blood test makes the explanation easy. Indicating the dominating influence of this disease upon the children of the syphilitic parent, Dr. Kirby states that with the parent insane from paresis, due to syphilis, other members of the family will be found affected with syphilis and that a surprisingly large number of children in these families are feeble-minded, nervous, and in other ways abnormal." Dr. Plaut examined a group of 100 children, the offspring of cases of paresis, and found that 45 per cent. were damaged mentally or physically, or in both fields. The blood test showed that one-third of these 100 children had the syphilitic poison in their systems."

Dr. A. J. Rosanoff, of King's Park State Hospital, N.Y., speaking on "Eugenics and Insanity," while pointing to the unfortunate effects of heredity on insanity, says: Furthermore the doctrine of heredity is not so fatalistic as it seems to those disinclined to accept it. The doctrine does not by any means

imply any denial or even belittling of the part played by environment. On the contrary, by throwing much light on hitherto obscure relations between personality and environment, it serves to emphasize how essential in many cases is the influence of the latter. In other words, exact studies in heredity reveal not only *how much* heredity is responsible for, but also *how little*; and even where the burden of heredity is great the realization of that fact will serve only to aid in a more intelligent adjustment of the environment with a view to the preservation as far as possible of the mental health of the individual in question." "In the same way a knowledge of these laws in their relation to human faculties affords a hope for the cultivation of a human race not at random, but with its weaknesses eliminated and its strength increased."

I have tried, by quoting from writers dealing with the various factors entering into our problem, to illustrate its extent. From these it would seem obvious that, whether in its diagnosis or in its treatment, we have the two underlying principles indissolubly mingled of *eugenics* and of *eusthenics*, and recalling Dr. Rosanoff's paper on Mendelism, or heredity, it is indeed consoling to know that the *how much* of what may be inherited is placed alongside the *how little*, which may result from heredity, and that in permanent results we have in environment—in all that the term implies—the potentialities of almost infinite improvement. Writing some years ago on "The Ethics of Public Health," I stated what seems very appropriate here: "Nature is indeed not evil, but beneficent; but Nature must work out her own problems. So must man be true to his mission. Endued with powers which make him a part of Nature, yet made by the Creator to be the head and crown of things placed on this earth to work out the purposes of Him who has caused man to evolve through the functioning of brain tissue peculiar to man, those high and yet higher principles of life, which operate through the same essential materials as those of the simplest living being, since the complexity of organization and structure in man is but the multiplied functioning of cells as simple as the protozoan animalcule, we behold in the whole mystery of Nature man given the exalted and single opportunity of overcoming seeming evil by

the exercise of his God-like powers through the purified and developed intellect in all its attributes."

I have attempted to deal with causes and with effects, and to some extent with treatment, in our study of the problem before us; and, were it possible, would like to prescribe a treatment of the disease which would prove a panacea for the physical, intellectual and moral evils involved. I am afraid, however—indeed, we know—that we are not sufficiently advanced for this; but yet we are not wholly without an armamentarium. Go anywhere amongst a congested population, as where Carlyle, in "Sartor Resartus," looks down on a sleeping city and moralizes on its vanities and inanities, mingled with tears and suffering; or to a seaport and observe 5,000 foreign immigrants in a single day, and this lack of moral advancement must impress one. In such we behold different languages, varying customs, distinctive dress, diverse habits, and even special foods, varying outlooks on life, hopeful, serious or gloomy, whether as influenced by their homes in the sunny South or their constant struggling with grim Nature in the North—in either case tinged with the differing teachings of their religious cult. Each influences and each has its effects upon the ethical plane upon which nations and communities live, and enables us in some slight degree to realize the problem we have before us and how inadequate we are for its solution. And yet if one looks into the honest eyes of a Galician mother bearing her sturdy baby, suspended in a bright-tinted shawl, or observes the stolid Russian moving forward towards his goal in a free country with some small hopefulness, he becomes soon convinced that it only needs the human touch to prove all men kin, and that it would be a simple matter, were our machinery at all adequate, to take this elemental, intellectual and moral material with all its potentialities and mould it into one homogeneous and elevated ethical whole.

How, then, can this ideal be arrived at? Of course we answer by saying: First, understanding the nature of the problem, its extent, the methods by which it must be attacked, and then strive to find some means adequate to this end—in the fields both of eugenics and eusthenics. Regarding the former I may say I have little faith in drastic measures such as are

being passed by several legislatures in neighboring States until we have a more generally diffused and higher standard of knowledge; but we can at least adopt recent English legislation and provide for the removal to Homes for the Feeble-Minded of moral delinquents, and through wholesome environment and useful occupations educate so far as possible these defectives, provide them with protection and a livelihood, and at the same time protect society against their aberrancies and the propagation of their kind.

The regulation of marriages regarding medical certificates of physical and mental health will be educative; but I greatly fear that a more independent person than the family physician must be the one to issue a certificate; and yet none is in such a good position or ought so willingly to aid in protecting the interests of the families of whom he is the adviser. But the higher type of physician can do much more than advise, since, as the confidante of at least the mother of the family, he can and ought to guide her in matters relating to the education and development of her children. In this field there is laid upon no class in the community such widespread responsibilities, since none equals them in opportunity as those of the family physician. And yet as remarked by psychologists everywhere, there is almost no medical school with anything more than the beginnings of instruction in psychiatry. It seems most remarkable that all that is taught anywhere is some elementary work to the teachers of our normal schools, so that what reaches the future mothers and fathers of the nation is of the most accidental sort.

In the field of eusthenics, or education in strength-giving, it is quite apparent that all we have said regarding education is important; but the sanitary environment, which includes housing, lessening of overcrowding, which includes the cost of land, of wages, the cost of food, local taxation, and child labor, is seen to mean everything which makes up the daily life of the individual. Dr. Mott, pathologist to the London Asylums Board, said recently, in a paper before the Royal Sanitary Institute:

"If it can be shown that there is a correlation between insanity, tuberculosis, alcoholism, syphilis, and overcrowding

in one-roomed premises, and insanitary dwellings in our large cities, it might be asked whether public money would not be better expended in solving the housing problem than in spending vast sums on sanatoriums and lunatic asylums in the hope of dealing with physical and mental degeneracy."

It is apparent, then, that we must attack the question of unfavorable environment in a broad way, if we expect to diminish seriously the "Social Evil." Nowhere do our Lord's words, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," seem so pregnant of truth and meaning. Dr. Landis, already quoted, says regarding urbanization, "The constant contact of the sexes in occupations, with much danger to morals, is inevitable"; while limiting these influences as far as possible by removing to an environment where occupation in sunlight and fresh air with an abundant food supply is the everyday existence, seems one logical means of dealing with what has become a national problem.

It might be thought that a paper on this subject is incomplete which does not take up all the problems of the "curfew," licensing of prostitution and a red-light district, the establishing of a Delinquents' Court, the probation system, the industrial farm and all the adjuncts attaching to our penal systems; but it appears to me that such are but attempts to treat the sick and cannot prevent the disease about which the world has for thousands of years philosophized and pondered, as upon "the origin of evil," too often looked upon as an emanation from some Demonic power, opposed to the Divine. Close analysis, however, would seem to teach us that its phenomena are but illustrations of human imperfection of the too often untrained, not necessarily untaught, child in those principles of education through which Froebel and all teachers like him have sought to develop character. The laws of evolution are equally applicable in the mental and moral as in the physical sphere; an overcoming through struggle—the survival of the best. As man has learned to subdue Nature, to discover her secrets and make them subserve his needs, so must he struggle to overcome in the mental and moral sphere until discipline shall make conformity to high ethical ideals the law and normal routine of his life; in a word, the process which has marked in

man from the beginning his movement upward toward the Divine.

As Browning, in "Paracelsus," says:—

" 'Tis time
New hopes should animate the world, new light
Should dawn from new revealings to a race
Weighed down so long, forgotten so long; thus shall
The heaven reserved for us at last receive
Creatures whom no unwonted pleasures blind,
But ardent to confront the unclouded blaze
Whose beams not seldom blessed their pilgrimage
Not seldom glorified their life below."