

Psychoanalysis and Christianity

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MARKED interest in the study of psychology has risen and spread during the last quarter of a century. In accord with the spirit of the age it follows experimental lines. Psychoanalysis was introduced by the now famous Viennese physicians, Freud and Breuer, as a method of treatment for nervous and hysterical patients. Ridicule was its lot from the beginning, yet it thrived in spite of opposition; in fact, development was so rapid that a just evaluation of the system was next to impossible. Urged on by success in the field of medicine, men were naturally led to seek the results of a broader application of its principles. One by one other departments of life were subjected to analysis, with the result that some startling discoveries were made in the hidden recesses of the mind, notably the unsuspected influence exercised by the unconscious on life and conduct. Sooner or later a comparison of psychoanalysis with religion and its functions was inevitable. After a brief review of modern psychotherapy, or mind-healing,¹ we will consider the relations of this new cult to morality in general, and more particularly the claims put forth in its favor to supersede the Christian religion.

After the manner of Catholic philosophy we turn first of all to the principles of psychoanalysis, and afterwards to the results of practical application. Although psychoanalysis is a study of our entire psychic life, its special concern is with unconscious activities. The vagueness of these unconscious mental phenomena does not make them any the less real; it only adds to the difficulty of pinning them down and subjecting them to close examination. Nevertheless, a theory of the unconscious has been formulated. It is interesting in examining it to seek light in Scholastic philosophy. Fundamentally psychoanalysis rests quite largely on those very mental states which, lying as they do beyond the reach of our conscious grasp,

¹ The subject was treated extensively in "Dominicana," March, 1924: "Some Demands of Psychoanalysis."

seem wholly inexplicable save in the light of a spiritual human soul, the underlying source of all our life and action. The existence of a subconscious mind is a scientific fact;² and closely related to it is a whole series of other stubborn things to be satisfactorily explained. Some of these are: the sudden recurrence to memory of a long forgotten experience, rising up before us in a moment of reverie or suggested by associated ideas; and those extraordinary disclosures of the buried past one makes in hypnotic passivity. In laying constant stress on these operations of the mind, not the result of conscious mental effort, psychoanalysis points to a living sleepless something or other ever at work in the depths of our being, collecting, rearranging, storing up memory images of everything howsoever experienced in the course of the longest life. Access to this hidden store is so narrowly restricted here below that nature would seem to have made a mistake in thus preserving it, unless it is for use and fruition in another, higher and freer, state of existence.

The power of suggestion, too, which plays so important a part in every analysis, confirms the Catholic doctrine of union and interaction between soul and body. Psychoanalysis bears this out in practice, since suggestion is but an expedient to which the neurologist, or physician, resorts in his effort to dispose the mind of his patient to cooperate with and submit to outside help and guidance in the delicate task of suggesting himself into a cure. It is probably needless to add that the apostles of this science are innocent of any desire to popularize Scholastic tenets. They have simply turned to account the fruits of their study of the human mind in its abnormal states. Psychoanalysis was the result of their labors.

In all probability psychoanalysis within legitimate bounds has a permanent contribution to offer the science of medicine, and therefore deserves, under proper surveillance, exhaustive consideration and thorough trustworthy experiment, especially in this day of widespread neurotic affliction with its trail of human woe. But man is heir to moral as well as physical and psychic ills. What are we to think of psychology as the physician of the soul, that is, the healer of moral disease?

² Human Destiny and the New Psychology, by J. Godfrey Raupert.

With the aforementioned basic principles of this science we can see no cause for quarrel. At the same time, however, we must not forget the moral excesses to which mind-healing so readily lends itself. These extravagances are apt to incline all with a conservative mental bias to disfavor the system without trial. On the other hand fairness demands that we judge it in its actual results achieved by legitimate and approved practice. Now it has been and is being substantiated that, rightly used, modern psychotherapy is productive of real and lasting good. Yet it is sadly true that capable hands are in a decided minority. The evils which follow in the wake of unprincipled practitioners are apparent from the very process of treatment. Suggestion and hypnotism often play a decisive part in the psychoanalytic procedure. But suggestion may become as potent an influence for evil as for good; and hypnotism, despite the protestations of some that "it is impossible to induce a person under hypnosis to do anything against which his waking moral judgment would revolt," by alienating reason and liberty and subjecting the patient to the domination of the operator, creates a situation calling for the most scrupulous use of power.³ Again, in the course of treating young women the faithless psychiatrist will have occasion to take advantage of the confidence reposed in him to trifle with the affections which may manifest themselves. Wherefore the absence of at least the natural safeguards of high-minded purpose and moral integrity might not infrequently lead to baneful moral consequences. Of course these are not chargeable to psychoanalysis as such: even a holy thing in the hands of the unholy can be turned to evil ends. The system surrenders its claim upon the consciences of men and fails at its very foundations to supply those pure and uplifting motives that emanate from true religion and its practices. At times it lays itself open to unholy usage; at times it even serves the unlawful desires of the unscrupulous. The sanctity of the sick-chamber, which Lytton somewhere speaks of, is here intensified and made more holy when it is the soul that is weak, sick and distraited. "To the true physician . . . age or youth, beauty or deformity, innocence or guilt, merge their distinctions in one common attribute—human suffering appealing to human skill." Few

³ Recent Psychology and the Christian Religion, by C. E. Hudson; and Catholic Encyclopedia (Hypnotism).

indeed are fit to gaze on a naked human soul. Can psychoanalysis with its uncertainty of method and its openness to abuse serve the soul in its direst need as religion has done?

Fundamental to the cure of moral ills are the principles of right and wrong, of responsibility for our actions. Yet the attempt to solve moral problems without recourse to moral theology is growing in favor daily. The psychological clinic essays to cover the entire field of the confessional, and much that lies outside its province. The purpose of the clinic is to reeducate the mind of the patient and free him from those early religious prejudices and restraints of the moral law which are causing undue mental stress.⁴ But any code of ethics to be acceptable in the Christian era must meet certain demands. Does psychoanalysis with such aims and endeavors uphold human dignity, or at least not debase it? Does it defend human liberty, without which we have no position to maintain? Does it render to the soul those definite and positive services which we have a right to expect from religion? Let us see just what this new cult has to offer.

Psychoanalysis both in theory and practice is too slavishly engrossed in the animal part of man. Based on the Freudian assumption that the key to every symptom is to be found in some repression of the sex instinct, analysis is prone to leave a patient unduly sex-minded. It is true, conflicts and repressions are the common lot of all as the inevitable penalty of sin. St. Paul points out their source in language that will endure long after the Freudian patter has passed into oblivion. "I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members."⁵ But while not minimizing in the least the imperiousness of the dictates of this "law of the members," or denying its power to affect us in our decisions, we must never lose sight of the fact that the last word rests, not with the passions, but with reason. The unwarranted concessions being made to the influence of the unconscious mind on conduct and the affairs of life have blinded many to the facts of universal experience, for however sudden or violent may be the "uprushes" from this hidden source, we yet find ourselves in a position to choose. If we are overcome by

⁴ Dr. Moore's article in the *Catholic Charities Review*, March, 1922.

⁵ Rom. VII, 23.

the onslaught it is not because we were unable to make a choice, but because we did not choose rightly. The ultimate cause may go back to faulty or neglected training of will, or the admittance to our conscious mind of matter that should never have found entrance there.

Psychoanalysis is all too ready to patronize determinism, whose comfortable tenets never fail to popularize any system which adopts them.

Freud, James, and others do not hesitate to admit that, in the light of the New Psychology, human liberty takes wings; although, forsooth, we must act as though we were free, lest progress cease and civilization decay. Nevertheless the impelling motive of every action, according to them, proceeds from antecedent conditions and processes, partly within our nature, and partly in our environment. In the unconscious mind of each is buried alive, as it were, the sum total of his life's experiences; here also reside the libido, or sex and hunger urges, and a formidable array of complexes. To give vent to this hidden energy, releasing it into proper channels, is the only salvation for neurotics. But the psychic censor blocks the outlet. Its office is to keep tight at all costs the lid of the unconscious. In some respects it is not unlike the moral conscience holding in check our unruly passions. The censor, however, is blind. So here we meet again the doctrine of determinism: given the cause, the effect must follow inevitably with no room whatever for freedom and moral responsibility.

As a religion psychoanalysis promises much with little or nothing to give. In the first place the human soul has positive and pressing needs which the essentially emptying process of the system can never hope to supply. It shows its deficiency at the crucial stage of every application. Authorities are agreed that a successful analysis hinges on the transference, the feeling of acknowledged sympathy between patient and physician, in the absence of which it is impossible for the complex-laden mind to yield up its burden, and so find relief from its unknown fears. But supposing these favorable working conditions do exist, the neurologist has next to delve into the unconscious, locate the secret motive—often disguised beyond recognition—which is playing such havoc in the life of his patient, and, by subjecting the unconscious motive to the light of consciousness, cause it to

be dispelled as mist before the rays of the sun. Now all this is clearly a negative or, as it is called, a purgative process, the release of pent-up emotions. Sublimation must follow at once, that is to say, construction must begin; new interests must be created; a healthy direction given the emotional life of the subject. But here is where psychoanalysis fails. Knowing only its own little world of the material, the cult of psychoanalysis cannot even appreciate the needs and cravings of the soul it would reeducate. It is to be noted, however, that the burden of reeducation rests with the analyst in charge, who will naturally be guided by his own philosophy and ideals. Hence there are great possibilities for good in the profession of a Catholic neurologist.

But let us see the merits of the New Revelation in the light of the common-sense, Scriptural criterion, "By their fruits you shall know them." Freud's principles are based on sex. According to these assumptions the beginning of every neurosis can be traced back to some sexual experience. The itching, prurient curiosity and morbid effects in general which must and actually do follow from such tenets and their indiscriminate application cannot but prove fatal to morality. It is a function of religion to cultivate our better and higher self, to diffuse a spirit of optimism, and to spur us on to lofty ideals; to build character in the individual, to civilize and spiritualize the people as a whole. Man has need of religion because of his rational soul and free will, which are proper to humanity; not because of what he has in common with the brute creation.

A religion which is so completely taken up with the libido and its manifestations that it simply ignores man's nobler faculties, is no religion at all. It is either the product of Atheism with its absolute denial of God; or the outgrowth of Materialism, unable to appreciate the spiritual and true values of life. Without a divinity of some kind religion is dead; without a personal, distinct and provident God it is sick unto decay. The results of this unnatural, morbid trend of psychoanalysis speak as words cannot, and they declare their verdict infallibly. Heeding only our emotional life to the utter exclusion of the voice of conscience has the effect of drugging the soul into happiness, placing us in a world of unreality. Truly, Freud's trail stops far short of that substantial joy and peace to which religion should lead the soul.

Other questions present themselves for our consideration, but can be given little more than a passing mention here; for example, points of contact with the confessional. Some would see in the new cult an admission from non-believers that this tribunal fills a real need in the lives of all of us. There is no doubt that psychoanalysis supports the dictum: "Open confession is good for the soul." This is true enough; but, like so many adages, is too trite to stand unmodified. A willing listener may indeed be ready at hand; but is he worthy of our confidence? As Newman says, is he strong enough to hear, and yet not too strong so as to despise? Is he capable of pronouncing judgment, and qualified to lead us out of our perplexities? Above all is he sufficiently virtuous to support an open confession?

Of course it goes without saying that the direct object of Penance is not the mere release of surplus emotion; this is but a natural advantage which often accrues from the sacrament. It is significant too that analysis seeks the cause of the disorder in the suppressed desire; confession in the non-suppressed. For while the neurotic patient is harassed by his blameless instincts, the penitent is tormented by the voice of conscience. Finally, psychoanalysis would change the nature of the urges, or deceive them into gratification by giving their energy an ethical direction. Confession sees in the passions the result of original sin, instruments of good given to lusts, not to be appeased by indulgence, but reduced to submission by the cultivation and practice of virtues.

The term psychoanalysis may signify either the latest method of treating nervous disorders, or the new psychology of life and religion. In the first sense its object is good, and the means to obtain it are, fundamentally at least, legitimate; that is to say, health through the mobilization and disciplining of our natural powers and faculties. We see in this science the very practical application of principles recognized as valid by Christian philosophy. Although they seem to make superhuman requirements of the neurologist in order to be efficacious, and it is apparent that the unworthy can turn them with disastrous results to unlawful ends; nevertheless, by actual test under proper auspices they have more than once been successful where everything else had failed. Psychoanalysis must purge itself of quackery and imposture to win recognition in the medical profession.

Meanwhile thanks is due to those who have given us this method of exploring the unconscious mind; and encouragement to all who contribute in any way to the alleviation of the multitude whose mental and nervous afflictions have too long succeeded in baffling the labors and skill of even the best physicians. As a religious cult, however, severest strictures are the just portion of psychoanalysis. It debases human nature, allotting to the honest endeavors, the heroic sacrifices, and the noblest aspirations of mankind an origin in the despicable urge of sex transformed. It reduces freedom to little more than a name; and relegates morality and its obligations to the ignorant past. Like the general run of revolutions it would oust the old and accepted, with practically nothing to supplant it. Rejecting original sin it sees in our fallen state the natural order of things: the unconscious, lord of the conscious, and reason the slave of instinct. Engrossed in those things which St. Paul says should not be so much as mentioned among us, it imparts a despairing and fatal outlook on life, the sickly perverted effects of which are as sure as they are unmistakable. It would be hard to conceive anything more directly opposed to religion in its universally accepted sense: the civilizer, the hope, the inspiration, and the salvation of this great human family of ours.

Yet it is well to remember that we are witnessing its heyday of riot and extravagance. What is good in psychoanalysis will emerge tried and proven to minister to the ills of the future. At present ordinary mortals can do no better than make caution their watchword. Catholic physicians, imbued with a deep sense of their Faith and the duties it imposes, will be in a position to distinguish between what is acceptable in the system and what is morally objectionable. Few others, except perhaps judicious and capable priests, may hope to accomplish anything from the study or practice of psychoanalysis.