MENTAL HEREDITY AND EUGENICS

BY FLORENCE MATEER

The Training School, Vineland, N. J.

The work of the last few years has brought the physician and the psychologist more closely together than ever before. The questions of mental defect and mental disease have needed study from both standpoints, and the aid mutually rendered has been invaluable. But now another feature of the problem has drawn the two sciences still more closely together. Both physician and psychologist recognize that, in view of the new light that recent study, observations and investigations have thrown upon abnormal mental conditions, both must stand together so as to be better able to spread this information and educate the people up to the reforms necessary.

Eugenics—preventive medicine—having as its aim the saving of the race rather than the individual has come to the fore and there seems to be none of its various fields of activity but has interested some one as its advocate. Solomon (27) has stated in a concise masterly form the chief aims of the eugenics movement of today.
and thus carefully displaces the false statements made by poorly informed aggressors. Doll (9) and Barker (2) have covered the chief aims of the Mental Hygiene movement. The value of the work of the International Congress on Hygiene and Demography cannot be overestimated. Through exhibits it has started the immense task of educating the public on this subject. Some of the other work of Barker (3) has been to draw attention to the very practical use of these principles of mental hygiene in dealing with nervous school children. Training does not make a child’s nervous condition but it heightens or lessens his hereditary predisposition.

The views held by Fortune (13) are very similar. School children need medical and mental examinations, but let them be from the standpoint that children are individuals and not merely parts of a mass. Ipswich examined her school population of 12,000 and found 112 mental defectives in that number, besides a large number of cases just needing watching. Hyslop (18) states clearly that he believes it to be the duty of the home rather than of church, state or medicine to teach mental hygiene. If only this view were more widely held! We might then hope to reach through the home some of the school reforms advocated by Fairbanks (11). Nervous conditions are often intensified by educational methods. He advocated school in the morning, only, for children below the sixth year. From there on, the children would undoubtedly be benefited by an afternoon session largely recreational.

The work of Downing (10) goes even farther and states that with proper care and training in childhood many of our insane would not necessarily have reached that condition. The nervous normal child will get along all right but the abnormally nervous child needs study. This might better have been stated as a supposition than as a fact. We cannot tell as yet whether lack of such training is the determining factor for insanity. The fact that the children were “abnormally nervous” to begin with is rather an important indicant of a latent neuroticism which might just as well break out as remain hidden to be handed on to another generation. Wallin (29) strikes the keynote. We must try to keep alive all children once they are born but what we want is “better babies, better born.” Prevention of procreation by the unfit seems at present the only measure that will bring us toward the desired ideal.

This has naturally brought the question: “Who are the unfit?” The complete answer cannot come except through many years of hard work. The relative influence of heredity and environment
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cannot be settled offhand. Wright (31) discusses quite generally the tendency of present-day biological opinions and then takes up more in detail the possible influence of environment upon the germ plasm and the social significance of such a possibility. The state of mind of the scientific world as to the possibility of such a germ-plasm change is shown nicely by Adami (1). In spite of the popular theory that the child is not affected by the acts of his parent, present scientific facts show that changes may be going on which are too minute to be detected but which may nevertheless exert an influence. Lundborg (23) gives a practical plan for centers in each country to study the conditions of its races and proposes that the material thus collected by any country be made accessible to all others. We must have such data before any perfected plan can be made for the disposition of the undesirable elements.

In view of this fact it is interesting to note that simultaneously there have appeared in various centers in this country and abroad a number of similar investigations upon the heredity of the various types of the unfit. The work of Cotton (6) in this country and of La Griffe (21) in France shows that insanity is hereditary. The work of Cotton is not yet finished but the case histories published are very significant. Field-workers have been trained to make these investigations and such a plan seems satisfactory. As yet we are unable to see the possibility of a full application of the Mendelian law to the inheritance of mental traits. La Griffe's work has been similar, although his investigations regarding each of the main types of insanity have been made and are reported separately. He finds that heredity is usually an important factor in the etiology of mental diseases. The taint usually comes from one side of the family only and may be a neurotic condition intensified by social factors. The human race has been preserved from a larger number of insane by the frequency of celibacy and sterile marriages among them and by the large number of children dying in infancy.

The work of Davenport and Weeks (8) shows that epilepsy, too, is transmissible. Their theory is that epilepsy is due to the absence of a protoplasmic factor determining complete nervous development. Kreiss (20), working on the heredity of tremor, and Frey (14), on ataxia, find they are both inherited and are likely to be found in families containing other forms of degeneracy.

Probably the largest work that has been done on the heredity of feeble-mindedness is Goddard's (15). Hereditary defect has been found in 143 out of 480 descendants of a defective, illegitimate son of
a normal man and an unknown defective girl. From the later marriage of the same man to a normal woman there have been traced 486 descendants, all normal. Chouchoud (5) gives us a brief report of observations made by Col. Ewens on a number of microcephalic defectives living in northwestern India. They are evidently of defective descent and kept alive—parasites on society—by well-meant alms. Unfortunately the report is not accompanied by detailed descriptions of the individuals studied. But no matter whether we can ascribe 75 per cent. or all of such abnormal condition to heredity, the question at the base of all such investigation remains fundamentally the same: What caused the defect in the first place? The theory has been advanced that mental defectives are a strain of the race which has never developed the ability to see the proper relation of cause and effect. They see no need for restraining their desires so that they may not conflict with the rights of others. But does this really settle the matter? Is it not possible that the reason they did not learn to adjust themselves to society is that they were defective from the beginning? Something must have caused their primary difference.

All such investigations have led the scientific world to believe more and more that action must be taken. The burden of supporting these people must not rest any more heavily upon the normal race. In time it should be removed altogether. But what can be done? The institutions available cannot supply room for a quarter of them. Taylor (28), Fernald (12), Mears (25), Barr (4), and Hart (16) have taken the stand that since we cannot segregate them all and since that would be unnecessarily expensive anyway, the only thing to do is to sterilize them. With procreation stopped the matter would be practically under control in a generation. Of course, this plan has its adversaries, too, but a rather capable defense against them is the work of Hurty (17). From studying several hundred cases of criminals that had been asexualized he found the results of the operation had been good. The work of McDonald (24), too, is a plea for the asexualization of all those who carry the “taint,” be it of epilepsy, feeble-mindedness or insanity. To this end he urges the education of the public and preventive legislation. Savage (26), on the other hand, tends to emphasize personal rather than racial good. He states that many insane may recover and marry without danger to their mate or their children. Right here in such cases one sees the danger of asexualization unless we have full and certain knowledge of the irremediability of the subject’s condition. Such knowledge is coming, however, and until it does come there is plenty to be done with those cases about whose inferior condition there can be no doubt.
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Whetham (30), Lankester (22), and Kellicott (19) in their books have outlined very clearly the situation as it confronts all men at present. Man, more heavily endowed with mental powers than any other creature, has made himself master of many of nature’s weapons for eliminating the unfit of every type, mental and physical. The responsibility that comes with his ability to fight nature, disease and his environment is the necessity of providing his own means of promoting the welfare of the human race.

REFERENCES

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