THE DUTY OF SOCIETY TOWARDS ITS FEEBLE-MINDED CHILDREN.

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In accepting the invitation with which I was honoured by your Right Rev. President to address to this Congress a few remarks bearing upon "Heredita and Social Responsibility, with special reference to the Feeble-minded," I have thought it best to select an aspect of the subject with which my own life-long professional experience has rendered me most familiar. The title chosen for my paper does not, of course, cover the whole ground; but in considering the case of the feeble-minded child we must necessarily look both backwards and forwards—backwards with reference to the causes on which his abnormal mental condition depends, forwards to determine the extent of our social responsibility towards him.

RETROSPECT OF THE SUBJECT.

To speculate as to the primary origin of mental defect from the point of view of science presents as many difficulties as does the cognate question in theology, "What is the origin of sin?" "God created man in His own image: in the image of God created He him," is the testimony of Genesis; and however we may regard this Book in the light of modern criticism and of theories of evolution, we can but with great humility admit that as sin is a departure from pristine innocence, so physical and mental defect is a lapse from primitive perfection, however arrived at. "Spontaneous variation," of which we hear so much nowadays in connection with the origin of mental defect, is but a well-turned phrase to disguise our lack of exact knowledge on the subject. Whatever enlightenment we may have derived from the modern theories of Weissmann as to the organic independence of the somatic part and of the germ plasm constituting the propagative portion of our being, from the interesting researches of the Prälät Mendel of Brünn in cross-fertilisation of peas, which enabled him to trace out the probable ratio of variations in successive generations, from the modified views as to somatic influence on germ plasm held by Forel and Semon, and from the mathematical calculations of coefficients of correlation by Karl Pearson and his Biometric School,
I think most of us must admit that as yet we can but apprehend the working of the laws of heredity through a glass darkly. After all, we revert to the old-fashioned notion that abnormality must needs result from some infraction of nature's laws; i.e., in other words, of the divinely appointed conditions regulating normal human existence. It is remarkable how seldom we find in ancient writings that have come down to us allusions to the sort of mental defect which today we call feeble-mindedness. Of the acute forms of madness, of delirium, of the "Morbus Sacer," which we now call epilepsy, Greek poets and tragedians make frequent mention, some of these visitations being ascribed to inspiration, some to the anger of the gods. Even the correlation of mental and physical degeneracy is finely depicted by Homer in his description of Thersites ("Iliad," ii., 218-69), of whom he says (quoting Cowper's translation):

"He squinted, halted, gibbous was behind,
And pinched before, and on his tapering head
Grew patches only of the filiment down;"

and his mean, carping spirit was in accord with his physical characters.

It is of interest in connection with our subject to notice that in the Hippocratic writings we find the earliest glimmering of our modern conception of degeneracy, and it is therein argued that epilepsy produced in the ancestor by Traumatism or other physical causes may be inherited by descendants.

In the period of Roman decadence we may also trace in the account Suetonius gives of the Twelve Caesars a recognition of the doctrine of inherited degeneracy. In Roman law, moreover, there is evinced the state's interest in what we should call mentally defective members of the community, for provision was made for the appointment of a "Curator" in the case of the prodigal who wasted his patrimony, and also, it would seem, in certain cases of young people of the "pupillary" age lacking in intelligence.

Amongst Greeks and Romans, however, degeneracy of offspring does not appear to have caused much anxiety to the community. In early days, at any rate, such summary measures as exposure on the mountains of Taygetus or precipitation from the Tarpeian Rock, together with unchecked infant mortality, effectually prevented any large survival of children unfit to become useful citizens of the State.

With the introduction of Christianity, however, a new spirit of compassion towards weaklings and a recognition of the sacredness of human life changed the whole attitude of society towards its degenerate members. In mediæval times the Church became the guardian of those afflicted in mind, body, or estate; and monastic establishments, officered by priests, who were also physicians, sheltered many who were incapable of fighting life's battles for themselves. The Royal Hospital of Bethlehem had its origin in a thirteenth-century ecclesiastical foundation, and the ancient Priory of Bath, after for many years ministering to lepers, afforded subsequently a refuge to lunatics and idiots, when the demand for the accommodation for lepers had disappeared. The hospital attached to the priory continued its good work even in post-Reformation times, and from it has sprung the modern Magdalen Hospital School for Imbeciles, now doing useful work in its new location on Combe Down. Thus the Church in the past has shown practical appreciation of social responsibility in the care of the poorer class of victims of mental incapacity, and it is satisfactory to find in the present day a revival of interest in the subject on the part of the clergy.

**MODERN METHODS.**

In the middle of the last century, i.e., about the year 1842, a general awakening as to the duties of society towards children of weak mind occurred almost simultaneously in France, Switzerland, and Germany, and was not long in spreading to our own country and to the United States. Much of this interest was due to the success attained at the Bicêtre Hospital in Paris by Séguin in his pioneer work of educating the idiot, following the lead of Itard, Voisin, and Esquirol. Classifying his pupils under the heads of superficial and of profound idiocy, he included in the former many of the class whom we should nowadays call feeble-minded. Perseveringly applying his principles of "Physiological Education"—a system which he once succinctly summarised as the art of educating the mind through perceptions instead of by pre-arranged reasonings, his cardinal axiom being "that the physiological education of the senses must precede the psychological education of the mind"—he converted into more or less productive workers many who up to the time they came under his influence had led useless, even mischievous, lives, and possessed but little intelligence or power of application. Though Séguin made no pretence of curing his cases, he referred to thirty per cent. of pupils who had been rendered capable of order, of good feeling, and of working like the third of a man; of more than forty per cent. had become capable of the ordinary transactions of life under friendly control, and of working like two-thirds of a man; whilst others approached nearer and nearer the standard of ordinary manhood. With such encouraging reports as an incentive, it is no wonder that in philanthropic England charitable institutions soon sprang up for training the mentally defective on similar lines, and for upwards of half a century five such institutions (with an aggregate capacity of some 2,000 beds) have done excellent work in training children certified under the legal designation of "Idiot or Imbecile," but comprising also a not inconsiderable proportion of higher grade imbeciles nowadays known as "Feeble-minded."

There is, in fact, no sharp line of demarcation between the three classes just named; indeed they may be said to shade into each other, representing three conventional gradations of mental incapacity. The Royal Commission on the Feeble-minded have suggested certain differentiating definitions, but these we cannot now fully discuss, and it must suffice for our present purpose to say that comprehended under the designation of the feeble-minded we find a large group of children of various degrees of mental incapacity, whom the ordinary medical practitioner is perhaps unwilling to certify as idiotic or imbecile under the forms required by the Idiots Act, 1886, but of whom it may be predicated (in the words of the Royal Commission) that they will turn out to be "persons who may be capable of earning a living under favourable circumstances, but are incapable from mental defect existing from birth or from an early age (a): of competing on equal terms
with their normal fellows; or (b) of managing themselves and their affairs with ordinary prudence. During their school life it has been ascertained that they are unfit for the ordinary school curriculum by reason of mental defect, but not incapable of receiving more or less benefit from special schools organised under the Act of 1899. During the ten years that have elapsed since this Act came into operation (and its operation has been but partial, as it is an adoptive Act), accommodation has been provided in England and Wales for about 10,000 children, more than half in London and the rest in large urban centres. The special schools are for the most part day schools, and consequently rural districts with scattered populations are practically unprovided for, there being no power under the Act to compel parents to send their children from home to a boarding school, although local education authorities may enter into contracts with the latter. As the Royal Commission estimate the number of children in England and Wales needing special instruction at 55,662, less than one-third have so far been provided for.

As regards the results of special school instruction, there is considerable diversity of opinion. The methods used have necessarily been more or less experimental, the tendency being, as time goes on, to devote more and more time to the manual and industrial training of the pupils. The necessity of organised after-care for those who had left school soon became evident, and in this way statistics are gradually accumulating as to what becomes of the specially trained children, or a uniform plan devised by the National Association for the Feeble-minded.

After eight years' experience, the Birmingham After-care Committee reported in 1909 that of 307 feeble-minded persons who had left school, and were still alive and under observation, only 34.8 per cent. were earning wages at all, and only 5.5 per cent. were earning as much as 10s. per week. The London After-care statistics, starting from 1906, show a higher ratio of remunerative employment, probably due to a higher standard in the selection of the pupils, about two-thirds of those reported on being employed, the average wage earned being about 6s. 9d. per week. Taking the most favourable view of the results that have been gathered by After-care committees, there can be no doubt that although the institution of special schools under the Act of 1899 has in districts in which it has been adopted been of signal advantage, not only as regards training, but in the early detection of the pupils. The necessity of organised after-care for those who had left school soon became evident, and in this way statistics are gradually accumulating as to what becomes of the specially trained children, or a uniform plan devised by the National Association for the Feeble-minded.

I have already referred to the trend of recent researches as to the hidden workings of heredity. Whether with Weissmann we admit that we are but trustees of our germ-plasm which, segregated from our somatic constitution, passes on from generation to generation, or whether with Forel and Semon we believe that somatic changes do influence the latter, we cannot deny that in parenthood modifications must necessarily occur. Possibly we may in time be able to work out for the human species schemes of unit-characters to be evolved by specific combinations analogous to those observed by Mendel in his experiments on plants; but till that time comes we must be content to stand upon the old ways, and as far as lies in our power limit the spread of morbid heredity wherever we know it to exist; and in the case of feeble-mindedness there is ample evidence of the existence of morbid heredity of a strongly transmissible character. Heredity eventuating in mental defect has multifarious manifestations. Neuroses of various kinds—neuralgias, nerve storms, hysteria, megrims, tics, and spasmodic affections of various sorts such as asthma—may be the only evidence of nervous instability in the family history of a feeble-minded child. True, mental peculiarity may sometimes be traced in one or both of the parents, but they may be persons of exceptional ability in spite of, possibly because of, their neurotic tendencies, and the union of two persons of neurotic temperament, however, undoubtedly hazardous, and unfortunately there is frequently a mutual attraction between such pairs. Intensifying the morbid strain too often results in offspring with minds so unbalanced as to practically place them in the feeble-minded class. Neuropathic
inheritance may, indeed, be looked upon as the preponderant factor in the genesis of feeble-mindedness. Dr. Tredgold has traced a definite neuropathic factor in 64.5 per cent. of the cases investigated by him, Dr. Lapage in 27.9 per cent., and Dr. Potts in 28.4 per cent. in abnormal school children as compared with 10 per cent. amongst normal children of similar social condition; and statistics collected many years ago by Dr. Fletcher Beach and myself amongst 3,386 children in two large institutions for imbeciles give a percentage of 41.98 in which neuropathic ancestry could be traced. To bring into activity the latent predisposition, however, the combination of other adverse factors, often physical, seems necessary. A predisposition to tubercle is one of these, and in my experience a blend of phthisical and of neurotic heredity is most disastrous, a phthisical family history appearing in no less than 28.31 per cent. of the cases tabulated by Dr. Beach and myself. How far parental intemperance is to be regarded as an efficient cause of feeble-mindedness has given rise to much controversy. Dr. Lapage found a marked history of intemperance in but 7.7 per cent. of the parentage of the Manchester special school children investigated by him, amongst whom no other factor was ascertainable in 2.9 per cent.

Dr. Tredgold has noted a pronounced history of family alcoholism in no less than 46.5 per cent. of his cases, remarking, however, that in five-sixths of these definite neuropathic heredity was present in addition, and certain other morbif taints in most of the remainder. He believes, as I do, that continued excessive indulgence in alcohol exerts a direct influence on the germ plasma and causes impairment of the nervous system of the offspring; and in the case of the alcoholic pregnant woman there is in addition a direct environmental degenerative effect upon the embryo. For a careful résumé of the various views held on this subject I would refer my hearers to a paper by Dr. Potts in the *British Journal of Inebriety* for January, 1900. Of the Biometric “Study of the Influence of Parental Alcoholism on the Physique and Ability of the Offspring,” which has recently startled the world, I can only say that it seems to me to be founded upon data insufficient to warrant conclusions universally applicable.

Time does not permit of the discussion of the influence of toxic constitutional taints such as that of syphilis, which I believe to exert a more extensive influence in the production of mentally as well as physically degenerate offspring than can be shown from statistics. Of marriages of consanguinity I can only say that in such unions there is always the risk of intensifying any morbif strain inherited from common ancestry.

We shall, I think, all agree with the dictum of the Royal Commission, that feeble-mindedness tends strongly to be inherited, but that it is usually “spontaneous in origin”—that is, not due to influences acting on the parent—seems to me still a debatable question. At any rate (as Dr. Saleebly has remarked), toxic influences acting within the parent and causing changes in the blood demonstrably circulating through the germinal tissues—e.g., the poisons of alcohol and of syphilis—cannot scientifically be excluded from consideration in this connexion.

### CONCLUSION

In the light of the foregoing observations let us see what practical points bearing upon the duties of society towards its feeble-minded members we may thereby consider. Are there any means whereby we may diminish the extent of the evil in our midst? We cannot revert to drastic repressive measures such as were used in ancient times, and the idea of a lethal chamber is abhorrent to modern ideas. Modern medical science vies with Christian philanthropy in thwarting nature’s arrangements tending to eliminate the unfit at an early age. No amount of training can transform one originally defective into a self-dependent member of society. We can, however, go still farther back, and by discouraging imprudent marriages and absolutely barring those of persons of proved feeble-mindedness (as, indeed, is now legislatively provided for in some half-dozen of the States of the American Union), at least diminish the production in the future of feeble-minded children. The only effectual method of humanity compassing this end in the case of the majority of the rising generation of feeble-minded would seem to be segregation in industrial colonies apart from the ordinary community, for otherwise there is always the risk (too obvious in the experience of our maternity wards and Magdalen homes) of the production of illegitimate progeny. Experience shows that the inmates of such colonies as have been already established live happy, useful lives to the extent of their capacity, and although there may be need of increased legal power of detention in certain cases, the majority show no inclination to leave the tasteful and loving care provided for them. But many more colonies are required, and it must be remembered that all the money spent on them would diminish in the long run be as much out of pocket by the change proposed as might be anticipated.

Another point of importance is the provision of adequate means throughout the country of dealing with the increasing number of school children who, owing to the introduction of medical inspection of our elementary schools, are notified as requiring special instruction. The urgency, as we have seen, is most acute in rural districts, and the establishment of residential schools for defective children from country parishes is much to be desired. Such residential schools are best placed in conjunction with an industrial colony, to which the pupils can be transferred naturally and without trouble after school age. In fact, all who have had experience of the drawbacks attending "special" day schools in towns can appreciate the superior advantages of residential schools, which would form the natural stepping-stones to permanent custodial establishments.

The parochial clergy have unique opportunities of seeing how unsuitable, as a rule, are the surroundings of a slum-dweller’s home for the promotion of the physical, mental, moral and spiritual welfare of the feeble-minded child. The colony and colony schools cannot but appeal to their sympathy, and even though the first cost of such institutions may prove a heavy burden on the present generation, future generations will have cause to bless their founders for venturing to follow the apostolic injunction, “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak.”