

*Baltimore Evening Sun*  
April 29, 1910

### *Psychotherapy*

Psychotherapy is the fashionable “science” of the hour; the delight of women’s clubs; the darling of yellow journal savants; the pet of the 10-cent magazines. Among impressionable folk of defective education some such fantastic favorite always reigns—some new sure-cure for all the ills of life; some new master key to all its riddles. Once it was phrenology. Another time it was hypnotism. Anti-vivisection, anti-vaccination, telepathy, crystal gazing, psychical research and pseudo-sociology have all had their innings, and later on, no doubt, they will have their innings again. But at the moment the rage is for psychotherapy—that amazing compound of faulty observation and magnificent over-generalization.

No one seems to know who invented psychotherapy. Those features of the “science” which it possesses in common with the so-called New Thought seem to owe their origin to certain speculations of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who borrowed their substance, in turn, from the German mystics of the post-Kantian era. In addition one finds lingering traces of mesmerism, of various other obscure and oblique “isms” and even downright Mediaeval magic.

The dash of fact in the bubbling cauldron of fancy seems to come from the more imaginative neurologists of the modern French school, and from Dr. Paul Dubois in particular. Dubois has been chosen perhaps against his will as the patron saint of the devotees, the Osier of psychotherapy. His vague, but entertaining, treatises are their principal scriptures. They have a quotation from his works to prove every claim they make.

### *An American Fad*

It is in the United States that psychotherapy chiefly flourishes, but it has also gained a foothold in England, where the Christian Science invasion paved the way for it, and even anatomical demonstrations strive for a literary style.

So great, indeed, has been the progress of the new “science” among us that a number of reputable physicians have succumbed to it. More than one of them, no doubt has been deceived by the show of caution which the leading devotees made by their insistence that they do not intend to displace scientific medicine, but merely to give it aid—that they are willing to remain the obedient servitors of the educated physician, as trained nurses are his obedient servitors.

Other medical men, perhaps, have gone into the thing in the hope of ridding it of its obvious absurdities; and yet others, it is possible, have been actually converted. The fact that a man is a doctor of medicine is no proof whatever that he is capable of clear

reasoning, even upon purely professional subjects. All of the new pseudo medical cults, such as chiropractic, for example, gather in a few fifth rate holders of real enough diplomas.

But what is psychotherapy? It is, indeed, rather difficult to frame an entirely satisfactory definition, for the expositions of the leading authorities are beautifully vague and there are puzzling differences between them. But at the bottom of all of their rhetoric you will usually find at least one idea pretty plainly stated, and it is this: That the mind is the sovereign of the body.

The Christian Scientists, going even further, maintain that the body has no existence save as an idea of the mind. The devotees of psychotherapy are less courageous. All they presume to maintain is that the mind is the body's boss, and even then they make reservations, for they are perfectly willing to admit that the body sometimes rebels against its boss and that on many lamentable occasions the two actually change places.

### *The War Of Delusions*

We have here a theory that, in itself, is far from absurd. Setting aside, for the moment, the question as to the causation and mechanics of the thought process, it is obvious that mental states have a very powerful influence upon bodily states. The man, for example, who becomes the slave of the fixed idea that he has some fatal disease of the heart may suffer all the agonies of that malady and even come near to death, though his heart actually be perfectly sound all the while.

The psychotherapists attempt to turn this fact to profit by inoculating their patients with fixed ideas of a salubrious instead of a deleterious sort. That is to say, they try to rid a hypochondriac of his idea that he is sick and fill him with the firm conviction that he is as healthy as an officeholder. It is just as easy to acquire beneficial ideas, they argue, as it is to acquire disturbing and harmless ones.

The objection to this doctrine lies in the fact that it overlooks a very important circumstance, which is this: That the hypochondriac's delusion that he is dying of heart disease is very good proof that he is actually suffering from some other disease. In other words, hypochondria is itself a symptom of disease. The perfectly healthy man never believes that he is dying. It is the weak and neurotic man—i.e. the diseased man—who acquires such delusions, and though they may be in a large sense delusion pure and simple, there is always some basis in fact for them, however slight it may be.

Now, the psychotherapist when he rids the hypochondriac of his delusion that he is dying does not also rid him of the cause of that delusion. All that has been done, in truth, has been to take one delusion away from the poor fellow and to give him another. Once he believed that he was mortally ill: now he believes that he is perfectly well, and the second idea is as erroneous as the first. True enough, of course, if we admit the object of the physician to be merely that of making his patient feel good, then we must admit that psychotherapy is efficient. But no sane man makes any such admission. The object of every honest physician must be to cure and not merely to soothe. If that were not so, those patent medicines which put their victims into agreeable alcoholic stupors would be accepted by everyone as satisfactory specifics.

### *Insomnia As A Disease*

The chief campaign of the psychotherapists is waged against insomnia, that horrible plague of civilization. Open any of their textbooks and you will see at once that they make the serious mistake of regarding insomnia not as a symptom, which it almost always is, but as a disease, which it is but seldom, if ever. There are long directions in those books for putting a sleepless man to sleep. He is directed to stretch himself out on his couch and the operator is directed to stand over him stroke his hair, smooth his brow and recite long incantations over him in low voice.

Specimen incantations are often set forth. As a rule, they are mixtures of platitude and nonsense—stings of words that have little more definite meaning than a college yell. That the recitation of such stuff in a low indistinct voice, by the bedside of a weary man may have the effect of putting him to sleep is not to be denied. Any sort of mumbling would be just as useful.

But in the treatment of insomnia the important thing is not to give the patient an occasional nap but to remove the cause of his sleeplessness. Without any treatment at all he must inevitably fall into an occasional doze, but such doses, in themselves are not proofs that he is cured.

### *The Danger Ahead*

It is well to admit here that the causes of insomnia frequently elude even the most skillful physicians—that the latter are oftentimes forced in lieu of any more rational treatment to fall back upon the psychotherapist's attack upon symptoms. But that fact does not prove that the psychotherapists have solved the problem, but only that they are as helpless as the doctors.

The objection to them lies in the valor of their ignorance. Seeing a patient fall asleep, they must be more than human if they can resist the temptation to call him cured and claims of that sort must inevitably impress laymen. The result is a dangerous obscuration of the whole subject—a ready acceptance of the whole hocus-pocus of psychotherapy on the ground that it actually cures—a lamentable revival of that alliance with wonderworking and necromancy which the science of medicine was so long in shaking off and which was so potent for many centuries in obstructing the search for truth.