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More Psychotherapy

Books upon psychotherapy, that new and bizarre “science,” pour from the presses in a constantly increasing stream. A dozen years ago those laymen who felt in their hearts that they knew more about medicine than Dr. Osier were forced to seek satisfaction of their sublime self confidence in faith-healing, anti-vivisection, anti-vaccination, hypnotism and other such miscellaneous and preposterous crazes: but now psychotherapy opens its motherly arms to them and there is room beneath its umbrella for all of them.

The very name of the new cult in truth has an extremely scientific and inviting sound. It makes the neophyte feel that he is being introduced to dark and portentous mysteries; that he is getting the bulge, as the vaudevillians say, upon the common herd. A psychotherapist is plainly no ordinary ignoramus. It would be absurd to class him with horse doctors, acrobats, oyster-shuckers and other such commonplace virtuosi; it is difficult for the plain people even to pronounce his appellation. He pretends (and seems) to be privy to many of nature’s secrets: he knows a lot of things that the rest of us do not even suspect: and the mere fact that they are not true is nothing to him, for he doesn’t know it. It must be pleasant, indeed, to be a psychotherapist—pleasant, but excessively dangerous to the stomach and the heart, the kidneys and the lungs, the liver and its lights.

There is here, of course, no intent to allege that psychotherapy is entirely and utterly nonsensical like psychical research, for example, or theosophy, or spiritualism, or the New Thought, or the use of systems at Monte Carlo. At bottom it is grounded upon ideas that are valid enough, but the difficulty is that its lay votaries are constantly, and apparently irresistibly, tempted to erect those ideas into sweeping and ridiculous generalizations. When they learn, for example, that the queer disease called hysteria often counterfeits the physical symptoms of other widely different disease and that hysteria itself may be attacked (and even cured, perhaps, though this last remains in much doubt) by mental suggestion, they are sorely tempted to ascribe any and all physical symptoms that may appear in themselves, or in their luckless relatives and friends, to hysteria, and to make futile efforts to combat them with soothing, cabalistic words instead of with the sulphur and molasses, the quinine and cold steel which they may perchance demand.

That sort of leaping from the particular to the general, without intermediate steps, that effort to reduce enormously complex things to simple formula, that silly notion that the cure of disease may be turned into a childish trick possible to any layman is at the bottom of psychotherapy, as it is at the bottom of all other quacks systems of healing. The essential thing about every one of them is that it presumes to offer remedies which the ordinary physician in his ignorance is supposed to know nothing about. In other words, each of them sets up the staggering and obnoxious thesis, either in so many words or by implication, that any average laymen, by the simple device of reading a little book may acquire a fund of exact knowledge which professional students of medicine, after a dozen years of hard study, of elaborate experimentation, of assiduous snouting in hospitals, cannot match.

Such vapid balderdash, of course, appeals with great force to a certain type of mind. That type of mind, one may say roughly, is characterized by an enormous desire to appear

wise and a marked disinclination to acquire wisdom in the customary painful manner. Its eternal search is for the royal road to knowledge, the short cut, the master key.

The ordinary man, desiring to become wise, sets out to acquire wisdom by the sweat of his brow and brain. He is willing to devote three or four long years, let us say—and years of assiduous, tedious, disagreeable endeavour—to the science of philosophy. During the whole of that time he spends all of his waking hours in reading, pondering and digesting the world's vast stock of philosophical ideas. When, at last, he closes his books, he knows all that is worth knowing about philosophy, and he has acquired that knowledge, not at one gulp, but bit by bit.

Such a system is altogether too fatiguing for the disciple of the New Thought. He is either too lazy or too stupid (and usually both) to plough through a thousand books weighing their countless ideas as he goes along; he doesn't want knowledge, but the mere appearance of knowledge; he doesn't want to learn, but to teach. Opening Kant, he finds "The Critique of Pure Reason" an enormously difficult volume; opening an ordinary college textbook he finds it entirely beyond his comprehension. So he dismisses Kant and the textbook writer as fools, and concocts some sort of easy formula for himself—concocts it between dinner and bed-time, and convinces himself and his disciples, next day, that it solves all the problems of philosophy.

The exact substance of his formula is immaterial. As a rule, it is a mere string of occult gibberish, such as "The Mind Is All" or "Truth Is the Eternal Essence," or "The Secret Lies Within" or some other such flapdoodle; but at other times it may have some slight trace of intelligibility—enough, perhaps, to make persons who are not quite intelligent give it attention. But whatever its nature, it is always entirely unsupported by evidence. The New Thought, in other words, is made up of conclusions without premises, of generalizations without particulars, of words without definite ideas in them. Its devotees presume to solve the riddles of life without examining them or understanding them, and often, indeed, without even stating them.

Psychotherapy is smeared with the same stick. Its lay devotees constantly proceed from the particular to the general by dizzy leaps. In the face of extremely complex and diverse pathological problems, they offer the vapid master answer that the subconscious, whatever that may be, is to blame—and then proceed gaily upon the assumption that the problems aforesaid have been disposed of. In competent hands, true enough, the massaging of the "subconscious" may have useful, or at least harmless, effects: but it is impossible to keep such wonder-working in competent hands, once it has been set before half-educated folk as a new revelation.

The objection to psychotherapy, in brief, is that it has been erected into a cult, that it has been made a fashionable craze, that it has inoculated thousands of laymen with the false idea that they know more about medicine than Dr. Osler. In the form of the Emmanuel Movement it has taken on a frankly occult tinge. Originally a sort of combination of medicine and magic, it is fast becoming all magic. If you don't believe that, read any of the little "handbooks" that pour from the press so copiously. In practically all of them you will find incantations that belong, not to any same science at all, but to mediaeval necromancy.