Kerlin (I. N.) & Broomall (J. M.)

MORAL IMBECILITY.

TWO PAPERS READ BEFORE THE ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL OFFICERS OF AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS FOR

IDIOTIC AND FEEBLE-MINDED PERSONS.

BY

DR. ISAAC N. KERLIN,

OF ELWYN, PA.,

AND

HON. JOHN M. BROOMALL,

OF MEDIA, PA.

SURGEON GENERAL'S OFFICE 373 LIBRARY

LAKEVILLE, 1887.

PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY,
PHILADELPHIA.
1889.

MORAL IMBECILITY.

TWO PAPERS READ BEFORE THE ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL OFFICERS OF AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS FOR

IDIOTIC AND FEEBLE-MINDED PERSONS.

BY

DR. ISAAC N. KERLIN,

OF ELWYN, PA.,

AND

HON. JOHN M. BROOMALL,

OF MEDIA, PA.

SURGEON GEN'S OFFICE
375
LIBRARY

LAKEVILLE, 1887.

PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY,
PHILADELPHIA.
1889.

MORAL IMBECILITY.

By Dr. Isaac N. Kerlin, Elwyn, Pennsylvania.

Read at the Lakeville Meeting, 1887.

Two divergent views in regard to the existence of moral insanity divide the professions of medicine, law, and theology. The law, incrusted with technique and in bondage to precedent, is, perhaps, almost a unit in antagonizing the admission of the peculiar doctrines of responsibility which the recognition of moral insanity would force upon the courts. Theology, with its adherence to certain dogmas of the origin and nature of sin, presents scarcely a gap in its solid front of pulpits, reared like so many batteries against any invasion from free thought. The medical profession is divided within itself into a conservative body and a liberal body, the latter, lively in this day of scientific research, active in every field of progress, and ready to accept with the most sanguine expectancy the speculations and developments of evolution; this branch of the profession adopts and advocates the newer philosophy of moral insanity, while it is bitterly antagonized by the conservative element,—large in America, very small in Germany, and lessening in England. So that we have the lawyers, who largely make but are slow to unmake our legislation, the ministers, with their venerated accessories of sanctuaries and worship, and a divided profession of medicine on the one side; on the other, a fragment of our own profession, sustained by scattered and exceptional thinkers in all ranks and classes. These last, whether in church-pews or out of them, through charity organization and other direct contact with the nether classes of society are learning what the nature of sin really is, and coming to apologize for it as the result of physical infirmity rather than the inspiration of any impersonal devil. Because at the bottom of this whole discussion of moral insanity there rest the questions of accountability and the nature of sin, therefore the intensity of feeling on the subject and the distrust with which it is approached.

The medical journals of England teem with articles on this interesting subject, the result of which has been a very greatly advanced position on the part of our profession there as compared with ourselves in America. To aid ever so little in a better understanding of this controversy, I have desired to present the subject to our Society, premising that, while strongly biased towards the acceptance of the most ultra theory of moral or emo-

tional insanity, I am fortified by the experience of thirty years with feeble-minded children, among whom it is not phenomenal to discover numerous illustrations of this radical malady.

Moral insanity, emotional insanity, affective insanity, *mania sine delirio*, or reasoning mania, are a few of the various and in some respects inapplicable terms which have been applied to a "mental disorder in which there is a loss or absence of control over the lower propensities, or in which the moral sentiments rather than the intellectual powers are confused, weakened, or perverted." This definition by the distinguished alienist Dr. Hack Tuke refers to loss of control, the word "loss" implying, therefore, a change in the state of the individual which would constitute an insanity. At this point I will say that the condition known in after-life as moral insanity is most likely to present itself very early in life, yet may be temporarily suspended by the environment of the individual, or overgrown by the protrusion of the intellectual faculties and the business preoccupation of the individual; the reappearance of the trouble only coincident with shock, disaster, nervous break-down, etc. I think it will be found, upon a careful study of most of the typical cases of so-called moral insanity, that there had been an eccentric, unstable, eventful childhood, with nervous disturbances such as epilepsy, chorea, uncontrollable paroxysms of anger, truancy, incorrigibility, intractable thieving, and the like; and hence the term "moral imbecility" will better define the morbid state of the individual.

That derangement or disorder of the moral part may be inbred and radical was first pointed out so long ago as when Dr. Rush wrote his early and remarkable work ("Diseases of the Mind," 1812), and it is strange that only a few American writers have distinctly followed. Spitzka, indeed, is singularly and exceptionally clear when writing as follows: "It may be advanced as a cardinal canon of psychiatry that in insanity the moral feelings are usually more or less dulled or perverted. The deficiency of the moral feelings may, however, be of a different kind; in certain cases it may be a necessary result of intellectual enfeeblement, it may be due to an obtuse emotional condition, or it may be *an original deficiency* analogous to that lack of musical sense, or color-blindness, which may coexist with a fair faculty of language and good contour perception, just as that moral imbecility which authors call moral insanity may be found associated with fairly good logical powers in the abstract. An intense egotism is sometimes found to lie at the root of a constitutional inability of the individual to recognize any moral obligation to others. In such cases abstract moral conceptions may be inculcated by education. But the subject of this condition, while he may be able to guide his conduct

by these, regards them as purely utilitarian conceptions. They never become as organically fixed as where they have been developed from that inborn tendency which is the common heritage of normal mankind."

In the last words of this paragraph from Spitzka is contained the doctrine, which I think permissible,—that the moral sense is a primary feeling, resulting from the long experience of the race, and that its perceptions are of the same kind, engendered in the same way, and possessed of receptive and volitional centres, perhaps less localized, but common to large areas of the nervous system, exactly as obtains in the case of the special senses; and as the ordinary perceptions are preceded by inward sensations transmitted from without, requiring for their integrity a healthy and impressible brain-centre, so the perceptions of the moral sense require an impressible and co-ordinating physical basis. (See Bannister, p. 652.)

Hence, as there are persons in whom we discover a partial or entire absence of color perception, or of the musical perception, and others who are partially or entirely destitute of the power of numbers, of distance, of direction, of analysis, of logic, or of any other special faculty,—*nor can the absence be supplied by education*,—so we have individuals who, from some inherent fault in, or some radical defect of, the receptive centres, are destitute in part and sometimes wholly of the so-called moral sense, and no environment and no education will supply the deficiency.

Who that has followed the history of bullet-wounds of the brain has not become familiar with the painful illustrations of the complete change in the moral character, resulting from the local injury: the strictly temperate man sinking into inebriety or alcoholism, or the virtuous man giving himself up to obscenity or sexual excess; changes attributable to disastrous lesion of the nerve-centres? Also, probably, to some of you have occurred cases of grave decadence in moral perception and self-control coincident with the progress of a general disease, or associated with convalescence from some acute disorder. In all of these the condition interprets itself; but why are we less discerning in those of congenital standing? Why call such unfortunates "incorrigible," and, measuring their offences by their perception of right and wrong, fail to recognize an utter wanting of the power of self-control,—the real defect,—which in its relation to crime has been called by a distinguished observer "the loss of the inhibitory power"?

As long ago as 1842, Judge Edmonds, of New York, in simple language differentiating between the faculties themselves, described the condition we are trying to name as follows: He says, "It must be borne in mind that the moral as well as the intellectual faculties may be so disordered by disease as to deprive the mind of its controlling power." And since that

utterance, moral insanity has had its recognition in the jurisprudence of the State of New York, and nearer and nearer are the courts and the bar of that State approaching a safer judgment by inquiring into the nature of the criminal or civil acts involved in any question of insanity, rather than into the abstract knowledge of right and wrong of the individual under inquisition.

But more embarrassing than the cases which come to court are the hosts of uncanny people who never become certified lunatics, although the annoyance of a community, the disturbers of domestic peace, and the skeleton of many a closet; if introduced to public notice it is through some unexplainable and mortifying climax, as the elopement of an heiress with her father's coachman, or the sudden abandonment of husband and children for a false paramour, or the slip in honesty and downright ruin of the reputable banker, his naturally enfeebled will yielding at last to its undue strain; or we may have the break-down in some form of startling tragedy, as a suicide with dramatic settings, or a murder with crimson accessories.

Before these terrible climaxes the medical man could never have been able to supply the facts "observed by himself" that would be sufficient for a medical certificate; but nearer and dearer observers have noted, felt, and feared, and have lovingly covered over their anxieties from all the world.

There are four classes of moral imbeciles, or, I should say, four classes of society largely consisting of moral imbeciles, to whom I would briefly call your attention,—(1) the alcoholic inebriate; (2) the tramp; (3) the prostitute; (4) the habitual criminal. There are other classes which might be enumerated, but they are beyond the reach of any immediate action either of law or of popular consideration.

These four classes correspond in one characteristic defect; *e.g.*, there is a radical lack of will-power to be other than they are, or to do otherwise than they do. They all know the wrong of their living; if fairly approached, they confess and regret their evil courses; they are generally ready to reform, and make promises that are self-deceptive and deceiving. In this psychical defect of instability, and conscious but helpless wrong-doing, they are almost uniformly alike.

Secondly.—They are generally of bad heredity. The inebriate is not necessarily the outcome of inebriate stock, but back of him there is epilepsy, or insanity, or family scrofula, or aristocratic debility, or genius. The tramp and prostitute are not necessarily the children of tramps and prostitutes, but pauperism in some form is likely to have been in the blood, and, more likely still, the infection of syphilis or the poison of rum

may have cursed the loins that bore them. Carefully examined, I believe the history of the Juke family will be found repeated in thousands of the lives of these four classes of moral defectives. Of them all it is said that crime life is less likely to take its origin in heredity, and yet there is much to sustain an opposite view.

Thirdly.—Examining these different individuals, we find that, if there be not original feeble intellect, there is a gradual weakening of the intellectual faculties in nearly all, and many of them, if carefully balanced, will be found of light weight in reason as well as in will-power.

What I have said is confirmed, in the case of the inebriate, by those physicians who are so industriously and hopefully studying Alcoholism. In the case of the criminal, Mr. Z. Brockway, who has made a profound study at the Elmira Reformatory, defining the moral sense as shown in filial affections, sense of shame, or sense of personal loss, reports of 1463 examinations: absolutely no moral sense, 1082 (or 73.9 per cent.); possibly some moral sense, 229 (or 15.7 per cent.); ordinary sensibility, 88 (or 6 per cent.); specially sensitive, 64 (or 4.4 per cent.). Corresponding views with these of Brockway are boldly set forth by Dr. Paul in the reports of our Eastern Penitentiary. Mr. Howard Edwards, a philanthropist of Philadelphia, who has for many years devoted himself to the rescue of fallen women, writes me thus: "I suppose I have studied this subject of prostitution as much as any person in Philadelphia. I agree with you that its cause is mainly mental and moral instability or imbecility, and not downright wantonness." I have carefully examined and interrogated many tramps during the past few years, and am ready to aver that there is the same evidence—almost to a man—that the tramp is a low, cunning, lazy imbecile.

The evidence of insanity occurring in the adult is determined by change in his previous habit of correct thinking and acting by unaccountable perversity, suspicion towards former confidants, quarrelsomeness, melancholia, etc., and, to aid a diagnosis, there may have been a starting-point for such change, as a severe illness, temporary mania, or a great reverse. In presumed cases of moral imbecility the evidence in childhood cannot be weighed, as in the adult, by contrasting conditions in the same individual, but must be established in a careful examination of unlikeness to normal and ordinary child-life, with allowance for neglect, abuse, and unfavorable environments. If the investigation concerns a carefully reared and guarded child, whose conduct is in violent contrast with the favorable circumstances of that rearing, a doubt is established as to its soundness which seldom needs more than the added fact of a neurotic heredity to make the case one of moral imbecility; proportionately diffi-

cult is it to form a judgment if the child be of the "slums," in whom early contamination and abuse may have marred a normal development of the moral sense. To constitute a case of moral imbecility we must have badness without reason, violence without motive, deception without purpose, thieving without acquisitiveness, brutality inspired by a fiendish love for inflicting pain. There may be a clear apprehension of right and wrong, but an inability to choose the right because overborne by the seductiveness and sensationalism of the wrong; there is a perception that discovery is certain and that punishment will follow on the heels of offence, but the ingrained lowness and depravity bear its victim on to his fate, and under punishment he is stubbornly callous or extravagantly penitent, as best suits his dramatic instinct. Often we have to aid us some slight peripheral defect, indicating a central lack or early lesion,—the dragging of one limb, a shuffling or heedless gait, inconstant gaze, partial deafness, jerky pulse and irritable heart, habitually furred tongue, etc. We may find as aids to diagnosis, evidence of night-scares, fits, chorea, etc., in infancy, and farther back still a history of family insanity, alcoholism, or epilepsy. A keen analysis of ntellectual power will, I think, discover in most cases want of average power of attention, a significant feebleness of judgment and indecision of purpose in all matters of a rational character, not associated with the special and controlling impulse; in the latter the attention and purpose are preternaturally fixed and directed.

The moral sense being the latest and highest attribute of our rising humanity, it is the first and most to suffer from the law of reversion to lower type, when from any cause the progressive development of a family is broken in the birth of a defective child; hence these moral monstrosities are often found conceived and born in the best of families; inheriting graces of body and precocious in accomplishments, there is an inherent failure or want of power to recognize the claims of others, which is the foundation of duty, truth, respect for property, prudence, discretion, and all the primary virtues of civilized society; in this declension consists the essence of moral insanity and imbecility.

Coupled with this condition is a singular apathy to the consequences of wrong-doing: the dock and prison excite no apprehension; the gallows has no terror; and death and eternity are faced with sensational stoicism; indeed, it is a frequently-expressed doubt whether the impressions gained by this class from the punishable sequences of crime, as published in our daily press, are not outweighed by excitation to crime-doing; for these people are egotists, who will play their rôle on any stage which elevates them into notice.

THE HELPLESS CLASSES.

By Hon. John M. Broomall, Media, Pennsylvania.

Read at the Lakeville Meeting, 1887.

It is now fully recognized that we are as we are very much by reason of our antecedents and surroundings. Heredity and associations, modified in their effects, to a greater or less extent, by the individual will, make us what we are. Over our antecedents we have no control, but we can to some extent escape the influence of our surroundings. That far our actions are our own, and that far and no farther our responsibility extends. Where is the dividing-line? Where does the effect of heredity cease?

To go one step farther, our surroundings are not altogether within our control. We cannot choose the place nor the associations of our childhood. Arrived at maturity we can change both, but in the early and tender years more or less of the effect of our surroundings is inextricably woven into our character to modify our whole future life. Who then shall draw the dividing-line between the two classes of actions: on the one hand, those resulting from our own wills alone; on the other, those resulting from antecedents and such surroundings as we could not escape? There is of course a distinction between the misfortune which is the cause of the one class of actions and the guilty intention which is the cause of the other, but where is the dividing-line? An eminent English judge, after many years of constant administering of criminal law, was compelled to admit that in a large majority of the cases brought up for sentence he himself would have committed the same acts if he had descended from the same stock and been subjected to the same surroundings in his early life.

We all recognize the cruelty as well as the absurdity of punishing an act committed during insanity. This is for the plain reason that the person committing it could not restrain himself from it. Is it not equally absurd and cruel to punish an act resulting from the effect of heredity and childhood surroundings? Take any given crime, and who shall say to what extent it resulted from causes beyond the control of the criminal? Whatever that extent may be, just that far it is cruel and absurd to talk of punishment. Impossible as it is to ascertain that extent, no human tribunal should try it. Punishment, as a measure meted out to the crim-

inal to pay him for what he has done, should have no place in any civilized community nor under any proper government.

The professed object of punishment is to prevent crime: first, by deterring the individual, and second, by setting an example to others. This latter object is not very logical. We would not seriously think of punishing one man for a crime committed by another, and the propriety of punishing one man for a crime which another may commit is not very obvious. But, grant its propriety, centuries of experience have shown that the example of punishment, so far from deterring, really acts as an incentive to crime. Public hanging, public whipping, the pillory, have all been abandoned for the admitted reason that the example is pernicious, is degrading, that it really increases what it is designed to prevent. That object of punishment therefore has wholly failed, and the other one—deterring the individual—is little better. A boy—for these things commence in boyhood under the influence of bad associations and possibly with a hereditary taint—commits a crime, is detected, serves a few years of sentence, and is discharged. He is without means, he can get no employment, nobody will trust him. He very soon discovers that he must steal or starve. His physical wants force the choice upon him. The earth has become so small of late, steam and electricity have so contracted it, and the newspapers have so lighted up every part of it, that it affords no hiding-place for the discharged convict. Let him change his name; let him leave the scene of his errors thousands of miles behind him; let him commence a new career of honest industry: it is all of no avail. In a short time his reputation will find him out, and force upon him the choice between crime and starvation.

We know what to do with the insane criminal. We restrain him of his liberty until the constituted authorities are satisfied that it is safe to set him free. I would treat the sane criminal in precisely the same manner. Why trouble the minds of ordinary jurymen with the intricate question of sanity? Why put it upon an ordinary criminal court to decide whether or not, and if so, to what extent, a vicious will, cultivated by the individual, caused him to commit the offence? I would discard all idea of punishment. I would abolish the word from our legal nomenclature altogether. I would let the jury hear testimony of the doings of the accused and pass upon the single question whether or not it is safe to him and his neighbors that he should be suffered to run at large. If this question should be decided against him, I would order his restraint, not for a fixed period, but indefinitely. I would change the prisons into reformatories such as New York has tried with marked success and such as Pennsylvania is now about trying. I would teach the inmate a trade

or business, and encourage him to earn his living and to save something for his future use. Whenever the managers of the establishments become satisfied that it is safe to set him at liberty I would have them do so. They should not, however, turn him out, but suffer him to go and return at will for a time. They should find him employment outside, and generally keep a kindly watch over him. If, with all this and without the necessity to resort to crime to avoid starvation, he should fall into evil ways again, and a jury should again find it not safe to trust him at large, I would renew the restraint with a much smaller chance of the authorities again trusting him with his freedom. After a few trials this might result in restraint for life, and why not? The lunatic with homicidal mania and without lucid intervals is restrained indefinitely, for life if necessary, and why should not the sane criminal, who has proved himself incorrigible, be treated the same way?

Remove the degradation of punishment as well as the example of it. Abolish the criminal courts, those frightful schools of crime to the young. Save the discharged criminal from the necessity of returning to crime to avoid starvation, and the percentage of those who would prove themselves incorrigible would be very small. But suppose it should amount to one-fourth of the criminal classes, it would be cheaper, as well as more humane, to maintain that fourth for life in the reformatories than to suffer them to maintain themselves outside by depredations upon the community. One thing is very certain: the influence of heredity in keeping up the ranks of criminals would gradually diminish as incorrigible criminals came to be restrained of their liberty for life. It is humane and it is right for us to say that the incorrigible criminal, the lunatic, and the imbecile shall not be represented in the coming generations.

The helpless classes—lunatics, imbeciles, and criminals—all call for our sympathy as well as our care. They are all to a greater or less extent the victims of circumstances from which the more fortunate of humanity escape. There is no sharp dividing-line between these three. The ranks run into one another, and the individuals are readily interchangeable from one rank to the others. There is a moral defect in all of them, often also a physical defect. Call it moral insanity, moral imbecility, or what we will, it runs throughout all the helpless classes, and is the main element in their helplessness. Being unable to govern themselves to the extent required by the public good, it is our duty to govern them, and that without unnecessary harshness or cruelty.

The power of kindness in controlling and managing humanity is little understood even in our enlightened age. Christians manifest singularly little faith in their own religion. By their treatment of His system they

characterize the Great Teacher of the law of love as an enthusiast, an idle dreamer. But wherever the sublime precepts of that Teacher have been tried they have succeeded. The Indian, the lunatic, the imbecile, the public enemy, submits to the law of kindness. The wayward child obeys those who love it. Even wild beasts are subject to this law. The successful lion-tamer is the man who loves the lion, and his first lesson is to teach the pupil that he loves it.

Before casting Christianity aside as a failure let us try it upon the criminal classes. They are the wayward children of society. Hate them, and they will hate us. Treat them cruelly, and they will retaliate. We have tried harshness and severity long enough, and have demonstrated their failure. Let us try the opposite course. Show them that we restrain them for their own good, and not because we enjoy seeing them suffer, and that we restrain them only as far as is necessary for their good and the safety of the community. I have an abiding faith in the law of kindness, and when it shall have shown itself by fair experiment to be applicable to the criminal classes, Christianity will have achieved its greatest triumph throughout all the centuries.