

The Evolution of the Conscience in Civilised Communities.

(In special relation to sexual vices.)

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That the mental and moral qualities of mankind are inherited to the same extent as are the physical characters is now so firmly established that we have some difficulty in realising the opposition which early investigators encountered in establishing this fact. We may recall, however, that Wallace who arrived independently of Darwin at the idea of Natural Selection, denied that the moral qualities, and even the powers of aesthetic appreciation, were evolved in the natural course of evolution from the humbler attributes of the lower animals, but expressed his belief that they were conferred upon mankind by a special act of the Creator. We may recall, too, that the best years of Galton's life were spent in collecting the biographical material by which he made it evident that the differences which men show in their intellectual gifts, in moral stability and in artistic power, are innate in the stock from which they spring, and are handed on in the same manner as physical differences to their descendants.

Since his time numerous carefully conducted experiments have proved the fact beyond question. It will be sufficient here to cite the concurrent testimony of the method of experimental psychology applied by Thorndike, that of the correlation between mental characters applied by Pearson to English school children, and the genealogical method of Galton, by which C. B. Davenport has been able to show clearly the natural inheritance of numerous special traits. I am not, however, aware that attention has been called to the historical evidence of the changes in temperament and moral disposition which have taken place in certain civilised communities during historical times, and of which it is possible to indicate the selective agency.

The practice of infanticide represents man's earliest attempt to check the natural increase of population for the sake of the economic advantage, which, as Malthus has shown, follows from the restriction of numbers. It has been found to be widely practised among uncivilised peoples, especially where, as in the islands of the Pacific, the evils of over-population are apparent. In these cases the act of infanticide is popularly regarded as a moral action, and in some cases it is to some extent compulsory. In the same way the early Greeks, and the primitive Teutonic peoples in the state of barbarism, practised

infanticide. In Arabia, before the time of Mahommed, female infanticide was exceedingly common, and was even regarded in the light of an honourable duty, in that it relieved the tribe of the burden, serious in that country, of additional mouths to feed.

Among civilised peoples on the other hand, the practice of infanticide is held in abhorrence, and when practised is performed surreptitiously and regarded as a serious crime. The religions of all civilised communities, of China and India, and the various sections of Mohammedans, Jews and Christians, all agree in condemning infanticide; although public opinion may connive among Mohammedans at the act of abortion, or among Christians at the prevention of conception, acts which attain the same economic advantage by less savage methods.

The majority of civilised persons would feel themselves almost physically unable to slay a newly born child, and making all allowance for the effect of use, we cannot but be shocked at the callousness with which savage men and women carry out this custom.

Now it is evident that the natural instincts of the father and mother must offer some resistance to this practice, even when it is performed under the pressure of need. Moreover, we cannot doubt that savages, like civilised folk, differ among themselves in their degree of callousness or sensibility. The feeling of aversion and repugnance to the cruel act must be more strongly developed in some parents than in others, and since infanticide is always to some extent at the discretion of the parents, it cannot be doubted that these have the larger proportion of offspring. In this way there is a natural tendency, wherever infanticide is practised, to strengthen the feelings of tenderness and compassion towards the newly born child, by the natural elimination of those who are most willing to murder their offspring, for the sake of an easier or a freer life.

Amongst wholly savage peoples, although infanticide is not usually regarded as wrong, it is probably not practised more frequently than necessity exacts; because the foresight of the savage is short, and the conditions of savage life do not admit of the accumulation of wealth. With civilised peoples, however, the conditions are very different: the accumulation of property is now not only possible, but is the natural aim of the more ambitious. The temptation to infanticide is, therefore, much stronger, and the corresponding selection of the moral instincts which resist this temptation is correspondingly severe. When we realise that all long-civilised peoples have been purged of their more murderous elements by passing through this period of severe selection, we are in a position to realise why it is that the religions of civilised peoples so unhesitatingly condemn infanticide.

An example of such a transition period is supplied by the Arabs. In the Times of Ignorance we have seen that the pressure of occasional famines compelled the nomads to slay a proportion of their female children. Doubtless they were growing more and more unwilling to follow this custom, as is suggested by the fact that we hear of reluctant parents being urged to do so for the sake of their tribe. But when Mohammed commenced his career as an obscure religious teacher in Mecca, we perceive the extent to which their consciences were rebelling against the usages of their ancestors by the importance which this little

gathering of the faithful, attached to abstaining from infanticide. It is abjured in one of the few clauses of the First Homage, and is repeatedly forbidden in the Koran. One of the first acts of Mohammed after his conquest of Mecca was to obtain an oath of abstinence from infanticide from the Meccan women.

If it be conceded that the selective effect of infanticide is gradually to extinguish those hereditary types of temperament which are least unwilling to conform to this savage custom, a similar selective effect is to be expected from the equivalent act of feticide or abortion, wherever this practice is sufficiently common. The history of the evolution or moral opinion in ancient Greece and Rome during a period in which feticide was very widely practised, will therefore be of some interest.

In the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. no approbrium seems to have been attached to this practice. We find high minded men, of the greatest moral weight, commending its utility. Plato advocates it for eugenic, Aristotle for economic motives; just as high minded men of our own day may be found to advocate contraception. A few centuries later opinion has changed somewhat: Pliny is almost apologetic; "the great fertility of some women," he says, "may excuse such a license." Seneca is more severe: he gives special praise to his mother Helvia for never having committed feticide; he ranks this act among the follies and vanities of the fashionable world. We may see by these instances and by many other less direct indications, that a profound change had taken place in the popular conscience of the Roman Empire, before Christianity was known. But a few centuries later, what has seemed high minded and patriotic to Plato and Aristotle, a venial offence and a fashionable folly to Pliny and Seneca, was anathematised as a damnable sin by Tertullian, and made a capital offence by Valentinian.

Now it cannot be maintained historically that this change of moral values was due to the preaching of Christianity, for it had progressed far before Christianity was heard of. Yet its connection with the rise of the Christian faith was none the less intimate, and in the later stages the question was one of Christian against Pagan morality. The function of the early Church was not to introduce but to confirm with divine sanction, those sentiments towards sexual morality, which had been produced by centuries of selection by feticide. It was by its appeal to the individual conscience, the innate moral nature, that this revolution was wrought by the early Church: for in the Gospel Story there is no mention of feticide. It is further clear that this change in sexual morality was not brought about as an indirect consequence of the humanitarian spirit of Jesus' teaching; for the early Fathers and their followers complied with the dictates of their consciences, with what moderns would regard as an excessive ferocity. The temper of the reformer is shown rather by the cruel law of Valentinian which condemned to death the women guilty of feticide, or to the edict of Constantine under which illicit lovers were thrown to the beasts in the amphitheatre, while slave accomplices were put to death by a draught of molten lead. The extraordinary doctrine of the damnation of unbaptised infants, even if born dead, shows how far sentiments had changed from the spirit of the Gospels.

The Christian religion then, like the religion of Mohammed some

centuries later, came to a people whose moral evolution had advanced beyond the traditional usages of society; and by appealing directly to the individual conscience generated a code of sexual morality in accordance with the most advanced instincts of the times. The supernatural sanction attached to this code has preserved it through the centuries even among peoples like those of Northern Europe who practised infanticide without compunction in the early centuries of the Christian era. Greater and nobler in every other way than the degenerate citizens of the Roman Empire, the barbarians of the North, were yet undeveloped in those instincts of reproduction needed for civilised conditions of life, which the peoples of the Mediterranean had developed. Even at the present time this difference appears in vital statistics wherever equal comparisons are made in civilised conditions it is found that the Jews have the highest rate of reproduction, next come the Roman Catholics, and last the Protestants. The Jews lead because they are, of all, the most anciently civilised; while the Roman Catholics, mostly from Mediterranean lands, have had many more generations of selection under civilised conditions to modify their primitive instincts than have the peoples of Northern stock. In doctrine, too, the same point is brought out. The modern methods of the limitation of population by contraception is condemned by the religious heads of the Jewish and Catholic Churches, whilst Protestant peoples are irresolute without any very decisive moral opinion.

During the latter quarter of the last century contraception became an important factor in reducing the birthrate, especially in the upper classes, of all civilised communities. Hitherto only one aspect of its selective action has been widely noticed: namely that it increases the disparity in reproduction between the upper and lower classes, and is to that extent dysgenic. That there is another and an important selective effect will be apparent to those who have followed our argument respecting the evolution of moral temperament among the Arabs and the peoples of the Roman Empire. When contraception is widely practised, those who find such methods repugnant to their moral nature, will on the average have the largest number of children. Future generations will be more and more largely composed of those whose feelings towards the methods of contraception may be compared with those of the early Christians towards abortion. The greater the economic pressure to which they are exposed, the more severe will be the selection, and the more fiercely and clearly will their new morality be branded upon their conscience. Moral forces of the same intensity as those which destroyed the Pagan Empire in Europe, or which in the seventh century flung the illiterate Beduin as conquerors across half the world, are developed gradually through centuries of hardship, degradation and temptation. In such a period as that which now lies before Europe is prepared the seed bed of a new religion.