

The Necessity for an Exact Definition of Blindness.

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THERE is only one possible exact definition of blindness, and that is to be found in any dictionary. In two standard works I find "blindness" is defined as "want of sight," and that is the one and only possible definition that can be given with any exactitude. If a man has sight of any degree, even though it be only perception of light, then he is not strictly blind; if there be no perception of light, then he is blind.

In our work we are, however, accustomed to extend the term to cases of partial blindness, and it is in these cases the difficulty arises. The demand indicated in the title of this discussion voices a desire on the part of many to arrive at some limitation of this looser application of the term "blindness" to varying degrees of partial blindness. The demand does not arise from any academic desire to furnish interesting definitions, but because of the public interest aroused by the proposed State aid or pension for the blind. Those who are interested in these matters, and who are lacking in professional knowledge, wish us to tell them who are to be counted blind and who are not.

So soon as we come to review these many cases of partial blindness, the extreme difficulty—nay, the impossibility—of arriving at any really useful definition, so far as it relates to the blindness itself, becomes apparent. Vision is a matter of several factors: acuity, field, mobility, mentality, the varying effects of light both night and day, and besides all these habit and custom. By no possible phrasing can we present a sufficiently simple definition that will embrace the possible variations in these several factors that make up sight, and state that such and such a variation shall be accounted blindness. The man who has a defect of the macula of each eye may be unable to read $\frac{1}{60}$ under any circumstances; yet, his visual field being otherwise perfect, he will be as free in his movements and as safe as the best sighted of his colleagues. But the man with a pinhole field and a high degree of visual acuity may be as helpless and as dependent on the guidance of others as the man who is totally blind. Again, there are cases where there is but small fault in the eyes themselves, but defect in the

development of the external muscles of the eyes ; the lack of mobility consequent therefrom presents as grave a handicap as any of these other defects. There are those whose mental condition affects their vision : at one time, under favouring conditions, they may obtain vision of all forms that would remove them from any strict definition of partial blindness ; yet at others they may fail to obtain any satisfactory vision. Lastly, there is the influence of habit. To those who are born with grave defect of vision, or who have sustained the loss within the first few months of life, any remnant of vision they retain is of the greatest value ; habit and skill in the use of their poor eyes, and the judgment of what their feeble impressions mean, are such that they are able to act with considerable freedom. On the other hand, to those who have sustained loss of sight of no greater degree, or even of less degree, in adult years the suddenness of the change leaves them as helpless as though they were completely blinded.

These variations in the conditions and effects of partial blindness render it impossible to gather them up into any sufficiently simple and intelligible formula. But suppose, for the sake of argument, it were possible for us to agree on any such formula. Would the definition present any advantages ? Such a definition would apparently have to state a minimum of acuity, of field, and so forth. When we have examined the eyes of a patient and have ascertained the standard of vision attained, can we say that we have gained any adequate judgment of the value of the sight the patient possesses ? I do not think that this can be affirmed. What we have got are a number of observations, but as they stand they are quite unrelated to life, that is, to the life of the patient, and accordingly they cannot be held to define his state of partial blindness. We have learned that he has a certain visual acuity, a field, and so forth, at a certain time and place, and under conditions of lighting, of mental liveliness, and general health, existing at that time, and probably never likely to recur at any other time. These findings are definite enough for the particular occasion, but they are no indication of the patient's disability in obtaining a livelihood.

Again, let us suppose that we could agree upon some definition. To what use would it be put ? This definition is asked for by laymen in pursuance of certain projected schemes of legislation. It follows, therefore, that our definition would have to come before Parliament as the considered opinion of a body of experts. It would thereon be subjected to the clever criticism of a number of acute minds bent on

favouring one or other extreme of the cause advocated. Every one of these skilled debaters would fall foul of our definition, and shatter its *ex cathedra* utterance by citing particular cases, "known to themselves," of patients who having less vision than that specified in our definition have attained brilliant success in ordinary walks of life; or, on the contrary, others would cite cases, also "well known to themselves," of folk who in their judgment were hopelessly incapable, and yet would be excluded from the embrace of this harsh and "unconscionable definition."

Supposing, for the sake of argument, that our definition did come before the august body of the Legislature. It is quite likely that it would emerge therefrom in so altered a form that we should wish we had never essayed our task, for the change might be in our opinion for the worse and not for the better. This is no mere speculation, it is based upon real personal experience. In 1910, on the invitation of the Gardener Trust for the Blind, I joined with Mr. Wilson, the Secretary of that Trust, in a deputation to the Registrar-General with reference to the collection of information regarding the blind by the census paper. We asked that in the census form of 1911 there might be a change from the older paper in which the entry was given under the unqualified term "blind"; and we asked that for the future the entry might read (1) "blind," (2) "partly blind." We added that if any definition of these terms were required (1) "blind" might read "totally or stone blind," with the explanation "not able to see his way about"; (2) "partly blind," (a) "a child who attends blind school," (b) "adult unable to earn living by ordinary sighted work." The view was expressed that most probably the terms themselves were sufficiently descriptive without added explanation. At the conclusion of our interview with the Registrar and his staff we were inclined to think that the object of the deputation had been attained. But, alas! when the actual census paper appeared, it was clear that we had failed and the first condition of the entry had been worsened, for it now appears as "totally blind." What effects this alteration was likely to produce on the value of the census of the blind for 1911 I have already indicated, for I was able to obtain the census returns of most of the blind children under my care in London schools, and to compare these returns with the actual state of their vision.¹

There is yet one other consideration that makes it highly undesirable

¹ *Brit. Med. Journ.*, 1911, ii, p. 520.

that we should ask Parliament to incorporate any hard and fast definition of blindness in any Act. When once a Bill has passed into law it is uncommonly difficult to obtain any modification of its terms. It is far better in such matters to secure such a general definition that the actual meaning of it shall be in the common-sense of the community and those who have to do with the working of the Act. Our ideas, and those of the community, are always in a state of flux, and with a general definition there is room for variation within reasonable bounds.

Again, would "an exact definition" be of service to those of our own profession who in subsequent years will have to examine the bad-sighted and state whether or no they come within the embrace of this definition? Any definition, to be a definition, must be exact, and the more perfect the exactitude the harder and faster the line of cleavage. In the first place, the task of accurately setting the cases on the one side or other of this line would present insuperable difficulties. In many cases our findings are so much more a matter of judgment than of rigid fact; and an unconscious bias in registering these findings would inevitably influence the manner of their record. The definition might be exact, but the manner of its usage would not be; it would be much more a matter of the good judgment or common-sense of the observer. This is a point to which I shall wish to refer again in making my recommendation for a definition of blindness.

From these speculations I will pass to the consideration of certain actual happenings that should be a good guide to us in the matter under discussion.

Blindness, in a certain section of the community, has already been defined by Act of Parliament, 56 and 57 Vict., Ch. 42, September 12, 1893. "An Act to make better Provision for the Elementary Education of Blind and Deaf Children in England and Wales" reads in Section 15 thus: "In this Act the expression 'blind' means too blind to be able to read the ordinary school books used by children." That definition for its judgment is, to my thinking, the definition of a Solomon. It relates the blindness to life. It recognises the use vision is to be put to in school, and states that blindness shall be considered to be the incapacity to perform the usual work of the school. I know quite well that the definition has been attacked, but the attack is purely academic, and bears no real relation to the facts of school life. It is said that there is no statement as to the nature of "ordinary school books," and that nothing is said as to the distance at which the reading must be

done. The very absence of these desired limitations proves to me the wisdom of the definition. We have only recently begun to understand what are suitable books for children's use, and the latest recommendations have been incorporated in the report of a Committee of the British Association. The recommendations differ from older views, and no doubt future views will differ again from these. But the terms of the Act cover all these variations. As to the point of the distance at which the book must be read, our legislators appeared to have some sense of the intelligence of the magistracy with whom the final and particular interpretation of the definition must rest. During the past twelve years I have had occasion to certify as blind, or within the meaning of this Act, no fewer than 1,500 children, and in those few cases in which I have had to support my certificate in the courts of justice, these alleged difficulties have never been apparent.

Again, it is objected by some that the definition allows of wide variations in the certification of cases of blindness. It is said that children in one district are certified as blind who would not be so certified in other districts. My experience does not lead me to attach any weight to this objection. Many of the children whom I have certified as blind have been transferred to blind schools, both in London and in the country, which are under the care of other ophthalmic surgeons, and in no case has there been a refusal to accept the child on account of any disagreement with the certification of blindness. Further, in my London schools I have had to receive many children who have first been entered at country schools, and in no case have I found it necessary to disagree with the original certification. That experience seems to me to be conclusive. The judgment of the surgeons who make the certifications is equal, even though they are not guided by the inelastic scale of an "exact definition."

In any effort to obtain legislative action precedent exerts a large influence. It is common to decry precedent; but in practice it has the advantage of being the path of least resistance, whilst if the precedent be a good one the advantage is manifest. There is the precedent of the definition of blindness in school children, and as has been indicated it is found good after twenty-one years of experience—it has attained its majority. But there are other precedents from which we may take guidance. Certain people have to be certified under the lunacy laws, and in the last year there has been a large extension of the application of the principle underlying these laws by the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act. Certification under these Acts is very

carefully safeguarded, for the very good reason that the laity are fearful that without such safeguards the liberty of the subject, and perhaps their own individual liberty, might be jeopardised. In these Acts there is no exact definition of the madness or lack of mind of these unfortunates; the whole reference is to the facts of life, as these affect them or others in relation to them. Idiots are those who are "unable to guard themselves against common physical dangers." Imbeciles those who "are incapable of managing themselves or their affairs, or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so." Feeble-minded those who "require care, supervision, and control for their own protection, or for the protection of others, or in the case of children those who appear to be permanently incapable of receiving instruction in ordinary schools." Some of those terms might be deemed dangerously vague, for there are a good many of us who "require care, supervision and control." But this danger is avoided not by an attempt at exact definition, but by bringing into play the lively judgment of personality. The certification has to be made independently by two medical men who are recognised by the proper authority as having knowledge of the matter on which they certify. One is reminded of the saying, "Out of the mouths of two witnesses every word shall be established"; the personal equation is a better safeguard than a rigid definition.

Following the lines of the practice established by Act of Parliament in the certification of blind children, and again in the case of the mentally deficient, I would suggest that any definition of blindness that we may recommend should have reference to the facts of life rather than to any data concerning degrees of visual acuity and the like. Our recommendation should take some such form as one of these: "Blind for the practical purposes of life," or "blindness of such seriousness as prevents earning a living wage," or, in the case of those who have lost their sight in adult years, "formerly sighted and become so blind as to be incapacitated from following former occupation." The actual phrasing of such definitions will be best determined after critical handling by ourselves and by laymen who have knowledge of labour conditions. We might even go so far as to recommend the adoption, with necessary alterations, of such a form as is now in use for the certification of the mentally defective. The new certificate would read as follows:—

§ County.

PENSIONS FOR BLIND ACT, 19 . .
MEDICAL CERTIFICATE.

In the matter of _____ of _____
in the County of X , an alleged blind person.

I, the undersigned _____ do hereby certify as follows:—

1. I am a person registered under the Medical Acts, and I am in the actual practice of the medical profession and approved by the Local Authority for the County of X for the purpose of giving medical certificates under the above Act.

2. On the _____ day of _____ at _____
_____ in the County of X , separately from any other practitioner, I personally examined the said _____ and satisfied myself that (s)he was a blind person within the meaning of the Act.

3. I formed this conclusion on the following grounds, viz.:—

(a) Facts observed by myself—

(i) at the time of examination.

(ii) previously to examination on _____

(b) Facts communicated by others—

Dated _____

(Signed) _____

Address _____

Under such a scheme as this each case would be examined by two medical men independently, the examiners would be practitioners approved by the authorities for this purpose, each would certify his opinion of the case and the facts upon which he based his opinion. Finally, the certificates might be subject to the critical examination of the medical officer of the acting authority. There would be check and counter-check. The certificates would be furnished by men resident in the district of the patient; they would know the circumstances of his work, the conditions of employment in the district, and their two certificates, with the data on which they based their opinion, would be

collated by the medical officer of the authority. It would be difficult to secure a better safeguard for the public purse. And it may be argued that the State would be satisfied with the security of double certification with the added check of its own officer, even as it is in the case of consigning one mentally incapable to permanent custody.

Finally, whatever the Section may determine with regard to this matter of the definition of blindness, so far as it affects the adult population, it is to be hoped that there may be nothing in any agreed definition that will weaken the security of the definition of blindness as affecting school children. That definition is established by custom, and it works well; it is scarcely possible to better it, and to qualify it or overshadow it by any other definition might prove a loss rather than a gain.

Mr. F. RICHARDSON CROSS said that after the admirable papers which had been contributed to the Section, he did not feel he could add much. But this question of the blind would become a legislative one, and Mr. Rockliffe had shown how working men themselves had been agitating for more to be done for these afflicted people. He thought it quite right that legislative notice should be taken of the matter; but there seemed in certain quarters a lack of proper recognition of what had already been done for the blind, and a somewhat antagonistic attitude towards the work both of individuals and blind institutions.

The education of the blind child had been placed on a sound footing. If, owing to defect of sight, a child was not fit for an ordinary school, some other arrangements must be made for him. There was the blind school and the intermediate school for myopes.

Mr. Grimsdale had been appointed member of a Committee before whom, probably, a projected Parliamentary Bill would be considered, in which the word "blind" constantly occurred, and the question must arise as to what "blind" really meant. Ophthalmic surgeons should have some clear and, if possible, similar ideas on the subject.

Much diversity of opinion existed as to what constituted blindness. For example, instructions employed by the Census Bureau for the securing of data for the twelfth Census of the United States (1900) required the enumerator "to ask whether all persons have *good sight* and good hearing—i.e., can see and hear well." If it was found that some member of the family *could not see well*, the enumerator was then