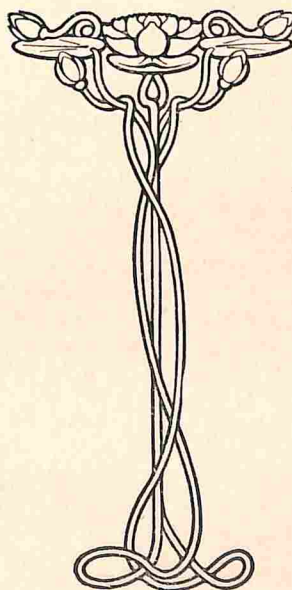


The Causes of Alcoholism

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Recognition in recent years of the far-reaching scope of factors tending to mental unsoundness gives special importance to what the authors of this pamphlet have to say of the interrelation of alcohol and mental disorders, and especially of the influence of alcohol in the environment as a cause of alcoholism by which degenerative tendencies are deepened or rendered more serious.

Grave questions are raised for the United States also in the warnings by these students, acquainted with conditions in Europe, as to the disastrous results of giving children alcoholic drinks. According to much testimony by those who have to do with children in our cities, the increasingly cosmopolitan population of this country is unquestionably transplanting to the United States this custom, which, in the judgment of these authors, contains seeds of social and race weakness.

The Causes of Alcoholism

ONE of the most important branches of psychiatry [the science of mental disorders] is that of alcoholism. Even intoxication, the simplest form of acute mental disorder, as well as chronic alcoholism with its serious mental consequences, not infrequently brings its victim to the immediate attention of the specialist in mental diseases.

Alcoholism as a Social Disorder

But more important than the detailed work of the study, treatment and cure of these individual cases is the task of the physician when he turns to the question of alcoholism as a social disorder. It presents to us a typical picture of a mental disorder of the masses, whether we take it as [1] acute alcoholism, such as occurs at the drinking table around which the cup circles until far into the night, or as [2] chronic alcoholism, the irresistible, compelling desire for the exciting or narcotizing effect of the poison manifesting itself either as periodic intoxication, or as that form of alcoholism which results from being continually under the influence of alcohol, where a new dose is taken before the effect of the preceding dose has passed off.

The Craving for Alcohol That Is a Disease

The craving for alcohol is a disease, of course, in cases where it expresses itself during the whole life-time in serious and stormy attacks which render the alcoholic socially impossible; but it is not a disease when the person in question does not require the care of the mental specialist. It is only the chronic craving, the inability to live without alcohol, continual heavy drinking, that is a disease, not the use of alcohol in general or the use of it in amounts that are moderate and do not injure the health.

In this paper persons are not considered alcoholics who use alcohol occasionally and with moderation. We are to consider here the causes of only that alcoholism which is characterized by an irresistible, compelling desire, which is, therefore, a symptom of disease. The object of the discussion is not the psychology of the use of alcohol, but the diseased perversion of the use.

How the Craving May Arise

A diseased craving for drink may spring from both external and internal causes. As external causes, continued contact with drink and the influence of surroundings may lead to habituation, and that to a craving; social coercion, or bad example and influence from early youth can cultivate in men the chronic, inordinate desire.

On the other hand, the passion for drink may spring solely from a diseased mental condition of the man quite apart from outside influences. Even in the healthy man, when he is continually surrounded by opportunities for drinking, there arises after a time the desire to indulge in alcohol on every occasion that presents itself. But he is deterred from surrendering to every abnormal impulse by the ability to meet

cause of their anti-social tendency is viewed from a psychopathic standpoint. It has been conclusively shown that in these individuals alcoholism is a very frequent symptom, but that it appears in them in a clinical form at such an early age that the alcoholism can not be explained from the criminal course nor the criminal acts from the effect of the alcohol, though, as to the former, it is true that nearly all criminals finally become alcoholics.

Of course the inter-relation of alcoholism, crime and mental disorder is not always simple and evident for the reason that neither alcoholism nor the mental disorders at first manifest themselves actively, or perhaps they appear only as symptoms. But there are cases—and their importance hinges upon the fact, not upon the extent—in which the appearance of alcoholism is a symptom of mental defectiveness, and in which it stands upon a plane with the other expressions of these complexes, the social wrecks, the youthful criminals.

Bonhoeffer carefully investigated about 400 vagabonds and habitual criminals and found that among 69 individuals not yet 25 years old, 51 [74 per cent] were to be designated as mentally abnormal, 29 [42 per cent] were addicted to chronic drunkenness. In another group of 113 who also had become criminals before they were 25 years old, 91 [80 per cent] were mental defectives, 101 [89 per cent] were actually interesting because Bonhoeffer separated the cases into two groups, the first including those not yet 25, therefore young, and the habitual criminals whose course also began in youth, and the second, those who did not become criminals until later. Only thus can the various conditions of the phenomena be correctly and thoroughly investigated. The ones who were older might have become alcoholic during the course of their criminal career; these youths were such at the start.

Experience with dependents is similar. It accords, as shown by the investigations of Bonhoeffer, with the experience in dealing with vagabonds and prostitutes who are largely recruited from those who were mentally defective from birth. In all these individuals one finds an enormous number in whom the tendency to alcoholism shows itself in early life, and before the age of 20 they have a fully developed craving for drink.

Still more clear, if anything, is the parallel between the drink craving and the psychopathic tendency as shown by investigations, among which are the well known family of Zero in the publication of Jorger, the family [Jukes] reported by Dugdale, as well as the family tree made known to us by Aschaffenburg. Even realistic literature has taken up this fact, as in Zola's family Rougan-Macquart. Of 310 members of the family Zero, 168 were defective or degenerate from birth, 31 of whom were alcoholics.

If we try to summarize these experiences, from which it is evident that alcoholism may be a symptom of a tendency to mental disorders, it can be done in the brief words: There is also a born drinker.

A Drinking Bout May Be a Preliminary Symptom of a Mental Attack

After the conditions already discussed come other possibilities, far less frequent and important, in which mental disease is the starting point or direct cause of the drink craving. Thus, in many forms of pronounced mental disorders, in mania at the beginning of a new attack, in paralysis at the beginning of the disease, and in melancholia, a reckless alcoholism, is the immediate symptom, hence the narcotic effect of the poison is looked for instead of these conditions. One factor demands here special emphasis, that is, the peculiar mental disturbance, dipsomania, which consists of periodically recurring attacks of intense craving for drink; in these alcohol is

taken up to the point of absolute stupefaction. Here, in contrast to all the mental disorders previously mentioned, the drink craving is usually for time being the only symptom of disease, while in all other disturbed mental conditions, at least in those closely investigated, other more or less pronounced symptoms can be identified.

External Causes of the Desire for Drink

Numerically more important than the influence of the internal factors as causes of the drink craving, appear certain external circumstances, those external conditions of daily life against which so many of even the healthy and sound are not proof. It is precisely through these that the internal tendency, in the greater number of cases, first crops out. While not every psychopath finds it necessary, though it is natural, to fall into drunkenness, most of them do it under the influence of outside factors. All those in mentally abnormal conditions whom we meet in the alcoholic clinic, or in connection with the questions of heredity and juvenile criminality, manifest in the highest degree a diminished mental capacity for resistance; and they are the *first to suffer from the constant omnipresent seduction of drink*. Moreover, when we consider the hereditary factors in many cases where apparently only unfavorable external conditions are the cause of the drink craving, the effect of drink becomes more easily comprehensible. But where factors of mental disturbance are present, they usually act together with external factors rising from the environment.

This joint action of external and internal conditions is an important fact and carries not simply one individual man to drunkenness by the free use of alcohol, but, united, these factors are able to exert their destructive action upon a whole family, a whole class of the population, a whole nation.

The Foundation of Race Degeneracy

Thus we see these conditions at the foundation of a phenomenon so momentous in history—race degeneracy. We would emphasize the fact that we understand and recognize alcohol as a cause of race degeneracy and that we are mindful of the part played in the destruction of many uncivilized peoples by flooding them with alcohol. The role of alcohol does not end there. Alcoholism is cause as well as symptom of race degeneracy. This process has been typically exhibited before the eyes of the world in its operation upon the North American Indian; and the same is the case with certain tribes of negroes on the coast of Africa. We must not forget that the advance of the whites brings with it a narrowing of the field of food supplies for these peoples, not infrequently making the conditions of life harder, and that their mentality is not elastic enough to adapt itself to the new civilization. We have here factors enough to promote degeneracy; with these native races' acquaintance with alcohol degenerates into passion.

Environment Most Influential

In addition to all the activities of hereditary factors alone or in combination with environment which we have considered, it is environment which has by far the greatest practical importance as a cause of alcoholism. Even the healthy do not always have energy enough to withstand, in the long run, this evil enemy of our strength and health. Training and example, the influence of one's immediate surroundings and environment, drinking customs, social coercion, the ease with which alcohol can be everywhere obtained, the ruinous drinking during work, particularly as a means of enabling one temporarily to go beyond his strength, drinking perhaps during convalescence from illness, want, care, poverty and the desire springing from them for a "care-breaker," all these factors work now here, now there, and evolve their disastrous results.

Perniciousness of Use in Childhood

Among the external factors, a particularly important influence is exerted by acquaintance with alcohol during childhood and youth. More numerous and serious, probably, are the external influences of maturity surrounding the adult every day and every hour which lead to alcoholism. Much more dangerous, however, are the occasions and influences which lead to the craving for drink in childhood.

[The authors here describe in detail the widespread Continental European custom of giving children alcohol even at a tender age until, as many investigations have shown, by the time school age is reached the use of alcohol is a well-fixed custom.

Habituation to the use of alcohol in childhood is promoted by the drinking of mothers and nurses, by the drink habit in the home, by bad housing, poor care and training of the children, by chronic under-nourishment, when the fathers spend from 25 to 60 per cent of their income for drink.

An important factor also is the idea that alcohol is useful or necessary in promoting children's strength and development and for medical treatment, the dangers of which were strongly emphasized by the late Dr. Max Kassowitz, professor of children's diseases in the University of Munich. "For these purposes," say the authors, "we have plenty of other well-established medicinal substances."]

The causal connection between all these influences and the origin of alcoholism is of immense importance, and it is only to be regretted that we have yet no means of making impossible the administration of alcohol in childhood, a practice that is highly mischievous, or, more correctly, a careless violation of the body. The physiological effect is incomparably greater in childhood than in adult life, even in single doses; how much more obviously this lower resistance manifests itself in continued use. In these tender years, mental alterations are much more easily produced; the tendency which is akin to chronic alcoholism in the adult paves the way to mental defect, which, later, leads again to alcoholism (Kassowitz and Delobel); or there is formed in early life a habit which advances slowly to drunkenness.

Disastrous Effects Upon the Developing Brain

A little consideration enables us to see the full meaning of the disastrous effects of alcohol upon the developing brain. On one side stands the fact that the brain continues to develop long after birth, that the fine processes of differentiation are postponed to later youth, and that specific structures are forming up to this time. These exact and superfine processes are, moreover, of a naturally delicate nature, and of special importance, because when normal they guarantee the development of mental ability and particularly of the higher mental abilities.

Beside this is the fact which has been demonstrated by animal experiments that physical growth and development can be checked by alcohol. If the poison enters the body at the time of these processes of development and comes into contact with the brain, the injury done is immeasurable. Alcohol impairs development, especially brain development. All these periods share susceptibility to disturbing influences: childhood, youth, adolescence, and especially the latter period, with its development of personality.

This giving of alcohol to children and youth is one of the most important sources of alcoholism. On the whole road from the cradle to the grave there is truly no other external cause of drunkenness of such far-reaching importance as this: the training to alcoholism.

The Causal Influences of Later Life

What the alcoholic influences of later life lack in seriousness compared with

those just mentioned, they make up in quantity. It would lead too far from the scope of this study to attempt to include all in this discussion. The great social and hygienic significance of these influences, even of those which can not be mentioned here, should be fully recognized. Only a few will be briefly referred to, those particularly which have a connection with the psychological factors, and, first, those especially significant in the origin of alcoholism, which are involved in the extension and practices of the brewing and distilling industries.

According to Bode, one-fifteenth of the cultivated land of Germany furnishes products for the manufacture of alcoholic liquors; every fourteenth workman is engaged in the alcohol industry. That is one aspect of the question, the absolute amount of the production of the producing power. Next in significance is the number of production places. Every such industrial plant is to be looked upon as a focus of infection. The big industry with its large force of labor does not have as injurious an influence (in this respect) as the small plants, since only a comparative few come into contact with the finished product; it is the small places that have the worst influence. The worst condition of this kind prevails where the home distilleries are in the business; the cheapness, the strong concentration, and especially the constant accessibility of the products, make them veritable breeding places of alcoholic degeneracy.

One of the countries where the movement against alcohol is at present conducted in the most far-sighted and effective manner is Scandinavia. It began with the abolition of the home distillery, in a correct recognition of its significance.

Seductive Influences in Other Lines of Work

It is not only the persons engaged in the brewing and distilling industries who are in danger of being drawn into habitual and immoderate use of alcoholic drinks. Other classes of laborers are in similar danger because of the sometimes intense exertion required, or because of the monotony of work which brings a desire for the exhilarating effects of alcohol.

Then, too, in many kinds of work, in many industries, or localities, there is the widespread custom of drinking during work or in the pauses, a danger not to be underestimated. In this custom of continuously taking the poison which puts the men chronically, one might say, under the influence of alcohol lies the great difference in the use of alcoholic drinks on the part of the working class in contrast to that of other classes, where drinking, and especially immoderate drinking, is confined to social gatherings, to festivals and banquets, so far as the matter is general instead of individual custom.

Efforts to abolish the use of alcohol during work have begun to decrease, in many places, one of the most important causes of alcoholism. Such is the movement prevailing in American transportation industries, also the prohibition of spirits during work which is making constant headway even in Germany.

Of first importance in all these causes in producing alcoholism, and especially as regards the alcoholic saturation of public and social life, is the ease with which all kinds of alcoholic drinks can be bought.

Besides these objective conditions, one must not lose sight also of the personal factors that drive men to drinking places where they are subjected to pressure to take alcohol. A beginning has indeed been made in the workshops to substitute other drinks for alcoholic beverages, but not yet to any great extent in public house management and institutions of that nature, and the liquor-selling public in particular, with its social arrangements offers to the subjective desires of the work-

man what he craves, as well as a meeting place for political activity to the thronging masses.

The Influence of Home Conditions

Many other considerations also have an indirect influence here such as circumstances which drive the man away from his home, and leave him no choice but the public house. Among these conditions are bad home influences, incompetence of the wife in household matters. For this reason the training of girls in making the home comfortable is one of the most important measures for combating alcoholism. This matter, and particularly promotion of the art of cooking among the wives of workingmen, has not received sufficient attention. That active efforts in this direction are being made (for instance, schools of domestic science) is recognized; but in this subject of proper nourishment lies one of the most important of all factors.

The thorough studies of Grotjahn are first to be mentioned in this connection. In the matter of diet, alcohol has a formidable influence in two directions. In extreme poverty, the feeling of hunger must be quieted and the man's attention distracted from the actual deficiency of food or the unsatisfactory character of his diet. The bills of fare collected by Grotjahn deserve closer attention, particularly his remark that our industrial workers have stopped half way on the road from a vegetable to a meat diet, that they no longer use enough of the former and do not yet use enough of the latter. The condition of the American laborer in this respect shows a better average. Alcohol has to serve too often as a relish and this shows the importance of what has been said of the cooking art in making the monotonous and insipid food taste good.

The Importance of Knowing the Causes of Alcoholism

In what has been said, an attempt has been made to present evidence as to causes of alcoholism from the psychological side. Such a consideration of external and internal factors seems of some value because in individual cases as well as in general this alone affords us a correct estimation of alcoholism, which is a phenomenon rather than a vice. As in the practice of medicine, so also here, as far as possible, the ultimate aim should be to reach causes. The attempt to find the cause often leads, it is true, to questions that are difficult to answer, yet it often gives to the work a real point of attack. Everyone recognizes that this effort which aims at a prevention of the desire for drink is incomparably more important to the alcohol problem than the treatment of the individual drinker—a procedure that can only be regarded as symptomatic medicine.

In civilized countries we see in the extensive permeation of human society by psychopathic elements an important cause of the wide distribution of this destructive evil.

Again it is often these factors of liability and hereditary taint that first permit the everywhere present external factors to become provocative agents. Therefore, our battle front must advance in these two directions. When we repress the occasions and inducements to drink, and strive to better the surroundings of the people, and to ameliorate the severity of many social conditions, we thereby reduce the need, the desire, the craving for a "care breaker." When we work for education and training we are directly meeting the psychological problem.

As the question comes before us in the light of social and racial soundness, the thought, rather than the possibility of action, points to the slogan of the French physician, "Correct the heredity!"

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