

SHALL COUÉISM SPELL PROGRESS OR REGRESSION?

BY ADOLF MEYER.

IT does not seem fair to brush aside a call to know the estimate of Couéism as seen by medical experience. To show the public and the medical profession what is involved in this latest cult is, however, not very simple. Unfortunately, sound conceptions of science are not merely a matter of talking and writing, but of familiarity with work and facts. Mere discussions about suggestion without supervised laboratory work, practical work and the trial of experience, are about as satisfactory as trying to settle denominational and political beliefs by discussion of differences. Most people are impatient of collecting and painstakingly testing facts such as would be needed for a proper orientation and discussion. The recent wave of uncritical popularization of psychoanalysis has undoubtedly added to the inflammability of popular imagination and to the wide-spread notion that plausibility and desirability are sufficient evidence of truth and actuality. Everybody seems to be perfectly ready to think of the 'unconscious self' as if its existence, in whatever form you might want to imagine it, could no longer be disputed.

The concept of the 'subconscious' is a convenient one because you can make it out to consist of what suits your theory or wish. Freud makes it one thing, Morton Prince another, and Coué yet another; and nobody can give more than a pragmatic definition of the concept. Yet before one assigns to the 'subconscious' the power to determine the sex of a child or the suppression of the circulation to a tumor, it would be well to subject the available trials to a conscientious scrutiny rather than to make impressionistic assertions. It is the physician's duty not to scold and criticize, but to see that the facts required for the development of correct ideas be made more widely accessible to the medical profession and to the public. This is what the few well-organized centers of psychobiological and psychotherapeutic work are aiming at. Unfortunately, theirs is not

quite as exciting and sensational a program as the one furnished by an enthusiastic believer in naive, simple, and in many ways effective scheme and doctrine and a type of work which makes almost exclusively for cures without any analysis of the failures and of the special reason for the cures where they are attained.

Dr. George Draper in *The New Republic* of January 10, 1923, has given us an unusually attractive picture of the constructive part of the wave of Couéism. It is quite appropriate that he should have subordinated in his discussion the numerous flaws of such movements which could hardly survive in homo sapiens if there were not strong reasons or causes at work. Such causes are, on the one hand, a profound ignorance of the data of hypnotism and suggestion on the part of the majority of people including physicians; and on the other hand, an equally narrow and inadequate current conception of pathology, which is not capable of doing justice to the mentally integrated aspects of life. The unfortunate part is that an enthusiastic and thoroughly sincere man like M. Coué, who does a lot of good in his sphere, is, on critical inspection, found to work with some claims which are better than the conceptions of the average lay and professional public, but also with others on which he is uninformed and misled and misleading.

M. Coué undoubtedly learned a great deal under the shadow of the great Nancy school of hypnotism represented by that splendid old practitioner Liébeault, and the professor of Internal Medicine of the Nancy Medical School, Dr. Bernheim. Under the additional influences of an American health tract of the 'will to believe' type, M. Coué's common sense and experience as a druggist and his simple and direct mode of reasoning allowed him to develop a practical plan of work, which has often enough been described. He is eminently a practitioner of his theory, intent on cures, and neither an investigator, nor, in the strict sense of the word, a scientifically trained or scientifically interested person. He is satisfied with the positive results of his ambition, that is, his treatments and theory. The whole plan allows him to wash his hands of the failures. They simply mean that some people do not try sufficiently to make themselves use auto-suggestion properly. His enthusiasm leads him to undertake difficult problems which sometimes go beyond what the judgment of scientifically controlled medical experience would countenance. Warts and fibromata behave strangely and *may* be accessible to suggestive treatment or may favor the semblance of successful suggestion, or actually may occasionally be influenced by suggestion, just as men-

stration can be started and stopped by suggestion in some persons; but we should beware of making hasty promises and arousing expectations on the part of the whole rank and file of the public, where serious errors of diagnosis might occur owing to delay in making a proper study of the facts.

Like Freud, M. Coué discards hypnosis proper and therewith the use of the, to many, annoying or impracticable submission reaction; and he leaves the patient with the welcome idea that he and not Coué is entitled to the credit of the 'cure' and of whatever else takes place. With all his good will and efforts, however, Coué will never be able to eradicate from his patients a certain attitude of mysticism, which is apt to oppose itself to what is scientifically verifiable and commendable, and which will work as faith usually does. After all, Robinson's *Mind in the Making* and many other books of the day make it plain to anyone that man has not emancipated himself from the tendency to believe in magic. American healing cults have shown us plentifully that such a state of faith with its melioristic fancy may be very favorable for many sufferers and more advantageous for a naive getting along than a half-baked and frequently scoffing and self-sufficient rationalism; but it would be a pity to see the more intelligent public and the medical profession retrograde from a spirit of inquiry into one of dogmatic faith. The simple principle of crowding out all the other influences in ourselves by just repeating fast enough some well meaning phrases will undoubtedly appear to work in many cases; but the theory is far from convincing. Even the good result is apt to be a mere smoothing over, and there is no telling what other effects have to be taken into the bargain.

M. Coué's theories and those proposed by Baudouin offer many points which might well be subjected to conscientious laboratory study before they are recommended for public consumption. The criterion of success is a poor guide if one forgets the failures and only extols the desirable results. In this direction we physicians undoubtedly have to plead guilty very often. A large amount of medical practice is based on taking credit for results which any kind of half-way reasonable hygiene would bring about without expense to the patient. Neither the medical profession nor the public realize fully how much 'sickness' is a way of charging grievances up to a poor innocent organ or part, from the bowels to the spine. In this connection one gladly recognizes that a most commendable feature of M. Coué's philosophy is his insistence upon 'Self-mastery of Moral and Physical Health,' a point which the philosophy of medical train-

ing is apt to eliminate from the picture of nature as seen by the physician. On the other hand, the actual investigation of the real working of real disorders is not as simple and inexpensive as the good work of Pollyanna, whether she appear in the garb of 'the will to believe' or of the chiropractor or the good and honorable prescription of traditional bitterness or alcoholic flavor.

The natural selection of the numerous willing and hopeful patients who go to see M. Coué in Nancy and the charming and ably managed setting have a great deal to do with the frequency of success. If M. Coué had to deal with large numbers of patients who receive compensation for being sick and who resent any interference with their invalidism, he would come somewhat nearer the rank and file of so-called psychoneuroses. The scope of efficiency of waking suggestion naturally is limited, but it is large among those who seek help from him, and there is always some zest in furnishing the wished-for testimony against the non-believers. But the thought of thousands of people reeling off the formula with the twenty knots of a string in hand leaves a bad taste.

Nobody wants to put a ban on such efforts as M. Coué's. Indeed one cannot help feeling grateful for his good deeds and the appeal for a revision of tradition. In the meantime the Christian Scientist will feel that he might give credit to the healing powers of religion, and the physician will ask for a more thorough study of the facts, and a better formulation of the theory in harmony with the facts. A spirit of inquiry, and support of those who honestly try to put the experience with auto-suggestion on a solid and critically and experimentally controlled basis, will in the end be the best result of the wave of interest. The most wholesome upshot will be a natural curiosity, a frank expression of questions arising in the mind of the thinking public and an honest effort on the part of those who are in a position to investigate, to give the public a helpful and dependable account of the present knowledge of the pertinent facts and the conditions under which knowledge can be promoted.

Two lines of helpfulness are open: a collection of the views and questions of the thinking public, to be gathered and sifted and interpreted by a competent and sympathetic student of both the public and of auto-suggestion or whatever M. Coué's work involves—this would be using the occasion to fathom public opinion and current misconceptions; and, on the other hand, a formulation and thorough carrying out of the necessary experimental and control work in a center of research that might obtain the necessary means to under-

take the study. With due respect to M. Coué's modest opinion of his own importance in the movement one cannot help feeling that it would be difficult to duplicate the conditions with his whole-hearted self-confidence, the fascination of the public with the man of the hour, and the happy and simple setting of the Nancy home left out. Out of the combination of the analysis of the intellectual needs of the public and the control of what can be experimentally tested something substantial and constructive might nevertheless arise as a lasting benefit from the noteworthy and sincere demonstration of this fourth one of the quartette of great healers mentioned by Dr. Draper. Beside Aesclepiades of Bythnia and Greatrakes and John Joseph Gassner there have existed and exist in every generation many other great Healers; history repeats itself on this point. They will undoubtedly help some persons but are apt to corroborate superstitions and false philosophies. The example of the vivid personality of M. Coué might well be turned into more than a boon of the moment and of his life-time—an occasion for a deeper study of the nature of man and his ills and the means to overcome them at the root, by constructively helpful balance of imagination, knowledge and will, and at the same time an awakening of the public interest in a saner conception of disease and its cure.