

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHAOS

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EVERY now and then some science produces chaos in human thinking. Astronomy upset the old theories of the universe. Bruno bravely died at the stake in Padua, but calmly said to his persecutors, "Light the flames. I foresee that you dread this more than I do." The theory of evolution produced an upheaval in human thinking the echoes of which are still heard in every quarter of the globe. Psychology is the latest science to produce chaos in human thinking. But it differs from other sciences because it effects its own material—its own phenomena. It is as if some chemical discovery should modify all other chemical activity.

It is not my purpose to discuss the present status of psychology as a science. Even a glance at the conflicting theories in psychology spells chaos. But I propose to picture the chaos psychology has produced in certain lines of thinking. It has touched life at its very depths and is forcing us to *unmask ourselves*.

I refer specifically to the psychological chaos produced concerning the *meaning of words*. Slowly but surely the eruption is taking place. Instead of the doctrine of innate ideas by which the human soul was supposed to be miraculously endowed with the meaning of certain fundamental words, psychology now proclaims that *no word ever did or ever will have any meaning that did not come out of human feelings and experiences*. All else is as "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." A few fundamental urges, feelings, impulses and instincts are all that are left of the old doctrine of innate ideas. But even these fundamental tendencies cannot be accepted as any indication of objective truth. In short, the meaning of words never dropped down out of heaven, nor was any individual or convention of men authorized to fix and limit the meaning

of words. Words have no absolutely fixed meanings. Especially is this true in the subjective sciences where quality predominates over quantity or where quality is the exclusive basis of judgment.

We are no longer satisfied with science in mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, and biology; but its domain has been extended to literature, art, morals, and religion. Havelock Ellis would have us inject it into love making. Everything must be scientific, even our feelings and ideals. But how can a *quantitative science* be applied to those fields of human experience which depend entirely upon qualitative subjective standards. Certainly science must mean something entirely different when applied to life and conduct. Standards of good and bad, better and worse, justice and injustice, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, happiness and misery, moral and immoral are found only in the subjective court of appeals—in the desires, needs, and cravings of the human heart, without which nothing, not even life itself, would have value.

Words are only signs of some mental state supposed at least, to be similar in the minds of those using them. But they do not give origin or birth to the mental states. They only limit and make them more specific. Everyone recognizes that these symbols of thoughts and feelings are of two kinds—subjective and objective. But even the objective signs vary in all degrees of indefiniteness. You may say: "Anyone knows what a tree is. I look out of my window and there is a tree, and yonder is another, and another." Yes, but what about the small sprout growing from the root,—only three feet high? Trees are of an indefinite variety of patterns, no two of which are exactly alike. And the meaning we put into the word *tree* always has and always will vary with our experience with trees. Only in the region of *purely quantitative* symbols can words approximate a fixed meaning. The words, *foot*, *yard*, *pound*, *unit of energy*, *kilowatt*, etc., are relatively fixed.

In such fields as art, music, literature, morals, and religion we have no objective standards such as the physical sciences have. We can approximate sameness of meaning only in so far as human feelings and experiences are the same. It is in these lines of human activity that psychological chaos is rapidly developing. In the absence of any objective fixed standards, no one can assert his judgment as right and all others as wrong. Ibsen saw this fundamental

psychological fact when he said: "My book is poetry, and if it is not it will be. The conception of poetry in Norway shall be made to conform to the book. *In the world of ideals there is no stability.*"

I hear my readers, trained in the old way of thinking, say: "What nonsense. For what purpose are dictionaries? Do they not tell us the meaning of words?" In answer I say that no one ever did or ever will get the meaning of a word out of a dictionary. What you do is to fill an unknown term with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of your own life. If not this, you have only two meaningless terms where before you had but one. To learn that X means Y gets you nowhere. But if you learn that X is a symbol for human suffering, you know X just in as far as you have experiences with human suffering.

Let us show further the application of this psychological chaos. Suppose you are asked to pass judgment upon the question: Is suicide ever justifiable? You examine Webster's Dictionary as to the meaning of suicide and learn that "Suicide is the act of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally." Still your meaning of suicide is entirely limited by your feelings and ideas concerning the words in which it is defined. Suppose you are quite willing to stand by that definition and we apply it to the experiences of life. Here is a mother and her three children in a boat. To stay in the boat is to lose all. To throw herself overboard is the only chance of saving her children. The deed is done. Did she not "voluntarily and intentionally" take her own life? Did not Mrs. Strass commit suicide when she refused to leave the sinking Titanic and went down with her husband? She might have been walking the streets of New York today and rendering service to many as was her custom. You will not concede that she, or the mother, committed suicide because there is a qualitative element here which prevents your accepting the definition. But when you have conceded this you have abandoned all hope of any fixed objective standard. Every class has its varying conditions. The standard of human values is all absolutely and completely subjective. Every act of human life which we call good or bad and on which we place value exists but a few moments and will never be performed again. Ever afterwards it exists only in the subjective thinking of men. What seems to be its duplication is another act under modified or entirely different conditions.

The physical quantitative sciences are not so limited. An experiment or a discovery in one laboratory may soon be repeated under the same conditions in a thousand others. But suppose you gave a beggar on the street a dollar this evening. Neither you nor anyone else can ever repeat *that act* under the same circumstances. Neither will the reaction ever be the same for you or the beggar. That act modifies all future acts and tomorrow finds you with modified feelings and ideas.

However, even this is not the limit of the psychological chaos which confronts us. Webster's definition of suicide contains the word *voluntarily*. The psychologist and physician proceed to show us that there are an almost unlimited number of factors that make any strictly voluntary act impossible. These are such as the strength of the original impulses and instincts, the circumstances of early life, habits of thought and action, age and physical health, the secretions of the endocrine glands, the presence or absence of conflicting emotions, the great unconscious forces both of mind and body.

Apparently the law, "Thou shalt not steal" is simple and plain enough for anyone and for all time. But when, where, and how was the meaning of the word "steal" determined? Evidently it grew out of the experiences, conditions and feelings of men, and has and will continue to vary with these experiences and conditions. Suppose I am a real estate dealer and offer you a house for \$12,000, while you are in turn willing to pay only \$10,000. Months later, real estate has greatly depreciated, but you are ignorant of this fact. It is now worth only \$6,000. I appeal to you to buy the property. You hesitate and finally say that you will give the \$10,000 you at first offered. When I close the bargain have I stolen \$4,000 from you, and will I be considered a thief? Not legally, for thousands of such transactions take place daily. But may such a transaction some day be considered stealing? Certainly it may, and ten thousand others.

Public conscience has no objective quantitative basis. It is therefore flexible and may expand or contract—now here, now there. Psycho'logically, the meaning of the word steal is not and never can be fixed and complete. The chief occupation of Socrates was to bewilder his countrymen by showing them the purely subjective nature of art, morals, and religion.

The gap that now exists—almost a gulf—between the old generation and modern youth is due more to the fact that modern youth has become saturated with the introspective variability of all moral standards than to any other one thing. The new generation realizes as no other generation ever has the shifting sand on which they stand; while the old generation is still clinging to what they think to be solid rock—objective universal standards. No one can understand modern youth until he comprehends how far this psychological conception has spread among them.

“Thou shalt not lie” would seem to be a law about which there could be no difficulty in giving a universal application. Suppose we should ask, as Socrates did, “Is a lie ever justifiable?” To answer yes undermines the law at once. To say no involves the most serious difficulties. Such an answer would be incompatible with any justification of war, for the art of war is mainly one string of deceptions after another. A lie is a qualitative phase of human conduct with no objective standard, and only human feelings and human experiences can put a meaning into the word.

When Socrates received from Thrasymachus the positive answer that a lie is never justifiable, he presented cases such as these “At the battle of Thermopylae did not our officers lie to the soldiers and tell them that the Spartans would be there in three days? They held the pass and we were saved from slavery. Was that all right?” Again, he asked Thrasymachus if a poor widow has saved her money and buried it in the right hand corner of the cellar, and robbers should come and say: “Madam, have you any money in the house?” should she say, “Yes, in the right hand corner of the cellar?” Turning to another phase of the problem he said: “Do you think there is a physician in Athens who tells his patients the truth about themselves?”

What is true of these concepts is also true of the fundamental concepts of all subjective qualitative thinking. Some will ask and have asked if we are going to outgrow the Bible and the Commandments. Certainly, we are not only going to do so, we have long ago done so, in the sense that we have given new meanings to the old laws and formulas.

Herein lies the collapse of the so-called doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope. Suppose he is infallible. He must still com-

municate this wisdom to his hearers or readers through words which must either remain empty words or get their meaning out of experiences of the individual. The same thing is true for those who fall back on the Commandments as having been dropped down from Heaven. There is no way to escape this difficulty except on the absolutely false assumption that words not only have a fixed meaning, but that they mysteriously impose that meaning on the individual.

During the Middle Ages, Logic reigned supreme in human speculations, and the whole fabric which it created rested on the assumption of definite meanings in abstract words. In mathematics where logic deals with exact quantitative measurements all is well, but logic is only a delusion and a snare when the syllogism deals with subjective, qualitative concepts. This has been the chief blunder of theology for two thousand years. Geothe saw this difficulty and in his "Faust" he makes Mephistopheles say to a theological student:

"To sum up all—to words hold fast—
For there precisely where ideas fail,
A word comes opportunely into play.
Most admirable weapons words are found,
On words a system we securely ground."

It is shocking to think that for a thousand years the learned world should have labored under the delusion that the meanings of words must be secured by the study of dead languages. No dead language or any foreign language possesses any hidden meanings that may be secured by learning these symbols. Dead languages do not contain the thoughts and feelings of dead people. They are only the signs and symbols they used in thinking and feeling. After long study and by a process of emptying new wine into old bottles we may come to express *our* thoughts and feelings by means of these symbols. In a few cases we may even improve our signs and symbols but the content is still *our thoughts and feelings*.

One of the most useless and even dangerous things psychology can conceive is the effort to discover truth, applicable to our needs, by chasing through dead languages. I once put this question to an advocate of the dead languages. "If I can find twenty-five words the meaning of which you do not know, will you be willing to look up the root meanings and, relying entirely upon such, write an

article for a standard magazine using these words. Yes or no?" He saw the dilemma and said, "No." Even if we could arrive at the thoughts and feelings of the Hebrews or Greeks without corrupting them with *ours*, on what grounds do we assume that they had the truth? Such an assumption carries with it the idea of human degeneration. It is a sorry trade that tends to drag us backward instead of forward. Human conduct and human values have no objective standards—at least none that can so far be discovered. Its maxims and so-called laws depend upon the subjective thoughts and feelings of a people at any one time. Consequently they are qualitative and vary not only with every age but with each thinking, feeling individual. All conduct is coming more and more to be judged as good or bad not only by these general tendencies, but by modified conditions of each individual act.

However, the difficulty is equally in evidence when we turn to the fields of art, music and literature. They all rest upon a subjective basis and belong to the *world of ideals where there is no stability*. The laws of literature and art are simply mental ways of conceiving things; they are subjective and changeable. So long as human intelligence, feelings, and sentiments vary in different individuals, in races, and at different periods of the world's progress, so long shall we be obliged to content ourselves with *approximation to any fixed universal principles*. The more knowledge increases, the more will this psychological chaos spread, and the less will we be hypnotized into formal assent to those who say they know what is best in these fields of art, music, and literature.

Suppose it be a question as to whether Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger* is better. Suppose 10,000 people read the two and only 100 vote in favor of *Hamlet*. Suppose these are teachers and students of literature. Shall we not accept their judgment as final? But for whom have they spoken? Only for themselves. How can they speak for the 9900 unless they can bring them to see in *Hamlet* what they think they see in it? But even then must they not know what the *Mysterious Sranger* has meant to these 9900? Remember that "best" in any of these fields has no objective standard. Its value is individual and consists in building up an appreciative sentiment. In other words that piece of music, literature, or art which does not seem to be an extension of

yourself is not suited to you. *It is not best for you and no one can make it best for you by saying that it is best for him.*

The fact that certain pieces of literature have survived is often claimed to be sufficient grounds to pronounce them the *best*. But have we not evidence in other fields that teaching can perpetuate almost anything? Again, it is said that when a great number of the wisest renders a favorable judgment it is safe to accept this judgment as best for the average. Yes, certainly for the average of those who have *similar feelings and ideas*. But that judgment is subjective and cannot be made a universal law. The same is true of all principles of literature and standards of judgment in human conduct.

Certain general lines of development in all these fields of human achievement may be catalogued and formulated. This similarity and approximation arises from the fact that the human mind is so constituted that under similar conditions its manifestations are similar. But these manifestations are, and have only been similar because human feeling and thinking have varied and will continue to vary. Value is qualitative and is fixed by the human heart and its satisfaction. Even this does not establish the objective truth of these general and approximate laws. The so-called *best* may yet remain to be discovered in all these lines of human achievement. In the world of ideals there is no stability and a great genius may arise in any of these arts and overturn most of what we have thought to be eternal.

In spite of its great difficulty and the danger of being called unscientific by the behaviorists I cannot imagine how psychology can avoid dealing with this psychological chaos which it has produced. In the end it will not be a thing to be regretted any more than the temporary chaos produced by the physical sciences. But he who sees the rapid undermining of the old ideals through these psychological principles, readily anticipates the greatest change in human beliefs the world has ever seen. This movement marks the dividing line between the Fundamentalists and Modernists. The chief fortification of Fundamentalism always has been and always will be the tacit assumption of definite meanings in words. Undermine this foundation and the whole structure gradually slides into Modernism. But Modernism is involved in this psychological chaos

and must trust to the use of scientific methods for deliverance in the future.

Psychology must by its very nature deal with both the quantitative and qualitative phases of conduct—with the objective and the subjective. Its methods will vary accordingly. No mere objective description of behavior will ever satisfy the demands of human existence. In fact, the discoveries in the other sciences receive their value and are ranked on the basis of their ability to serve human needs and human desires—all of which are subjective and introspective. The discoveries of the radio and x-ray would never stamp them as *good* or *great*. No fact of the quantitative sciences is ever wonderful until it receives the stamp of the introspective, qualitative, subjective approval as meeting some of the needs and desires of the human heart.