

obviously not entirely a question of morals, such as for example severe attacks of scruples.

It is useful therefore from time to time to consider the relevance of modern psychology to Christian life. But there should always be present this *caveat*—the practice of the technique or the use of the knowledge acquired by psychology should be restricted to the expert and as far as possible to the Christian expert. The world is at present overpopulated by the amateur psychologist morbidly interested in everyone's dreams and detecting complexes and neuroses in every show of irritation or loss of temper.



CHARITY AND THE NEUROTIC

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G.H.'s letter in the August-September issue of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* has found wide interest. Two priests and two doctors have already given their expert advice on a situation in which an ordinary person with no specific psychological experience or training is called upon to meet, efficiently and in a Christian manner, the difficulties of living with a neurotic member of the family. The correspondents pointed to the danger of being eaten up by the neurotic and admonished those who are in constant contact with them to be prudent and not to mistake for Christian charity a weak, doormat-like attitude which allows the neurosis of the individual unlimited freedom in producing itself in ceaseless speech, the performance of all those many and varied antics of which the neurotic is capable and intruding into the privacy of other members of the family. The nature of neurosis and the correct attitude towards it was widely discussed and, if in approaching the problem from a slightly different angle, I touch on something that has been said before, I beg the reader's indulgence.

As a scientific problem 'neurosis' has been tackled for a long time now. It began fifty years ago with Freud who, through his method of approaching the unconscious mind, has become the father of modern depth-psychology. Since then many workers have been engaged in discovering the nature of neurosis and its cure. While all this work is of great theoretical and therapeutical importance, little attention has been paid to the practical difficulties arising from living in close touch with neurotics. Whilst

the doctor realizes that such a disturbed person creates great havoc in the family, he possibly does not consider it his task to educate the more normal members in their method of behaviour towards the sick person. The doctor is not called upon to experience daily, hourly even, the tensions which exist in a neurotically disturbed family but sees the patient only for a limited time in his consulting room. The gap, therefore, between the doctor, who in the security of his profession can more easily maintain an objective and detached attitude, and that of the harassed family, who must have the neurotic always with them, is not easy to bridge. Doubtless G.H. and all those in a similar position feel that, with a little advice and direction, they too could and should do something to help their less fortunate members and themselves. Perhaps some have already looked for such direction in the form of a book in the hope that it would give principles to guide them in their attitude and behaviour in a home where, at any moment in any day, relationships may become upset by neurotic tensions and explosions. Such a book has still to be written and if ever it were its value would be questionable because in psychology, even more than in any other science, the axiom that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing' applies. G.H. does not wish to do the work of the doctor or psychologist whose work is to deal with the disease *directly* and bring the patient to a point where he can reform his falsely orientated psychological system. He obviously wishes to take part in the curative process, however, and either by his personal experience or his natural insight he points to a wide field in which a lay person, in a kind of lay-apostolate, can give invaluable help *indirectly* to the neurotically disturbed for he can tackle that most important element in nervous diseases, the environment.

I propose to discuss two factors which I think will go a long way towards answering G.H.'s questions. The first factor concerns the individual inner attitudes which create the psychic climate of the family and the second deals with the environment of external circumstances. The active, energetic and rather more extraverted type of person may, perhaps, look upon the first point as of lesser value than the second, but he will be well advised not to make too hasty a judgment for each point has values which complement the other.

With regard to my first point there is very little advice to be

given on what one can 'do' or 'not do'. It is rather a matter of what one can or cannot 'be'. Success or failure depends with nervous people primarily and to a great extent on the qualities of the personality. A person's 'healing powers partly, sometimes largely, depend on the impact of the personality, on what he is and believes'.¹ Psychology has been called, and rightly, a method of re-education. In the educational world the central problem, which has never been tackled in a practical way, is the 'education of the educator'. This tenet is particularly applicable in the field of psychology. The parents, relatives and friends who live with neurotics should, therefore, take a good look at and into themselves. Psycho-analysis is, of course, not suggested but it will be worthwhile to remember relevant principles. 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect', said our Lord. He does not ask for perfect actions; they will follow by necessity (as day follows night) in relation to the standard of perfection attained. Actions that are right, good and helpful arise spontaneously from an attitude which is sound, strong and well-balanced. G.H.'s quotations, 'If any one demands your coat, give him your cloak also' and 'If he compels you to go a mile, go with him twain', have to be understood in this sense, for separated from the true source such actions have little meaning or value and might even be dangerous. Only too often they merely demonstrate the pride that is felt in the exercising of Christian charity and the remoteness of the real goal is hardly realized. The neurotic, being far more sensitive than the ordinary person, will immediately sense any artificiality; he will react with deep bitterness if he sees that kind words and charitable actions are merely part of a 'treatment'—in other words, are 'put on' for a purpose and are not the expression of a genuine charitable attitude. Furthermore, honesty and sincerity, qualities essential in our relationship with nervous people, require to be accompanied by an understanding of the nature of neurosis.

The neurotic, as G.H. rightly remarks, is ill and should not be judged morally, for the neurosis is not the patient's fault, he has not brought it upon himself deliberately. Although his behaviour and reactions may frequently give an opposite impression, the neurotic longs to be normal. Accusing a person of being weak-willed, telling him to pull himself together and make an effort to

¹ Sir Richard Livingstone: *Br. Med. Journal*, 1955, p. 503.

do better may be suitable treatment for a normal person, but for a neurotic it is not only unsuitable but, more often than not, quite unjustifiable since he is not in charge of the situation. He is in the tragic position of being caught in a trap from which he is unable to escape unaided but is swung round and round in the same narrow ego-centred psychological system where, in isolation, he lives cut off from the normal feeling reactions most people experience. Although the direct feelings, such as joy and sorrow, love and hate, so to speak, by-pass the neurotic, they are, nevertheless, part of those life processes which follow each other in rhythmic sequence. The neurotic's reactions to these experiences as they occur in his own inner, private emotional world may often promote behaviour which, to the outsider, unaware of the inner complications, appears in such forms as sarcasm, cynicism, sickening sentimentality, negation or aggression. It will often produce the pseudo-tragic who seems to enjoy his misery. A clearer insight into his nature shows that all these are but poor surrogates for the spontaneous positive feelings he has missed. Such a person genuinely suffers under the tyranny of his psychological system and longs to be free. He needs to be understood, to be helped. Arguing and talking at him and trying to convince him intellectually of his unreasonable behaviour will have no positive result. It is common knowledge that even with normal people such an approach is usually ineffective; hence the proverb: 'Convince a man against his will, he is of the same opinion still'. A real understanding, a sympathetic feeling into the other's situation that is free from emotional entanglement with his problems, respect for the dignity of his personality and opinions are some of the fundamental factors which may help the neurotic to accept himself and look out upon the world with confidence and freedom. The neurotic, if enveloped by the atmosphere such an attitude creates, will in consequence feel less frightened and resentful and grow brave enough to venture out of his isolation. The lay person, familiar with the ramifications and distortions of the neurotic nature, will carefully guard against moral judgments colouring his attitudes. We all have a strong inclination to bring moral judgments to bear upon others but there is a far greater propensity to pass judgment upon the neurotic than upon the normal person. It is an insidious tendency and I feel, that, un-awares, G.H. was motivated by it when he, rather reluctantly,

suggested that 'neurosis' might be the 'modern form of plague'. This analogy is tempting but correct only in so far as both, plague and neurosis, are diseases. However, it should not be forgotten that the plague is an illness of a particular nature and that, in medieval times, it was regarded as a scourge, the manifestation of divine vengeance and punishment. I am sure that G.H., aware of their presence, would not allow these moralistic undertones, which the neurotic would detect immediately, to influence his idea of and attitude towards neurosis. Neurosis is not a plague, it is rather the modern equivalent of conditions which in previous times was referred to as 'melancholy'. Also G.H., quite naturally, seems to be interested in and, perhaps, a little afraid of the infectious nature of psychological disturbances. It is true they have this characteristic but the disease is not transmitted by an external agent, that is to say by a bacillus, as it is in infectious conditions. When a psychological illness is 'caught', nothing new is induced but an inherent psychic mechanism which responds to the infecting psychic power is triggered off. It is necessary for everybody to guard against this effect. The sensitive people, of whom G.H. speaks, are in particular danger of response.

The correct practical attitude to neurosis further demands the avoidance of drawing too sharp and distinctive a line between the neurotic and the normal. These terms are used for lack of finer definition. Actually both, neurotic and normal, are in the same boat and, as Dom Oswald Sumner said, are suffering from the result of original sin or, speaking in psychological terms, from a disintegrated psyche, and any difference is only one of degree, not of kind. Those who are normal and well-adjusted and, therefore, not classified as neurotic, do, of course, exist but, perhaps, sometimes only because they have met with happier circumstances. They have found or were placed in a milieu or lived in a period to which their particular nature was suited. If by circumstances such an apparently well-balanced person were forced to live under uncongenial and frustrating conditions, a hidden neurotic pattern might manifest itself in symptoms which the so-called normal person would consider impossible for him to exhibit. But the story of many P.O.W.s gives ample proof of the fact that, at least temporarily, healthy people may react in a neurotic way. Looking at our family neurotic, fixed in his psychic system, we should avoid saying or even thinking (perhaps in a pharisaic

manner): 'He is neurotic and I am normal'. Rather should we say: 'But for the grace of God. . .'.

The ideas so far presented, if understood and put into practice, will help to create an atmosphere in which a more objective view can be taken of the neurotic. This, in turn, will lessen the tension of negative emotional entanglements. It is, of course, very difficult to maintain the right attitude while family life with its responsibilities makes so many demands. 'How on earth', G.H. may well say, 'can one practise these good precepts when one is neither a saint nor a super-man?' Answering this question brings me to the second point, the factual climate of the environment.

The family, we Catholics hold, is a sacrosanct institution. It is the fundamental unit of all social life and should be kept strong and sacred. We all know these statements to be true, but when we look at the small and almost miserable units which nowadays exist, we perhaps ask: 'Do they really deserve the name of Family?' It might be wise to look at this fact and admit that the family has been sacrificed on the altar of modern civilization and is now only a travesty of the strong, large, protective unit which formerly a man was proud to refer to when speaking of his 'people'. In olden times the family had a head, the respected *pater familias* whose opinion was law for its members. Children were born, lived, whether sick or healthy, and died within its circle. When they married, they did so not so much as individuals but as members of the family. It was the centre of life and, as a magnet, attracted and held the members. Even the feuds between families exemplify the strength by which the individuals were identified with the soul of the family. This powerful, solid structure gave protection and security. If one of the members was difficult or 'melancholic' he was carried by the collective of the family. The influence of such a one, straining our modern homes, came to nothing in the strong and sane atmosphere of the group. No psychologists were required, for any necessary cure was provided by life itself in its free and natural functioning through the rich and varied interplay of the individuals comprising the group. One can easily imagine that the effect of many children upon each other, not in overcrowded houses but in the natural environment of life on farms or in small towns, had a corrective and formative influence and that a difficult nature, except in extreme cases, was

absorbed easily by the family without damage. Modern family life runs on different lines. The *pater familias* scarcely exists. The emancipation of women has influenced the position man has held in the world for thousands of years; even his status in the family is involved. The modern family is small, consisting only of three or four members, seldom more, and all dominated by the attractions and demands of modern life. The family has little to offer and its members are driven to look for an interest or centre outside. When a psychologically disturbed person is set in so small a circle, the undiluted tension and strain, that is imposed upon the remaining few of the family, creates a situation which may become unbearable. There is no strong collective to help the modern melancholic who in a group of eight or ten had a far better chance of finding sympathetic and understanding friends. Now everybody turns away or has no time. Sensitive and difficult, the sick person soon finds himself isolated with his problems, his fears, his neurotic reactions.

A comprehensive survey of the impact of family life on neurotic conditions cannot, of course, be given in a small article. I do not wish to convey the impression that the small family alone is responsible for the cause and maintenance of neurosis, since there are many other contributory factors and neurosis occurs in large families too. But it must be recognized that the influence of the modern small family is an important element. To claim that the obvious solution to this particular aspect of the problem is to increase the family gives no satisfactory answer, for this has been said so often before. It is preached, apparently and unfortunately with no avail, by priests and laymen who are aware of the seriousness of the signs of the present day. It might, of course, be possible to increase the size of the family by adoption or by taking into it friends and acquaintances. This, however, would work only in rare and exceptional circumstances after long periods and, perhaps, many experiments. Besides, G.H., being a practical person, will hardly be satisfied with advice that could work only on a long-term policy of this description. He asks for help here and now. There is a more practical answer but it is also more drastic. Instead of perpetuating a situation in which the whole family suffers and which, in the circumstances, cannot be dealt with in spite of all good intentions, the wise suggestion which has often been followed with great success is separation. This breaking

away is not an admittance of defeat but a facing of facts. The neurotic exists as an outsider in his family unsuited to the environment in which he lives. It is not true that the present-day family, unless it is large and of the older type, is unquestionably the best place for everybody. Natures and temperaments clash, even though they be of the same flesh and blood. It is possible, therefore, that the neurotic will be far better off in another environment. Actually this is a time-honoured solution, for religious orders, when confronted by the problem of a difficult member, have often made use of it by sending the ill-fitting one to another house. A difficult or neurotic person may be a nuisance with one set of people but a blessing with another. But if it is important that a separation should be arranged it is also important that it should be done in the right spirit. Were it done grudgingly as a punishment or as if a great tragedy were taking place, it would, of course, be of very little value. Although no plant, animal or human being can thrive in a soil or climate to which it is not suited, the essential transplanting must be judiciously effected. The wrong climate is not necessarily the family circle. It can be the job, or an irritating neighbour, sometimes the lack of a hobby and some form of artistic expression, or perhaps it is contact with animals that is needed. Even the meteorological climate has to be taken into consideration, since we know of the depressing or elating effect of atmospheric conditions.

To sum up I would say that from the many practical suggestions that have been made in this correspondence G.H. will surely find one or more ways of improving the disturbed family situation. It is important to bear in mind that the right attitude and the right environment are essential factors. There is one point more I would like to bring to the notice of readers. It is that psychology has often been accused of encouraging sentimentality, weakness and indulgence. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Psychology is a new and specific method of education which the neurotic needs. He must feel that he is being guided firmly. Strict handling is necessary but, as Henri de Lubac says, there are 'two ways of being strict: one that is unjust and arises from lack of understanding, and the other is a requirement of love itself; the first increases evil, the second produces good where there was none before.'²

² Catholicism, page 149