

THE ORIGIN OF SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATIONS

TOM A. WILLIAMS, M. B., C. M.

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Read at the 7th Annual Meeting of the American Psychopathological Association, New York, May, 1915.

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THERE is a general impression that the explanations of natural phenomena, including human destinies, to which the term superstitious is given are usually attributable to the vestiges of traditional cosmogonies of our tribal ancestors handed down to children at the knees of their parents or guardians. This explanation however, is only true of a portion of the beliefs which we call superstitions. The demand for superstitious explanations depends upon psychophysiological tendencies of the human organism, the root of which is comprised in the affect which we call craving. This theorem I have tried to develop as follows:—

I

Craving is a sign of physiological need. It is a sensory phenomenon, of which, however, explicit awareness cannot always be discovered. It is conspicuously noticed in cases of disturbance of the body secretions, such as occurs in over-function of the thyroid gland. It is regarded as a crude body-consciousness that something is the matter. In motorial organisms it causes visible reaction: this expresses itself in what is termed restlessness. But the unrest may show itself by a fixation more particularly in the muscles of emotional expression, although the manifestation is not confined to these; shallow respirations and restricted amplitude of movement in limbs and trunk may be observed also. In cerebrate animals the reaction of the individual is under the guidance of preceding impressions stored in the pallium and known as memories; whereas in the animals without a pallium all reaction is accomplished through stable mechanisms known as instincts. Both of these types of reaction are tropisms merely; but the former are labile, conditionable; whereas the latter cannot be modified. The science of conditionable reactions of cerebrate animals is called psychology, and the means by which the reactions are influenced are called psychogenetic, whether these are healthy or diseased. It must not be forgotten, however, that the genesis of a psychological disturbance may be purely somatic, although the manner in which the reaction shows itself is contingent mainly upon the features of the individual which have been derived from previous sensory impressions and their resultant motor reactions commonly known as experience. It is the influence of these upon the hereditary dispositions of the individual which constitute what is known as "make-up" or character; and it is this which determines the form which reaction to stimulus must take, whether the stimulus is purely psychological or somatic.

Now physiological discomfort is an experience universal at one time of life or another; but the reaction to it is infinite in variety; and while part of it depends upon the congenital dispositions which are the common property of humanity, a larger part is contingent upon the psychogenetic factors which have stamped the individual.

II

Now an influence which has been of great significance to every human being since the traditional period, at least, has been the concept of the universe regnant at the period of that individual's life. The insistence by its protagonists upon this concept as the ultimate motive of human endeavour made its acceptance almost universal at periods when it was the custom to lean upon the dicta of authority for guidance in life even when blind obedience was not the rule. Now in natural affairs, inconvenient questionings and scepticisms towards

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dogmatism would ultimately reach truth. But as inaccessibility to verification of what was called supernatural made authority, rather than investigation, its criterion, excommunication from the tribe would still all criticism.[1] Thus every act of life became permeated by motives, originated in arbitrary interpretations of a super-nature.

[1] A dramatic study of this occurrence is presented by Grant Allen in "The Story of Why-Why" in his book "The Wrong Paradise."

These influences were specially conspicuous concerning the difficulties of man's almost blind struggle against the uncomprehended astronomical and geodetic phenomena marvelled at and fled from, as well as the pestilences which ravaged him. In his sociological affairs too, every act or thought became imbued with relationship to an extraneous power.

It is by these social and physical phenomena that the greatest appeal is made to the states of feeling termed emotions and sentiments. So that it became the custom to invoke, concerning ill states of feeling, the reference to a supernatural influence. Thus, from the cradle up, the ordering of social relationships was made dependent upon the simple expedient of the supernatural extraneous agent, rather than upon the more difficult and elaborate analysis and synthesis which would have been required for a proper investigation of each perturbing circumstance in its relation to life as a whole. The power of this influence was inversely proportional to the resiliency and tenacity as well as the general well-being of the individual.

But not only is reference to the supernatural favoured by traditional cosmogony, but because of certain psychological features of the individual himself there is a tendency towards supernatural explanations of the introspective observations. The Occasions of introspection of this kind are two, and I am not speaking of the inculcated introspection of the moralists. One of these Occasions is the self-examination into his conduct which is a normal character of a thinking being. This may give rise to supernatural explanations even when the introspection is not determined by the tradition of which I have already spoken.

The second kind of Occasion demanding introspection, is the autochthonous emanation of feeling of unaccustomed character. Such feelings occur at the physiological epochs;—but at these times they are readily explained in a familiar and simple way, and hence no supernatural agency is usually invoked. A similar explanation is made readily enough in cases of evident bodily disease, even where mental symptoms are prominent, for it is no longer the custom to speak of demon-possession even in the acute deliria. But even where no physiological epoch or clearly defined physical disease stands forth, unusual feelings are no uncommon phenomenon, and they demand explanation. Such occur conspicuously in the psychopathological syndrome so completely described by Janet under the term psychasthenia. Persons thus afflicted feeling an incapacity and an impediment to their free activity and not recognizing that they are sick, endeavour to interpret their feelings. Of course, the interpretation varies somewhat in accordance with the nature of the feelings, and with the person's information about the world and his psyche. But quite apart from modifications of this type, I have found it very common for patients to declare "I feel as if there was another person in me," or "I feel compelled as if by another agency to act thus." The explanation of a supernatural agent weighing upon them becomes very easy. For the purpose of this discussion, it is not important whether psychasthenia arises purely from degeneration of structure, or from faults in the chemistry of the plasma which bathes the nerve structures, or whether it is a purely psychopathological condition to which the physical phenomena are secondary, as some would have us believe. Our object is merely the setting forth of the fact that it is a diseased condition which disposes its victim towards metaphysical explanations.

It is a sort of uneasiness which prevents comfort in the feelings of certainty, in the operations of the intellect and decision of action. The patient finding himself abulic, and perhaps too critical minded to accept the mundane supports in his vicinity, seeks a solace in that which to him seems powerful because incomprehensible, that is to say in something supernatural.

For this, it is not essential that the victim's mind be pervaded by the infantine cosmogony which parades often as religious truth. Without anything of the sort, there may arise naive interpretations, hardly even having explicit reference to supernatural agents. For example, a patient may say "If I begin on Friday, a certain undertaking will fail," "If I do not turn my vest twice, misfortune will occur," "It is incumbent upon me to turn round in my chair, or the negotiations will fail." The enumeration of expedients would be useless. The above are from three different patients, one a boy of fourteen now completely cured; the second from the son of a prominent public man now quite restored to health; the third from a case still under care. In none of these was the bodily state of importance,

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the psychological reactions were the sole object of therapeutic effort, and their ordination was accomplished by purely psychological means.