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Psychological Problems of the Ageing Personality

By Dr. A. L. Vischer, Basle

The necessity for medical science to devote more attention than hitherto to the problem of old age and of ageing requires no special urging. The statements of Prof. *F. A. E. Crew* in a recently published paper apply not only to the changing structure of the population of Scotland. They are equally valid for other countries of the British Commonwealth, and for Switzerland, too, for that matter.

Anybody who has occasion to observe old people closely, soon realizes that the study of old age and of growing old meets with very great difficulties. Let us compare a group of young people with a corresponding number of aged individuals. The young people will show differences of growth and constitution ; nevertheless we find no difficulty in comparing them, and in studying the signs of development, of puberty. We can make comparative observations on the physiology of youth. In old people, on the other hand, we shall soon find that physiological observations are impaired by pathological conditions. As Sir *Francis Fraser* recently stated, "pathological conditions are generally present in addition to old age, and it is difficult to differentiate between them. Therefore clinical research on physiological ageing is practically impossible."

The phenomena of old age and of involution rarely appear alone, they are nearly always overshadowed or accompanied by pathological processes. Moreover, all comparative research is complicated by the fact that every aged individual is a separate problem ; he represents the sum of his own physical past. All the diseases and accidents which he has experienced in the course of a lifetime, have left their mark upon him. I wish to draw attention to this characteristic of all research on ageing, before I pass on to the subject of this paper.

The same applies also to the psychological changes of old age. These can only be correctly understood, if we are quite clear in our minds that such changes as a rule take place in a body no longer intact. The old Roman maxim "*mens sana in corpore sano*" is no help to us here. Rather must we seek to ascertain what psychological reactions are produced by

the physical defects and diseases of old age. Those who seek to adhere strictly to the letter of the Roman maxim quoted above, who postulate the inseparability of bodily and mental health, will soon find that they have effectively obstructed their own understanding of the aged. Like the ancient Romans they will draw the conclusion: *de ponte*, over the bridge. "The debt of our civilization", says Logan Pearsall Smith, "to the ancient Greeks is of course beyond all calculation, but in one respect we have no cause to thank them. Their adoration of the youthful human form, in contrast to the Eastern idealization of venerable age, has put a kind of blight on human life". This fact finds expression in many psychological studies devoted to the aged, in which stress is laid almost exclusively on the symptoms of decline. Interesting though the results of these tests doubtless are, they have taught us but little about the specific mental attitude of the subjects. Psychology does not merely mean the recording, adding, and stringing together of figures, it is the knowledge of the mental life of man, both in its elementary principles and in its most subtle reactions. Many old people feel themselves that their minds undergo a development differing from that of their bodies. When sixty-five years of age Rousseau expressed this feeling in the following words: "Mon corps n'est plus pour moi qu'un embarras, qu'un obstacle, et je m'en dégage d'avance autant que je puis." Goethe, too, that life-long student of Nature, came to realize from the experience of a long life that in our youth we live *through* our body, whilst in old age we are forced to live *against* it. The same observation is recorded by the Italian physiologist Gaetano Viale in his "Fisiologia della vecchiaia". He states there: "I dare maintain that a certain degree of independence between body and mind may exist, particularly when we consider the higher mental and spiritual activities."

Furthermore, psychologists must bear in mind the fact that old people carry with them the products of their entire thinking past, which we designate as experience. In describing a certain period of life, one is inclined to divorce the individual from the current of life which is always bearing down on him and flowing from under him. An organism deprived at duration is unthinkable. The constant motion which is reality is replaced by an abstraction, existing, as it were, in a vacuum. The transitory phase under observation must not lead to the formative influence of the subject's past history being overlooked. At any given point, the course of a life, adding experience to experience, creates a picture of the individual at that moment, a cross-section through his personality. But this section does not do justice to the constantly evolving entity of the life as a whole. If we undertake to examine the concluding phase of a

life, we must not neglect its earlier course. No understanding of old age is possible without considering the preceding phases which lead up to it, that is to say, the longitudinal section of the personality under observation. Old age as a psychological problem must be allotted its place within the psychological problem of the entire life.

In the course of a lifetime the consciousness of the ego is subjected to constant change. The young person asserts his youth; from its beginnings at the time of puberty he develops it in adolescence, and even demands it as a right. The old man on the other hand knows that he is old, and is conscious of being in a definite objective situation. Old age appears to him as the final stage of a development of which he is fully aware. Senectitude has unmistakable objective characteristics, but it is not a phenomenon which becomes manifest over night. *Being* old implies a preceding stage of *growing* old, of ageing, that is to say a development before old age.

I should like to make the attempt to describe to you the experience of certain psychological changes, and to give you a few indications from the point of view of an understanding psychology, of the manner in which the experience of time undergoes a change in ageing people. The passage of time, the time actually lived, and subjective time or "*le temps vécu*", as Minkowski says, all play an important part in the mind of the ageing individual. Again and again we hear old people remark that time passes more quickly than their youth. The French psychologist *Pierre Janet* has attempted to derive a law from this changed feeling for the passage of time: The length of a given period of time appears to the individual to be in inverse ratio to the total length of his past life. A child of 10 years estimates a year as one tenth of its life, a man of 50 years estimates a year as one fiftieth of his life. The explanation of this phenomenon is probably to be sought in the fact that life becomes progressively poorer in new impressions, that as a result, a given period of life is less enriched by new impressions and experiences, and therefore appears shorter. The estimation of the length of periods of time in the various stages of life requires further psychological research.

The time-factor, to which I venture to call attention, is the attitude of the individual to the past, the present, and the future. According to whether a man's mind is directed towards the present, the past, or the future, his attitude towards life his outlook on life will be quite different. Close relations exist between the vital feeling towards life and the time-factor. Of course I am well aware that there are individuals who throughout their life show a preponderantly retrospective or as the case may be prospective tendency. This fact is a characterological moment which,

hitherto, has perhaps not been sufficiently emphasized. The retrospective and the prospective tendency may be linked with *Jung's* introvert and extravert type.

Seen from the point of view of youth, life has an unlimited future, it lies before the young person like the broad expanse of the ocean. Life appears infinitely long while one is going forward. As long as a man is able to think of all the things that he may yet realize in life, he feels his strength to be in full development, and he feels himself young. For him the knowledge, that life must come to an end, is as yet only theoretical. His outlook is still actively directed towards the future. It is this expectation of what the future will bring that nourishes that feeling of hope which makes us regard the future as a field of manifold possibilities. And this belief in future possibilities in its turn fosters that will to life which enables the individual to bear the burdens of the moment. Elan vital, plastic force, and will to life are closely bound up with our consciousness of the future. "La majesté du mystère", says Minkowski, "fait de l'avenir comme une réserve de forces éternelle et inépuisable, sans laquelle nous ne saurions vivre."

However, only comparatively few people retain this hopeful expectation with regard to the future to the end of their life. Either suddenly or gradually, through the decline of physical powers or through the incidence of disease, it may diminish. When this occurs, the individual becomes conscious of the limits by which life is bounded. Whereas formerly his vision extended almost to the infinite, he now finds himself, as it were, in a valley shut in on all sides and with a restricted horizon. Whereas in the period of youth, life appeared to be a broad highroad, it becomes a cage in old age. What used to be "*not yet*", is now "*no more*".

The limitation of the forward view is not experienced in the same way by everybody. Firstly there are people who give one the impression of not being fully conscious of the change in their situation. These are active individuals, gifted with an apparently inexhaustible plastic power which often remains entirely unimpaired by physical defects. Such people usually live in an active present. They appear never to grow old, but perhaps they never really mature. Moreover, it is noticeable that among the people "who never grow old", we do not infrequently find restless, nervous, or psychopathic types who never succeed in taking root. "The head of a fool never grows grey", and "a rolling stone gathers no moss". This observation was given a psycho-therapeutic interpretation by Sir *Farquhard Buzzard*. He says: "Change as a restorative may be an important factor in deferring infirmity ... In fact the individual seeking to prolong his prime must not order his life too much. A

judicious amount of disorder and of irregularity should be encouraged. Regular work, regular play, regular meals and regular hours of sleep may be the slogan of the health expert and may indeed be the guide to a prolongation of life. We don't want to prolong life ; we want to put off that evil hour when our mental horizon begins to narrow, our views become more rigid, our tolerance, sympathies, insight and interest less wide."

A confirmation of this is to be found, incidentally, in the fact that scientific research, which in some way is always determined by curiosity and, therefore, directed towards the future, has a favourable influence on age. "My returns", writes *Stanley Hall* in his book "On Senescence", "suggest that men engaged in scientific work have more power to carry on than any other class and that those engaged in these professions are perhaps least likely to do so when they cease active work."

With many people the decline of their consciousness of the future may lead to a serious conflict. When the consciousness of the future disappears, the general framework of the life of the person may be said to break down. In such cases three phenomena become manifest, *firstly* a feeling of the emptiness of the present ; thus the time of the older person is seen only in terms of the daily present and his animal functions ; *secondly*, an inner unrest and the occurrence of cravings as a form of distraction, and *thirdly*, depression. And it is those who can not bear this melancholy who seek refuge in distractions. There is a very definite relation between the concentration on the different directions of the experience of time. The various planes of life, present, past, and future, possess in the experience of the individual not only different values by virtue of their content and their vital impulse, they are also linked with each other by the fact that the changes in the dynamic character of the one plane go hand in hand with certain changes in the other direction of time.

When expectations of the future have declined, or if the future plays no important part in the inner life-history, the life of the individual is, as we have seen, dominated by experiences of the present, and, in addition, the past is revived. Finally, we have the fully developed picture of old age, in which the daily present is lived with all-absorbing attention to every detail and incident—old age flowing free as *Walt Whitman* described it—and in which childhood and youth stand plainly before the mind's eye.

The more attention is focussed on the distant future, the farther does the past recede, and the more the future contracts, the closer does the distant past move up to the present. Concentration on the past is often accompanied by a critical phase ; the individual sees him-

self faced with finality. He is forced to the conclusion that not all the expectations, hopes, and ambitions of his youth can be realized, and that a course of life lies before him which is inevitably restricted and immutable. At the same time it is brought home to him that the life of every man is fragmentary in character. Many people regard this finality as a deprivation of freedom which fills them with fear. Closely connected with this problem of finality is the total balance of a lifetime which presents itself to the ageing person at this time as a result of his pre-occupation with the past. Not infrequently senescent persons experience acute crises ; they cannot accept finality, and attempt to make up in all haste for what they have missed in the most varying fields. They register a convulsive vital protest against the finality of life.

Whereas the retrospect view of their lives produces in many people a feeling of vain regret and even despair, it may be observed in others that their past life presents itself to them in a peculiar perspective. In their recollection the concept of time, which links up the various events and phases of the past, assumes a new and subjectively important function. Past events are interpreted as necessary and purposeful instead of as merely fortuitous, and this re-interpretation banishes fear and despair. Of the many statements supporting this observation only one need be mentioned here, that of *Havelock Ellis*, made when he was seventy years old : "So when I often look back now I sometimes feel like one who has been long tossed and buffeted amid the waves and at last thrown on to the shore, shipwrecked and naked but able at length to rest on the firm ground ... The stuff of one's life is, indeed, a tangled web, yet in the end there is order. The peace that passes all understanding has dwelt in my heart."

By peace he probably means an expansive living in the present, and this is identical with the conception of serenity which is often applied to old age, even though the state of mind which the word implies is not very often met with.

At this point, I must bring these brief remarks to a conclusion. I hope to expand them into a more comprehensive study in the not too distant future. I believe that psychological observation of the relation between personality and time-factor helps us to understand aged persons. I am well aware of the exceedingly fragmentary nature of what I have said to you to-day. My sole purpose was to render a small contribution towards the better understanding of the minds of the increasingly large number of old people. By its very nature psychological knowledge will always remain incomplete, but I find in the following words of Goethe some justification for speaking as I have done to an assembly of

men whose life's work is devoted to the pursuit of exact knowledge : "We would know many things much better if we did not seek to know them too exactly."

Summary

After a discussion of the principles of all research on Old Age an attempt is made to understand the psychological changes of the flux of consciousness throughout life using as a criterion the modifications in the experience of time, especially the changing attitude towards past, present and future.

Zusammenfassung

Nach einer kurzen Besprechung über Grundsätzliches der Altersforschung wird der Versuch gemacht, die während des ganzen Lebenslaufs wechselnde Grundstimmung aus dem besondern Zeiterlebnis, besonders aus der Einstellung gegenüber Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft, zu verstehen.

Résumé

Après discussion des principes qui sont à la base de toute étude sur la vieillesse, l'auteur – en prenant comme critère l'influence du temps vécu dans l'expérience humaine – cherche à dégager la suite des variations psychologiques, que subit l'individu au cours de sa vie, et en particulier celles de son attitude envers le passé, le présent et l'avenir.

Riassunto

Dopo discussione dei principi che devono essere alla base delle ricerche sulla vecchiaia l'autore – basandosi sull'influenza che ha il tempo vissuto sulle vicende – cerca di comprendere le continue alterazioni psicologiche che subisce l'individuo durante la sua vita ed in particolare la sua attitudine verso il passato, il presente ed il futuro.

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