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THE APPLICATIONS OF HYPNOTISM.[1]

AT the present time, when even medical experts hold themselves in an attitude of indecision towards hypnotism, it is not surprising that the laity are at a loss to reconcile the conflicting opinions of the advocates of the practice and its opponents.

There are two leading features as to the nature of hypnosis, held by the two leading schools of hypnotism. That of the Salpêtrière, enunciated by the eminent physician, Charcot, is, that hypnotism is pathological, and, in fact, a form of hysteria, and occurs in hysterical subjects only; while the Nancy school contends that hypnosis is a physiological condition analogous to natural sleep, and that nearly all persons of sane mind can be hypnotized.

Much credit is due to Charcot for his researches into hypnotism at a time when the subject was held in contempt or abhorrence; but it is to be deplored that he and his followers, by experimenting mainly on hysterical subjects — for the most part women — have forced us to regard their experiments as incomplete, and the arguments based upon them as futile. As agricultural laborers, sailors, soldiers, and the majority of children are shown to be exceptionally susceptible to hypnotism, we must, if we accept Charcot's dictum, very greatly enlarge our views as to the prevalence of hysteria; indeed, we shall be forced to assume that one-half at least of humanity are victims of this form of nervous derangement.

The fact is, that there are two kinds of hypnotism: "le grand" and "le petit." The former, which has been so developed by cultivation at the Salpêtrière as almost to constitute a new nervous disease, is undoubtedly to be seen in comparatively few subjects, which few are always of pronounced hysterical type; but the latter, "le petit hypnotisme," which is employed by Bernheim and by all physicians practising the Nancy method, is a condition of very constant occurrence. Many persons, and even some men of science, seem to imagine that by hypnotism is meant the production of such a state of unconsciousness and automatism as is seen in the subjects at the Salpêtrière, or on public platforms. But Bernheim's definition covers a much wider field. "Hypnotism," he says, "is the induction of a psychical condition in which the subject's susceptibility to suggestion and ability to act upon it are enormously increased."

Suggestion is the key to the hypnotic problem. By it the subject is put to sleep or calmed into a state of receptive quiescence, and by it he is guided in the way of cure. The degree of suggestibility is not necessarily proportioned to the depth of sleep. Some persons are barely hypnotizable, and yet a suggestion will take possession of their mind and dominate their actions; while others, even in the most profound hypnotic sleep, will refuse to receive or to act upon suggestion. As an illustration of great suggestibility accompanying a slight degree of hypnosis, I may refer to a case that has come under my own notice. The patient, whom I may call Dr. A., a university professor and a member of several learned societies, was an inveterate smoker, and hardly to be found without a cigarette in his mouth, except when he was eating or sleeping. As he was a man of highly irritable and nervous temperament and suffered from sleeplessness and atonic dyspepsia, such excessive smoking was the very worst thing for him. He knew well, and had been told by several medical men, that the habit was undermining his health and ruining his nerves, yet he found himself absolutely unable to give it up. I hypnotized him, and he fell into a state of languor resembling sleep, but without loss of consciousness. I then suggested to him that he should no longer have any desire for tobacco, and that he should feel much better for leaving it off. After a few minutes I aroused him, and found that he had a perfect recollection of every word I had said to him; but he remarked that previously, when his physicians had assured him that tobacco was poison to him and had advised him to give it up, he had mentally resented their assertions and their counsel, while now, under the influence of hypnotism, he felt that the words I had spoken were so convincing that it would be impossible to go against them. As a matter of fact, he at once gave up smoking, and I hear from him that he has felt no inclination to resume the habit. He was hypnotized only three times, and it is now eighteen months since he underwent the treatment. Still, frequently though such cases may occur in practice, we may take it as a general rule that the deeper the hypnotic effect, the greater is the influence of suggestion.

Suggestibility apart from hypnotism comes within the experience of us all. Every one has some portion of such susceptibility, and in many it is very highly developed, and may be worked upon for good or evil with signal effect. The drunkard, converted by a Gough or a Father Mathew, is redeemed through suggestion; and through it the victim of evil example or evil solicitation falls to his ruin. We are physically benefited by it when words of hope and cheerful surroundings lead us to forget bodily pain or to entertain the idea of its removal, or even to make the effort required for self-cure — as when a sufferer from functional paralysis is induced, by kindly encouragement, to move the affected limb. On the other hand, suggestion may, and continually does, work physical harm, as when some unwise sympathizer or some meddling Cassandra utters prognostications of sickness and trouble, which, by reason of the depression they induce, are likely to undermine the health of a nervous hearer.

[1] Abstract of a paper by Charles Lloyd Tuckey, M.D., in The Contemporary Review for November.