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DE RENNE

THEORY CONCERNING THE NATURE
OF INSANITY





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T H E O R Y

CONCERNING THE

NATURE OF INSANITY.

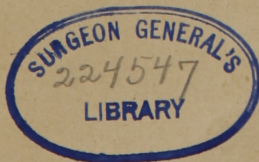
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GEORGE WYMBERLEY-JONES,

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De Renne.
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VULGUS ISTA NON RESPICIT.

BOETHIUS.

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TO
WINTHROP SARGENT, ESQUIRE.

AS A SLIGHT TOKEN OF
ADMIRATION FOR HIS TALENTS,
ESTEEM FOR HIS CHARACTER,
AND OF
PERSONAL ATTACHMENT,

This Little Volume

IS INSCRIBED

BY HIS FRIEND

THE AUTHOR.

T H E O R Y

CONCERNING

THE NATURE OF INSANITY.

AMONG the various sciences whose pursuit affords employment to the human intellect, there is scarce any so profoundly interesting, and at the same time so abstruse, as that which relates to psychological phenomena. The nature of spirit, its modes of existence, the conditions of its connexion with matter, its manner of action upon material substances and upon other spirit—are questions which gave scope to the brilliant specula-

tions of ancient philosophers, exercised the ingenuity of mediæval metaphysicians, baffled the investigations of modern inquirers, and are at the present time as interesting and unexhausted as the most novel discovery.

The source of this interest in so trite a subject is to be found in the close relation it bears to others of deep importance to mankind—the separate existence and immortality of the human soul. These questions early engaged the attention of philosophers, and have since afforded ground for continual discussion, and as continual disagreement. The materialists maintained the identity of mind and matter—their opponents proclaimed the mind's independent existence and antagonistic nature. Of the former, some confined the possession of mental qualities to the brain; others contended for their equal diffusion throughout the whole body. The latter were divided into numerous parties, who entertained various

and opposite theories. But a considerable portion of them held the opinion that man is a "tripartite person"—*τριμερης ὑποσταση*—constituted of three essentially distinct component parts—body, soul, and mind.

It is not proposed to enter into any disquisition on the merits of these respective dogmata, but merely to premise a few observations upon the view that is to be taken in the present paper.

Man, as at present constituted, is resolvable into two elements—of which death acts as a kind of chemical test—a material substance termed body, and an immaterial essence, called indifferently mind or spirit. These two elements were not synthetically combined, for they had no previous existence—at least no demonstrable one; their creation and combination were simultaneous. Our knowledge of their distinct individuality is derived from the natural analytic process by which their union is dissolved—death.

The material element being subject to the

laws which govern matter, is susceptible of an indefinite mechanical division, of chemical resolution, and of transformation by the processes of nature. But the immaterial is not so subject; it belongs to a class of entities which obeys peculiar and widely different laws; having, so far as we can judge, neither relationship nor analogy with those of matter.

The law which compels matter to go through a continued circle of transmutations—like the fabled Proteus, who was its type—has no influence over spirit; its advance is perpetually progressive, from nothing to Deity; it never recedes, is never stationary. The two elements further differ in the nature of their constitution; the material is characterized by complexity, the spiritual by unity.

It is the custom to speak of the mind as if it were a bundle of faculties that could be easily confused or deranged; and while some of them remained in a state

of perfect soundness, others might be diseased, impaired, or lost. But this language, if used as the exponent of a theory, is wholly inadmissible; for if there is one thing which can be predicated of mind more certainly than another, it is its indivisible unity. Indeed, this attribute rests upon the same foundation as the independent existence of the mind itself: both are attested by our individual consciousness. Through all the varieties of mental operations, the consciousness of our identity and oneness—the conviction that the agent which carries on those operations, how diversified soever, is one and the same—remains persistent. Now on the supposition that mind is but an aggregate of faculties, it would not be possible to account for this pervading feeling of sameness; nay, the feeling would have no existence.

Again: adopting the immortality of the spirit as an incontrovertible, because a revealed, truth—its unity follows as a necessary

consequence. For a compound body is the result of a combination of constituents, upon the continuance of which its being depends, and not upon any inherent aptitude for existence. When, therefore, the force which produced the combination—whether it be external, or resident in the elements themselves—ceases to operate, the body being resolved into its component parts, loses its individuality, and is no more.

The liability too of the bond of union to disruption is continual, since it is evident that the protraction of the influence of the combining force is purely arbitrary, being not an inalienable or essential quality of the body, but depending upon other entities.

Now the attributes of immortality and susceptibility to annihilation are too incongruous to belong to the same being; the possession of the one precludes that of the other.

Because then of this very incompatibility—since, moreover, destructibility necessarily

attaches to complexity of nature—and since the spirit is endowed with immortality, its unity also may fairly be inferred.

Assuming then the unity of mind, the so-called faculties would be merely different modes of its action.

The brain is the agent, or instrument, wherewith the mind, during its alliance with the body, is compelled to work. It is not contended that spirit could not exercise intellectual functions—could not think, reason, imagine—apart from the brain; but only that the conditions of its connexion with matter are such that it cannot carry on its operations or perform its functions, cannot exhibit to other minds appreciable manifestations of its existence, or display its powers, without the assisting agency of the brain. The necessity and importance of this relation between the mind and its agent, and the controlling influence it exerts over all mental action, are generally underrated. Not only are the ideas suggested directly by sensual

perceptions tinged by the material source whence they proceed, but even those which are believed to originate with the mind itself—the most purely spiritual, the most completely abstract—partake of attributes essentially material. The most spiritual and refined of all ideas, that of Deity, may be taken as an example.

Who has ever been able to conceive a precise notion of a spirit divested of the material attribute of form? and who could ever give that conception the slightest degree of distinctness without attaching to it a definite extent? But, by hypothesis, a spirit is formless and without shape; so that it is not a spirit which is conceived of, but an abstract quality of matter. If then it is not possible for the human mind to apprehend the nature of a finite spirit, how utterly, how ineffably powerless is it to conceive of an infinite Mind, pervading the vast regions of illimitable space, and defying the utmost attempts of all inferior intellects to comprehend even

a part of its stupendous magnitude. In truth, the mind shrinks instinctively from the attempt; and if, perchance, it is seduced for a moment to forsake its habitual caution, soon sinks prostrate, crushed beneath the overpowering sense of its own utter impotency.

Again, the abstract notions of place and time are essentially material. Annihilate matter, and you destroy these notions, since they are wholly dependent upon it; as may be easily shown. "Place is a relation of extension, and extension is a property of matter." "It is motion that measures duration, and time is duration measured into equal parts by the equable motion of bodies through space;" but motion is a condition of matter. Hence even for its knowledge of these abstract conceptions, mind is indebted to its alliance with body; which is too intimate to admit of its having ideas purely immaterial. Perhaps this consideration may

tend to diminish the regret felt by some that the connexion is not indissoluble.

The material complexion of mental actions being established, the necessity of the co-operation of the brain in their production will not appear incredible; while its importance is sufficiently attested by the deplorable effects which result from its interruption.

The brain is a highly organized animal substance, subject, like all others of its class, to temporary alteration of the respective relations of its parts, to acute disease, and to chronic morbid degeneration of structure. Its functions are twofold, animal and intellectual, and exercise a reciprocal influence upon each other. Every deviation from its natural healthy condition which produces a change in its physical functions, accomplishes a corresponding modification in the development of intellectual phenomena. A turgid state of its blood-vessels—ramollissement, or induration of its substance—its

being a little too dry or a little too moist—almost any of the numerous disorders to which it is subject—are causes capable of disturbing the operations which, as the mind's agent, it is continually carrying on.

On the other hand, an excessive over-exertion of the brain's intellectual functions will tend to depress the vigour of its physical processes.

It is generally assumed as an undoubted fact—a necessary adjunct indeed of the doctrine of the union between soul and body—that during the period we term life, the spirit resides in the corporeal frame, pervades its substance or some portion of it,* is in actual contact with its particles, and is rigorously restrained within the limits of its material

* “ And his pure brain
(Which some suppose the soul's frail dwelling-house)
Doth, by the idle comments that it makes,
Foretell the ending of mortality.”

KING JOHN, Act 5, sc. 7.

tabernacle; that by means of this incorporation principally, if not altogether, the spirit acquires a distinctive individuality. But, although the formation of the body may be considered in some sort as the cause, or at least the sufficient reason of the creation of the spirit—yet, from the fact of its living after the dissolution of the body, its vitality is evidently not dependent upon contiguity to matter. For a similar reason its distinctiveness as a being is not thereupon dependent. Nor does the influence it exerts over the cerebral functions require a local proximity to the organ; for if there are material substances endued with forces whose potency is not invalidated by intervening distance from the object acted upon, how much rather is the same thing possible and probable of spirit, freed as it is from all subservience to the laws which govern matter.

From all that we know of spirit, there is no reason to believe that it cannot exercise its influence over body as well when sepa-

rated by indefinite space, as when in the closest connexion. I strongly protest against the philosophy that would confine the spirit to a circumscribed locality and a narrow habitation, as an essential condition of its intercourse with matter. It may have its abode in the regions of the upper air, it may wander through the vast vacuity of space, it may hover above that earthly being with whose course its destiny is so intimately interwoven, and by whose deeds its doom will be determined. But so long as it breathes the breath of life, that terrestrial form is the centre whither the spirit always wends its returning ways, and to which it is drawn by an irresistible attraction.*

* It may be objected, that I attribute so much to animal organization, and allow the spirit so little influence over the actions of the body that it would be unjust to hold it answerable for them. But neither the manner nor amount of this influence do I pretend to define. The justice of the Deity being unquestionable, there can be no doubt it is so adjusted as to render the responsibility of the spirit strictly accordant with right.

The only condition annexed to the union of soul with the body is, that while it lasts, the spirit has no power to enter into any other state of existence.

The position of the mind in relation to the brain I conceive to be somewhat analogous to that of an engineer in a steamship. As his presence is necessary to set in action the machinery and to regulate its movements, and as he is totally incapable of imparting motion to the vessel without the intermediate instrumentality of that machinery, so is the existence and alliance of mind requisite to excite into action the brain's intellectual functions, and so is it entirely unable to exercise any influence upon the material world save through cerebral intervention. *How* mind acts upon the brain, is a question involved in impenetrable mystery; nor does there appear any reason to indulge a hope that human knowledge will ever be sufficiently advanced to dispel the obscurity which surrounds it. But our ignorance of

the manner of communication of this spiritual influence is no argument against its reality. It is a well-ascertained chemical fact, that there are substances which by their mere juxtaposition cause in other bodies the display of affinities not before suspected to exist; so spirit by its simple presence calls into action those dormant powers of the brain, which it could not previously be even conjectured to possess. Again, it is a well-known physiological truth that there is transmitted along the efferent nerves to their loop-like terminations in the muscles an influence, a principle, an unknown entity, denominated *vis nervosa*, which produces muscular contraction, or, what is the same thing, muscular power. If the connexion between the ganglia, supposed to generate this influence, and the muscle which is its recipient, be severed, power is lost, contraction ceases. As then the spinal ganglia are the prime cause of muscular contraction, and as this contraction is a function

of the muscle and not of the ganglia, so the associate existence of spirit is the cause of the brain's intellectual operations, and so are those operations functions not of the mind but of the brain.

In contradiction to the view here presented, it may be said, in the first place, that the intellectual functions are so essentially and by their very nature distinct from and opposed to animal functions, that they cannot coexist as properties of the same body; secondly, that the possession of mental faculties cannot be ascribed to a material substance; and thirdly, that inasmuch as it is confessedly by the assistance of those very faculties that we take cognizance of the existence of mind, and as the spiritual only can appreciate spirit, these powers must partake of the spiritual nature; and even if the mind be an abstract entity independent of its parts, yet that whatever can be predicated of it, is equally applicable to them.

To this it is answered that the whole ar-

gument is fallacious, being palpably nothing else than a begging of the question. It assumes as true, what it proposes to prove. For, in the first place, properties of the most dissonant character may belong to the same body. It is the property of water to become vapourized by the application of heat, and to become solidified under the influence of a low temperature. Thus, different stimuli elicit the display of diametrically opposite qualities. But heat is not more contrary to cold, than is the spirit, which excites into action the intellectual functions, to the principle which sustains cerebral organic life. If the first pair of conflicting properties are inherent in one body, wherefore may not the last two coexist in another?

With those who advance the second objection, I might join issue on the question of fact, and meet simple affirmation by absolute negation, which would throw the burden of proof upon them. But it is not necessary to resort to such an expedient; the material

character of the mental powers—their dependence on matter for the suggestion of the most refined ideas which they elaborate, and their utter inability to bring spirituality under their ken, have already been shown. Now to adopt the admission in the third objection—if the spirit is cognizable only by the spiritual, and if, as has been before proven, the mental faculties do not possess the power of appreciating it, it follows inevitably that they are not spiritual in their nature. But by the third objection, whatever is predicable of the mental faculties, is equally so of the spirit itself; if the former are not spiritual, neither is the latter. Now to say that spirit is not spiritual, is to say that it is not at all; which is absurd, for by hypothesis it is confessed to be. So that we must either deny totally the existence of spirit, or admit that the mental faculties have no claim to a participation in its nature.

I have insisted thus particularly upon the

wide separation between mind and mental powers, because upon it is based the particular theory respecting the nature of insanity which will be developed in the present essay. Yet it is not expected that the truth of the theory will be incontestably demonstrated; it will suffice to show its superior probability. The attainment of absolute certainty in speculations of this kind is altogether impracticable.

It was an ancient doctrine and a plausible, that no human being is perfectly sane: "Insanivimus omnes," was the declaration of the least crazy of the philosophers.* The man

* "Huc propius me,
Dum doceo insanire omnes, vos ordine adite."

HOR. SAT. II. 3.

"*Semel insanivimus omnes*, not once, but always so, *et semel, et simul, et semper*."—ANAT. MELANCH.

My friend, Mr. Sargent, informs me that he has traced the preceding phrase, quoted so approvingly by Burton, to "the first Eclogue of Baptist Mantuanus, who died

never has been, who at all times, under all circumstances, and upon all subjects, has possessed his mental faculties in complete soundness; and there are few who do not continually evince insanity in some one or other of its numerous varieties, modifications, and shades. But under whatever guise the malady manifests itself—whether as the raving madness of the lunatic, or the subdued melancholy of the hypochondriac—whether in the hallucinations of a feeble mind, or in the infatuations of a mighty one—whether as eccentricity diffused among the many, or cooped up in the characters of a few—whether it be dissipated in harmless peculiarities, or concentrated in the horrors of diabolical possession—it is still the same disease; identical, though exhibited under diversified phases. The difference is not in kind, but in degree. In fact the various forms are

A. D. 1516.” The doctrine it embodies was first taught by the Stoics.

frequently commingled and run insensibly into each other. Peculiarities, at first scarcely discernible, become developed into glaring eccentricities, and an augmentation of these again is not uncommonly the precursor of madness; while on the other hand madness itself sometimes subsides into singularity, and after suffering a gradual diminution takes its final departure.

The division of insanity into Mania, Monomania, Dementia, and Idiocy, though highly useful for practical purposes, is not grounded upon the nature of the disease, but is purely arbitrary and artificial. These are nothing but names for the principal and most common modes in which insanity manifests itself; and are not distinct species comprehended under a generic appellation.

Insanity has generally been located in the mind—it has been supposed to reside in the immaterial, immortal element of the human constitution. I shall endeavour to show that such a view is false, unphilosophical, and

untenable. Its prevalence is perhaps owing to the fact that insanity has heretofore usually been treated of by practical physicians, who have contented themselves with investigating its most obvious causes, observing its phenomena, and inventing remedies to abbreviate its duration and mitigate its violence. And unquestionably great results have been achieved. A complete revolution has occurred in the method of treatment of the insane, and their physical condition has been marvellously ameliorated. I am, moreover, not altogether certain that this improvement would have been accelerated, had a more correct philosophy obtained earlier; and in very truth, if the value of the theory set forth in the present essay were to be judged of by the searching criterion of utility, there is reason to suspect it might sink to within an inappreciable distance from nothingness. But the same may be said of all metaphysical disquisition; which is nevertheless tolerated—the best

fate to which the present author presumes to aspire.

That insanity has not its seat in the mind, will be evident from the following considerations. In the first place, its character as an hereditary disease furnishes a strong presumption against that opinion. The resemblance which a child bears to its parents in bodily conformation and other characteristics is well known, and is very generally held to extend to the mental qualities. The question whether the latter doctrine is well-founded or not, is disregarded, as irrelevant to the point at issue; for even if it were established in the affirmative, the likeness might be attributed to the resemblance of cerebral configuration and the inference that the functions would partake of the similarity of the organ. Now, although the corporeal part of the child originates undoubtedly from the germ of the mother stimulated into development by the effluence of the paternal semen, or certain particles thereof, it

yet must be admitted that the spirit could not spring from the same source. The parents may in conjunction create an embryo, which, following the laws of vital development, enlarges into foetal proportions, and when its full time is come proceeds forth a living being. But it is not so with mind. Neither the spirit of the father nor of the mother is endowed with creative energy. Let us suppose, however, for the sake of argument, that they were. To which of them is allotted the task of making the new soul? It must be the province of one; for it is absurd to imagine that spirits could generate by coition an immaterial essence. If the spirit of the new being was created at all—and was not rather an emanation from Deity—it must owe its existence to the great first Cause of all things, and to no inferior entity. Wherefore, seeing that the mind of the child is not the offspring of the parents, and that insanity is acknowledged to be a disease susceptible of hereditary transmis-

sion, it follows that it must be located in the mental faculties, or in other words, in the intellectual functions of the brain.

Secondly : Insanity cannot be asserted to have its seat in the mind, because it is impossible to predicate anything positively of spirit save its existence ; and even that, independently of revelation, is but an inference deducible from the operations of which it is presumed to be the cause. To say that mind is sane or insane, healthy or diseased, is to attribute to it mutation of substance, which is a property peculiar to matter ; and to affirm its capability of derangement, implies its composition by constituent particles, which, though true of a complex material body, is entirely irreconcilable with spiritual unity. We have no warrant for attributing to spirit any material quality—we have no power to conceive of any other.

Again, as all normal mental phenomena have been shown to be produced by the

mental faculties, it follows that the abnormal must belong to them also.

Thirdly : The general proposition that insanity is posited in the mind, must be equally true of each particular form of it ; the liability to one form implies the liability to another. Now the furious madness of a maniac is not more certainly a form of insanity than is senile imbecility. Besides, the susceptibility of disease necessitates a subjection to decay. If therefore the mind is liable to madness, it is likewise so to imbecility ; if it is susceptible of disease, it must be obnoxious to morbid effects—it must be subject to decay. But whatever decays must have an end, and whatever has an end must have had a beginning ; moreover a beginning and end involve the notion of a maturity, which is nothing but a point whose position approximates more or less nearly to equidistance from those two termini. But what is it, which is thus de-

clared to have a commencement, a maturity, and a termination?—The human soul. Behold then the resurrection of the ancient and unanswerable Epicurean argument against the soul's immortality;* which, incapable of refutation, sat like an incubus upon the mightiest spirits of antiquity—mocking at their futile attempts to bring the doctrine of their delight within the reach of demonstration—confounding their imaginings—crushing their aspirations—overwhelming their hopes—and leaving no refuge to their despair but in the embrace of a gloomy and sensual infidelity, or in the bewildering mazes of profitless speculation. One or other alternative must inevitably be adopted; the reasoning must be abandoned or the immortality—if the former was followed out, the latter was inadmissible. It is true there

* “*Præterea, gigni pariter cum corpore, ut unâ
Crescere sentimus, pariterque senescere, mentem.*”

LUCRET. III. 446, et seq.

were some philosophical works which purported to establish the truth of the dogma; but the paucity of their number, and their utter lack of influence, showed how frivolous and ineffectual it was to attempt to prove what every man felt to be an unsustained hypothesis.

Thus the fact of the mind's having a beginning, an increase, a maturity, a decline, and an extinction, was fatal to the captivating theory of its immortality. But, in process of time, Christianity revealed to the world the existence of a human spirit, whose attribute was eternal life. Here were two conflicting declarations; one the result of as conclusive an argument as the intellect of man ever devised—the other reposing upon the strong ground of divine revelation. They clashed, and the philosophical doctrine, like every other established by human reason that has been deemed contrary to Christian truth, was vanquished, proscribed, and its holders damned to the immortality they denied.

The inconsistency of the two opposite views, however, vanishes, and their compatibility is clearly evinced, by the adoption of the hypothesis herein maintained. The mental faculties being considered essentially distinct from mind, and themselves in fact nothing else than functions inherent in and indissolubly attached to the brain, the different stages through which they pass, from the imperfection of infancy to the inanity of old age, are readily accounted for by the corresponding modifications which occur in the cerebral organ; and the decay of the intellectual powers, which proved a stumbling-block to so many honest inquirers, instead of indicating the decrepitude of spirit, and foreboding its final annihilation, only marks the progress of functional infirmity or organic dilapidation, while the spirit's vigour is not diminished nor its viability enfeebled.

Inasmuch then as the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is irreconcilable with

that of the location of insanity in the mind—and as the certainty of the former may not be questioned—the falsity of the second is by direct consequence inferred.

The claims of insanity to the character of a spiritual malady being disallowed, it becomes incumbent on one who impugns their validity to designate a more probable location for the disease. To consider it as seated in those cerebral functions which are styled mental faculties, appears to be the view most consonant with its own peculiar phenomena, and best adapted to fulfil the indispensable requirements of probability. But does an affection of the functions imply an affection of the organ to which they appertain? It is doubtless true that disease of an organ will obstruct or interrupt the exercise of its functions; but is this the only cause which can produce such a consequence? And may not functional disorder be compatible with organic integrity?

Waiving, however, the consideration of

the abstract question of possibility, it will be more pertinent to the particular point at issue to refer to the record of actual observations.

In most cases of persons who have died insane, dissections after death have displayed some morbid condition of the brain; yet in a few no abnormal appearances have been detected. Nevertheless, their eluding discovery in these latter instances may be ascribed to a want of minute accurate investigation or of the employment of the microscope in conducting it, rather than to their entire absence. On the other hand, it may be contended with equal plausibility, that these diseased conditions are not causes, but effects of the functional disorder, insanity. And so the determination of the question seems as remote and impracticable as at the outset.

In conclusion, it is deemed proper to state succinctly the views hereinbefore enforced;

and whose superior probability it has been attempted to establish. They are—

First—That mind and mental faculties are altogether distinct, and, for aught we know to the contrary, dissimilar; the former being an independent entity, our knowledge of whose existence and attributes is derived exclusively from revelation; while the latter are mere functions of a material substance—the brain, of whose nature they partake.

Secondly—That insanity is one and the same disease, whatever guise it may assume; and that its most common and recognised forms differ only in degree.

Lastly—That insanity is not a “disease of the mind,” but is restricted to that class of cerebral functions which are generally denominated mental faculties.

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