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RECENT TENDENCIES IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION.

by

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RECENT TENDENCIES IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION.

According to William James conversion is "the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities(1). "We thus conclude," says Dean W.R. Matthews, "that the essential element in conversion is the attainment of a unity of emotional and volitional direction out of a state of disharmony and distraction."(2). Taking these two statements as expressing the essential elements of conversion, we can easily recognise that the experience is not confined to any particular era, race, or religion, but belongs to man as man.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.

The problem with which this essay is concerned arises from a consideration of the psychical forces at work in the production of the unified self out of the preceding state of disharmony and conscious inferiority. We start with the assumption that there are no contingencies in the realm of mind any more than in the physical world, and consequently such unification of the self as conversion involves is not a chance haphazard occurrence, a "bolt out of the blue," but is an experience which can be understood according to the laws which govern the working of the mind. During the past twenty years we have come to know those laws more fully, and, in consequence, there has been a considerable advance upon the position held by such pioneers as Starbuck and James.

(1) James: Varieties of Religious Experience. p.189.

(2) Matthews: The Psychological Approach to Religion. p.39f.

METHOD OF DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM.

In order that we may note and understand the trend of recent explanations of the phenomena of conversion, we will first state the positions of Starbuck and James, as representative of the older view, and from them pass on to a consideration of the views of more recent writers. The points to be emphasised in the point of view of these two psychologists may be stated briefly as follows: their conception of the action of the subconscious; the part played by effort of will; the surrender of effort; the "once-born," in whose conversion experience there is apparently no violent element; the part played by the sex instinct. Such a consideration, followed by an exposition of more modern views, should enable us to understand the solution which is now being offered of the problem with which this thesis is concerned.

STATEMENT OF THE VIEWS OF STARBUCK AND JAMES.

Starbuck sees evidence of the presence of both conscious self-direction and automatism in conversion, though the conscious element is generally somewhat small. Most of the cases he studied fell between the extremes, so he concludes that "in conversion the conscious and unconscious forces rarely exist separately, but usually act together and interact on each other." (1). In what way does Starbuck understand that this unconscious or automatic element works? He points out that even the most spontaneous awakening type of conversion has antecedents in thought or action which leave their impress and work

(1) Starbuck: Psychology of Religion. p.105.

themselves out in the sphere of the subconscious, and which may be regarded as "causes" leading to the awakening.(1). He appears to identify the subconscious with the unconscious and to interpret it in terms of the nervous system, holding that since certain brain events are regularly followed or accompanied by certain mind events, many of the phenomena of the subconscious may be explained by reference to the physical phenomena in the nervous system.(2). "The difference between the conscious and the subconscious elements is perhaps in the degree of resistance in the nervous system to the neural discharge which corresponds to a certain idea. If a discharge has little dynamic significance, or if it become habitual and easy, the even flow of consciousness is not disturbed by it. If, on the other hand, an idea is difficult of realisation, and at the same time involves a considerable fraction of the available nervous energy and a violent re-adjustment of the neural elements, it may be lifted up above the threshold of consciousness, and may have even momentous significance!"(3) Thus he concludes that "spontaneous awakenings are the fructification of that which has been ripening within the subliminal consciousness!"(4)

James accepts Starbuck's general position. He thinks that "we are tempted to suspect that what makes the difference between a sudden and a gradual convert is not necessarily the presence of divine miracle in the case of one and of something less divine in that of the other, but rather a simple psychological peculiarity, the fact,

(1) Starbuck: Psychology of Religion. p.106.

(2) Ibid. p. 107f. (3) Ibid. p. 108. (4) 8bid. p. 108.

namely, that in the recipient of the more instantaneous grace we have one of those subjects who are in possession of a larger region in which mental work can go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness may come."(1). But in a footnote he writes: "Candor obliges me to confess that there are occasional bursts into consciousness of results of which it is not easy to demonstrate any prolonged subconscious incubation." Some of the cases considered, he thinks, "might not be so easily explained in this simple way. The results, then, would have to be ascribed either to a merely physiological nerve storm, a 'discharging lesion' like that of epilepsy; or, in case it were useful and rational, to some more mystical or theological hypothesis." (2).

Neither Starbuck nor James regard the effort of the will as of very great importance in the conversion process. It is true that Starbuck distinguishes two types of conversion - the self-surrender and the volitional types - and that he admits that "the will is not valueless in the process of conversion...but, on the contrary, it may be of first importance;(3); yet the admission is somewhat grudging, and he later affirms that "the personal will is likely to fail to attain the new life...because it may be exercised not quite in the right direction."(4). James follows the classification of Starbuck, but dismisses the volitional type by saying that it is as a rule less interesting than the self-surrender type "in which the subconscious

(1) James; Varieties of Religious Experience. p.237. (2) Ibid. p.236.

(3) Starbuck: Psychology of Religion. p.99. (4) Ibid. p.114.

effects are more abundant and often startling." He therefore hurries to the latter "the more so because the difference between the two types is after all not radical."(1).

The general agreement of these two psychologists is further indicated by the fact that they both point out an interesting feature of many conversions, namely, that the conversion experience is frequently preceded by the surrender of effort. "The personal will must be given up," says Starbuck.(2). "In many cases relief persistently refuses to come until the person ceases to resist, or to make an effort in the direction he desires to go."(3). The reason he gives is that in exercising the will the subject is still living in the region where the imperfect self is emphasised, whereas, when the will is relaxed, and the subconscious forces take control, the better self has an opportunity of directing operations. So "he must relax, and let the nervous energy, which has been pent up and aching for some outlet of expression, seek its natural and normal channels - that is, he must fall back on the larger 'Power that makes for righteousness,' which has been welling up in his own being, and let it finish in its own way the work it has begun." "Self-surrender," he concludes, "is often necessary in order that the normal tendencies of growth may converge and flow into harmony, and that the point of new insight may be, for the person yielding, the truest organising centre of life."(4) James fully agrees, and quotes Starbuck extensively, finally summing the matter up in these words: "To state it in terms of our own symbolism: When the new centre of personal

(1) James: Varieties. p.207f.

(2) Starbuck: Psychology of Religion. p.113. (3) Ibid. p.113

(4) Ibid. p. 115.

energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, 'hands off' is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided!"(1) He further illustrates his position in the following manner: "There are only two ways in which it is possible to get rid of anger, worry, fear, despair, or other undesirable affections. One is that an opposite affection should overpoweringly break over us, and the other is by getting so exhausted with the struggle that we have to stop, - so we drop down, give up, and DON'T CARE any longer. Our emotional brain-centres strike work, and we lapse into a temporary apathy. Now there is documentary proof that this state of temporary exhaustion not infrequently forms part of the conversion crisis. So long as the egoistic worry of the sick soul guards the door, the expansive confidence of the soul of faith gains no presence. But let the former faint away, even but for a moment, and the latter can profit by the opportunity, and, having once acquired possession, may retain it. Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh passes from the everlasting No to the everlasting Yes through a 'Centre of Indifference.'"(2)

James made a distinction, which has become well-known, between the "healthy-minded" and the "sick soul." The former find that unification of the self and unity of emotional and volitional direction, which is the essential element in conversion, by a peaceful and imperceptible process. To such it is the most natural thing in the world. James appears to regard it largely as a matter of temperament,

(1) James: Varieties of Religious Experience. p.210.

(2) Ibid. p.212.

and holds that "the systematic cultivation of healthy-mindedness as a religious attitude is consonant with important currents in human nature, and is anything but absurd."(1). Starbuck deals with the same group in an interesting chapter entitled, "Growth Without Definite Transitions." "Many persons," he says, "develop so evenly that it is impossible to distinguish transition points in their progress." They "grow more as a tree, which year by year has been added to by a little; and when the process is completed, one can only say it was then a tiny sprout, now it is a sturdy oak."(2). He enumerates several conditions which conduce to this gradual development, such as the influence of religious surroundings in childhood; keeping children reasonably free from dogmas which they are incapable of assimilating; meeting the needs of the child carefully at every point in its development; and in some cases to a certain mixture of faith and doubt continually - "a sufficient degree of freedom to question all things to secure a clear horizon, and enough trust and insight and poise of spirit to remain firmly rooted in the heart of religion." But he holds that this type of religious growth, in which spiritual perfection is attained as naturally as a plant unfolds, is for most human beings an ideal, and, "we have to face the fact that at the present time, and with the conditions under which we live, growth does not usually come that way."(3). On the contrary he regards the "conviction" period of storm and stress as quite natural, and, after acknowledging that conversion is "spontaneous awakening and storm and stress crystallized into a dogma,"

(1) James: Varieties of Religious Experience. Lect. IV.

(2) Starbuck: Psychology of Religion. p.298. (3) Ibid. Chap. XXIV.

adds: "Theology takes these adolescent tendencies and builds upon them; it sees that the essential thing in adolescent growth is bringing the person out of childhood into the new life of maturity and personal insight. It accordingly brings those means to bear which will intensify the normal tendencies that work in human nature. It shortens up the period of duration of storm and stress."(1) As Pratt says, in commenting upon these words, "the work of theology in producing conviction and conversion is thus regarded as a perfectly normal process and one that merely hastens the regular processes of Nature herself."(2)

Conversion appears to be very largely an adolescent phenomenon, taking place at that period of life when the self becomes aware of new bodily and mental powers and of new responsibilities as a member of society. That being so it is not difficult to understand the emphasis placed by some students of the psychology of religion on the sex instinct as a predominant factor in the conversion process. This subject was carefully studied by Starbuck, and his conclusions may be summarised in two or three extracts from his Psychology of Religion. "Conversion is a distinctly adolescent phenomenon. It is a singular fact also that within this period the conversions do not distribute themselves equally among the years. In the rough, we may say they begin to occur at 7 or 8 years, and increase in number gradually to 10 or 11, and then rapidly to 16; rapidly decline to 20, and gradually fall away after that, and become rare after 30....The

(1) Starbuck: The Psychology of Religion. p.224.

(2) Pratt: The Religious Consciousness. p.151n.

event comes earlier among the females than among the males, most frequently at 13 and 16. Among the males it occurs most often at 17, and immediately before and after that year...Conversion and puberty tend to supplement each other in time rather than to coincide; but they may, nevertheless, be mutually conditioned." Later he writes: "Although the reproductive instinct may be primal, it seems to have been entirely superseded as a direct factor in religious growth by other elements. These latter themselves form a regulative instinct which acts upon the sexual impulse as a check. It seems that the two have become so far differentiated, the separation between them has grown so complete, that in the later stages of development they have different functions, and the interest of religion demands the suppression rather than the radiation of the reproductive instinct. The sexual instinct, which continues healthy and strong to conserve biological ends, has, from a spiritual standpoint, become a mere incident in growth." (1).

James' position is well stated in the famous foot-note in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (2). He holds that few conceptions are less instructive than the re-interpretation of religion as perverted sexuality. It might equally well be called an aberration of the digestive function, or a perversion of the respiratory function. "These arguments," he continues, "are as good as much of the reasoning one hears in favor of the sexual theory. But the champions of the latter will then say that their chief argument

(1) Starbuck: *Psychology of Religion*. pp.28, 45, 402f.

(2) pp. 10-12.

has no analogue elsewhere. The two main phenomena of religion, namely, melancholy and conversion, they will say, are essentially phenomena of adolescence, and therefore synchronous with the development of the sexual life. To which the retort again is easy. Even were the asserted synchrony unrestrictedly true as a fact (which it is not), it is not only the sexual life, but the entire mental life which awakens during adolescence. One might then as well set up the thesis that the interest in mechanics, physics, chemistry, logic, philosophy, and sociology, which springs up during adolescent years along with that in poetry and religion, is also a perversion of the sexual instinct:- but that would be too absurd."

PROPOSED SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM.

The position of Starbuck and James may be taken as typical of the general view of psychologists twenty years ago. Today, however, we are able to explain in much greater detail the psychological mechanism of conversion. This explanation is largely given in terms of the current theory of complexes. Speaking of the conversion of St. Pau, Underwood says: "In brief, what took place was a sudden irruption into consciousness of a complex which had been thrust into the unconscious by repression." (1) And he concludes that it "seems clear that all cases of sudden conversion, in which the subject is entirely unaware of any preparation for the

(1) Underwood: Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian. p.178.

change, are due to some complex buried in the unconscious by repression, steadily developing till it overcomes all resistance and bursts forth into consciousness and becomes the dominant factor therein."(1)

The term "complex" lacks precise definition. Some writers on the new psychology seem to regard repression into the subconscious as a necessary part of a complex: for example, Jones defines a complex as "a group of emotionally tinged ideas partially or entirely repressed."(2). Others define a complex as a system of ideas having a common centre, whether the system is present in the consciousness or exists only in the unconscious. (3). Dr. B. Hart, in his Psychology of Insanity, uses the illustration of a hobby and maintains that "if we endeavor to ascertain the exact nature of a hobby, we find that it is a system of connected ideas, with a strong emotional tone, and a tendency to produce actions of a certain definite character. Such a system of emotionally toned ideas is termed in technical language a "complex."(4).

If a complex should happen to be out of harmony with the mind as a whole, or if there should be two complexes incompatible with each other, then a struggle arises and a conflict ensues. In most cases of conflict the complexes concerned seem to involve only the more superficial elements of the mind, but when a more

(1) Underwood: Conversion. p.180.

(2) Quoted by Baudouin: Studies in Psychoanalysis. p.328.

(3) Ibid. p.328. (4) Hart: Psychology of Insanity. p.61.

thorough investigation has been made there has been discovered a conflict of a more fundamental character. As Dr. Hart points out: "This fundamental conflict involves factors of an importance commensurate with the effects produced, and generally leads us back to the great primary instincts which constitute the principal driving forces of the mind. We find a struggle taking place in which one of these primary instincts is pitted against another, or in which the desires and tendencies arising from such an instinct are opposed and thwarted by conditions enforced upon the patient by his environment and circumstances." He assigns a dominant place to the herd-instinct among the primary instincts which provide the opposing forces responsible for mental conflict. "From it the tendencies generally ascribed to tradition and to education derive most of their power. It provides the mechanism by which the ethical code belonging to a particular class is enforced upon each member of that class, so that the latter is instinctively impelled to think and to act in the manner ~~in~~ which the code prescribes. That is to say, a line of conduct upon which the herd has set its sanction acquires all the characters of an instinctive action, although this line of conduct may have no rational basis, may run counter to the dictates of experience, and may be in direct opposition to the tendencies generated by the other primary instincts. This opposition to other primary instincts, is well exemplified in the case of sex, where the impulses due to the latter are constantly baulked and controlled by the opposing tendencies arising from our moral education and tradition." He concludes that "it will be immediately obvious that in these struggles between the primary instincts and the beliefs and codes enforced by the operation of the herd instinct

we have a fertile field for the development of mental conflict."(1)

According to the theory of complexes there is one type of conversion in which the subject is unaware of any preparation for change, and another type in which he is keenly aware of a painful conflict. A good example of the attempt to explain the former type as the result of the outbreak of a repressed complex is found in Jung's treatment of the conversion of St. Paul.(2). Underwood gives a similar case in the conversion of Dayananda Saraswati, in which a monotheism-complex, developing all unknown, suddenly gained the ascendancy over the polytheism-complex, as he witnessed the desecration of the idol by a mouse on the night of the Sivaratri Festival.(3) In all such cases careful investigation seems to show that the convert had been deeply influenced at some period of his life by religious ideas. Coe, for example, quotes S.H.Hadley to the effect that "the down-and-outs converted at the Water Street Mission in New York are men who were formerly under the influence of religion in their childhood homes."(4)

Augustine may be taken as the representative of the other type in which the subject is keenly aware of a painful conflict. Within the soul of Augustine there struggled two painful complexes - the religious-complex and the sex-complex - and his Confessions reveal clearly how acute the conflict between them was. Such acute

(1) Hart: Psychology of Insanity. p.167f.

(2) Thouless: Psychology of Religion. p.189f.

(3) Underwood: Conversion. p.129f.

(4) Coe: Psychology of Religion. p.168.

conflict could not continue indefinitely and Augustine brought it to an end by a definite choice which meant the victory of the religious-complex. In making this decision he was helped by reading some words of Paul's: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh." There and then he made the personal surrender of himself to God.(1)

We observed above that neither Starbuck nor James regard the effort of will as of very great importance in the conversion process. This position seems to be held by many recent writers upon the psychology of conversion, for they either ignore it, or, with a light touch, pass on to the more interesting phenomenon of surrender of effort. An exception is J.B.Pratt who maintains that "when the aim to be achieved is the giving up of old evil habits, the acquisition of new insight, the revolution of one's ideals, purposes, values, and character, then effort is of the utmost importance."(2). He admits that effort alone is not sufficient; the man MUST WANT to be saved. But "in some cases of conversion the renewed and persistent effort of the individual who has had just one fascinating glimpse of the possible new life, is the really dominant factor in the explanation of the great change that comes about in his character."(3). Underwood regards it as an error to place Augustine's conversion in the self-surrender class, for there is nothing in the Confessions to even suggest the aban-

(1) Underwood: Conversion. p.180f.

(2) Pratt: The Religious Consciousness. p.156.

(3) Ibid. p.157.

donment of his strivings. "His conversion was a surrender to God, but his own view was that the surrender was made by a decision of his will, which decision was made possible by an accession of strength suddenly imparted to the will by the grace of God." And he adds: Psychology...produces evidence of the existence of resources of power that are normally not called into use, but which are released when some exceptionally strong stimulus is forthcoming."(1)

There seems to be unanimity of opinion, with the exception of Prof. Pratt, that the experience of conversion is normally preceded by the surrender of effort. "The personal will must be given up," wrote Starbuck. "In many cases," he adds, "relief persistently refuses to come until the person ceases to resist, or to make an effort in the direction he desires to go." Pratt criticises this severely. He admits that it holds of the Bunyan-Brainerd type of conversion, but he refuses to admit that this violent type is so common or so normal an experience as most writers on the psychology of conversion seem to suppose. He holds that with most religious people "conversion is a gradual and almost imperceptible process, with an occasional intensification of emotion now and then during adolescence." Where there are violent or depressing experiences, he holds they are largely due to the fact that the subject had been brought up in a church or community which taught individuals to look for such an experience if not to cultivate it. He also maintains that a study of Begbie's cases shows that the surrender of effort is by no means necessary to conversion. "There must indeed be SURRENDER - surrender of the old purposes and loves, the old self;

(1) Underwood: Conversion. p.182. Vide Hadfield's Essay, "The Psychology of Power," in "The Spirit." pp.71ff.