

POSSESSION AND THE STABILITY OF THE PERSONALITY.

BY HERBERT CHATLEY.

AMONG primitive peoples there is an almost universal belief in the frequent occurrence of demoniacal possession, and, as ethnologists often point out, those peculiar nervous complaints which are now called epilepsy and insanity are ascribed to this cause.

It is a matter of interest to inquire why such a belief should have developed. Primitive man, simple as his logic must have been, would need some definite foundation for an idea which involves considerable complexity. There can be little doubt that the phenomenon of "modified personality" provides such evidence and the fact that such a condition may be voluntarily produced provided a further basis for much of the working hypothesis of magic. In *The Monist* of January, 1912, the writer called attention to the psychological features of the "Boxer" outbreak, in the course of which artificial production of "possession" occurred. A book on this subject, *A Thousand Miles of Miracle* by Rev. A. Glover, M. A., (Hodder and Stoughton) gives some further particulars:

"He [the Boxer recruit] was required to repeat over and over a certain brief formula '*until the gods took possession* and the subject fell backward to the ground, foaming at the mouth and lying for a few minutes as in trances, then rising to drill or fight; whereupon he was declared to be invulnerable to foreign sword or bullet" [p. 11, italics in original].

The writer of this particular book (who displayed extreme fortitude in the persecution) is a believer in the reality of possessions, and quotes certain other examples of non-Boxer origin of considerable interest. It is of course somewhat difficult to say to what extent his theological bias has colored the descriptions but there can be little doubt of his sincerity.

In one case, a woman whose house he sheltered in, suddenly became "possessed" when addressed on doctrinal matters, sat with vacant stare and then commenced an imprecatory incantation which finally convinced the missionary of the presence of a Satanic influence.

Another case he mentions of a girl who sat in the road and similarly chanted, like the classical case in the Acts of the Apostles.

Several missionaries whom the present writer has met give similar accounts, but it is noteworthy that all such reports are tinged by the belief or otherwise in the reality of possession. All agree that Chinese women are liable to go into a trance, and, following this, *ma* (= curse) for hours or even days, after which they naturally pass through a phase of extreme exhaustion, followed by normality. Both men and women occasionally *sheng-ch'i* (= "generate breath," i. e., become furious) to an extent which culminates in illness or death, while it is a common feature of the Taoist ceremonies for the Tao-shih or Wu (exorcist) to go into a fit in which he is insensible to pain and utters oracles in the rôle of a second personality.

Amongst orientals generally there seems to be less "stability of personality" than amongst occidentals. Possibly vegetarian diet (which is the only marked point of difference in habits) may affect the coordination of the psychic elements. There may also be some relation to sex-functions. Hysteria, which appears to be the first stage in the displacement of personality, is notoriously associated with imperfect health in this respect (note the etymology of the word), and it is well known that certain modifications of personality (ecstasy, etc.) are producible by suppression of sexual instincts (celibacy). So close is the relation between these phenomena and the eccentricities of sex that some extremists have thought "religion" explicable on this basis alone. The sexual element in antique cults probably was considered of value as means of producing abnormal psychic states. The fact probably is that the state of equilibrium defined as personality suffers disturbance whenever a great emotion is experienced, and repeated similar emotions or a violent emotional shock will permanently modify the conditions of equilibrium so giving rise to a second personality. Recovery implies a reversal of shock or natural reversion to a more stable state. It is noteworthy that modifications of personality are most frequent among peoples who allow themselves to become excessively "excited," i. e., disturbed by emotion. Furthermore all philosophical thinkers (particularly among certain nations such as the Hindus) have realized that per-

¹ See Note at end on mechanical definition of stability.

sonality can only be "held" by the cultivation of placidity and resistance to emotion, although there is the paradoxical fact that extreme developments in this direction again tend to critical states (Nirvana, etc.).

There is a considerable weight of evidence in favor of the efficacy of "exorcism" in curing cases of "possession." The suggestion theory will go far to explain even this. The ecclesiastical doctrine of the priestly "absolution" is a simple form of the same idea, viz., the modification of a mental state (remorse, conviction of sin) by an insistent suggestion reinforced by the responsivity of the person (his belief in the remission of sins by such a process, etc.). One may go further and say that the phenomena of "conversion" (so ably described by Harold Begbie in his book *Broken Earthenware or Twice-Born Men*) afford a similar example of transition from one critical state of personality to another.

Psychologists have found that in all cases of mutation of personality certain associations persist, and it is conceivable that the human soul can remain in a number of adjacent conformations, some of which involve so large a displacement from the position of unanimous stability (normal personality) that the sense of identity vanishes, whereas others are less remote and while involving a great change in the mental attitude do not imply discontinuity of identity. Theologians speak of "perversions" as well as "conversions," and argue the existence of a special spiritual factor for each. It would seem far less cumbersome to regard them in the light suggested above. Christianity undeniably includes many of the processes of soul-culture by suggestion and there need be no hesitation in accepting such a hypothesis because it conflicts with dogmatic theology. Hudson in his *Psychic Phenomena* has made almost the best defence of Christianity extant by following somewhat similar lines.

Stability.

Stability may be defined as the *permanence of equilibrium*, and implies that any disturbance ("perturbation") of a body from its state of equilibrium (not necessarily of rest) is accompanied by forces which will restore it to that condition when the disturbing forces are removed.

In all practical cases stability is limited, i. e., with a sufficiently great perturbation the restoring forces cease or are insufficient. The extent of the perturbation within which recovery can occur is called the *range of stability*. Thus if a ship can heel either way through

an angle of 30° before the righting moment of the buoyancy vanishes, it has 60° range of stability.

Permanent stability is only possible when (1) The slowly applied disturbing force never exceeds the maximum righting force, and (2) when the work done by the disturbing force however applied cannot exceed the work done against the righting force within the range of stability.

Temporary disturbance of equilibrium is followed by oscillations unless there is great friction (damping). If the disturbance is periodic and the period coincides with that of the natural oscillations, energy will be supplied at each application of force and instability must finally happen. This is known as *synchronism*.

The only true criterion of stability is the decrease of the amplitude of oscillation, so that a mathematical analysis of the conditions of equilibrium in any case needs to be supplemented by an investigation into the oscillations which follow any disturbance. If these have a decreasing amplitude the body is stable, and not otherwise.