

A SICK WORLD

by John Dewey

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It is significant that the callings dignified by the title of professions have to do with the troubles and evils of mankind. Priests cure souls saving from sin, or at least from its consequences; lawyers heal disputes and physicians bodily ills. Aside from sport, amusements and recreation it is diseases that men are most aware of and that they are willing to pay for having "cured." And games and shows owe today a considerable portion of their attraction to the fact that they give a temporary relief from consciousness of troubles. Journalism is said to be becoming a profession, but here accident, murder, war and conflict form a large part of "news," certainly the sensational or striking part. The pathology of social life appears to be its exciting and interesting part. Medicine is indeed becoming preventive, but the very word shows that trouble is still uppermost in thought. Avoidance of evil rather than pursuance of a normal life may not be what men most prize, but it is what they are most aware of. The profession of law is becoming more an advisory adjunct to the conduct of business and less a matter of lawsuits. But the most hopeful would hardly contend that this fact means that law is becoming a mode of constructive social direction, or other than a counsel as to how business corporations can do what they want or need to do without involving themselves in trouble.

The world has always been more or less a sick world. The isles of harmony and health with which we dot the map of human history are largely constructions of the imagination, cities of refuge against present ills, resorts for solace in troubles now endured. But it may be doubted if the consciousness of sickness was ever so widespread as it is today. Our optimism of the cheery word, of sunshine and prosperity is a little too assertive; the lady protests too much. Our recourse to enjoyment is a little too fevered and noisy. They both testify to the pervasive and overhanging consciousness of disease. In earlier periods of history such epochs have been attended with an outburst of religion. Today this way out is not taken. Science, technology and business have left their impress. Upon the whole the world will be satisfied only with something which is more businesslike than past religions, something with more show of technique and the outward semblance of up-to-date science.

In short, we have such phenomena as Couéism, an appeal and a method as old as the caveman but dressed up in the latest fashions of the day. The method has always "cured" some; it will cure a considerable number today. In fact, an expert could go into any audience and pick out, with a small margin of error, just those who are susceptible. The hypnotic device of setting up inability to unclench joined fingers impresses an audience with the fact that there is marvelously "something in it"; it also enables the operator to select just those persons upon whom to work his "cures." Putting the word cures in quotation marks will seem to devotees to imply a particularly mean, because insinuating, method of disparagement; a way of admitting in words that some persons are helped while denying it as a fact, and thus escaping responsibility for taking any definite stand. But it is not intended by the device of quotation marks to question the fact that autosuggestion cures exactly as drugs cure. The object is to suggest the need of examining the whole idea of cure in its relation to the troubles of a sick world.

A cured body or mind is in no sense the same thing as a healthy, vitally growing mind or body, any more than winning a lawsuit is the same thing as cooperative social relationships, or payment of reparations the expression and guarantee of harmonious international relationships. Cure is a negative idea; health a positive one. The interest in cures and salvations is evidence of how sick the world is; it is also evidence of its unwillingness to deal with the causes of its sickness its preoccupation with symptoms and effects. A cure may reduce, suppress or transfer an effect; it does not touch the cause. Or if it does, it is something more than a cure. It is re-education; it is restoration of an organism which manifests symptoms of health because it is rightly constructed.

Does any one suppose that suggestion, whether externally induced or self-induced, although it may remove symptoms and the consciousness of disorder and suffering, actually makes over those conditions in the body which have caused the trouble? If it did, the methods would apply as surely to "organic" diseases as to those ills where cures are effected. A society or an individual which is living positively and constructively will be growing; it will be getting "better and better" every day. The fact would make it quite unnecessary to subject oneself to a suggestion. The whole technique, the very idea of cure, indicates that fundamentally evil, trouble, still exists; it proves that negative ideas and practices instead of constructive ones still dominate our consciousness. A truly healthy life would indeed "prevent"

many troubles but it would occur to no one that its value lay in what it prevented. Such a life would be simple and spontaneous joy, vigor and achievement. Being better signifies something radically different to having less of a trouble.

Any critical appraisal of such methods as those of Couéism seems to imply lack of sympathy for those who are relieved. Any relief, it would seem, is at least so much net gain. But all cheap, short cuts which avoid recognition of basic causes have to be paid for at a great cost. The greatest cost is that palliative and remedial measures put off the day in which fundamental causal factors are faced and constructive action undertaken. They perpetuate the domination of life by reverie, magic, superficiality and evasion; they perpetuate, that is, the sickness of the world. As long as the mind is set upon curing we shall need to be cured. Only education and re-education into normal conditions of growth accomplishes anything positive and enduring. And taking this road means that the specific, definite and complicated conditions of normal health and growth are studied and discovered, and positive endeavor taken in accord with them. No thoughtful person can admit that giving and taking dopes, whether they be physical or mental, in any way forwards the needed knowledge and action. Dependence on cures retards, hampers and confuses. Partial and superficial science, physiological or psychological, carried into immediate execution, is the greatest enemy of genuine and effective science. It substitutes error for ignorance, false conceit for the possibility of learning. Suggestions to the subconscious have the advantage of neither the animal nor the human method of control. They are a hopeless mixture.

Another item of incalculable cost is found in the attendant self-hypnosis of the public at large. Mr. Coué, his methods, cures and personality have filled the columns of the newspapers for weeks. His journey across the ocean was recorded day by day by radio and in newspaper headlines. Mr. Phillips in his column of humor in the *Globe* hit the nail on the head, as he so often does, when he said that, while the method had been practised from times immemorial, older practitioners suffered from the lack of effective press-agency. There is literally no difference between the methods by which Couéism has been exploited and the methods of propaganda used in the war. Both involve a surrender of conscious and intelligent direction of life to the effects of reiteration and appeal to the senses and emotions, an appeal which obscures and corrupts the most precious thing in man—his intelligence. Admitting the utmost claims that can be made for the merits of Couéism, it is not the merits nor their recognition which attract the public; purely factitious considerations which involve surrender of mind are the influential factors. Then one compares the benefits of the relief that some sufferers will obtain at Coué's hands and voice, with the harm done by increased dependence upon blind clamor and indiscriminating rumor, by habits of increased unintelligent response to stimuli that owe their force simply to their sensory and emotional accumulation when one thinks of the growth of credulity and the abandonment of judgment, the balance on the side of benefits is not impressive.

By chance it happened that the same boat which brought Coué brought another person who teaches and practices organic education and reeducation, conscious control, the positive rectification of our sensory appreciations and the judgments and acts that depend upon a correct organic consciousness. There is no doubt about the existence and operation of the subconscious. But the quality, nature and operation of the subconscious depend upon definite conditions. Its workings can be helpful rather than detrimental only when it is itself right. Making it right depends upon its bodily conditions being right—a state which cannot be achieved without a conscious control of them obtained only by positive labor, physiological, intellectual and moral.

The coming of Mr. Matthias Alexander went unheralded. The contrast between the reception of the two men affords a fair measure for our preference of a seemingly cheap and easy way of dealing with symptoms, our wish to be cured rather than to be well. We are now told, every day, following Mr. Wells, that the race is on between catastrophe and education. Half-science, publicity which is propaganda, reliance upon a sub-consciousness which is already corrupted, work against the adoption of the method of education, against, indeed, any serious search for its conditions and methods. And if the antithesis between education and catastrophe is just, this means that they are working on the side of catastrophe.