

The New Zealand Committee on Feeble-minded and Sexual Offenders recommended that the term "moral imbecile" should be included in our Act as in England—obviously in order to bring within the purview of our legislation people of feeble mind who offended our moral code more particularly in sexual matters. The definition of "moral imbecile" in the British Acts is—"Persons who from an early age display some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities on which punishment has had little or no deterrent effect."

There are several objections to this definition: (1) "An early age" is indefinable—and in any case the age at which the more obvious evidences of defect may come into prominence will depend on many extrinsic circumstances; (2) the definition would require the infliction of punishment in order to determine its effect as a deterrent; (3) "moral imbecile" is an unfortunate term, as these patients are not generally imbeciles in the accepted sense of the word, and, furthermore, abnormal behaviour which requires psychiatric examination is not confined to manifestations of vice or crime.

An attempt to meet these objections was made last year by the introduction into the British Parliament of an amending Bill in which the term "moral defective" was substituted, with the following definition: "Persons in whose case there exists mental defectiveness coupled with vicious or criminal propensities and who require supervision and control for their own protection or for the protection of others."

In view of the comprehensive nature of the recommendations made in this report, I suggest that in any new legislation we should adopt the term "social defective," defined as follows: "Persons in whose case there exists mental deficiency associated with or manifested by anti-social conduct and who require State supervision and control for their own protection or for the protection of others."

The problems connected with the State control and care of lower-grade defectives are many and difficult, but they are as nothing to those involved in dealing with the infinitely larger and much less sharply defined so-called high-grade and borderland class, the component individuals of which are presently dealt with through such varied and imperfectly co-operating agencies as mental hospitals, Juvenile Courts, Education Department, prisons, religious bodies, Hospital Boards, and charities. The fact that these social misfits are dealt with by such diverse bodies is in itself some indication of the extreme complexity of the problem, and it also serves to emphasize the essential fact that mental deficiency should not be regarded so much as a disease entity but rather as a social problem.

There is no cure for mental deficiency in the individual, and no panacea will remove it from the country; but I believe that we can gradually assume control of its incidence and diminish the economic burden it imposes on the community, provided we take certain measures to be detailed hereafter.

It is necessary at this preliminary stage to interpose an earnest word of warning. In each of the thirteen countries I visited I found a growing public interest in eugenic matters, and, as often happens when a scientific matter has an intimate popular application, this interest was sometimes accompanied by much uninformed enthusiasm and clamour for the institution of measures purporting to effect a dramatic removal of the menace. The tendency is admirably described in the following quotation from "Below the Surface" (Richard King):—

From time to time there surges through the social world a fashionable intellectualism which, shallow though it mostly be, at least is a pleasant diversion from the usual gossip of the everyday. Before the war it was to be in the vanguard of new ideas to discuss futurism and cubism as if each one led directly into a new art life. The war, however, obliterated every other conversational topic. This was the period when somebody who knew intimately somebody else whose cousin was in the War Office took the reins of dinner-table conversation to circulate rumours around, all more or less fantastic. Immediately after the war spiritualism had an immense vogue. Nowadays, spiritualism seems to be about to take an inferior conversational position to psycho-analysis, the new "cure" for all ills of the spirit, to say nothing of the body. Now, all these topics offer endless possibilities both conversational as well as instructive, but so far as the social world goes, each one is killed by the horde of "dabblers" who, understanding a little of what they are talking about, and liking that "little" immensely, immediately arrogate to themselves the position of being "authorities"—the authority, in fact, if no one amongst their listeners knows quite so much as they. The result is that the real value of each of these theories becomes lost or smothered beneath a mass of emotional faith, a determination to believe everything, simply because that belief would be the supreme gratification of desire. But, personally, as regards both spiritualism and psycho-analysis, I want to be convinced against my will, since I fear to arrive at that state in which I would believe myself convinced because conviction would be so very consoling. Both spiritualism and psycho-analysis are too important to the human welfare to be advertised by those who are always over-ready to dabble in the "extraordinary": who, indeed, only rush towards the "extraordinary" in order to dabble in it, and so earn prestige for themselves by confounding the more ignorant. Most believers in spiritualism have only too many apparent grounds for finding comfort in their belief. I understand their state of blessedness, but I hesitate to follow in their footsteps, because I know too well that where the wish is strong enough, conviction is a comparatively easy matter. As for the quasi-psycho-analysts, who abound everywhere, they do not attract the heart-starved, as do the spiritualists, so much as the sex-starved, the men and women who, to put it quite bluntly, must be stirred by some kind of sexual emotion, or atrophy. And how these people exhibit in themselves that old trite saying about a little knowledge being a very dangerous thing! They also make it a very dull thing too—since having, as it were, mastered the argot of their subject, they gaily substitute for scientifically proved facts a whole heap of words which sound so very intriguing but hide such a large amount of real "bosh."

The conditions thus described can best be seen in America, where the present economic situation is such as to permit of experimentation on a scale too large and expensive for us to follow, but, on the other hand, it presents to us a valuable field for investigation. Many interested travellers to America are carried away by the prevailing optimism and the relative immensity of the undertakings there, and tend to mistake experimental organizations for permanent institutions, forgetting that what is new is not necessarily true.