

How Behavioural Science Tried to Abolish Morality

A science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost, said the great philosopher of science, Alfred North Whitehead: and yet it is worthwhile in the case of psychology (supposing psychology to be a science in Whitehead's sense) to read the pretensions of our forebears. At the very least those pretensions should make us cautious in our claims to have understood anything.

Browsing among my books recently, I brought down from the shelves *Rebel without a Cause: the Hypnoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath* by Robert M Lindner, Psychologist to the US Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Of course the title is more associated in the public mind with the film than with the book, but the book came first. Dated 1945, my edition is British, and on its dustjacket are printed the quaint words:

This book is issued only for the use of the medical and legal professions, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists and others professionally concerned with the study of penology, criminology, etc.

But how were others to be prevented from getting their hands on it?

The contents are dull rather than titillating, however, being (as the blurb accurately describes them):

... literally a verbalisation of the stream of consciousness associations of a young criminal psychopath under prison detection, and amounts to a living self-disclosure of the involution of an abnormal [personality](#).

It was written in the days when, under the strong influence of [psychoanalysis](#), it was still hoped (and expected) that the

recollection of early experiences would, in itself, produce near-miraculous improvements in feeling and conduct.

The preface to the book was written by a couple who were eminent at the time, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, he being Professor of Criminal Law and Criminology at Harvard, and she being Research Criminologist also at Harvard. This is what they wrote:

If hypnoanalysis should be applied more generally in the study and treatment of offenders, it might make an even more significant contribution to the [philosophy](#) and techniques of the Criminal Law than to the rehabilitation of numbers of offenders. For it discloses with dramatic clarity the superficiality of an ancient system of symbols and rituals based upon such outworn notions as "guilt," "criminal intent," "knowledge of right and wrong," and the other paraphernalia developed long before the dawn of Biology, [Psychiatry](#) and Psychology and but little in advance of primitive law.

In other words, biology, psychiatry and psychology will do away altogether with the need for [moral](#) thought, reflection and categories: for there is no reason why its benefits should be confined to criminals (or should I use a more neutral term, for example those not in [conformity](#) with the law?). Why, indeed, should not biology, psychiatry and psychology enable us to act prophylactically, before the breaker of the law has broken the law?

The Gluecks must have believed that no one ever did wrong knowingly (wrong being in their case a word deprived of any moral content). In other words, but for pathology Man would be perfect. Compared with this, the notion of Original Sin is vastly more realistic as well as compassionate, at least in potential. C S Lewis wrote a brilliant and wonderfully concise essay in 1949 entitled The Humanitarian Theory of [Punishment](#), exposing the sheer cruelty of ideas such as those of the

Gluecks – ideas that were fashionable at the time.

As the Communists and the Fascists hoped to clear the world of the messiness of competitive [politics](#), so the Gluecks and their ilk hoped to clear the world of the ambiguities of moral judgment: for, of course, there are cases when pathology leads to what, without such pathology, would be crime, for example when the delirious strike out at those whom they believe are about to attack them. For any reasonably humane person when he considers the ill-conduct of his fellow-beings, there may be extenuating circumstances. But for the Gluecks, all circumstances are extenuating, to such an extent indeed that nothing remains to be extenuated.

The illusion that we can do without ‘primitive’ notions of [guilt](#) and criminal responsibility, seemingly generous but in effect turning human beings (other than ourselves, of course) into automata, is one that persists. I took down another book from my shelves, The [Crime](#) of Punishment, by Karl Menninger, published in 1968, when Menninger was one of the most famous psychiatrists in the United States. The book is the updated and expanded transcript of lectures that he gave at Columbia University: the author was no marginalised crank.

The very word justice irritates scientists [he wrote]... Behavioural scientists regard it as... absurd to invoke the question of justice in deciding what to do with a woman who cannot resist her propensity to shoplift...This sort of behavior has to be controlled; it has to be discouraged; it has to be stopped.

Cutting off her hands would not only do the trick in her case, but would surely deter others, especially if carried out in public. What objection, then, could there be? That the treatment (not punishment, of course) was disproportionate? But disproportionality depends upon the notion of justice, the very mention of which irritates behavioural scientists. That such treatment would be brutal? But brutality is a moral

category, not a scientific one, that must likewise irritate Menningerial behavioural scientists. In short, Menningerialism is fully compatible with the most revolting severity. It involves an attempt in the name of science to empty the world of moral categories, and its failure is pre-ordained by our very [nature](#) as human beings.

It is worth reading old books.

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