

Personality and the Addictions

'Be your own man' is a phrase which is usually applied to the seeking of independence in the sense of striking out on one's own, avoiding the role of subjection, being self-reliant. Of course that idea is fundamentally good. We should not be mere ivy clinging to the walls of life, tumbling down if supports are withdrawn.

But there is a higher form in which we should be our own, that is interiorly, and few enough people achieve that. Self-control in its various forms is not an outstanding feature. To look out over our society, it would almost seem as if no one exercises any self-control. People appear to be yielding totally to their desires, some of which are legitimate. But the point is that it is only a happy accident if they are legitimate, for in most cases they would be given into whether they were good, or bad. Desires, impulses are not resisted; they are just allowed to bear us away. Most people are distressingly like the ship that is at the mercy of the elements. If they

possess in themselves the quality of self-restraint, they certainly do not operate it.

And yet a person in that poor category may well be cutting a big figure in life. How many persons who are acclaimed great by reason of notable performance or high position, are quite unrestrained in their personal lives and characters? Very often, when one digs, will something seriously wrong be found in the background of the great. Look in particular at the acknowledged geniuses for special exemplification of this.

But I do not want this consideration of mine to turn itself into a general inspection of the shortcomings of humanity, but to give it a particular application to what would be regarded as the petty vices, although indeed these can carry one afar, even to disaster.

I am going to deal with the addictions, in particular drinking, smoking, drugs, etc. The *et cetera* could lead us into difficult territory, so I content myself with the named classifications. Excuse the fact that I switch around from one to another of them.

Those things have gone clean out of control in every sense. Governments have come to regard them as being a menace both to health and public order. After having viewed them benignly for a long time as legitimate yieldings and having utilised them for revenue purposes, those governments are now inveighing against them, publishing medical testimony in regard to their harmfulness, and prohibiting the advertising of them. But I think it can be said that those intimidatory measures are having about the same effect as that of a broom which King Canute used to keep back the rising tide. I explain to those not acquainted with the incident that the king in question was completely sane and was employing the broom to point a moral.

I am caused to wonder as to the extent to which people mitigate their consumption of drink or tobacco as the result of those warnings. No doubt the occasional beginner moved and still has sufficient mastery to put on the brakes. Certainly the bulk do not diminish their use of the commodities. It would seem as if they have passed the point where they have control. These are certainly not their own man.

The fact has to be faced to that at a particular stage in the use of those things an addiction has been created. A sort of necessity for them exists. To stop requires a degree of resolution which the majority does not possess. They prefer to bear the various disadvantages – that is the present one of considerable expense and the future possible one of hurt to health – rather to suffer the discomfort of battling with the addiction. Those people have to a limited extent ceased to be in charge of themselves. In extreme cases they are reconciled to that state of servitude which is really worse than that of the slave whose hampered condition may be external only. He may be a free man in his soul.

But the addict is not free. His thinking is conditioned by his need. His ordinary way of life has become dependent on it. If he cannot have it at the usual intervals, he becomes upset to the point of inability to carry on.

At this someone will say: 'Yes, but that would likewise apply to one's food. It has to come to us at regular intervals and we cannot go on without it.'

That is true. But there is the difference that food is a natural requirement whereas those other things are not. The desire for them is artificial. It was implanted by the using of those powerful drugs which at a certain stage inserted themselves into the normal functioning of

the body in such a way that they rank with the natural cravings and have to be satisfied.

Furthermore – and this is radical – food does not require increasing quantities as one goes along, possibly the reverse. But the drugs do and this is their special danger. Progressively they cease to produce the stimulation which has become necessary and therefore the dose has to be steadily increased. The degree of addiction grows.

Again, someone may object that one does not indulge in eating, drinking and smoking mainly because they are cravings; that we derive much pleasure from them. That is so, but I repeat what I have already said: Normal eating is a natural good. Those other things are artificial. You have given them a place in your nervous system which originally and naturally they did not have, but which now is assertive. If you do not satisfy the craving, it hurts you exceedingly. It is a relief and a pleasure to give into it. But surely it represents false policy to create that troublesome situation which would be in much the same category as deliberately causing pain which you then alleviate with opiates. The departure of that pain is a sheer luxury, but would any one for the sake of that luxury be insane enough to create that pain in the first instance?

To do those things deliberately would be like the taking into your house of a tiger as a tiny cub which you know is going to get out of hand when it grows up. But there is this big difference between the tiger and the drug that if you are lucky enough to see initial signs of the tiger's unruliness, you can have him packed off to the zoo. But in the case of the addiction you cannot tear it out of your breast.

So far I have been referring to the cases where it has been possible to keep the use of those things within

bounds, but it is not so easy and not too common. There are persons who are definitely moderate, but even in that case the question arises: why place oneself under that small degree of compulsion and danger? In the case of most people there is a tendency towards excess which goes on strengthening till finally it takes possession. They are always thinking about a drink or a smoke. They are spending money on it which is vitally needed for other purposes, for instance for their families. Unquestionably they have taken on themselves a slavery. Medical testimony supplies innumerable cases where apparently controlled drinkers went into violent delirium tremens when their customary supply was cut off.

Then there are the cases of complete lack of control where fine people have drunk away their lives and incidentally ruined the lives of others. In my own time I have known a very great number of persons of eminent capacity, spiritual and otherwise who have made a total shipwreck of themselves. In some of them it has really been a question of sanctity being thwarted. It represented a tragedy for the world that they original started on the habit.

Of course the invariable reaction to that is the confident declaration: 'That is not going to happen to me.' No one embarking on drink or on the lesser evil ever dreams that it will get out of hand on him. He will not let it! But examine into the number of those who could put it aside if they liked and you will find they are comparatively few. Excess tends to force itself in. Nerve habits are inclined to grow.

To those who think they are safely handling one of those habits I address the following: At a recent meeting of some medical association a report declared that women can successfully play with tippling until about the age of forty-seven when they become addicts. That is a general

and a startling statement. It establishes a distinction between drinking by women and drinking by men at which Women's Lib would protest, but which probably represents a compliment. The more delicate a person's nervous system, the less safe it is to touch drugs. Moreover, as many men have delicate nervous systems, may we not presume that they also would find themselves entrapped at some age?

The special argument which is used to bolster up drinking is that it helps social encounter; in other words that people cannot enjoy each other's company except they are gingered up by drink. That would represent a sorrowful situation if it were true. And I suppose it is true that persons who have become accustomed to social drinking cannot enjoy themselves without the drink. There is no one so mournful, so much on edge as the man who wants a drink and does not get it.

Of course fun can seem fast and furious as long as the drink is flowing. In those circumstances people imagine themselves to be witty and brilliant, but tape-recordings of such outpourings have proved that they are not elevated and can merit to be called drivel.

Then what about the aftermath of those merry gatherings where too much would ordinarily be taken? Well, the carnage on the roads is being largely blamed on the stimulated drivers. But even if all do manage to get home safely, there is the definite problem that such stimulation dies down and is followed by a reaction. Somehow all that false exhilaration has to be paid for – perhaps in ill-temper and serious bickering.

I make this further commentary on that allegation that drink is necessary to make the social wheels go round. The teams of CIE busses which are often engaged by the

Legion for outings have said that the legionaries are the only people who can have really jolly days without having to stop at every pub along the road.

Akin to that delusion as to alcohol making one brilliant is another one: 'I think better when I smoke.' No doubt – because in the absence of that smoke the addict cannot think at all. Moreover, if one reasons it out, is there not some degree of attention being given to the smoking and then a lessening of stress to one's thinking? If every now and then you are impelled to stop for a smoke, it shows that something alien to concentration is at work in your mind.

Another of the more serious misinterpretations which serve towards inducing people to drink and smoke is that it is a mark of manhood to do so; that the manly man does it. You are a sissy if you don't! This can have imperative force on weaker characters. No, on all. For if a thing is repeated sufficiently by those whom we look up to, it is natural to be governed by it. In this way has the young man come to adopt drinking and smoking, and the world is the worse for it.

But there is more to it than that. If the boy drinks and smokes to imitate men, women are now indulging in order to imitate the male sex. This sort of imitation is unworthy of them and amounts only to slavishness. The fact that it is weakness they are imitating makes matters worse.

I have said that when the habit has formed itself, it is more than difficult to unseat it. However, a nurse once told me that she was a committed smoker up to the time when she first saw the lungs of an extreme smoker. Evidently she had dainty ideas about her own body, interior as well as exterior, for the sight of the filthy yellow lungs was a shock to her and she never smoked again.

But one is left to judge that the warnings which the Health Services of the different nations are issuing are not being heeded; there are no reports of a crisis in the drink and tobacco trades. The most recent medical advice proceeding from the highest level of government authority declares that it is an error to suppose that smoking menaces only the lungs; that it is a hurt to the whole physical machine and probably plays a prejudicial part in every ailment, and so it is a curse on the community.

Cases, many of them, jump into my mind where addicts were faced with the medically delivered choice: 'Stop or die,' and they chose the latter. The present torment of craving was worse than the distant likelihood of dying.

One man, by the way a naturally high-minded one, was in the agonies of craving for drink. The only readily available supply was what was intended for his dying daughter who was being kept alive by repeated teaspoonfuls. He seized the total supply with the explanation: 'My necessities are greater than hers.' This was an act of which he would have been incapable if he were a free man.

I could specify for you hundreds, nay thousands of cases like that one where good and nice people have been driven by drink to perpetrate outrageous acts quite foreign to their character.

Apart from those grievous cases, I do say that to take drink even moderately could be an unnecessary hazard to your fulfilment as a person in as much as it is an intervention from outside, which at best can only exercise a mellow deceptiveness, and at worst can turn a decent person into a demon.

I give you an example of the former; that is the mellowing: A friend told me that his mother, a very lovable and abstemious person, always took a half glass

of whisky before leaving home for Confession every Saturday afternoon. She said it gave her perfect contrition. It enabled her to weep over her sins. But you will see that those tears came out of the bottle.

It is rather painful to watch the drinking man. He seems to be unable to do anything without a preliminary drink. Indeed everything is made the excuse for one. How can he contend that his will has free play? If we were engaged in some sensitive, important work we would not wish to have someone beside us jogging our elbow. But to the extent that we are subject to a craving we have, not beside us but in us, a disturbing force. It is not a case of merely jogging our elbow but of interfering with our personality. We are no longer free men. We have introduced inside us an intruder which is always claiming attention, which insists on its own rights, and which struggles for dominion over us. We are not in control of our own house.

This brings us to something of uttermost importance. There is a medical word which I find hard to pronounce but I must try. It is schizophrenia. Its true meaning is that of a mental state where ideas and actions become dissociated from each other. But its fashionable use is to denote a split personality, almost equivalent to another person entering in at times and taking over in us – a sort of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde business. Here I have to refer you to the powerful novel of that title by Robert Louis Stevenson. Appropriately enough, the switch from one personality to another in that book was produced by drugs, and the change was from a benign, cultivated doctor to a criminal maniac, a human devil. Of course that is only a story but a certain amount of it is applicable to what we are talking about.

Personality stands for the ruling principle in us, and as such for a consistency, a capacity for concentration, an unswerving vision. But these things do not harmonise with even a moderate degree of addiction which breaks in frequently and demands to be served. And Holy Writ itself says that we cannot serve two masters.

Thereby has not that addict interfered with his personality? And in such case has he not done himself what can be described as central-damage.

There is yet another aspect which applies to the moderate and controlled individual. It is that there is in those habits a certain offence against delicacy? Could one imagine St Teresa of Avila, just to mention one of the saints, or Edel Quinn, puffing away at cigarettes? Still less could we conceive the same in respect of Our Blessed Lady.

Those are women. But could we think of St Francis of Assisi or St Bernard in the role of the alleged moderate drinker or smoker? You will agree that the notion is incongruous. It just strikes a wrong note in the harmony of holiness. I am not saying that a moderate drinker or smoker cannot achieve sanctity. I suppose that we could find such in the ranks of the saints. But I do say that the two ideas require some little adjusting with each other.

For sanctity is a matter of a single-minded approach. Can the person, who is beset by cravings which he has brought on himself and which he is unable to resist, possess that single-mindedness? It is an interesting question. Of course it could be correctly argued that to fight for sanctity against a disability – however caused – which has become a natural infirmity is a source of merit. But again that only boils down to the essential in this discussion: Why subject ourselves to something which

so easily can become an infirmity and which may form an obstacle to sanctity? For sanctity requires the doing of violence to oneself in many ways. In other words do not embark on those particular forms of amusement. Or if you have already embarked but are able to emancipate yourself, do so without hesitation.

Here the argument may be presented that the system requires some moderate stimulation and that in the days before tea and coffee were available, the corresponding beverages were wine and weak beer. They were even prescribed in the rules of religious orders. But that took care of them and kept them in their place. Nowadays the tea and coffee fulfil that purpose of moderate stimulation.

I am not looking on this matter from the angle of its being virtuous to give up drinking and smoking. Of course it would be a very brave act to break away from those habits out of pure self-sacrifice and not merely to save health and money. It is no act of virtue to abstain if one has no desire for those things.

But there is a fundamental reason. Why stir up the evil which is boiling deep down in every child of Adam and Eve just like the fiery fury which seethes under the earth's crust and which erupts frequently as volcano or earthquake. No one would wilfully set about producing that effect in nature. Why do it in the human order by awakening urges which are so ready to rage? Yet the use of drugs basically does that very thing. They tend towards weakening the barrier which all right education has built up in us to curb the elemental evil that is in us. It is a real case of playing with fire, and we should not even at a distance warm ourselves at that fire.