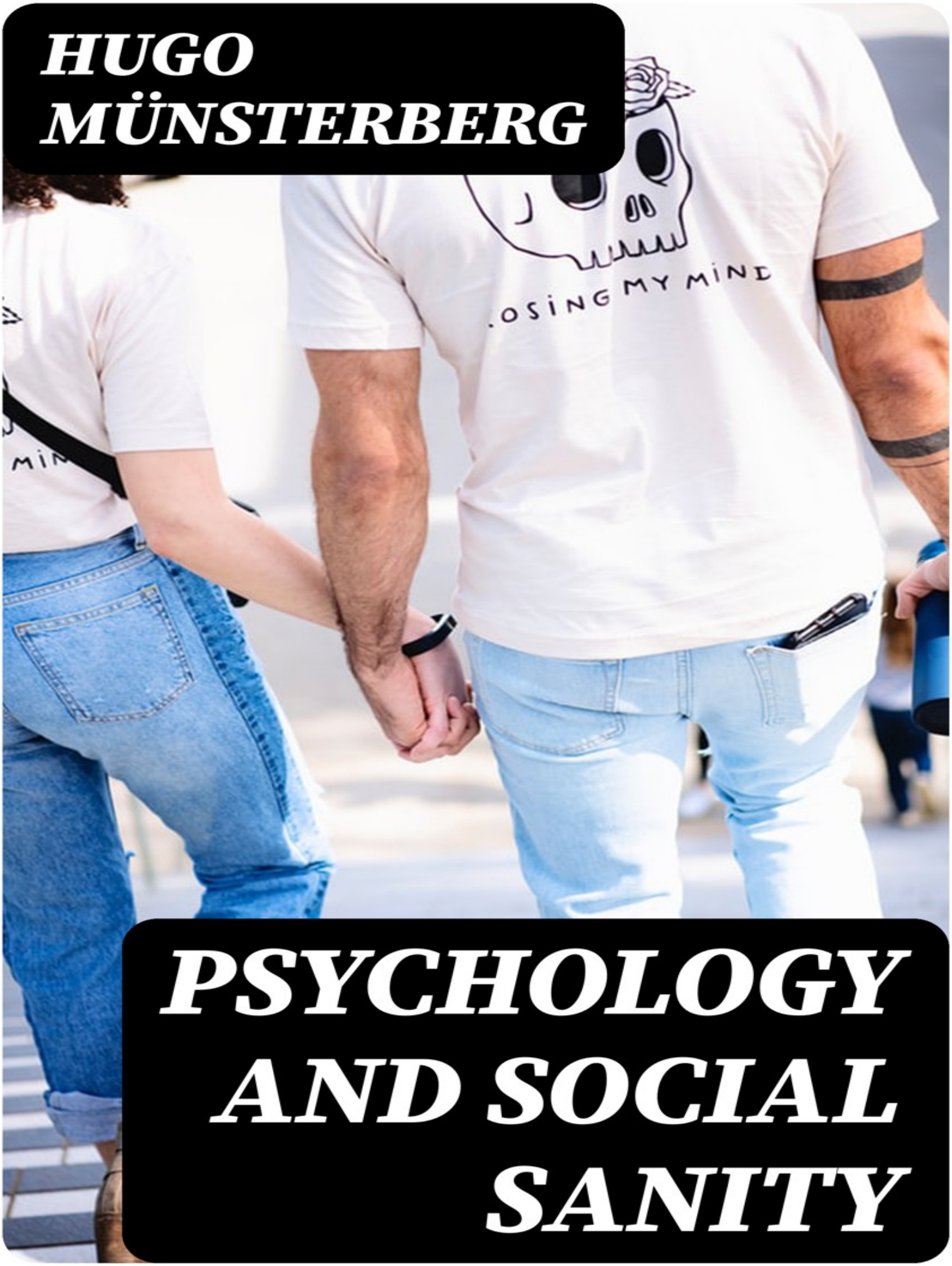
HUGO MÜNSTERBERG



PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL SANITY

Hugo Münsterberg

Psychology and Social Sanity

EAN 8596547363637

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

It has always seemed to me a particular duty of the psychologist from time to time to leave his laboratory and with his little contribution to serve the outside interests of the community. Our practical life is filled with psychological problems which have to be solved somehow, and if everything is left to commonsense and to unscientific fancies about the mind, confusion must result, and the psychologist who stands aloof will be to blame.

Hence I tried in my little book “On the Witness Stand” to discuss for those interested in law the value of exact psychology for the problems of the courtroom. In “Psychotherapy” I showed the bearing of a scientific study of the mind on medicine. In “Psychology and the Teacher” I outlined its consequences for educational problems. In “Psychology and Industrial Efficiency” I studied the importance of exact psychology for commerce and industry. And I continue this series by the present little volume, which speaks of psychology's possible service to social sanity. I cannot promise that even this will be the last, as I have not yet touched on psychology's relation to religion, to art, and to politics.

The field which I have approached this time demanded a different kind of treatment from that in the earlier books. There I had aimed at a certain systematic completeness. When we come to the social questions, such a method would be misleading, as any systematic study of these psychological factors is still a hope for the future. Many

parts of the field have never yet been touched by the plow of the psychologist. The only method which seems possible to-day is to select a few characteristic topics of social discussion and to outline for each of them in what sense a psychologist might contribute to the solution or might at least further the analysis of the problem. The aim is to show that our social difficulties are ultimately dependent upon mental conditions which ought to be cleared up with the methods of modern psychology.

I selected as illustrations those social questions which seemed to me most significant for our period. A few of them admitted an approach with experimental methods, others merely a dissection of the psychological and psychophysiological roots. The problems of sex, of socialism, and of superstition seemed to me especially important, and if some may blame me for overlooking the problem of suffrage, I can at least refer to the chapter on the jury, which comes quite near to this militant question.

Most of this material appears here for the first time. The chapter on thought transference, however, was published in shorter form in the *Metropolitan Magazine*, that on the jury, also abbreviated, in the *Century Magazine*, and that on naïve psychology in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The paper on sexual education is an argument, and at the same time an answer in a vivid discussion. Last summer I published in the New York *Times* an article which dealt with the sex problem. It led to vehement attacks from all over the country. The present long paper replies to them fully. I hope sincerely that it will be my last word in the matter. The advocates of

sexual talk now have the floor; from now on I shall stick to the one policy in which I firmly believe, the policy of silence.

HUGO MÜNSTERBERG.

Cambridge, Mass., January, 1914.

PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL SANITY

Table of Contents

I

Table of Contents

SEX EDUCATION

Table of Contents

THE time is not long past when the social question was understood to mean essentially the question of the distribution of profit and wages. The feeling was that everything would be all right in our society, if this great problem of labour and property could be solved rightly. But in recent years the chief meaning of the phrase has shifted. Of all the social questions the predominant, the fundamentally social one, seems nowadays the problem of sex, with all its side issues of social evils and social vice. It is as if society feels instinctively that these problems touch still deeper layers of the social structure. Even the fights about socialism and the whole capitalistic order do not any

longer stir the conscience of the community so strongly as the grave concern about the family. All public life is penetrated by sexual discussions, magazines and newspapers are overflooded with considerations of the sexual problem, on the stage one play of sexual reform is pushed off by the next, the pulpit resounds with sermons on sex, sex education enters into the schools, legislatures and courts are drawn into this whirl of sexualized public opinion; the old-fashioned policy of silence has been crushed by a policy of thundering outcry, which is heard in every home and every nursery. This loudness of debate is surely an effect of the horror with which the appalling misery around us is suddenly discovered. All which was hidden by prudery is disclosed in its viciousness, and this outburst of indignation is the result. Yet it would never have swollen to this overwhelming flood if the nation were not convinced that this is the only way to cause a betterment and a new hope. The evil was the result of the silence itself. Free speech and public discussion alone can remove the misery and cleanse the social life. The parents must know, and the teachers must know, and the boys must know, and the girls must know, if the abhorrent ills are ever to be removed.

But there are two elements in the situation which ought to be separated in sober thought. There may be agreement on the one and yet disagreement on the other. It is hardly possible to disagree on the one factor of the situation, the existence of horrid calamities, and of deplorable abuses in the world of sex, evils of which surely the average person knew rather little, and which were systematically hidden from society, and above all, from the youth, by the

traditional method of reticence. To recognize these abscesses in the social organism necessarily means for every decent being the sincere and enthusiastic hope of removing them. There cannot be any dissent. It is a holy war, if society fights for clean living, for protection of its children against sexual ruin and treacherous diseases, against white slavery and the poisoning of married life. But while there must be perfect agreement about the moral duty of the social community, there can be the widest disagreement about the right method of carrying on this fight. The popular view of the day is distinctly that as these evils were hidden from sight by the policy of silence, the right method of removing them from the world must be the opposite scheme, the policy of unveiled speech. The overwhelming majority has come to this conclusion as if it were a matter of course. The man on the street, and what is more surprising, the woman in the home, are convinced that, if we disapprove of those evils, we must first of all condemn the silence of our forefathers. They feel as if he who sticks to the belief in silence must necessarily help the enemies of society, and become responsible for the alarming increase of sexual affliction and crime. They refuse to see that on the one side the existing facts and the burning need for their removal, and on the other side the question of the best method and best plan for the fight, are entirely distinct, and that the highest intention for social reform may go together with the deepest conviction that the popular method of the present day is doing incalculable harm, is utterly wrong, and is one of the most dangerous causes of that evil which it hopes to destroy.

The psychologist, I am convinced, must here stand on the unpopular side. To be sure, he is not unaccustomed to such an unfortunate position in the camp of the disfavoured minority. Whenever a great movement sweeps through the civilized world, it generally starts from the recognition of a great social wrong and from the enthusiasm for a thorough change. But these wrongs, whether they have political or social, economic or moral character, are always the products of both physical and psychical causes. The public thinks first of all of the physical ones. There are railroad accidents: therefore improve the physical technique of the signal system; there is drunkenness: therefore remove the whiskey bottle. The psychical element is by no means ignored. Yet it is treated as if mere insight into the cause, mere good will and understanding, are sufficient to take care of the mental factors involved. The social reformers are therefore always discussing the existing miseries, the possibilities of improvements in the world of things, and the necessity of spreading knowledge and enthusiasm. They do not ask the advice of the psychologist, but only his jubilant approval, and they always feel surprised if he has to acknowledge that there seems to him something wrong in the calculation. The psychologist knows that the mental elements cannot be brought under such a simple formula according to which good will and insight are sufficient; he knows that the mental mechanism which is at work there has its own complicated laws, which must be considered with the same care for detail as those technical schemes for improvement. The psychologist is not astonished that though the technical improvements of the railways are

increased, yet one serious accident follows another, as long as no one gives attention to the study of the engineer's mind. Nor is he surprised that while the area of prohibition is expanding rapidly, the consumption of beer and whiskey is nevertheless growing still more quickly, as long as the psychology of the drinker is neglected. The trusts and the labour movements, immigration and the race question, the peace movement and a score of other social problems show exactly the same picture—everywhere insight into old evils, everywhere enthusiasm for new goals, everywhere attention to outside factors, and everywhere negligence of those functions of the mind which are independent of the mere will of the individual.

But now since a new great wave of discussion has arisen, and the sexual problem is stirring the nation, the psychologist's faith in the unpopular policy puts him into an especially difficult position. Whenever he brings from his psychological studies arguments which point to the errors in public prejudices, he can present his facts in full array. Nothing hinders him from speaking with earnestness against the follies of hasty and short-sighted methods in every concern of public life, if he has the courage to oppose the fancies of the day. But the fight in favour of the policy of silence is different. If he begins to shout his arguments, he himself breaks that rôle of silence which he recommends. He speaks for a conviction, which demands from him first of all that he shall not speak. The more eagerly he spreads his science, the more he must put himself in the wrong before his own conscience. He is thus thrown into an unavoidable conflict. If he is silent, the cause of his opponents will

prosper, and if he objects with full arguments, his adversaries have a perfect right to claim that he himself sets a poor example and that his psychology helps still more to increase that noisy discussion which he denounces as ruinous to the community. But in this contradictory situation the circle must be broken somewhere, and even at the risk of adding to the dangerous tumult which he condemns, the psychologist must break his silence in order to plead for silence. I shall have to go into all the obnoxious detail, for if I yielded to my feeling of disgust, my reticence would not help the cause while all others are shouting. I break silence in order to convince others that if they were silent, too, our common social hopes and wishes would be nearer to actual fulfilment.

But let us acknowledge from the start that we stand before an extremely complicated question, in which no routine formula can do justice to the manifoldness of problems. Most of these discussions are misshaped from the beginning by the effort to deal with the whole social sex problem, while only one or another feature is seriously considered. Now it is white slavery, and now the venereal diseases; now the demands of eugenics, and now the dissipation of boys; now the influence of literature and drama, and now the effect of sexual education in home and school; now the medical situation and the demands of hygiene, and now the moral situation and the demands of religion; now the influence on the feministic movement, and now on art and social life; now the situation in the educated middle classes, and now in the life of the millions. We ought to disentangle the various threads in this confusing social

tissue and follow each by itself. We shall see soon enough that not only the various elements of the situation awake very different demands, but that often any single feature may lead to social postulates which interfere with each other. Any regulation prescription falsifies the picture of the true needs of the time.

II

We certainly follow the present trend of the discussion if we single out first of all the care for the girls who are in danger of becoming victims of private or professional misuse as the result of their ignorance of the world of erotics. This type of alarming news most often reaches the imagination of the newspaper reader nowadays, and this is the appeal of the most sensational plays. The spectre of the white slavery danger threatens the whole nation, and the gigantic number of illegitimate births seems fit to shake the most indifferent citizen. Every naïve girl appears a possible victim of man's lust, and all seem to agree that every girl should be acquainted with the treacherous dangers which threaten her chastity. The new programme along this line centres in one remedy: the girls of all classes ought to be informed about the real conditions before they have an opportunity to come into any bodily contact with men. How far the school is to spread this helpful knowledge, how far the wisdom of parents is to fill these blanks of information, how far serious literature is to furnish such science, and how far the stage or even the film is to bring it to the masses, remains a secondary feature of the scheme, however much it is discussed among the social reformers.

The whole new wisdom proceeds according to the simple principle which has proved its value in the field of popular hygiene. The health of the nation has indeed been greatly improved since the alarming ignorance in the matters of prophylaxis in disease has been systematically fought by popular information. If the mosquito or the hookworm or the fly is responsible for diseases from which hundreds of thousands have to suffer, there can be no wiser and straighter policy than to spread this knowledge to every corner of the country. The teachers in the schoolroom and the writers in the popular magazines cannot do better than to repeat the message, until every adult and every child knows where the enemy may be found and helps to destroy the insects and to avoid the dangers of contact. This is the formula after which those reformers want to work who hold the old-fashioned policy of silence in sexual matters to be obsolete. Of course they aim toward a mild beginning. It may start with beautiful descriptions of blossoms and of fruits, of eggs and of hens, before it comes to the account of sexual intercourse and human embryos, but if the talking is to have any effect superior to not talking, the concrete sexual relations must be impressed upon the imagination of the girl before she becomes sixteen years of age.

Here is the real place for the psychological objection. It is not true that you can bring such sexual knowledge into the mind of a girl in the period of her development with the same detachment with which you can deposit in her mind the knowledge about mosquitoes and houseflies. That prophylactic information concerning the influence of the insects on diseases remains an isolated group of ideas,

which has no other influence on the mind than the intended one, the influence of guiding the actions in a reasonable direction. The information about her sexual organs and the effects on the sexual organism of men may also have as one of its results a certain theoretical willingness to avoid social dangers. But the far stronger immediate effect is the psychophysiological reverberation in the whole youthful organism with strong reactions on its blood vessels and on its nerves. The individual differences are extremely great here. On every social level we find cool natures whose frigidity would inhibit strong influences in these organic directions. But they are the girls who have least to fear anyhow. With a much larger number the information, however slowly and tactfully imparted, must mean a breaking down of inhibitions which held sexual feelings and sexual curiosity in check.

The new ideas become the centre of attention, the whole world begins to appear in a new light, everything which was harmless becomes full of meaning and suggestion, new problems awake, and the new ideas irradiate over the whole mental mechanism. The new problems again demand their answers. Just the type of girl to whom the lure might become dangerous will be pushed to ever new inquiries, and if the policy of information is accepted in principle, it would be only wise to furnish her with all the supplementary knowledge which covers the multitude of sexual perversions and social malpractices of which to-day many a clean married woman has not the faintest idea. But to such a girl who knows all, the surroundings appear in the new glamour. She understands now how her body is the object of desire,

she learns to feel her power, and all this works backward on her sexual irritation, which soon overaccentuates everything which stands in relation to sex. Soon she lives in an atmosphere of high sexual tension in which the sound and healthy interests of a young life have to suffer by the hysterical emphasis on sexuality. The Freudian psychoanalysis, which threatens to become the fad of the American neurologists, probably goes too far when it seeks the cause for all neurasthenic and hysteric disturbances in repressed sexual ideas of youth. But no psychotherapist can doubt that the havoc which secret sexual thoughts may bring to the neural life, especially of the unbalanced, is tremendous. Broken health and a distorted view of the social world with an unsound, unclean, and ultimately immoral emphasis on the sexual relations may thus be the sad result for millions of girls, whose girlhood under the policy of the past would have remained untainted by the sordid ideas of man as an animal.

Yet the calamity would not be so threatening if the effect of sexual instruction were really confined to the putrid influence on the young imagination. The real outcome is not only such a revolution in the thoughts, but the power which it gains over action. We have only to consider the mechanism which nature has provided. The sexual desire belongs to the same group of human instincts as the desire for food or the desire for sleep, all of which aim toward a certain biological end, which must be fulfilled in order to secure life. The desire for food and sleep serves the individual himself, the desire for the sexual act serves the race. In every one of these cases nature has furnished the

body with a wonderful psychophysical mechanism which enforces the outcome automatically. In every case we have a kind of circulatory process into which mental excitements and physiological changes enter, and these are so subtly related to each other that one always increases the other, until the maximum desire is reached, to which the will must surrender. Nature needs this automatic function; otherwise the vital needs of individual and race might be suppressed by other interests, and neglected. In the case of the sexual instinct, the mutual relations between the various parts of this circulatory process are especially complicated. Here it must be sufficient to say that the idea of sexual processes produces dilation of blood vessels in the sexual sphere, and that this physiological change itself becomes the source and stimulus for more vivid sexual feelings, which associate themselves with more complex sexual thoughts. These in their turn reinforce again the physiological effect on the sexual organ, and so the play goes on until the irritation of the whole sexual apparatus and the corresponding sexual mental emotions reach a height at which the desire for satisfaction becomes stronger than any ordinary motives of sober reason.

This is the great trick of nature in its incessant service to the conservation of the animal race. Monogamic civilization strives to regulate and organize these race instincts and to raise culture above the mere lure of nature. But that surely cannot be done by merely ignoring that automatic mechanism of nature. On the contrary, the first demand of civilization must be to make use of this inborn psychophysical apparatus for its own ideal human purposes,

and to adjust the social behaviour most delicately to the unchangeable mechanism. The first demand, accordingly, ought to be that we excite no one of these mutually reinforcing parts of the system, neither the organs nor the thoughts nor the feelings, as each one would heighten the activities of the others, and would thus become the starting point of an irrepressible demand for sexual satisfaction. The average boy or girl cannot give theoretical attention to the thoughts concerning sexuality without the whole mechanism for reinforcement automatically entering into action. We may instruct with the best intention to suppress, and yet our instruction itself must become a source of stimulation, which necessarily creates the desire for improper conduct. The policy of silence showed an instinctive understanding of this fundamental situation. Even if that traditional policy had had no positive purpose, its negative function, its leaving at rest the explosive sexual system of the youth, must be acknowledged as one of those wonderful instinctive procedures by which society protects itself.

The reformer might object that he gives not only information, but depicts the dangers and warns against the ruinous effects. He evidently fancies that such a black frame around the luring picture will be a strong enough countermotive to suppress the sensual desire. But while the faint normal longing can well be balanced by the trained respect for the mysterious unknown, the strongly accentuated craving of the girl who knows may ill be balanced by any thought of possible disagreeable consequences. Still more important, however, is a second

aspect. The girl to whom the world sex is the great taboo is really held back from lascivious life by an instinctive respect and anxiety. As soon as girl and boy are knowers, all becomes a matter of naked calculation. What they have learned from their instruction in home and school and literature and drama is that the unmarried woman must avoid becoming a mother. Far from enforcing a less sensuous life, this only teaches them to avoid the social opprobrium by going skilfully to work. The old-fashioned morality sermon kept the youth on the paths of clean life; the new-fashioned sexual instruction stimulates not only their sensual longings, but also makes it entirely clear to the young that they have nothing whatever to fear if they yield to their voluptuousness but make careful use of their new physiological knowledge. From my psychotherapeutic activity, I know too well how much vileness and perversity are gently covered by the term flirtation nowadays in the circle of those who have learned early to conceal the traces. The French type of the demi-vierge is just beginning to play its rôle in the new world. The new policy will bring in the great day for her, and with it a moral poisoning which must be felt in the whole social atmosphere.

III

We have not as yet stopped to examine whether at least the propaganda for the girl's sexual education starts rightly when it takes for granted that ignorance is the chief source for the fall of women. The sociological student cannot possibly admit this as a silent presupposition. In many a pathetic confession we have read as to the past of fallen

girls that they were not aware of the consequences. But it would be utterly arbitrary to construe even such statements as proofs that they were unaware of the limits which society demanded from them. If a man breaks into a neighbour's garden by night to steal, he may have been ignorant of the fact that shooting traps were laid there for thieves, but that does not make him worthy of the pity which we may offer to him who suffers by ignorance only. The melodramatic idea that a straightforward girl with honest intent is abducted by strangers and held by physical force in places of degradation can simply be dismissed from a discussion of the general situation. The chances that any decent man or woman will be killed by a burglar are a hundred times larger than that a decent girl without fault of her own will become the victim of a white slavery system which depends upon physical force. Since the new policy of antisilence has filled the newspapers with the most filthy gossip about such imaginary horrors, it is not surprising that frivolous girls who elope with their lovers later invent stories of criminal detention, first by half poisoning and afterward by handcuffing. Of all the systematic, thorough investigations, that of the Vice Commission of Philadelphia seems so far the most instructive and most helpful. It shows the picture of a shameful and scandalous social situation, and yet, in spite of years of most insistent search by the best specialists, it says in plain words that “no instances of actual physical slavery have been specifically brought to our attention.”

This does not contradict in the least the indubitable fact that in all large cities white slavery exists in the wider sense of the word—that is, that many girls are kept in a life of

shame because the escape from it is purposely made difficult to them. They are held constantly in debt and are made to believe that their immunity from arrest depends upon their keeping on good terms with the owners of disorderly houses. But the decisive point for us is that while they are held back at a time when they know too much, they are not brought there by force at a time when they know too little. The Philadelphia Vice Report analyzes carefully the conditions and motives which have brought the prostitutes to their life of shame. The results of those hundreds of interviews point nowhere to ignorance. The list of reasons for entering upon such a life brings information like this: “She liked the man,” “Wanted to see what immoral life was like,” “Sneaked out for pleasure, got into bad company,” “Would not go to school, frequented picture shows, got into bad company,” “Thought she would have a better time,” “Envied girls with fine clothes and gay time,” “Wanted to go to dances and theatres,” “Went with girls who drank, influenced by them,” “Liked to go to moving picture shows,” “Did not care what happened when forbidden to marry.” With these personal reasons go the economic ones: “Heard immorality was an easy way to make money, which she needed,” “Decided that this was the easiest way of earning money,” “Wanted pretty clothes,” “Never liked hard work,” “Tired of drudgery at home,” “Could make more money this way than in a factory.” Only once is it reported: “Chloroformed at a party, taken to man's house and ruined by him.” If that is true, we have there simply a case of actual crime, against which nobody can be protected by mere knowledge. In short, a

thorough study indicates clearly that the girl who falls is not pushed passively into her misery.

Surely it is alarming to read that last year in one single large city of the Middle West two hundred school girls have become mothers, but whoever studies the real sociological material cannot doubt that every one of those two hundred knew very clearly that she was doing something which she ought not to do. Every one of them had knowledge enough, and if the knowledge was often vague and dirty, the effect would not have been improved by substituting for it more knowledge, even if it were clearer and scientifically more correct. What every one of those two hundred girls needed was less knowledge—that is, less familiarity of the mind with this whole group of erotic ideas, and through this a greater respect for and fear of the unknown. Nobody who really understands the facts of the sexual world with the insight of the physician will deny that nevertheless treacherous dangers and sources of misfortune may be near to any girl, and that they might be avoided if she knew the truth. But then it is no longer a question of a general truth, which can be implanted by any education, but a specific truth concerning the special man. The husband whom she marries may be a scoundrel who infects her with ruinous disease, but even if she had read all the medical books beforehand it would not have helped her.

IV

The situation of the boys seems in many respects different. They are on the aggressive side. There is no danger that by their lack of knowledge they will be lured

into a life of humiliation, but the danger of their ruin is more imminent and the risk which parents run with them is far worse. Any hour of reckless fun may bring them a life of cruel suffering. The havoc which venereal diseases bring to the men of all social classes is tremendous. The Report of the Surgeon-General of the Army for 1911 states that with the mean strength of about seventy-three thousand men in the army, the admissions to the hospitals on account of venereal diseases were over thirteen thousand. That is, of any hundred men at least eighteen were ill from sexual infection. The New York County Hospital Society reports two hundred and forty-three thousand cases of venereal disease treated in one year, as compared with forty-one thousand five hundred and eighty-five cases of all other communicable diseases. This horrible sapping of the physical energies of the nation, with the devastating results in the family, with the poisoning of the germs for the next generation, and with the disastrous diseases of brain and spinal cord, is surely the gravest material danger which exists. How small compared with that the thousands of deaths from crime and accidents and wrecks! how insignificant the harvest of human life which any war may reap! And all this can ultimately be avoided, not only by abstinence, but by strict hygiene and rigorous social reorganization. At this moment we have only to ask how much of a change for the better can be expected from a mere sexual education of the boys.

From a psychological point of view, this situation appears much more difficult than that of the girls. All psychological motives speak for a policy of silence in the girls' cases. For

the boys, on the other hand, the importance of some hygienic instruction cannot be denied. A knowledge of the disastrous consequences of sexual diseases must have a certain influence for good, and the grave difficulty lies only in the fact that nevertheless all the arguments which speak against the sexual education of the girls hold for the boys, too. The harm to the youthful imagination, the starting of erotic thoughts with sensual excitement in consequence of any kind of sexual instruction must be still greater for the young man than for the young woman, as he is more easily able to satisfy his desires. We must thus undoubtedly expect most evil consequences from the instruction of the boys; and yet we cannot deny the possible advantages. Their hygienic consciousness may be enriched and their moral consciousness tainted by the same hour of well-meant instruction. With the girls an energetic no is the only sane answer; with the boys the social reformer may well hesitate between the no and the yes. The balance between fear and hope may be very even there. Yet, however depressing such a decision may be, the psychologist must acknowledge that even here the loss by frank discussion is greater than the gain.

A serious warning lies in the well-known fact that of all professional students, the young medical men have the worst reputation for their reckless indulgence in an erotic life. They know most, and it is psychologically not surprising that just on that account they are most reckless. The instinctive fear of the half knower has left them; they live in an illusory safety, the danger has become familiar to them, and they deceive themselves with the idea that the