

A possible statistical fallacy is thus introduced. The two classes of cases being treated under two independent official bodies there is a difficulty in satisfactorily combining their information. This is an additional argument in favour of the establishment of a ministry of health which should have general supervision in all health matters and furnish definite information in such cases.

Whether these statistics indicate an apparent or real diminution in the production of insanity, they are at least satisfactory as an evidence that we may expect that there should certainly be a decrease in the rate of the erection of asylums.

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*Questions on the Alcohol Question : the Use of Alcohol.*

The question of the use of alcohol was raised in connection with the annual meeting, and drew the attention of one of the most active of the daily papers to the views and habits of the members of the Medico-Psychological Association. Publicity has thus been given to the fact that, although as a body we advocate temperance, and to some extent enforce total abstinence in our asylums, as individuals the large majority use alcohol as an habitual article of diet. It behoves us to consider whether we are setting a bad example by habitually using a noxious poison, or whether we are availing ourselves of one of the means of enhancing the pleasure of life in using that which in moderation can "gladden the heart of man," and thus tends to aid his evolutionary progress.

The question, indeed, is ever the same : Is alcohol an absolute poison, in all quantities, or has it any use whatever as a food, stimulant, or for any other effect ?

On the one hand, the striking fact presents itself that some of the most progressive nations have habitually used alcoholic beverages for long periods. If alcohol is a poison why have these not deteriorated or become exterminated ? Is there progress in spite of, or by reason of, their alcoholic habits ? On the other hand, the Hindoos and Mahommedans who have been non-alcoholic for centuries, have not appeared to develop as rapidly as the alcoholic races, and, indeed, seem—in the case of the Mahommedans—to have undergone serious deterioration.

Has the decadence of the latter been by reason of, or in spite of, their non-alcoholic habits.

These offer the largest experience in the use of alcohol which the history of the world presents—extending over centuries and affecting myriads of individuals. If properly studied a conclusive opinion can surely be formed from so vast an experiment.

The main argument from experience of the total abstinence partisans is based on the insurance returns, and on the first glance they are very convincing, but if they are considered without bias they become less evidently conclusive.

The man who practises total abstinence in the midst of an alcoholic population is either impelled thereto by a strong determination or is compelled by his organic inability to tolerate alcohol. In all cases, the total abstinence is a proof of the possession of a life-long habit of self-control, which would act also in the other relations of life, the instinct of self-preservation being highly developed. Since these individuals are a chosen class, who devote much attention to their self-preservation, to compare them with the large majority of men who lead a life in which the enjoyment of the present, with its consequent risks, is predominant, is not a fair comparison.

Is the longer life of the one class not due to their greater self-care all round rather than to the total abstinence? Would they not live as long if they used alcohol with the strict self-control which their character would produce?

Again, is length of life the final test? A total abstinent ascetic in his cave lives to a hundred years, the Mahomedan and Hindoo live as long, or nearly as long as the alcoholic European, but, tested by the amount of work done, which is the fullest life? The non-alcoholic races may equal or surpass the alcoholic in muscular work, but can they equal them in the higher forms of energy, the intellectual, and in persistent endurance of nervous stress?

Another question is whether the non-alcoholic persons in alcoholic populations suffer less from nervous and mental breakdown, and whether they exhibit a greater amount of intellectual energy? Here, again, however, the question is by no means simple. Very many young abstainers break down: Is it from inherent weakness, or from loss of a racial habit? On the other hand, many inherit a vigorous self-control, which makes

them a special class, but is this due to non-alcoholic habit or heredity?

If it is conceded that alcohol is of possible use the question still remains whether, in consideration of the evils which are apt to develop from its habitual employment, other forms of food or stimulation cannot be more advantageously employed, and whether human evolution would be hastened or delayed by the change? The morbid desire seems to be for Lethe, in drink or drugs, and it has been shown that the asylum drunkard is, almost inevitably, a degenerate person hereditarily burdened with neurotic inefficiency.

These, and many other questions in regard to the use of alcohol, demand a more thorough and impartial examination than has been accorded to them, and the Medico-Psychological Association would do well to make a serious effort to give the public a definite answer to those which lie within the limits of its special experience.

We fear, speaking from the depths of a profound though, happily, only temporary ignorance, that the solution is not to be found on the lines laid down by a recent writer in the public press, who tells us, over letters implying that he is a physician, that the mental defect produced by alcohol is not insanity, and that insanity is probably produced by a trypanosome like the "sleeping sickness." One wonders at many things in this lofty statement. If the Porter in Macbeth were still at hand to be questioned, he might exclaim: "In sooth, aye! the sleep were a likely tale, but what of the others, my masters, the nose-painting, and the rest?"

Some poor heretics from the modern trypanosomatous faith, living in drunken lands, and unable to shut our eyes to what is happening under our noses, feel rather inclined to subscribe to the old vulgar view prevalent since Noah was an exhibitionist, and well phrased by the great thinker Berkeley when he tells us that the experience of every village shows that drink ruins in mind and body every man who takes to it—"except," he quaintly adds, "a few of the devil's decoys."

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