

The Prisoner— His Characteristics and Needs

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WHEN I STARTED thinking about different types of prisoners, I imagined I would simply read a few books so as to give me a comprehensive list of types of human personality as found in prison—mainly so that the list would be a complete one. I knew a fair number of types myself but wanted to make a comprehensive survey. The more I read, however, the clearer it became that whatever else any list would be, it would not be comprehensive. No one is going to produce a neat list of human types into which we can fit all the people we meet in or out of prison. So when you come to the end of this and feel it is incomplete or superficial, be assured that no one is more conscious of that than I. So to human categories. The first great division in the field of delinquency is one that is often forgotten. It is two-fold:

- (a) The caught (or failures at crime).
- (b) The uncaught (or successful at crime).

It is a useful exercise to reflect that *a* is a very small proportion of *a* plus *b*. Further, all our work on *a* has no effect on *b*, and the moral and social conditions which cause the large *b* will continue also to produce the smaller *a*. In other words, however successful the Prison Department and any others become, in treating *a*, we will never be successful enough to be out of work.

Any work on human personality will give you certain types, and some of these labels have become part of our everyday language, as for instance:

- (1) The extrovert (the outward looking person).
- (2) The introvert (an obsessional person).
- (3) The psychopath.

More will be said of (3) later.

It is interesting to note that modern writers on human personality still use the ancient divisions as laid down by Hippocrates though altering the actual wording. So the work of the Russian Pavlov

described in Sargents' *Battle for the Mind*, does this.

HIPPOCRATES

- (1) Choleric.
- (2) Sanguine.
- (3) Phlegmatic.
- (4) Melancholic.

PAVLOV

- Strong, excitatory.
- Lively.
- Calm, imperturbable.
- Weak, inhibitory.

The trouble with "typing" human beings is that, as we all know, we have in us a mixture of types. This is what makes the subject a complex one, and this theme is one to which we must constantly return. Then there is the complication of having categories created by certain influences e.g.:

- (1) Those categories created by prison administration—stars, Y.P.'s, B.I.'s, recalls, trainable ordinaries, ordinaries, C.T.'s, P.D.'s (already these are disappearing from the scene), lifers, and that *corps d'élite* of the prison world, picked out in startling technicolour from their fellow men, the E men, and the latest additions A, B, C and D. Many and varied are the "characteristics" imposed on men by being in one or other of these categories.
- (2) Those created by prison society—the manipulator, the baron, the strong arm man, the trusty, the "bloody-minded", the grass, the "good" prisoner.
- (3) The categories into which men are put because of the pattern of their criminal

behaviour—the false pretender, the petty sneak thief, the robbery with violence, the often pathetic indecent exposure and, much rarer, the big time men, the forger or jewel thief.

- (4) The medical types—epileptics, alcoholics and homosexuals.
- (5) The psychological types—psychopaths and hysterics.

B. A. Johnson, principal psychologist at Risley, did some research in 1964 at Manchester amongst unsentenced Y.P.'s in custody awaiting a sentence or a trial. He points out that in "Penal Practice in a Changing Society" the Department declared its "wish to develop a system of classification which is based more on a study of the personalities of the offender and less on objective criteria such as previous convictions and sentences". His study led to the conviction that there are indeed different types of offenders, not only different types of people who become delinquent, but offenders who belong to different categories as offenders. He then went on to ask a question which I feel like having printed in red, like quotations from the Bible in Christmas letters to prisoners: "Is it possible at all to generalise in the uniqueness of human nature"? He defended what he went on to do by saying something we must all acknowledge in ourselves, when brought up short by such a

question. "Inadmissible or not", he said, "the fact is, we *do* generalise". We see patterns of human behaviour. And alas, we so often try to fit our human into these patterns, so that we can have a nice tidy label on him. Johnson's study can help us a good deal, especially when we remember that *he* asked the question about the uniqueness of human nature. He studied a group of young delinquents on the basis of the happy or unhappy family. Now this is something right up our street. Are not we always on about the importance of the family and how it is the basic unit in human life? The psychologist, be it known, says the same thing, only in somewhat different terms: "The foundations of the mature social personality are laid down in the earliest interpersonal relationships; vertically with parent figures as the embodiment of authority, and horizontally with siblings as the prototypal peer-group with its more or less subdued authoritarianism of hierarchic subordination and superordination". I could not resist quoting that one. Some of the areas which he investigated might be of help to us in getting to understand our younger men better and have some kind of case history about them. The three main areas of human life studied were:

DOMESTIC STABILITY—because this is a social achievement, in that it involves living with

others, coming to terms with them as equals rather than as people from whom one can expect a home as a right.

COURTSHIP. This is a unique form of personal relationship demanding personal commitment. It is a measure of maturity in that only those who have attained sufficient maturity are able to commit themselves to this degree of mutual intimacy. Loving and being loved is a threat to the immature. Against this, as evidence on the personality we are studying, is the fact that having a girl is a fashion. Having a girl, therefore, is not necessarily reliable evidence of maturity; but *not* having one is much more reliable evidence of immaturity.

WORK. This again is more reliable evidence on the negative side. Adequacy in work is uneventful. Unemployment, the end of a job and why, tells us something of the man, and his answers help us to grade him as incompetent, apathetic, impulsive or just unfortunate.

There has always been an argument about the comparative importance of inherited character and environment on the personality. Johnson is most illuminating on this. "That behaviour is a function of both constitution

and environment is an elementary principle to which theorists of all schools give assent but then seem to forget it and pursue diverging lines of enquiry. This results in sophisticated and highly elaborated theoretical systems, concerned with constitutional variables (e.g. Eysenck); and equally sophisticated systems concerned with environmental variables (e.g. sociologists) but no apparent communication between them. Faced with the practical realities of dealing with offenders, the inadequacies of any such one-sided theoretical casework became increasingly apparent. When so many dull, inadequate and unstable individuals are able to manage their lives without coming into conflict with the law, there *must* be special environmental pressures on the one in prison. Every human personality must be viewed as an emergent process that can only be expressed in terms of a story (history). It is in the life story that the two components of constitution and environment can be observed in proportionate relationship. A criminal offence is an event in the life story. It may be an isolated event or it may mark the beginning of a more or less protracted phase. A phase of delinquency and the series of separate crimes within it are different levels of phenomena, but equally do they constitute episodes in the story." We need to know as much as we can about the background of each member

of our flock, so reception interviews, all visits, applications etc., are never wasted, as each one adds to our store of knowledge. Jones in *Crime and the Penal System*, U.T.P., sees the same dangers as Johnson in specialist approach to criminology. He cites two general headings of study:

- (1) Criminal biology—concerned with the study of the personality of the criminal and the role of the personality in causing his delinquencies.
- (2) Criminal sociology—the study of the social factors.

But there are dangers and difficulties even in this modest division. The chief danger is that the specialist becomes so absorbed in his own narrow field that he loses sight of the overall picture.

"The criminologist", says Jones, "has a natural human craving for certainty but human motives are often deeply hidden, so that the individual himself hardly realises that he has such feelings within him. The observer must infer them from external behaviour *or* (chaplains please note!) derive them from personal contact, by some mysterious interpersonal alchemy that we must, for want of a real understanding of its nature, call intuition". This is an actual quotation from Jones' book and not made up by me to underline what I am trying to say and Jones, even if his name is Jones, is a criminologist of some standing and a

lecturer of Leicester University. Anyway it means we can take comfort from our daily involvement in the prison. The more we get to know our men—the more we get to know our men! We know this, but it is nice to be told so by the experts. In the human being, causes of action are woven one with another, modifying each other in the process. It is refreshing to find that Jones, too, has respect for the individual as a man. He points out that “our very proper respect” for human beings as persons precludes our using and manipulating them like guinea-pigs in the interest of science. The recent tendencies for experiment in social science has brought with it an obligation, as its justification, to help the subjects of the experiment “to solve their problems through the measures adopted”. He gives some history of the long search for “types” of, or reasons for, criminal behaviour. As the years from 1850 onward unfold, many theories about criminal types have been put forward and contradicted. This is not the place to go into such history but reference to Walker or Jones will give you pen pictures of the historical development. But any or all of them will only be at best a partial guide to us in our studies of human nature and too much dependence on them prove disastrous. As an instance of the kind of thing we can find throughout this field of enquiry

let us look for a moment at the work of Kretschner, a psychiatrist, who put forward the theory that there was a relationship between physique and temperament. The four main physical types are:

- (1) Thinner, taller, more angular, which he called asthenic.
- (2) Rounded, which he called pyknic.
- (3) Well developed muscles and skeletons, which he called athletic.
- (4) Marked physical anomalies, which he called dysplastic.

He claimed that the pyknic is associated with warm sociable, but “up one day down the next” type, the cyclothymic temperament.

The other physical types are apt to be detached, inturned, meditative temperament. By comparing his own estimate of the proportions of the various physical types in the general population with studies made of physical types of criminals, Kretschner found that pyknics are less likely to become criminal than any others. Now this is not going to give us any great guidance in “typing” our people. Indeed if we look at ourselves, most of us are mixtures of two or more of these types and in varying proportions. As many people will remember, Harry Secombe, a “pyknic” if ever there was one, claims, nevertheless, to be a very tall man sitting down.

Can we get any help from the electro-encephalographic studies of

the electrical activity of the brain? The e.e.g. is a delicate instrument which records the electrical activity near the surface of the brain. It is assumed that this activity reflects the more important electrical changes deeper down. Many e.e.g. studies have been made. One claims that 65 per cent of a group of aggressive psychopaths, and 32 per cent of a group of inadequates, as compared with 15 per cent of normals showed an unusual cerebral rhythm. It is suggested that it might indicate some form of cerebral immaturity. Many in this field, though, say that educational and environmental factors probably play as large a part.

Controversy continues to rage about the relationship between intelligence, or lack of it and criminality. It is easy to see how the connection between the sub-normal intellect and crime might arise. He tends to be easily led. His failure to get on in school and work may upset his social adjustments. He may well have difficulty in understanding and coping with the complexity of modern social life. *But* the more intelligent offenders are more likely to avoid arrest so the sample is suspect. They belong to class *a* (the caught) not class *b* (the uncaught). Then, intelligence tests are affected by outside factors such as anxiety and lack of concentration, or by cultural or educational background. So both the delinquent behaviour *and* a low test result may be due to a

common emotional factor or to a poor home. While the lower intelligence group contribute the larger proportion of delinquents, yet delinquents always include a wide range of intelligents. There is no simple "black and white" picture.

There has been much study made of the many possibilities of explaining criminality. The common result has been a demonstration of how complex is the problem. There is a fascinating study on the theory of degenerate families, another on the studies of twins. You will be relieved to read that I am only going to mention them. Then there is the "psychopathic personality". This "type" is the clinician's own contribution to the theory of the criminal category. He meets certain lifelong misfits whom he finds he cannot reach by any sort of remedial treatment and whose misfit behaviour cannot be traced to some recognised social or psychiatric cause. This type is assumed to be constitutionally inferior (indeed he was once called morally insane or a moral imbecile).

We are bound to meet his like, so a little more must be said of him. Neither sane nor insane, he is said to be congenitally incapable of making a satisfactory adjustment to normal social life. He may be aggressive and violent or merely inadequate, he may be criminal or merely feckless. In spite of apparent stupidity in persisting in profitless courses of action, he may

be highly intelligent. His behaviour may lead him to prison or mental hospital but in either case little can be done for him. The three main types are (1) aggressive; (2) inadequate; (3) creative. The causes can be many, sometimes mainly hereditary, sometimes environmental. Often, complicated neurological abnormalities are involved. The word psychopath has become a sort of waste-paper basket into which all those which fall into no other established category can be put. Investigators differ widely about them, but, as we all know, there is truth in the idea. They are difficult to treat successfully and they seem to display certain common symptoms:

- (a) Failure to adjust to the demands of society from the earliest years.
- (b) Inability to learn by experience.
- (c) No sign of guilt or shame.
- (d) Inability to make personal relationships with other people except the most shallow and fleeting.

There are many books on this whole subject. I have read quite a few*.

What you have read, if you have read it, is the collected wisdom of others and very little of mine. There

is enough, I think, and perhaps more than enough, to show the vast diversity of human beings. And a chaplain's job remains, through it all, recognising John Smith as John Smith and not as a type; and going on offering care and friendship when and if everyone else has stopped. There never is a time when the chaplain writes a man off. But we need to remind ourselves that his personality has been so battered by life that the area of free will is extremely limited. So is his ability to respond to what we have to offer. But however much he rejects what we offer, we must go on offering and we have to learn the lesson that the kind of response for which we are trained to look—interest in religion, prayers, attendance at services, attempt to live a Christian life, commitment, conversion, call it what you will—is more than likely completely beyond his power to give. This is a hard lesson, very difficult indeed for the part-time chaplain to learn, stepping as he does from one world into another. The full-time chaplain who does not learn this has less excuse. Even the presence of "star" prisoners, who may be differentiated from others in more ways than just the red star on his sleeve—one being his ability to feel shame for his position, may lead the chaplain into concentrating on him because his responses may be of the kind more easily recognised. But what

* (1) *Crime and Punishment in Britain*, Nigel Walker.
 (2) *Crime and the Penal System*, Howard Jones.
 (3) *Bang to Rights*, Frank Norman.
 (4) *The Unknown Citizen*, Tony Parker.
 (5) *Battle for the Mind*, William Sargent.

about the man who cannot do that? The people who sit in darkness turn away or hide their eyes when they see a great light and we, who are trying to bring the light, may read that as rejection when it really is only their method of adjustment.

The penitent thief is often quoted. Our Lord talked to him and made promises to him, but He also died with and for the other one. Charles de Foucauld wanted to found a religious order and thought of himself as the "universal little brother of all people" but especially concentrated himself for the salvation of the Moslem people in the Sahara. His life was one of prayer and work lived in abject poverty. He gave his friendship, trust and love to all without reserve, placing himself at everyone's disposal. In 1916 he was assassinated. Not one person had come to join him. It was not until 1933 that any fruit began to show from this—the "little Sisters of Jesus". Wherever there are minorities despised, rejected or overlooked there they try to live. They are not there to teach or preach. They are there as neighbours, who love, care for and respect each individual. The chaplain can take a leaf out of their book.

So I have no tidy list to give you; no cut and dried compartments into which you can place all your parishioners. You can learn much about human nature from books but in the end you will have to learn from the man himself. The

very fact that you treat him as a man, as himself, is your strongest ally. Do not make up your mind what kind of response you expect from him. He will give what he can and we must learn to recognise it. I treasure a story that Sister Thrush, of Church Army Prison Welfare headquarters, told me of her experience at one home. She had called while the man was in prison and helped the wife and family. Later she called when the husband was at home. He contributed hardly anything to the conversation but did accompany her to the door as she left and said: "If you would like a game of chess next time you come I could give you a game!" That was his way of making response. Sister Thrush cannot play chess.

Read Frank Norman's *Bang to Right* and Tony Parker's *The Unknown Citizen* and see pictures of the kind of men I am talking about, whose responses have been so conditioned by life that we show insensitivity when we are surprised that they behave in the way they do. We have a great number of these in our big prisons and it is so easy to lump them all together with the label "incurable". It needs great patience to live and work with them. But if it's involvement with humans we want and with humans who need us, here more than anywhere will we find what we seek.