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Ruth Woodruff

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A CLASSIFICATION OF THE CAUSES OF CRIME

RUTH WOODRUFF¹

In the thirteenth chapter of his recent book,² Parmelee discusses the classification of criminals. After a criticism of many former classifications,³ he offers his own. He chooses to base it upon the principle of causality, because, he tells us, "A classification of criminals should be based in the main upon the causation of criminality,

¹Student, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pa.

²Maurice Parmelee, *Criminology*, 1919.

³The author discusses first the older and simpler classifications. The two-fold classification in "habitual" and "occasional" criminals, and the three-fold classification in "habitual," "instinctive," and "occasional" criminals are regarded by him as artificial in their simplicity and quite insufficient to mark the distinct types of criminals. It may be noted here that the classification into "habitual" and "occasional" is identical with the two primary classes of criminals in the recent volume of Mercier's *Crime and Criminals*. The classifications of the leaders of the Positive School are taken up individually. (See pp. 189 to 193.) Parmelee accuses Lombroso (see below) of omitting amentia and including under the term "occasional" three different types of criminals, thus confusing the use of the term "occasional." His chief objection to Ferri's five-fold classification is the omission of the "political criminal" as a separate type. The classification of Ellis, on the whole very similar to those of Lombroso and Ferri, differs from the last named principally in the inclusion of a "professional" type, a type which is set off from the "habitual" type on the basis of the superior intelligence of the professional criminal. He also substitutes for the term "born" criminal of Lombroso, the term "instinctive" criminal. He makes this change because of the difficulty of estimating the congenital element. Parmelee deems this change unwarranted because instinct is as much congenital as any hereditary trait. He maintains at the same time that there is no instinct of crime. The attempt of Garofalo at classification on a physiological basis, is commended by our author, but he regards the resulting classification as vague, inconsistent and not sufficiently comprehensive. Garofalo's "typical" criminals are approximately equivalent to the "born" criminals of Lombroso, the "violent" criminals differ from the "typical" criminals in mildness of criminality.

Lombroso's Classification:

1. Born criminal.
2. Insane criminal.
3. Criminal by passion.
 - a. Political criminal.
4. Occasional criminal.
 - a. Pseudo criminal.
 - b. Habitual criminal.
 - c. Criminaloid.

Ferri's Classification:

1. Insane criminal.
2. Born criminal.
3. Habitual criminal.
4. Occasional criminal.
5. Criminal by passion.

Garofalo's Classification:

1. Typical criminals and murderers.
2. Violent criminals.
 - a. Endemic crimes.
 - b. Crimes of passion.
3. Criminals deficient in probity.
4. Lascivious criminals.

Havelock Ellis' Classification:

1. Political criminal.
2. Criminal by passion.
3. Insane criminal.
4. Instinctive criminal.
5. Occasional criminal.
6. Habitual criminal.
7. Professional criminal.

for the principal use of such a classification is to aid in planning the treatment of criminals, and this treatment must be directed primarily at the causes of criminality."⁴ Parmelee objects to all previous classifications of criminals because of their biological and psychological fallacies and because of their lack of self-consistency, system, and comprehensiveness.⁵

The principle of classification offered in the above quotation seems to us excellent. But has the author followed it consistently and successfully? Here is his classification:⁶

1. The criminal ament or feeble-minded criminal.
2. The psychopathic criminal.
3. The professional criminal.
4. The occasional criminal.
 - (a) The accidental criminal.
 - (b) The criminal by passion.
5. The evolutive criminal.
 - (a) The political criminal.

Now this is a classification of *criminals*. In our opinion, in order completely to follow the spirit if not the letter of his principle he should have given us a classification of the *causes of crime*. It is well known that most crimes have a multiplicity of causes, and unless the several causes are taken into account, the treatment of the criminal is not likely to be successful.

It is certainly true that many feeble-minded persons are criminals (Parmelee's first class), but it is just as true that many feeble-minded are not criminals. Aided by proper guidance or by favorable instinctive endowment, many feeble-minded never come into conflict with the law. Low mentality is, therefore, not the only important causative factor in the criminality of the feeble-minded. Among other causes may be mentioned psychopathic conditions, emotional eccentricities, and the absence of sufficient social guidance and control. When the crime of a feeble-minded person is due chiefly to causes other than feeble-mindedness, his treatment cannot be advanced by referring him simply to Parmelee's first class, where he belongs, according to that classification.

Case 91 in William Healy's *Individual Delinquent* may be used as an illustration of the necessity of usually referring the evil deeds of a particular criminal to more than one causal factor. Here is a truant

⁴Parmelee, p. 197.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 198.

and a thief, as well as a maliciously destructive and troublesome boy of fourteen years of age. Mentally he is subnormal. But in the causative analysis of the case appear the following items: bad heredity, involving insanity, alcoholism, and epilepsy; school irritation, due to lack of adaptation to the school situation, and perhaps congenital disease.⁷ Almost any instance of crime will be found to fall under several of the headings of Parmelee's classification. The "psychopath" is frequently feeble-minded, emotionally abnormal, or a victim of circumstances. In Healy's volume just referred to is found this other instance of the overlapping of causative factors.⁸ The causes of this person's criminality, arranged in order of their importance, are feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, abnormal sexualism, alcoholism. This man's most serious offense was murder. No particular light would be thrown upon the problem of treatment by placing him in Parmelee's psychopathic group. "Professional criminal" seems a doubtful causative classification for any representative number of criminals. Are the persons so tabulated criminals because a livelihood is afforded by certain types of crime? It is granted that this may be a factor, and an important one perhaps. Nevertheless investigation of one of the largest groups in this class, the professional prostitute, fails to reveal the economic motive as an important factor save in a few instances.⁹ This group, like the others among "professional criminals," has its quota of feeble-mindedness, defective social adjustment, etc. Similar objection may be raised against the "occasional" and the "evolutive criminal." In short, the classification of Parmelee does not fulfill his purpose; it cannot give the aid in determining treatment which it is intended to give.

Criminals might, of course, be classified according to the probable major cause. But we have already shown that this would be an inadequate procedure when the purpose of the classification is to lead to the remedial treatment of the criminal.

An analogous situation obtains in regard to the classification of school children. The segregation of groups of low mentality, of poor physical condition, and of bad character traits is now attempted in some schools. The plan has notable good points. But it can never be entirely adequate for treatment, since each group will contain within itself problems belonging specifically to one of the other groups.

In order to avoid the defect inherent in classifications of this type we would suggest that causal classifications of *criminals* give place to

⁷Wm. Healy, *The Individual Delinquent*, p. 497.

⁸Parmelee, p. 424.

⁹Maude Miner, *The Slavery of Prostitution*, 1916.

classification of *causes* of crime. The following headings may perhaps be found satisfactory:

- A. Psychological factors—
 - 1. Intelligence, rated by tests.
 - 2. Instinctive and emotional characteristics.
 - 3. Other character-factors (self-control, foresight, tenacity, etc.).
- B. Physical factors—
 - 1. Inherited diseases and physical defects.
 - 2. Acquired diseases and physical defects.
- C. Training received from society (including home and school training).
- D. Economic factors affecting both economic conditions and employment.

When working under the guidance of a classification of this type the task of the diagnostician would be to discover the presence and the relative importance of the several causes that have led to a specific crime, or, more commonly, that are or have been active in a particular criminal. We are in possession of satisfactory tests of intelligence,¹⁰ especially for children, but not of those other traits (intensity of the several emotional reactions, degree of self-control, patience, tenacity, perseverance, etc.); which, more than intelligence, determine delinquency and crime. We may hope, however, to be provided before very long with appropriate tests for these character-traits also.

In addition to the information called for by this classification, there should be in the hands of the persons who are to determine the treatment, and also of those who are to execute it, a criminal history of the individual, together with court records and any other evidence that can be obtained in regard to the exact nature of the crimes committed and of the attending circumstances. The importance of thorough historical records cannot be exaggerated if treatment is to be adequate. And until psychologists shall have provided tests covering all the character-traits, the gathering of that information will remain one of the difficult tasks confronting those to whom the care of criminals is entrusted. The forms used by the disciplinary barracks of the United States army indicate a clear awareness of the importance of this information. In that respect they contrast favorably with the practice of certain penal institutions which discourage their workers from ascertaining the criminal history of the inmates. Apparently

¹⁰A tendency may be noted (see for instance, Healey's *Individual Delinquent*, page 491) to differentiate between the socially feeble-minded, i. e., those unable to take care of themselves under ordinary conditions, and the intellectually deficient, who are nevertheless socially competent. That tendency may increase the value of intelligence testing for corrective purpose, for it tends to decrease the present inclination to ignore intellectual deficiency unless it be sufficient to warrant the diagnosis of "socially feeble-minded."

there is a fear that these persons would be prejudiced by the knowledge obtained.

When enlightened by all the information here referred to, the person in control of the criminal or delinquent would be in the best possible position to prescribe remedial measures. Knowledge of the mental and physical ability of the delinquent, supplemented by information about the criminal history would, furthermore, provide a basis for an estimate of the probable success of these measures.