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THE SEARCH FOR CAUSES OF CRIME

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Few problems in criminology present as many difficulties as the causes of criminal behavior. A fundamental examination of the meaning of "cause" as applied to crime will obviate some of these difficulties. The failure of such analysis has resulted in much confusion concerning criminal causal factors.

The concept of cause as used in the natural and physical sciences cannot be applied in exactly the same sense in the social sciences for three major reasons. In the first place, psychological factors play a significant role in human behavior. Secondly, not only must individual psychological reactions be investigated, but also the relations of *social* patterns to each other. Thirdly, the fact that neither individual reactions nor social patterns are reducible to common units which are independently measurable makes it impossible to obtain universal social *laws* (comparable to the "laws" of physical science) in terms of which prediction, with a small probable error, is possible.

1. *Psychologic Factors*

Psychological facts are as real as sticks and stones. Reducing them to objective behavioristic terms does not destroy their psychological effect any more than describing a chair as a system of hydrogen-proton particles destroys its use as a body-supporting object at the dinner table. A chair will remain a chair whether Newton, Einstein or some future physicist describes it as a system of molecules, electrons or mathematical formulae. Human desires, hates, fears and loves will operate *as such* no matter how refined the analysis of their underlying physical, chemical, neurological and physiological mechanisms become. They cannot be analyzed out of existence. Psychological "forces" must necessarily be considered in any causal analysis of individual behavior.

Psychological and physical "forces" are irrelevant in the physical world. In physics or chemistry, for example, the invariable sequence of individual events are observed and laws are derived from such repeated observations. Objects are observed falling at a certain rate of speed. Physicists do not speak of the physical "force" exerted. The physical force, accurately speaking, is no force at all. It is a

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figurative explanation of a mathematical product of mass and acceleration. This mass may be changed and the acceleration controlled; the force varies concomitantly. Certain physical events are selected for observation and experimentation. The system is arbitrarily limited. The exact relations between one element and another are observed.¹ The apple has no purpose in falling, nor any desire to rise. If it entertained any psychological notion, the law of gravitation would have to be restated in terms of such purpose or desire. Stated in general terms, a complete description of the *apple-falling* system is possible once the apple comes to rest.

A *complete* description of an individual's reactions is impossible since we cannot observe all the factors. Stated in other words, we cannot ignore what has preceded or what follows the situation without doing violence to the phenomena and distorting the facts under observation. The tree from which the apple grew (apart from its height), the attitude of the apple, its personality, its aims, play no role in the observation or description of the path it describes. The *psychological attitude* of a juvenile delinquent, however, is of great importance in the analysis of the delinquent act. This attitude may represent the crystalization of thousands of stimuli to which he responded in his early childhood. His family tree may be of utmost importance in the description of his delinquent attitude. To limit our observations to the act in question is to ignore important causal elements in the observed behavior.

The complete causal determination of any act is, of course, impossible. The elements selected for emphasis will depend upon the particular behavior the investigator seeks to explain, and *the type* of description in which he is especially interested. The criminologist is particularly interested in the attitudes of the criminal, their formation and development in a social setting. This approach does not exclude any information derived from the study of the organic causation of behavior. The criminologist is, however, more interested in motives than in mechanisms.

The causal relation between human values and activity is *not* a substitute for physical causation. Physiological, physico-chemical, and

¹The law of gravitation does not "force" the apple to the ground. It is not the "cause" of the apple's falling, nor is the fall of the apple an effect of the "pull" of gravitation. Forces do not govern or cause natural events. The fall of the apple is merely described in terms of gravitation. Gravitation is a mathematical *statement* of a physical event. The history of this event cannot be broken up into causes and effects temporal in character. The cause is not prior in time. The effect does not follow later. The sequential order itself constitutes the cause and effect relation. For purposes of analysis, however, we may speak of cause and effect.

neurological *mechanisms* must underlie human behavior. Natural causation is as basic in arson as in astronomy. In dealing with individual or social causation, however, a different set of descriptive principles must be employed. The fact that a boy is an animal does not prove or disprove that he is a delinquent. The causes of his social delinquency must be considered on a plane different from that of bodily mechanism underlying such behavior. Social meanings without bodily mechanisms are inconceivable. The causal relations of *meanings* in terms of physio-chemical postulates is unintelligible.

The problems of social science investigations are often practical in character. The overwhelming infinity of perplexities in human relations imposes limitations upon *theoretical* procedure. Our present knowledge of social mechanisms is so scant and our current methods so muddled as to make one skeptical of ever coming near the reduction of social behavior to physical, chemical and neurological fact. Nevertheless, it may be theoretically maintained that *all* forms of behavior are reducible to a pan-deterministic system of proton-hydrogen electrons, but even this theoretical position as usually stated is not logically justifiable. Social behavior *as* social behavior cannot be analyzed away by resolving it into neurological, physiological, and physico-chemical units.

The postulates of social psychology are not the postulates of individual psychology, even though both sets of categories are subject to a deterministic analysis.²

Integrated organic activity gives rise to behavior which is different from inorganic activity. This fact, though fundamental, is overlooked or denied in the attempt to describe both forms by the same laws or principles. The rigid physicist who wishes to describe all human activity by one set of physical categories, or the rigid biologist

²By a postulate is meant any basic assumption. Certain assumptions are made in every science. One of the principal ones is that of cause and effect. Upon this principle rests the explanation of certain types of activity, but this principle changes its content when applied to the description of different types of behavior. Thus, the law of gravitation which rests upon the cause-effect assumption, adequately describes the activity of falling bodies but not of living ones. Where the cause and effect principle takes on the character of the hypothesis of evolution, a different series of organic behavior manifestations is described. Again, the principles of organic evolution, such as the survival of the fitter, cannot be applied to human society where, obviously, biological fitness is not necessarily correlated with social survival. The cause and effect assumption underlies all these kinds of principles of explanation. Every effect may be referred back to a cause or to a set of concomitant circumstances or variations. Underlying both physical and social science is the ultimate assumption of causal uniformity, according to which under similar circumstances similar causes produce similar effects. Without this precept, analysis would be impossible.

who selects biological laws to describe human activity, or the neurologist who chooses neurograms, is methodologically committing as great a fallacy as the vitalist who introduces an *élan vital* or a *vis a tergo*, or equally untenable and unwarranted assumptions to describe the character of human association.

It is submitted that human behavior is subject to and must employ causal explanations in scientific analysis. All behavior is determined, but—and the but is of utmost importance—the postulates characterizing social motivation or criminal attitudes are different in character. They are additive categories, additional not contradictory principles of explanation.³ The concept of diffusion as employed in critical anthropology, the concept of functional neurosis as used in psychiatry are examples of these super-added principles in terms of which the particular facts of culture and abnormal behavior are described. The diffusion of the banana from America throughout the world could never be explained by electrons. The development of an oedipus complex cannot be explained by synaptic resistance.

In applying the categories of physical causation to psychological phenomena, the obstacle is not merely one of a greater complexity of causal factors. The insurmountable difficulty is more fundamental. *The difference in the kinds of patterns of organic conduct requires different descriptive principles.*

The position set forth is deterministic. It asserts that cause and effect operate in all behavior, organic and inorganic. The narrow deterministic view, however, is modified by maintaining that different levels of social experience must be described by postulates which arise out of each peculiar level of behavior. Thus, it is reiterated, physical and chemical principles will not adequately describe biological behavior nor will the principles of biology explain criminological attitudes.

The indiscriminate application of the postulates of one subject matter to another has led to much confusion in the analysis of criminal causation. Criminologists, speaking of *hereditary* causes of crime mean biological mechanisms underlying individual criminal behavior.⁴

³A similar point of view is held by many students, among them W. W. Wheeler, G. H. Parker, H. S. Jennings, and C. L. Morgan. See, *A Third Alternative: Emergent Evolution*, by Robert K. Nabours, *Scientific Monthly*, November, 1930, pp. 453-456. W. Wundt in his *Introduction to Philosophy* (1912) stated this "principle of creative resultants"; that the product of physical combinations is not the sum of the separate elements, but a new creation, p. 164.

Santayana refers to such products by the phrase "tertiary qualities." See also Alexander, S., *Space, Time and Deity*, 1920.

⁴Thus Dr. Goring attempts to show that the *social* irregularities found among some criminals depend upon their mental defects and not on their intelligence. His argument, based on the correlation between human intelligence and social defects, employs cause in both these senses. Lombroso, Schlapp, Smith,

Writers who view crime as *altogether* a social problem fail to recognize biological differences among members of a large group.⁵

Various sets of postulates are useful when validly applied. Biological and neurological mechanisms will yield a deeper understanding of the individual's physical and psychological mechanisms underlying crime. An understanding of *social* processes resulting in crime depends upon a set of *social* categories which as yet are not clear but are in the making.

No denial is made of the fact that the various types of explanation of criminal behavior shade into one another. Precisely because of this almost inextricable tangle of mechanism and process, the distinctions and limitations of the various postulates must be kept in mind. On the one hand, the tendency to simplify and sharply separate "hereditary" and "environmental" factors of crime will be checked, and on the other, caution will be exercised in not confusing the various principles of explanation.

The argument may appear gratuitous and the distinction unimportant. An illustration or two will possibly justify the importance of the analysis.

It is declared that much crime is committed *because* of distorted personality, or "mental sickness." Such explanations contribute almost nothing to an understanding of specific causal factors.

These terms, as well as the alleged causes for crime, such as poverty, illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, feeble-mindedness, the neighborhood and the family background blanket the problem. The chief difficulty consists in not distinguishing the various descriptive postulates. In all the above mentioned causes, both native biological tendencies and socially acquired attitudes operate. Yet no serious attempt has been made to deal with each causal factor in terms of postulates valid on that level. To assert that such analysis is impossible is to deny the possibility of a scientific study of the causes of crime. This may be so. The point being made is that without such analysis of criminal causation, words become surrogates for ideas, terminology is made to serve for subject matter.

Apart from the fact that qualitative aspects arise in the attempted quantitative measurement of an individual's reactions, desire and purpose give rise also to *social* modification and change

Goddard and other students fall into the same error. A recent German author accounts for shop-lifting tendencies on the basis of menstruation. See Lippman, Friedrich: "Weibliche Generationsphasen und Kriminalität." Arch. F. Frauenkunde, September, 1928, pp. 292-321.

⁵Prof. Ferri and the Soviet students of crime fall into this error.

which is generally unforeseeable and unpredictable. Such social forces must be regulated. Problems of an administrative and practical character constantly arise. Attempts are made to integrate diverse patterns of activity. William Penn, for example, labored to introduce imprisonment as a distinct and less evil form of punishment for crime. Little did he foresee our present penal system. The attempt of modern penologists to introduce changes in our present system which conform to the principles of modern psychology and education is not the result of the early prison reformers' desires, but a product of contemporary penal philosophy. Present day reformatory ideas do not represent the last link in a causal chain leading back to the conscious purposes of the seventeenth century penal reformers. They arise as a result of twentieth century penal problems. In brief, *what is socially desirable operates causally in bringing about social change.*

The concept of crime itself is a statutory crystallization of what is socially and ethically undesirable. Certain acts do not naturally, necessarily and inevitably lead to crime. The content of the law of crimes represents the attempt of society to regulate the activity of its members. The Prohibition Amendment, for example, was considered *desirable*.

May we not conclude, therefore, that *in part* what we consider as socially desirable or undesirable determines the facts which we select for examination and their relation to larger groups of facts of which they are a part? All desire, it must be reiterated, is amenable to causal analysis in different levels. Desires are always related to some organization. They are not creations *ex nihilo*.

The failure to seek for some of the roots of crime in contemporary social aims and conflicts seems to result from not clearly recognizing the meaning of social causation. Individual attitudes and social aims are qualitative aspects of human behavior which, although not readily reducible to quantitative measurement, must be taken into account when seeking for the causes of crime.⁶

2. Social Patterns

We consider next the second major difficulty in the application of cause to the social sciences. Causal relation in social science consists in the analysis of the relations of *social* phenomena and not in the relation of individual events.

⁶See John Dewey, "Social Science and Social Control," *The New Republic*, July 29, 1931, p. 276.

Let us begin with an astronomical observation. The time of the next total eclipse of the sun in a certain latitude can be predicted within the fraction of a second. This is possible because astronomical law is based on the *invariant* rotation of the planetary system. The relations of the sun, moon and stars remain constant. Their movements are uniform. The position of any two individual planets, such as the moon in reference to the sun, at a distant date can, therefore, be accurately determined.

The connection between poverty and criminology is not uniform. Poverty does not affect all members of society uniformly, nor are the elements of poverty invariably fixed and repeatable. It being practically impossible to isolate the elements constituting poverty and criminality, to vary them at will and observe the reciprocal influences of each on the others, a *logical* analysis must be substituted. The multiple and reciprocal relations of countless social situations cannot, from a practical point of view, be reduced to a uniform system. By isolating one aspect of the environment, however, and analyzing its effects on criminal behavior, we may arrive at the causal relation between *these* social events. Logical (statistical) analysis, rather than direct observation and controlled experimentation, is the chief method used to discover the principle of social processes.

Social investigations are liable to be top-heavy, due to our anxiety to know all the causal factors producing certain effects. The dynamic inter-relations of social, economic and political relations under which crime is committed cannot be ascertained wholesale, even though it is one of the tasks of scientific criminology. As in the physical and natural sciences, the comprehensive problems must be reduced to narrower issues. Instead of controlled conditions and a series of uniformly repeated tests, however, the criminologists must depend upon tracing the effects of specific social institutions on the formation of criminal habits. The situations are so varied and complex that at best only crude approximations to uniform conditions are possible. Absolute prediction of results is quite unlikely.

3. "Laws" of Criminology

This lack of uniformity of social events which makes repeated and controlled experimentation impossible is met by the alternative method of statistical tabulation, and the historical or individual case method. We obtain averages which represent tendencies but not laws. As statistical study will contain numerous variables, the probable degree of error in predicting social behavior is much higher

than in the physical and natural sciences. Predicting what will happen in an average number of cases implies that little is known about the likely behavior in all atypical cases not falling within the average.

The normal distribution curve, as applied in physical science, rests on the assumption that the number of cases investigated is a fair sample or cross section of an infinite series. This probability or normal distribution curve has been similarly applied to the social sciences. When it is discovered, as so often is the case, that the curve is somewhat asymmetrical, it is assumed that such distribution *approximates* the normal curve.

A more critical view of the results obtained would indicate that the number of cases tabulated are often insufficient, that they are not a random sampling of a large number of cases (within the meaning of the physical scientist), but rather a selected group sampling.

Again, the assumption underlying statistical mathematical manipulation that the elements or cases investigated are a cross section of an infinite series is certainly not warranted in social science. Individual events need not repeat themselves. Two individuals are never sufficiently alike and are always sufficiently different so as to make it impossible to obtain the kind of representative data dealt with in physical science.

Likewise, social events or data are unique in many respects. If some aspects of social phenomena are comparable, there will be other aspects which are non-repeatable and incomparable. There is no *necessity* for social patterns to conform to a normal distribution curve.

If coefficients of correlation are derived, their interpretation is doubtful, since in the multiplicity of variables, comparable and unique, it is difficult to discover which one factor or group of factors is causally significant. The data of social science have not been (and probably cannot altogether be) reduced to common quantitative denominators. What, for example, is the meaning of a correlation between "bad" associations and "family supervision"; between "congestion" and "immoral attitudes"; or between "broken home" and "juvenile delinquency?" When it is noted that the coefficient of correlation was formulated in connection with a *normal* distribution curve (i. e., the frequency of certain phenomena occurring in a number of cases truly representative of an infinite series of cases), the caution with which it must be used in its application to social data is apparent. In social phenomena, the variables are more com-

plex, often qualitative in character. At best, only general relations between the variables will be derived. The significance of the coefficients of correlation in social data is primarily negative. They indicate the *absence* of any functional relation in the data or point rather *indefinitely* to where a relation may exist. They may narrow the field of inquiry by pointing out, rather than by conclusively determining, the possible relation between several factors. By a process of elimination, further inquiry may discover which of the several factors causes the variability.

But the narrower the field of social statistical inquiry becomes, the less likelihood is there of obtaining data representative of a class sufficiently large to make any conclusions significant.

Let us suppose, for example, we wish to discover why Richard Roe committed murder. Well, Richard Roe, the individual, is in a class by himself. He is the only member of that class. Whatever the conclusions, they are inapplicable to John Doe, the murderer.

By enlarging the number of cases we introduce a greater number of variables, but at the same time increase the possibility of obtaining a representative group. An investigation of ten thousand murderers, each of whom is unique in certain respects, may reveal other traits *common* to the group. The generalization may then be made that if certain traits or conditions are present, murder *may be, but not must be*, committed.

In brief, we cannot establish a *law* which will enable us to predict the commission of a homicide. We may indicate general *tendencies*. The notion of cause or law as used in the physical sciences resting as it does on data with common denominators, each of which is independently reducible to quantitative statement and predictability, is inapplicable in social science. The multiple correlations between all the variables remaining unknown, no *law* can be deduced.

There is a tendency in criminology and penology to emphasize individual case study method.

If the problem is the rehabilitation of an *individual* prisoner or the determination of the guilt and disposition of an *individual* defendant, emphasis on that particular individual's history is justifiable. The problem in this instance is administrative in character. Common sense or wisdom makes use of the facts of a particular case in its disposition.

If, however, the problem is one of establishing a *more* scientific criminology and penology, over-emphasis on intensive case histories is unfruitful.

Dr. Healy and his co-workers in this country have made important contributions to the methods of studying case histories. But, studies of the individual delinquent alone will not yield an understanding of the general causes of crime.

Though the two sets of problems are interrelated, the essential difference from the point of view of a science of criminology must be clearly distinguished. Even though principles (laws) of criminology cannot be derived in the same sense as the second law of thermodynamics, it may be possible to define and predict what is *likely* to happen if certain individuals possessing certain personality traits are placed in a given specific socio-economic setting.

In the present state of criminological and penological inquiry, there is no data from which such tendencies could be stated with assurance. The "causes" of crime listed in criminological literature are *wise guesses* as to several outstanding conditions generating crime.⁷ They are general enough to be all-inclusive, hence, sound but unilluminating. Crime problems cannot be dealt with effectively by guessing. *It may be critically maintained that not one single generalization has been formulated on the basis of fact in terms of which the tendency to commit certain crimes can be predicted or the conditions generating them controlled.*

For the purposes of discussion, it is assumed that there are valid generalizations concerning some of the conditions making for crime generally. But the assumption remains unverified and therefore inconclusive. How poverty, feeble-mindedness, psychopathic personality, juvenile delinquency, etc., are related to crime has never been proven. All that is *known* is that these factors are sometimes in *some* way related to *some* crimes.

⁷Even "wise guesses" are rare in dealing with and in the treatment of prisoners before and during confinement and subsequent to their discharge.