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Delinquency Then and Now

Tony Gibson

To ask what is the *cause* of juvenile delinquency is to pose the wrong question. More realistically one might ask why such behaviour is refrained from so often by so many people.

A boy wanders through a department store and sees many objects – which he covets and which he could steal without much chance of detection, yet he refrains. What is the cause of the inhibition of his action? One cause is certainly a realistic fear of detection, but this cautiousness alone does not fully account for the widespread practice of honesty. Everyone will agree that there is also an inhibiting factor, an internal restraint, which we call the conscience. Many boys will refrain from gratifying their cupidity even when they are absolutely sure that they would not get caught. But to label an inhibiting factor ‘conscience’ is not to explain it. Freud approached the phenomenon in terms of the ‘super ego’, but one does not have to assume all the complexities of his system to study the workings of this form of built-in restraint which governs so many of our actions, sometimes in an arbitrary and ludicrous fashion.

The mechanism by which people normally refrain from forbidden acts may be discussed, and it now remains to consider

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why this mechanism breaks down with a certain frequency, particularly in boys of about the age of fourteen. One reason is that the training they have received has not been very effective. Many working class parents allow a degree of latitude to their children which is very different from that allowed in middle class families. The boy will learn that he may get clouted if mum catches him filching money from her bag, but this is not the sort of treatment which builds up a conditioned anxiety attached to stealing. Most studies of methods of upbringing have indicated that what produces a 'strong moral sense' in children training by the threat of 'withdrawal of love'. If the child grows up in a condition of affectionate emotional dependence on his parents withdrawal of parental approval is a very strong sanction. The child who is merely clouted when he is naughty learns to avoid getting caught, or indeed to weigh up the pain of a thick ear against the unlawful pleasure. The child who is made to feel moral disapproval from adults who normally treat him tenderly is less able to shrug of the penalty for wrongdoing; in order to put himself back in a state of grace he has to strive actively to be a good boy, and hence to introject the moral standards of his parents.

What has been described above is of course the extremes of two different types of child management. Generally the regime is mixed. If however, the parental figures are unloving, indifferent or absent they cannot train the child by 'withdrawal of love', and the child is liable to grow up with very little conscience. Again, if the parents are particularly inconsistent in their behaviour, sometimes blaming and punishing the child for wrongdoing and sometimes condoning such behaviour, the training process will not work, and the child will not develop any consistent moral standards.

Much of the above is open to misinterpretation by the careless reader. It may be assumed erroneously that the present writer is advancing a programme of strict moral training for the young by the effective sanction of 'withdrawal of love'.

This has certainly not been advocated here. Again it might be assumed, equally erroneously, that the present writer argues that the only reason we refrain from robbery and violence is that we get a nasty kick from the rising tide of anxiety every time we contemplate such actions. Such a model is altogether too crude. What is really suggested here is that ordinary moral behaviour becomes completely habitual with most people.

In a society based upon mutual aid, there would be little problem of morality. But our society is one based upon aggressive competition and unfairness. The status quo is maintained by a combination of sheer intimidation and ludicrously cock-eyed moral training. One of the most sacred institutions in our society is property. If a boy were to steal my car, I would be annoyed and call upon the police to recover it for me. Yet I would feel no satisfaction if they caught him and placed him in the lock-up. Nor do I believe that his act of theft is 'immoral'. As I drive through the wet, cold streets in my warm and comfortable empty car, and see the wretched mums of such boys queuing at bus stops, I might wonder if my position is not immoral — far more immoral than that of the underprivileged boys who occasionally steal a car. I am comparatively clever and have been well educated therefore I am well paid for interesting and varied work, whereas they are comparatively stupid and have been appallingly miseducated and so they are poorly paid for dull routine work. That is why I ride in the car while they queue in the wet. This is a social fact, and makes nonsense of the moralists' attempts to confuse crime with immorality.

Society gets the delinquency rate it deserves, yet this simple fact is not recognised by many good people whose profession it is to study criminology. The do-gooders vaguely hope that they will somehow reduce the delinquency rate by preventive methods of a social nature or even by 'therapy' applied to those under lock and key — and always without altering the essential structure of our society. In 1962 the criminological division of the Council of Europe circulated countries asking them what

programmes of crime prevention has been inaugurated in them. The resulting document reveals the utter poverty of imagination of the majority of those who have contributed to it. In general the response could be summed up in the honest reply 'nothing', but all too often a good deal of humbug is resorted to as a cover for the fact that no-one had any clear and practicable idea of how delinquency could be prevented.

Regarding 'therapy' applied to prisoners in order to reform their 'criminal tendencies', most of it is a bad joke which reveals the stupidity of the psychologists who confuse criminality with mental illness. Now although certain men land up in prison because of psychological disorders, e.g. the exposeur, the compulsive incendiary any psychiatric sense. It is indeed a huge impertinence for any do-gooders stand the hardened screws; the last thing they want to do is to do the prisoners good — they want to do them evil, to humiliate, crush and punish them. There is something terribly twisted in the character of any man who freely elects to spend his working life in prison when any other occupation, even the humblest, is open to him. Yet I have read of a self-publicist called Hauser who claims to be showing prison screws how to become 'therapists': I do not know if the Nazi movement produced any quacks who claimed to show SS men how to ameliorate the jewishness of Jews, rather than give them standard treatment.