

Immanuel Kant on Drinking

IN one of his least known works, the *Anthropologie*, Immanuel Kant made a few striking remarks about drinking. The *Anthropologie* has apparently not been translated into English, and even in Germany it has hardly been read in the past hundred years, although at the time of its publication it was the most popular of Kant's books because of its untechnical nature. This work is, in fact, so little known that the remarks of the Sage of Königsberg relative to alcoholism have not been quoted by German psychiatrists who are much inclined to classical quotations.

During every winter semester from 1772 to 1796, Kant gave a course in Anthropology. This is not to be understood in the present meaning of the word, but as a kind of empirical psychology to which the term was then applied. This course was published in revised form in 1798 and a few excerpts are translated here. These are from Part I, Book I, paragraph 29. For the translation I have used the fifth edition with the commentary of Karl Vorländer, but have had recourse also to the first edition for some particularly interesting features.

The basic psychological condition underlying the concrete manifestations of intoxication was described by Kant in the following brief sentence: "Drunkenness is the unnatural state of inability to organize sense impressions according to the laws of experience."* It is remarkable that, in the final analysis, all that experimental psychology has achieved up to now, in the field of alcoholism, was anticipated in this sentence.

He said about the function of alcoholism in human life what is still being said by psychologists and psychiatrists. "All these things serve to let man forget the burden which is inherent in life itself." He added that "The very wide spread inclination [to this medium for forgetting] and its effect on the uses of reason merit its consideration in a pragmatic anthropology."

Interestingly enough, Kant used the term "social drinking" (*gesellschaftliches Trinken*) and by this term he definitely did not mean simply gregarious drinking, but implied the distinction which is made nowadays between addiction and nonpathological heavy indulgence in drinking.

The modern standpoint in research on alcoholism is that the stimu-

*This formulation is taken from the first edition. In subsequent editions the formulation is less felicitous.

lation caused by alcohol is a pseudostimulation. The same idea is reflected in this sentence from Kant. "The carefreeness and with it the lack of caution which intoxication produces is a result of an illusory feeling of increased vitality."

It is a general belief that the true character of a man is revealed in his drunken behavior. This, however, is denied by reflective psychiatrists such as Bleuler. In this, Kant is a forerunner of modern psychiatrists. "Can one gauge the temperament or the character of a man in his state of intoxication? I do not think so. In the mixture of the circulating fluids there is a new ingredient, and thus is brought about a new irritation of the nerves which does not enhance the natural temperament but superimposes a new one."

Sex differences and racial differences in alcoholism are well-known facts and are used as explanatory principles in the discussion of certain aspects of alcoholism. In particular, the rarity of alcoholism among the Jews, which is well documented by statistics, is quoted frequently in connection with theories about the genesis of alcoholism. It is striking that in the time of Kant this characteristic temperance (not abstinence) of Jews was apparently well known. Kant mentioned this fact in connection with the rarity of alcoholism among women and ministers. He also ventured an explanation in which, apparently, he was thinking more of Jews than of these other two categories of temperate drinkers. "Women, ministers and Jews do not get drunk, as a rule, at least they carefully avoid all appearance of it because their civic position is weak and they need to be reserved. Their outward worth is based merely on the belief of others in their chastity, piety and separatistic lore. All separatists, that is, those who subject themselves not only to the general laws of the country but also to a special sectarian law, are exposed through their eccentricity and alleged chosenness to the attention and criticism of the community, and thus cannot relax in their self-control, for intoxication, which deprives one of cautiousness, would be a scandal for them."

Kant's explanation is surely not less satisfactory than the suggestions offered since that time. In modern terminology it amounts to saying that what he calls separatists by necessity develop a hypertrophied superego.

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