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psychiatry in history

James Harrington

Greg Wilkinson

A seventeenth-century cognitive-behavioural self-experiment to test a metamorphic belief

John Aubrey, FRS (1626–1697), known for his short biographies, relates a ‘curious instance’.¹ James Harrington (1611–1677), political theorist, was arrested and imprisoned for a time. His health deteriorated: ‘a living skeleton ... The doctors tried to save his life; and one of these doctors, undertaking to cure his scurvy by decoctions of guaiacum taken in coffee, made him worse, not only in his body but his mind ... He never was himself again’.² Guaiacum was used for syphilis; rheumatism, gout, and respiratory and skin conditions. Whatever the cause of his folly, much later Harrington ‘succumbed to an attack of palsy’.²

A.^o D.ⁿⁱ. 1660, he was committed prisoner to y^e Tower, where he was kept then to Portsey Castle. His durance in these prisons (he being a gent. of a high spirit and hot head) was the procatarctique^a cause of his deliration or madnesse, which was not outrageous, for he would discourse rationally enough, and be very facetious company; but he grew to have a phancy, that his perspiration turned to flies, and sometimes to bees,^b *ad cetera sobrius*^c; and he had a versatile timber house built in Mr Hart's garden (opposite to St James's parke) to try the experiment. He would turne it to the sun, and sit towards it; then he had his fox-tayles^d there to chase away, and massacre all the flies and bees that were to be found there, and then shutt his chasses.^e Now this experiment was only to be tryed in warme weather, and some flies would lie so close in the cranies and the cloath (wth w^{ch} it was hung) that they would not presently shew themselves. A quarter of an hour after, perhaps, a fly, or two, or more might be drawn out of the lurking holes by the warmth, and then he would crye out, 'Doe not you see it apparently that these come from me?' 'Twas the strangest sort of madnesse that ever I found in any one; talke of anything else, his discourse would be very ingeniose and pleasant'.

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^a preceding.

^b And, birds: ‘or the like. And those about him reported that he talk'd much of good and evil spirits, which made them have frightful apprehensions; according to: J Tolland. *The Oceana and Other Works of James Harrington, with an Account of his Life*. London: printed for T Beckett and T Cadell, in The Strand, and T Evans, in King Street, Covent Garden, MDCCCLXXL. [oll.libertyfund.org]. Tolland adds: 'I grew perfectly amaz'd when I found among his papers the beginning of a little treatise written by himself, wherin (without raiillery) he proves 'em to be all mad that thought him so with respect to what he discours'd of nature, which he maintain'd to work mechanically or mathematically, as Bellini, Borelli, Dr. Pitcairne, and other eminent men, have since evidently shewn. It appears there that his pretended visions of angels and devils were nothing else but good or bad animal spirits, and that his flies and bees were only similitudes wherby he us'd to express the various figures and forms of those particles'.

^c the rest sensible.

^d to use as a switch/brush.

^e windows.