

A CRITICAL DIGEST OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE ENGLISH PSYCHICAL SOCIETY.¹

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THE English Psychical Society was organized in London January 6, 1882, and definitely constituted Feb. 20th of that year.

In view of the fact that more than three years' proceedings are now before the public, it is of no little interest to glance over the results which have been obtained, and to consider the conclusions arrived at after this period of diligent work and investigation. The more will this be profitable since an American Society with associates has been recently formed to carry on this same work.

The objects of the Society were announced as follows :

" I.—To unite students and inquirers into an organized body, with the view of promoting the investigation of certain obscure phenomena, including those commonly known as psychical, mesmeric, or spiritualistic ; and of giving publicity to the results of such research.

" II.—To print, sell, or otherwise distribute publications on psychical and kindred subjects ; to afford information to inquirers into these subjects by correspondence and otherwise ; to collect and arrange facts respecting them ; to open libraries, reading-rooms, and other suitable premises and offices ; and generally to do all such other things as may be conducive to the attainments of the above objects."

¹ Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research. Parts I., II., III., IV., V., VI., VII., VIII., from Oct., 1882, to April, 1885. Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, London.

To further these ends special committees were appointed to investigate the following subjects :

I.—An examination of the nature and extent of any influence which may be exerted by one mind upon another, apart from any general recognized mode of perception.

II.—The study of hypnotism and the forms of so-called mesmeric trance with its alleged insensibility to pain, of clairvoyance, and other allied phenomena,

III.—A critical revision of Reichenbach's researches with certain organizations called "sensitive," and an inquiry whether such organizations possess any power of perception beyond a highly exalted sensibility of the recognized sensory organs.

IV.—A careful investigation of any reports, resting on strong testimony regarding apparitions, at the moment of death or otherwise, or regarding disturbances in houses reputed to be haunted.

V.—An inquiry into the various physical phenomena commonly called spiritualistic ; with an attempt to discover their causes and general laws.

VI.—The collection and collation of existing materials bearing on the history of these subjects.

The purpose of this paper will be to review the work done by the committees in regard to the different manifestations of these psychical phenomena, and to give a summary of the conclusions arrived at.

I.—THOUGHT-TRANSFERENCE.

This is one of the most interesting and striking of the branches pursued by the Society. It has been the most thoroughly investigated, and the committee have arrived at definite conclusions, which are as follows :

" 1. That much of what is popularly known as thought-reading is in reality due to the interpretation by the so-called 'reader' of signs consciously or unconsciously imparted by touches, looks, or gestures of those present ; and that this is to be taken as *primâ-facie* explanation, whenever the thing thought of is not some visible or audible object, but some action or movement to be performed.

" 2. That there does exist a group of phenomena to which the word 'thought-reading,' or, as we prefer to call it, *thought-trans-*

ference, may be fairly applied; and which consist in the mental perception, by certain individuals at certain times, of a word or other object kept vividly before the mind of another person or persons, without any transmission of impressions through the recognized channels of sense."

These conclusions were arrived at by the committee after a comparatively short experimentation, but upon what to them was evidence indisputable. Since these were promulgated, much investigation has taken place which has gone to confirm the above opinion.

The reader will notice that the committee first state that much which is called thought-transference comes from the interpretation of signs consciously or unconsciously imparted by touches, looks, or gestures of those present—in other words, what is known as "muscle-reading." A number of interesting examples of this are cited. Sometimes the person would go so quickly to the place or object designated, that it was almost impossible for him to be aware of any change of a material nature. He would also raise his arms quickly, when the object was above him, before the experimenter had thought of so doing.

Passing, however, from "muscle-reading," which exhibits merely extraordinary powers of perception of subtle changes of muscular tension to which some people are alive, rather than any psychical manifestation, we turn our attention to the proofs advanced for a belief in actual transference of thought.

In the outset it should be stated that the committee have endeavored to carry on these experiments in the most strictly scientific manner. They have kept a "perpetual vigilant watch" against all possibility of imposition or deception. In most of their reports these are detailed at length, but our space will not permit our mentioning these *in extenso*.

The experiments in thought-transference have included those with cards, numbers, fictitious names, descriptions of objects real and those imagined by the agent. It is difficult to tabulate these, but we submit two of the tables which give the result of the work up to April, 1883. Since then there have been a number of such experiments exhibiting similar results.

TABLE OF EXPERIMENTS ON THOUGHT-TRANSFERENCE.
 SHOWING SUCCESS OBTAINED UNDER STRINGENT CONDITIONS, WHEN THE ADVERSE CHANCES WERE BEYOND 50 TO 1.
 (To test the hypothesis of chance coincidence.)

Date.	Authority.	No. of trials.	No. right on		Total right.*	Total percentage right.	Objects selected.	Perceptants.
			1st guess.	2d guess.				
1881, Easter	Prof. Barrett	75			58	77	Playing cards, fictitious names, numbers of two figures, etc., chosen in each case by one of us.	The Misses Creery
" August	{ Mr. and Mrs. } { Sidgwick } { Profs. Stewart } { and Hopkinson }	23	6	6	13	56	"	"
" Nov. & Dec.	Committee	64	19	15	40	62	"	"
1882, Easter	Committee	346	122	51	186	54	"	"
" August	"	312	27	24	51	16	"	"
" December	Prof. Barrett	109	19	7	26	24	"	"
" "	Committee	23	8	6	14	61	Pains, colors, words, figures.	Mr. G. A. Smith.
	Totals	952	201	109	388	40.7		

* Inclusive of an occasional third attempt.

TABLE SHOWING SUCCESS OBTAINED WHEN THE SELECTED OBJECT WAS KNOWN TO ONE OR MORE OF THE COMMITTEE ONLY.
(To test hypothesis of collusion.)

Place of trial	Things chosen.	No. of trials.	No. right on		Total right.*	If 1st guess only is counted experiment gave	The chance of success by accident was
			1st guess.	2d guess.			
a. Buxton Experiments	Playing cards †	14	9	0	10	I right guess in 1½	I right in 52 trials
"	Numbers, etc.	15	4	0	5	" " " 3¼	" " " 90 "
"	Cards †	210	17	18	38	" " " 13	" " " 52 "
b. Cambridge	Numbers	64	5	6	11	" " " 12½	" " " 90 "
"	Cards †	30	3	0	3	" " " 10	" " " 52 "
c. Dublin	Numbers, etc.	108	32	11	43	" " " 3½	" " " 12 "
"	Words	50	25	10	35	" " " 2	" " " 4 "
Totals		497	95	45	145	" " " 5½	" " " 43 "

a Present : Mr. F. W. H. Myers, Mr. Edmund Gurney, and Miss Mason. b Present : Mr. Myers, Mr. Gurney, Mr. Barrett, and Mrs. Myers.
c Present : Mr. F. W. H. Myers, Mr. Edmund Gurney, and Miss Mason. d Present : Mr. Barrett only.

* Inclusive of an occasional third guess. † A full pack of cards was invariably used, from which a card was drawn at random.

The most startling experiments are those in which diagrams of objects have been reproduced by the percipient, either while the agent had them before him, or, as in some, when the results were most striking, the diagrams were drawn outside of the room in which the percipient sat, and the agent acted upon him from the mental picture which he carried.

Out of thirty-seven such experiments between Mr. Smith as percipient and Mr. Blackburn as agent, the former reproduced twenty-nine. In four he failed, and in four he could see nothing. Several experiments were tried, in which he did not reproduce diagrams, but described them. These he represented reversed, or upside down. The diagrams were mostly geometrical; but when a change was made to that of an animal, as a bird or a horse, without any mention of the fact to him, he drew shapes resembling them, though under the impression the while that he was producing geometrical figures.

From the reports written of experiments in the same line with two Liverpool young ladies, Miss R. and Miss E., it is not quite clear just how many trials were made. The results, illustrations of which are given, are equally striking. Of these sixteen diagrams are reproduced in the Proceedings. Most of these were done without the agent being in contact with the percipient.

A third set of diagrams was sent to the Society by a gentleman who drew the pictures for his little sister, thirteen years old, who reproduced them. Out of ten pictures six were almost perfect, and the remaining four were like the originals.

It is certain that with all the facts before the Society, the transference of ideas, of fictitious proper names, of colors, tastes, located pains, and above all the reproduction of drawings, the Psychical Society have accumulated a mass of evidence not easily set aside. Many will wish more, however, than this, and will look with greatest interest to the broader experiments in the same direction which are now being carried on by the American as well as the English Society.

II.—HYPNOTISM, MESMERISM, INSENSIBILITY TO PAIN,
CLAIRVOYANCE.

As the committee themselves recognize, there is not the same opportunity for exploring in this direction as is offered by most of the subjects included under the head of psychical research. The ground has been thoroughly gone over, and as the report says, speaking of the subject: "The investigators of mesmerism have been both numerous and intelligent. The literature of the subject forms a small library." Nevertheless the committee are doing some excellent work in submitting the whole subject to renewed and careful experimentation. They have adopted as a general title to their work the word *mesmerism*, rather than *hypnotism*. The latter is applied to the phenomena "which are produced without *any special influence or effluence* passing from the operator to the subject." This has been adopted as a complete designation of these phenomena by those who emphatically deny that any such influence or effluence exists.

The report further states that the line between these two classes of alleged phenomena has not been overstepped. By the scientists of England "hypnotism" is pretty widely acknowledged and mesmerism almost universally rejected. If, therefore, further facts than the hypothesis of hypnotism is applicable to are found, the word "mesmeric" is necessary to describe them. The aim of the committee has been to obtain such facts, and the report proceeds to set them forth, after a brief statement of some experiments to show the influence of suggestion, the most remarkable of which were the efforts of the individual to carry out the dominant idea, many times in a manner very unexpected to the mesmerist and observers. One subject "admirably mimicked a parrot, a worm, a clock, a statue, a bear, and a frog. His leaps under the last-named impression were so energetic and so reckless that it became necessary to discontinue the experiment lest he should do himself an injury. When he was told on another evening that he was a nightingale, it was anticipated that he would confine himself to vocal imitation mainly. He, however, unexpectedly rushed without hesita-

tion at a high set of book shelves, which lined one wall of the room, mounted—one might almost say fluttered up—them with wonderful speed, and crouched in a corner on the top of the shelves, with his head against the ceiling, violently and ineffectually flapping his arms, as a bird, accidentally imprisoned in a room, will flap his wings. Nor was his assumption of combined parts less complete. He at once succumbed, for example, to the suggestion that one side of him was a nurse and the other a windmill; and for many minutes his sedulous though left-handed attentions to an imaginary infant were quite unimpaired by the no less sedulous revolutions of his right arm.’”

In the conclusion of the first report of the committee (April, 1883) the work to be done by them is fairly outlined, and can be no better stated than by quoting portions of it, after which we will analyze the work brought forward to sustain the propositions advanced :

“ We have dealt thus far with three main phenomena connected with the mesmeric state, viz. :

“ 1. Dominance of a suggested idea.

“ 2. Transference of sensation without suggestion from operator or patient.

“ 3. Induction of general or local anæsthesia.

“ The first of these three theses is, we believe, on the high road to universal acceptance. The mass of recorded testimony to it is enormous, and the discussions of physiologists are beginning to turn on the explanation rather than on the existence of the phenomena.”

It is therefore to the transference of sensation without suggestion, and the question how the induction of general or local anæsthesia is brought about, to which the Society’s attention has been turned. The production of anæsthesia has already been fully established by what seems to the committee “overwhelming completeness,” but how it is produced is another matter. “Is it due to mere expectant attention exercised in a particular state of the nervous system?” “Is it the result of the inhibition of certain sensory centres in consequence of prolonged stimulation of the peripheral extremities of the nerves?” “Is it the

result of some specific effluence from the operator, which may act without actual contact, independently of the subject's knowledge or expectation theory?" To prove this latter, various experiments have been made. A subject would only respond to the mesmerist, even though a Babel of voices shouted his name and tried to distract him; but in the midst of it all the faintest whisper of a monosyllable from the one with whom he was in *rapport* would be answered by him invariably at once, even though the voice was so low as to be inaudible to a person sitting next to him. This was also done a number of times with thick curtains between the agent and the subject. The latter was entirely unconscious of the loud bellowing voice in his ear until the mesmerist told him he was to be spoken to by the gentleman, who then addressed him in the gentlest tone, whereat he at once complained of the excessive noise.

Another series of experiments was performed in the following manner: A list of twelve *yesses* and *noes* was written by one of the committee and put into the hands of the mesmerist, with the desire that he should successively "will" the "subject" to respond or not to respond in accordance with the order of the list. A tuning-fork was then struck and held to the ear. "Do you hear?" was asked twelve times, and answer or failure to answer corresponded in each case with the written yes or no of the list—that is, according to the silent will of the mesmerist.

The report especially says of these experiments, that however conclusive they may appear to mental influences acting otherwise than through recognized sensory channels, still they do not conclusively prove that there is a special physical *effluence* or force passing from operator to subject. The result is analogous to thought-transference.

A third set of experiments indicating this theory is as follows:

The subject was in a normal condition with the exception of *local* effects produced upon him without contact and without any idea or expectation of them. The subject's hands, placed so that it would be impossible for him to see them, were spread out before the mesmerist and

observers; care was taken to preserve a distance between the subject's fingers and the agent that when the passes were made there would be no contact and no appreciable current of air. After the passes had been made over two of the fingers by the mesmerist, and over the other eight by one of the committee, the former became perfectly stiff and insensible, as shown by testing them with a battery, with pricking, and with passing a lighted match over them. This, too, may be, says the report, another form of thought-transference. More conclusive, however, of the reality of a physical *effluence* are the experiments made with inanimate objects. A group of these, preferably not metal or coins, was taken, and one was handled by the mesmerist, the subject was, of course, out of sight and hearing at the time. This was picked out after each one was held for a moment in his hands. Ten small volumes of books were taken, so nearly resembling each other as to render it almost impossible to tell one from another; but the subject identified the mesmerized volume the instant he touched it. To eliminate thought-transference the person selecting the book was not allowed to be present. The other nine objects, or books, were handled by the others. The "subject" described his sensations as a "kind of mild tingling."

We would not represent the committee in these or in following reports as advancing with certainty the theory of transference of a physical effluence, but there is much in all that is said and written that argues a personal conviction that such is the case, and that it is their endeavor to establish what they themselves describe "as the least antecedently probable, the least generally accepted, explanation." And everywhere is advanced the idea of a specific influence as opposed to hypnotism.

The transference of sensations, such as pains, tastes, was confirmed by a number of extended experiments. This mesmeric sympathy was regarded as entirely consonant with experiments in thought-transference in the normal state.

III.—REICHENBACH'S PHENOMENA.

In a preliminary report to their investigations the committee make a brief statement as to the exact nature of

the phenomena described by Baron Carl von Reichenbach. He claims that certain persons declared to him that ordinary magnets, crystals, the human body and some other substances, were to those persons self-luminous, presenting singular appearances in the dark, and otherwise distinguishable by producing a variety of peculiar sensory impressions, such as anomalous sensations of temperature, bodily pain or pleasure, unusual nervous symptoms, and involuntary muscular action. These are generally (but Reichenbach believes not necessarily) accompanied by abnormal physiological and mental states. His further conclusions are, that all bodies whatever, in a certain degree, and magnetic and crystalline bodies in a high degree, produce peculiar effects upon exceptional organizations called "sensitive."

The committee fitted up a dark room thirteen feet square by twelve feet high, so arranged as to be perfectly darkened on a bright summer day. Even with large, white, polished surfaces, lenses, and silvered concave reflectors, there was not rendered visible any of the light assumed to still linger in the room. Furthermore, to exclude the effects of phosphorescence exhibited more or less by all substances, the apartment was usually darkened for an hour or more before each series of observations.

The magnetic objects which have been used have been permanent magnets of various shapes and sizes; a small portable electro-magnet, whose position could be easily changed; and a larger and more powerful one, with limbs 8 inches long, the same distance apart, of flattened section $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches by 7 inches, reduced to $2\frac{1}{4}$ -inch circular at the polar surfaces, the whole 24 inches wound with wire, and mounted on a trunnion in a massive wooden stand, so that it could be inclined in any position. It was excited by a current of 8 (10 x 6-in.) plates. Small cells led to it from a commutator in an adjoining room.

After careful and repeated trials with forty-five subjects, of both sexes and of ages between sixteen and sixty, only three of these professed to see luminous appearances—A much smaller proportion of "sensitives" than, according to Reichenbach, should be found.

"The committee feel that the evidence is too slight to draw more definite conclusions than the following :

"*Firstly*, that three observers, separately, and on distinct occasions, were in some way immediately aware when an electro-magnet was secretly 'made,' and 'unmade,' under such precautions as were devised to suppress ordinary means of knowing and to exclude chance and deception ; and identified such magnetization with luminous appearances, which, as described, agreed generally with the evidence recorded by Reichenbach.

"*Secondly*, that there were, though less decisively, indications of other sensory effects of magnetism."

In view of these apparent confirmations of previous testimony, the committee incline to the opinion that, among other unknown phenomena associated with magnetism, there is a *prima-facie* case for the existence, under certain conditions not yet determined of a peculiar, and unexplained luminosity resembling phosphorescence in the region immediately around the magnetic poles, and visible only to certain individuals.

It is to be regretted that this committee has not published any further report since this of two years ago. It is to be inferred that experimentation since that time has been negative in results.

IV.—APPARITIONS AND HAUNTED HOUSES.

The committee have collected with praiseworthy perseverance a number of interesting stories, which, when published, will form a most unique addition to ghost-lore. Even though they have been at work since the beginning of the Society, it is not yet possible for them to classify and exhibit their work in a sufficiently satisfactory manner to come to definite conclusions. In the second report (July, 1884) the committee state that the evidence before them "unquestionably points to the reality of this class of abnormal phenomena. We are not investigating fables."

In the last number of the Proceedings (April 24, 1885), Mrs. H. Sidgwick publishes a long series of "Notes on the Evidence Collected by the Society for Phantasms of the Dead," in which she sums up the result of the Society's work in this direction as follows :

"*Firstly*.—There are large number of instances recorded of appearances of the dead shortly after their death, but generally there is nothing by which we can distinguish these from simple subjective hallucinations. In a few cases, however, information conveyed seem to afford the required test, but these are at present too few, I think, for us to feel sure that the coincidence may not have been due to chance.

"*Secondly*.—There are cases of single appearances at an interval of months or years after death, but at present none which we have adequate grounds for attributing to the agency of the dead."

V.—SPIRITUALISTIC PHENOMENA.

Very little has been reported in the proceedings of the work done under this branch of "Psychical Research." F. W. H. Myers presents a paper "On a Telepathic Explanation of Certain So-called Spiritualistic Phenomena," in which he says :

"An explanation, partly dependent on telepathic influence (thought-transference), partly on unconscious cerebration alone (though unconscious cerebration raised, if I must say so, to a higher power than had previously been suspected), has been offered for certain widespread phenomena, which, while ignored or neglected by the main body of men of science, have been for the most part ascribed by those who have witnessed them to the operation of some external and invading power."

In closing this paper, the writer remarks that he has made an appeal to spiritualistic newspapers with very little results.

"Those who believe themselves to be in possession of truth of this high value may surely be invited to take as much trouble to prove it as the chemist is willing to take in investigating a new compound, or a physician in identifying a new disease. As a mere matter of fact and without imputing blame to any one it may be safely said that no such persistent organized presentation of spiritualistic evidence has yet been attempted as is habitually demanded by the scientific world in matters of far less difficulty and importance."

VI.—THE LITERARY COMMITTEE.

This committee have been active in collecting material for a volume to be published under the title of "Phantasms of the Living." This will include narrations of dreams, premonitory, symbolic, or coincident, either with other similar dreams or with the external fact dreamt of ; instances of so-

called second sight ; accounts of apparitions during life, at the moment of death, or after death ; or, on the other hand, of spectral illusions, recognized as such by the subject of them ; or any other kind of abnormal phenomenon which is exactly recorded and fully attested.

We have taken especial pleasure in presenting this review of the work done by the English Society for Psychical Research for several reasons, but especially because it is so little known among investigators, and if known misapprehended.

Many have regarded the work as a metaphysical snare in which the unwary engage only to become entangled.

These problems are rife in the present age. To avoid superstition and blindness is to meet them on a ground as far as may be of purely scientific investigations. We have certainly in the last decade made wonderful advances in our knowledge of the nervous system, and all neurological investigators must feel that we are on the eve of still greater discoveries. Who can say that the investigations of these psychical phenomena are not some of the very many roads that will lead us to the Rome of certainty !