

Our Subconscious Selves

Have We, Right at Hand, an Explanation for a Large Class of Psychic Phenomena?

By J. Malcolm Bird

THE phenomena to which the term "psychic" has been loosely applied are of two sorts, with a fairly distinct line of demarcation. On the one hand we have occurrences whose whole sphere of action lies in the human consciousness; which are devoid of demonstrable effect upon the external world or of visible connection with that world. On the other side we have the production of definitely "physical" effects by "supernormal" agencies.

The present discussion aims to catalog the more significant of the phenomena which fall in the non-physical category, and to supplement this with a few general remarks. Some of the items will be at once recognized as "psychic," others will not be so clearly of this character. For while we can with some success draw a line between the psychic phenomena which involve the minds alone of those concerned and the ones which bring in an actual physical effect, the psychologist well knows that in his field the normal shades imperceptibly into the supernormal, and the latter appears merely to be the former, extended or accentuated. We shall therefore not attempt this separation, but shall permit the normal to overflow into our discussion when it will.

The supernormal phenomenon whose existence will be least disputed by the hard-headed person who pooh-poohs the whole subject is hypnotism. Indeed, it is not to be asserted with certainty that this is supernormal. We are all more or less susceptible to suggestion. To any suggestion that comes to us we ordinarily apply the critical faculty. We inquire whether it is in line with our wishes, whether there is logical reason for or against it; so far as we are able we examine it on its merits. Perhaps the only difference between the hypnotized and the un hypnotized person is that the ability of the former to do this is suspended. His ordinary cerebral associations inhibited, the hypnotic subject naturally and automatically responds to any suggestion put to him. It is not necessary that this be in the form of a command. Since he has no power to reject it, it may come in any form at all; but the impressive character of the performance is heightened by giving it as a command. The medical man who uses hypnosis, however, does not command his patient to ignore his ailment or abandon his vicious habit; he merely tells him that he has not got it, and the suggestion is accepted.

At the point where the operator acquires the necessary dominance over his subject this argument has been left blank; it tells what the hypnotist does but not how he does it. Here, if at all, the process is supernormal. But we all know persons whose suggestions carry great weight with us, and are ordinarily accepted. The hypnotist has perhaps found a wholly normal way to make himself appear irresistibly in this light to his subject. The less commonplace alternative will appear later.

Closely parallel to hypnosis are numerous phenomena where the subject may be regarded as having hypnotized himself. The practice of crystal-gazing has been universal. Stripped of all hocus-pocus, it comes to this: A respectable percentage of humans find, on concentrating the gaze upon certain objects and striving to make the mind a blank, that pictures appear in the visual field. The object of the gaze may be a ball or crystal of glass, quartz, etc.; a bowl of water or anything else giving the impression of clearness and depth; a pool of ink, a slab of polished stone, a mirror, a finger-nail, etc.; even the empty hand sometimes suffices. A person either can induce these pictures, in which event he may discover the ability by accident; or else he cannot, in which case he may stare his eyes out and nothing will happen. This makes it easy for those who cannot see the pictures to discredit the whole business; but there can be no rational disbelief that the power exists as outlined. The pictures seen are of a wide variety, but the general style of art favored by a given crystal-gazing eye is fairly uniform. The visions may be stills, or action pictures.

A close analogy are the phantasies which many of us

have when half awake. Probably more of us are subject to this than to crystal-gazing. With closed eyes, between sleep and waking, we see faces, landscapes, all manner of things. I am able to distinguish between visitations of this sort and true dreams by my ability to command the waking vision. I cannot induce or dismiss it at will, but once given the picture I can control its behavior and am usually conscious of so doing. This is the only psychic experience to which I am subject.

Of rarer occurrence, but undoubtedly genuine so far as its subjective character to the percipient is concerned, is the true hallucination of wide-awake consciousness. Occasionally auditory, this is usually visual. The apparition, ordinarily of a dear friend or relative, presents itself, lasts for an indeterminate period, and vanishes. It may be of a person known to be living or known to be dead; in either event it may present the appearance of life or of death. It may speak or be silent; it may remain motionless, move at random, or act a part. It is seldom, if ever, recognized as hallucination until it has passed—not always then.

The subjective mechanism of all this is simple enough. We have certain sense organs, with their lines of communication and their associated brain-areas which receive and interpret their messages. It is dif-

two identities for ultimate possession has been cited in behalf of this viewpoint. But in recent cases treatment of dual personality has taken the direction of a successful effort to aid the merging of the two streams of consciousness; and this makes the phenomenon look more like a strictly subjective one.

The theory that an external intelligence may be operating upon the corporeal rind of the subject links multiple personality with automatic writing. Here again we have a phenomenon lending itself readily to deception, and nothing is to be gained by ignoring this. But nothing is to be gained, either, by holding out against the obvious fact that in a majority of cases automatic writing is without the operator's volition. It may occur when he is in a trance—spontaneous or induced, pathological or healthy; or when he is apparently normally awake. His attention may be on the writing, on something else, on nothing at all. He may be conscious of the message as it develops; of words as they are formed individually but not of the context; or of nothing at all in connection with the message.

Things completely forgotten may be recalled through automatic writing. Rarer but far from unique are cases where knowledge is presented by the automatic writer which it seems certain he could never have had. Persons of mediocre attainments display literary ability, or exhibit mastery of subjects with which they

have plainly never been in contact. The penmanship is ordinarily that of the agent, but often a distinctive hand is adopted for these communications. Occasionally the same automatist will employ several of these, keeping them apart without confusion. Sometimes the hand of living or dead persons will be imitated.

With appropriate modifications to meet the different operating details, practically everything said of automatic writing applies to oral mediumistic communications. We do not have to accept these as from the dead, but we must accept the fact that many of them are without fraud and without volition on the part of the agent.

With all these phenomena the same question arises. The picture seen in the crystal, in the waking dream, or as an outright vision; the extra personality that appears and vanishes; the message of pencil, planchette, or voice; are these mere phantasies without significance or do they represent a real message of some sort? The attempt to answer presents numerous difficulties; passing these for the moment, it leads us at once to one further important psychic manifestation of the mind alone—telepathy.

We all know what this term covers. We must all realize that its very name implies a simple, straightforward explanation of the puzzling occurrences listed above. But—does telepathy exist, itself?

Its occurrence is admitted by its supporters to be usually spontaneous; failure of attempts to operate consciously and with intent is not necessarily conclusive against it. The direct experimental evidence in its favor consists in part of trials in which direct transference of thoughts, images or sensations was attempted; in part of successful hypnotism at a distance, which fairly defies explanation on any other ground; and in some part of the very fact that thus is simply explained much that without telepathy must for the present go unexplained. Aside from fraud, in any independent test of telepathy precaution must be taken against accidental reception of the desired information—thus, if one think of a number hard enough, the lips are apt to form it unconsciously, and the recipient may with equal absence of knowledge or intent read this message. It is also necessary to guard against the operation of chance. If I draw a card and you try to name it, you should score one success in 52 attempts; in 2700 tries, two of the 52 successes that are coming to you for this period ought to occur consecutively. You will have to do much better than this, over a considerable period, before I shall admit anything beyond a run of luck.

When we check up the possibility of telepathy by investigating the reliability of the reports rendered by other psychic phenomena which might be due to it,

INCREDULITY may go to lengths as absurd as credulity. The man who believes nothing at all is as impossible as the man who believes everything. One who will not credit the occurrence of the phenomena which for want of a better title we group under the term "psychic" has made a vice of skepticism, and in its name rejects what is true but unwelcome. If we but remember that we can accept the occurrence of these things without committing ourselves to any particular explanation of them, the admission that they really do occur loses its sting.

If he were asked whether he believes the explanation which, borrowing from others, he has outlined in this article, the author would answer frankly that he does not know. It may be objected that he has treated the subject more sympathetically than this state of mind would warrant. We do not see that he has suppressed anything unfavorable to the hypothesis with which he deals; and after this, it seems to us that if this hypothesis is to be exhibited at all, it should be presented with some sympathy. Aside from any question of actual acceptance, the author is the more inclined to give this sympathy because, to his mind, the hypothesis of his text is vastly to be preferred to any explanation involving the direct action of departed personalities. Unless and until it is shown that it contradicts itself or contradicts something else that we can less afford to give up, it covers the ground so completely that work in other directions is really without point. As stated in the text, it is for this reason alone that it is put before the readers of the SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN as part of our series on the psychic.—THE EDITOR.

icult to get away from the supposition that these circuits are electrical in nature. Ordinarily they are closed to the action of any other stimulus than the sort they are designed to receive. But it is far more difficult to imagine that this insulation is absolute, than to suppose that at times the circuit is subject to extraneous influence of some sort. And just as extraneous currents in a telephone circuit set up sound waves at the receiving diaphragm, it seems fairly inevitable that external currents in, say, the visual circuit must set up visual impressions at their receiving terminus. The character and intensity of the extraneous factor would presumably determine whether associative as well as perceptive centers would come into action, and accordingly whether the picture seen would be a more or less familiar one. The nature of the extraneous force acting would, of course, determine whether the phenomenon would have to be regarded as normal or as supernormal; of this we are not quite ready to speak.

Touching hypnotism from another angle is multiple personality. This condition is never induced, never in any way at the sufferer's command. It is suggestive of the introduction from without of the extra personality, and the possession of the victim's physical and mental structure thereby. The fact that in authenticated cases there has ensued a struggle between the