

SPIRITISM.

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I. THE GENERAL STATE OF THE QUESTION.

The word "Spiritism" is of French production, the English, and generally the Germans, having retained the term "Spiritualism;" but it seems advisable to confine the latter to the metaphysical position opposed to Materialism, and not confounding it with the explanation of mediumistic phenomena by the co-operation of spirits, to designate that explanation by the recent term "Spiritism." The preponderating tendency in Spiritism is the American-English, which does not accept Re-incarnation, but mainly proceeds upon the Christian belief in immortality. In France the direction given by Allan Kardec prevails, namely, the inclination to the Indian belief that the soul has to re-incarnate itself in new bodies till it has realised its divine aspiration for perfection. In Germany, Hellenbach's transcendental individualism has a circle of adherents who teach the possibility, but not quite the necessity, of Re-incarnation, and are chiefly distinguished from French Spiritism by attaching just as little importance to the utterances of mediums as that school attaches much.

The number of Spiritist journals is considerable; *Psychische Studien* exchanges with fifty of them, and in Germany alone there are five. Most of them are uncritical and superstitiously credulous to a really incredible degree, the worst of all in this respect being the American reports, their value being further reduced by the fact that it is just in America that the humbug and swindles of professional mediums have reached their climax. Among German Spiritist journals the monthly *Psychische Studien* (Leipzig: Oswald Mutze, 1874-1885) occu-

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pies an exceptional position, the conductor, Dr. Wittig, representing with energy and critical acumen Cox's theory of psychic force and the hallucination hypothesis against the spirit hypothesis, especially in the last three years. It is characteristic of the whole movement that this attempt to secure a hearing for the voice of reason, and to raise his journal to a scientific level, can only be carried out in conflict with the chief of the paper and the majority of the staff,* and that its first result has been the springing up of several competitive papers. For as most of the subscribers to Spiritist journals have no scientific interest whatever in the explanation of the phenomena, but only the interest of the heart in the confirmation of their belief in immortality by means of them, the deprivation of this hope is at once the cessation of their whole interest in the matter.

Whoever will concern himself with the literature of the Spiritists must take up the position of a physician of the insane, who obtains from his patients the exactest description possible of their delusions; and he who has no patience to enter and become familiar with the circle of ideas and the typical modes of expression of this mental aberration will never fathom its psychological causes.

That a somnambule represents under an image, and as far as possible personifies, the ideas (*Vorstellungen*) of his middle-brain, is a psychological necessity over which as a somnambule he has no power. That a masked (*larvirter*) somnambule ascribes the intelligent manifestations of his somnambule consciousness, which his ordinary consciousness does not recognise as his "own," to foreign, invisible, personified intelligences, is not less psychologically necessary. Now if, further, those activities by which the, to him, unconscious intelligence of his masked somnambule consciousness mediates its manifestations, are produced by

* It is necessary to explain that though *Psychische Studien* is described on the title page as "edited and superintended" (*herausgegeben und redigirt*) by Alex. von Aksakow, and Dr. Wittig describes himself as "editorial secretary" (*Sekretär der Redaktion*), the supremacy of the former seems merely nominal, but the latter seems to be the responsible conductor of the paper.—TR.

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involuntary and unconscious impulse of his middle-brain (be it on the muscles of the limbs or vocal organs, or upon a still unknown nerve-force of mechanical agency), it is inevitable that he should deny these activities to be his own, and should look on them as immediate activities of those personified intelligences. And if with these processes is connected the faculty which the somnambule has of producing combined hallucinations of several sense-organs in the souls of sensitive persons present, the latter will be easily disposed, on account of the ‘ palpability ’ of these combined hallucinations of sight, hearing, feeling, and touch, to take them for objective realities. And if, finally, the agreement of these implanted hallucinations is proved by several witnesses, the reality of the phenomena seems to them, as to the somnambule influencing them, scarcely to admit of further doubt.

All these intuitive fallacies have the same conformity to psychological law as deceptions of the senses. Abstract reflection may completely see through a deception of sense, without the latter ceasing to reproduce itself for perception as often as the conditions of its origination recur. For part of the mediumistic phenomena, especially the transfer of hallucination to third persons, undisturbed belief in the reality of the dream-personifications appears to be an almost indispensable condition in the somnambule evoking them, and to be at least favourable for effectuation in the witnesses. This explains why spectators encounter more developed phenomena with the growth of their spiritistic faith, and how an *intolerant* scepticism, which disdains to conform, even in appearance, to the ideas of the medium, must have a paralysing action on the latter’s productive power.

From these preliminary remarks it will be already seen that in the phenomenal province on which Spiritism rests we have to do with essentially different conditions of research than in experiments with inorganic substances or

organic bodies. A small part only of mediumistic phenomena is purely physical in its action, and even this part is connected in its origin with psychical conditions, with the disposition, confidence, and untroubled comfort of the medium. Now it is quite unwarranted for men of science to decline the examination of these phenomena because they are connected with conditions the re-establishment of which is not always in the power of the investigator.

If the flea of the mole, or the intestinal worm of the cricket is to be examined, moles and crickets must first be caught for the fleas and worms to be found. If particular forms of insanity are to be examined the madhouses where such patients are to be found must be visited. If electric roaches or eels are to be examined, they must be obtained from their resorts. Just in the same way, if we would study abnormal phenomena of human nature we must seek out abnormally disposed natures or get them to come to us. Even the experiments of the laboratory are often so dependent on complicated conditions that the investigator cannot answer for success in every case; but this does not impair the demonstrative force of successful cases. If the electric roach is exhausted by the journey or is sick, the experiments with it must be just as unsatisfactory as those with a medium who is unwell; and if the dampness of the atmosphere exceeds a certain degree, experiments with an electrical friction machine will miscarry just as much as those with a medium. All this, however, cannot possibly prevent the investigation of abnormal phenomena.

Worse than the dependence on mediums and their disposition is the contest with intentional deception, which is certainly spared in the investigation with electric roaches. Here, however, we are reminded of the provinces of mental and nervous disease, hysteria and somnambulism, where the physician and the theorist have likewise to deal with the subtlest attempts at deception, without their scientific zeal

being arrested on that account. A somnambule receives from his phantasmic personages directions which he punctually obeys, in the good faith that they are acting through him, and in his waking state swears with a good conscience that he knows nothing of those actions, holding them immediate performances of those figures of his phantasy. Similarly a medium in the somnambule state can play the part of a spirit and do things of which afterwards, when awake, he knows nothing, and which from the reports of the witnesses he must take for immediate spirit actions.

Whoever has been closely concerned with hysterical patients, without being their dupe, knows how finely and intricately good faith and deceit are entwined in them. Now all such mediums as are not merely magnetisers but also open or masked somnambules, are without exception individuals with a certain disorganisation of the nervous system; that is, the lower and middle nerve centres are too independent of the highest, reflex-inhibiting centre of conscious self-control; they are, in other words, just as much as non-mediumistic somnambules, and notwithstanding frequent appearance of bodily health, hysterical;* and their actions, whether in open or in masked somnambulism, are thus under the most favourable conditions imaginable for unconscious or half-conscious deceit. They are firmly convinced that the spirits help them, but are yet conscious that they are in some way indispensable to the spirits as a co-operating condition, that is, that the spirits can only act with their help. Is it a great step from this to the endeavour, on their own side, to help the spirits, so that the boundary between wholly involuntary, half-voluntary, and voluntary co-operation gets obliterated? Can generally the conception of "full accountability" be applied to a mental condition in which the organic-psychical collective energy is split between waking consciousness and somnam-

* That hysteria is not merely a female disease has been considered established in France for twenty years, and in Germany has lately been placed beyond doubt by Mendel.

bulic consciousness, leaving for the first only a proportion, greater or less, of the normal intensity ?

It must, I think, be of singular occurrence for a completely normal man to have the notion of coming out as a medium. The best qualified would evidently be conjurers, but these prefer to carry on their art before a larger circle of spectators, while to mediums are allotted the small profits of a narrow circle. One has heard, indeed, of many mediums who have become conjurers, but never of a conjurer who has become a medium. It may, therefore, be assumed that no one enters the career of a medium who has not accidentally discovered in himself abnormal properties and forces. Somewhat of these properties and forces may indeed belong to every one, but in so slight a degree that nothing special is to be done with them. In England 3 per cent. ; in America, where the air is dryer, even as many as 5 per cent. of people are mediums to an extent worth cultivation. With women the development of these abnormal dispositions is more frequent than with men, with lean, nervous constitutions more frequent than with the stout, with young persons more frequent than with older ones, before puberty more frequent than afterwards.

The medium at self-discovery is usually as much astonished by the phenomena as are those about him ; it requires long exercise so far to obtain control over his middle nerve centres as to be able voluntarily to place himself in the condition adapted to elicit the phenomena. As this exercise progresses, the phenomena increase in variety and strength, and his notoriety extends ; by-and-bye he receives invitations to other towns and countries, with guarantee of compensation. If before he has been stimulated by vanity, now pecuniary interest is added ; he neglects his ordinary calling and becomes a professional medium. It is disagreeable to him to accept money for unsuccessful sittings, and yet he must have money to live ; he begins to help the spirits that so his customers may be satisfied.

The professional medium is paid for each sitting ; the more sittings, the more money. But every sitting is a tension to the nervous system, and makes the medium more nervous, more hysterical, more powerless. As long as youth's store of force holds out, the thing prospers ; then the exhausted mediumistic force abates considerably, and phenomena are rarer and weaker. But notoriety pursues him, and he has more invitations than he can accept ; he sees before him money which he cannot earn. Now is the temptation to help the spirits urgent. Scarcely any professional medium is spared this diminishing phase of his mediumship, and it needs great strength of character again to take up the abandoned ordinary occupation after long erratic life. Many mediums prefer to become anti-Spiritists, and to entertain the public with the tricks by which they formerly helped the spirits, earning thereby, as a rule, much more than by genuine mediumship. Thereby also particular mediumistic performances, which can be produced in larger circles (*e.g.*, thought-reading by contact and by the involuntary muscular movements of the directive person) are further carried on, and the anti-Spiritism is only used to conciliate the requisite confidence ; the conjuring goes on at the same time, and the public is far more certainly duped by these anti-Spiritists than by the Spiritist mediums. Many mediums arrive at length at complete derangement of body and mind, become infirm or melancholy, and end in insanity or suicide. This is the case, not only with American mediums, but also with the Indian, although the latter can never make the thing pecuniarily profitable, and are far less tempted to exhaust their power by too frequent exercise ; but the Indian mediums aim at just that derangement of mind and body which our medicine fears, and see in the gradual decay and dying away before death the most desirable goal.

Between a conjurer and a medium an important distinction is perceivable. The conjurer is independent of his

health, of atmospheric conditions, of the dispositions towards him of those present, of the number of spectators, and light; on the other hand, he is dependent on the locality, on appliances, on the distance and position of the spectators, and in most performances on the preparations he has been able to make. He is seldom without confederates, and he has not to reckon with nervous exhaustion from the representation; he is dependent on certain conditions, but if these are not disturbed he is as good as sure of success. All this is otherwise with the medium.

The medium comes alone, without assistants and without apparatus, into a place which is strange and not accessible to him before the sitting. The Indian fakir appears naked, with only a rag round his loins; every sensible medium—and none others should be experimented with—willingly allows himself to be searched from head to foot before and after the sitting, and does not refuse to exchange, under inspection, the clothes he has brought on him for others newly provided of particular cut and colour. Every article he needs is received from the host, so that any preparation before the sitting is excluded. During the sitting the medium is immediately under the eyes of the spectators and in contact with them; but as he is influenced by their ideas and feelings, a malevolent, hostile, or frivolous disposition disturbs his psychical activity, and that equally whether he is conscious of the reason of this disturbance or not. Since each brings different thoughts, feelings, and influences, the disturbing influences are multiplied with the numbers of the spectators; mediumistic representations in the presence of more than three are antecedently to be suspected, and are usually only successful when among the spectators are mediums, who unconsciously reinforce the principal medium, and thus compensate for the disturbing influences.

The nervous relaxation and exhaustion of the medium is

proportional to the abundance and strength of the results produced, but may, of course, be feigned or hypocritically exaggerated. Success is entirely uncertain, and if the medium is to be kept from all temptation to imposition, it must before all things be made clear to him that one is aware of this uncertainty of success, and will be in no way disappointed or impatient, though even many sittings should be without result. It is also to be recommended not to pay mediums for each sitting, but to arrange with them a fixed sum per month, or for a series of sittings, with free quarters, because with the fee for each sitting there is a powerful motive to deceptions.

Not less obstructive to mediumistic effects than damp air and evil disposition of the spectators, is the glaring light, which the conjurer prefers, so that it should not be thought that he was making things too easy for himself by darkness. Most mediums must first discover and develop their powers by dark sittings, till they are so far strengthened and inured as to be able to bear a moderate light. Only distinguished mediums succeed with full light; certain results, as for instance the levitation (*Emporfliegen*) of the medium, and the implantation of hallucinations in the spectators, seem under all circumstances to endure only a subdued light. As certainly as the different forms of the electric glimmer can only be observed in the dark chamber, so certainly also the phosphorescent lights, which are very common attendant phenomena of dark sittings, can only be witnessed in the dark. It is, therefore, impracticable to reject dark sittings altogether. Yet they should be confined to the study of these phenomena, and no value should be attributed to anything else occurring in them. Sleeves, boots, and cap of the medium, as perhaps other objects in the room, should be marked with self-luminous colours. Still better is the distribution of a number of weak electric lamps in the room, such as are now used for ornamentation. Even weak mediums

can bear faint lights of a phosphorescent character, while stronger light (perhaps by its relation to electrical induction) has a disturbing effect.

All other investigations must and can be undertaken with subdued or bright light, then, what with the visibility of the medium's whole person and visitation and change of clothes before and after the sitting, there will be sufficient control to make sure against conjuring tricks. Altogether to be rejected is every binding of the medium, as a direct challenge to intentional and unintentional deception, and because conjurers in the loosing and retying of knots, and in slipping out and in of loops and fastenings are incredibly expert, so that only a conjurer can be competent to judge of the sufficiency of the fastenings. Besides which, fastening is a kind of supposed security which is painful to the medium, and, therefore, is unworthy, and almost every medium seeks to get free from the bonds as soon as he has fallen into the hypnotic or somnambulant state, and knows himself to be safe from the eyes of the spectators. Whoever relies on bonds, and neglects other control, may always be sure that he is deceived, and all reports of sittings of this kind are at once to be rejected as worthless.

Whoever holds his five senses to be insufficient, with the precautions supposed, to distinguish conjuring from involuntary phenomena, thereby declares the human organs of sense to be unadapted for the establishment of facts generally, and must equally renounce every judicial proof by witnesses and every scientific research. If a skilled conjurer can be introduced as a fourth at every sitting, that is certainly to be recommended, such an one having a professional interest to expose any conjuring, so that mediums may not compromise the vocation of the conjurer. It is notorious that the two best conjurers of Germany and France, Bellachini and Houdin, have given their testimony in favour of the mediums observed by them: other