

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Notes on Early Interpretations of Mediumship

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Submitted 2/2/10, Accepted 3/7/12

Abstract—The purpose of this note is to dispel the notion that ideas of human agency to account for the veridical mental phenomena of mediums began with persons associated with the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in England, or with certain later individuals. In fact, the appearance of these ideas preceded the founding of the Society in 1882. Examples of earlier writers who discussed these ideas include Carl Gustav Carus, Edward W. Cox, Justinus Kerner, Asa Mahan, André-Saturnin Morin, Maximilian Perty, B. W. Richmond, and Edward C. Rogers. In contrast to the speculation by later SPR authors and others, the concepts that appeared in the old literature often involved belief in physical forces.

Keywords: Mediumship—human agency—psychic force—spiritualism—super ESP—super psi

Introduction

The study of the possibility of survival of death is a traditional area of parapsychology, and one that has influenced the field in many ways (Alvarado 2003). Within survival research much attention has been paid to the veridical statements of mental mediums delivered through such means as automatic writing or trance speaking. Among the information that could be corroborated in reports on the mediums of the past were specific names and information about relationships and events relevant to the life of the purported spirit communicator (e.g., Hodgson 1892, Radclyffe-Hall & Troubridge 1919).

Provided conventional explanations such as sensory cues and fraud have been ruled out or considered unlikely, much of this material has been interpreted by some as evidence of discarnate agency. However, as has been discussed in modern writings about mediumship, the psychic abilities of the mediums have been proposed as a frequent counter-explanation for discarnate agency (e.g., Braude 2003, Gauld 1982, Hart 1959, Sudduth 2009). Gauld (1982) stated that the assumption here is that mediums “obtain all their information by telepathically tapping the memory-stores of living persons, clairvoyantly scanning archives, etc.” (Gauld 1982:127). The purpose of the present note is to provide the reader with examples of early ideas of this sort, generally neglected in the modern literature.

Recently one author argued that “the idea of explaining mediumistic communications in terms of extraordinary living agent psi originated in the late 19th century among members of the British and American societies of psychical research” (Sudduth 2009:190). Another recent author singled out Frank Podmore (1856–1910), an active member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and a well-known writer, as someone who had developed this concept (Fontana 2005:104). Similarly, authors of overviews of survival of death in psychical research have not mentioned early ideas of this sort (e.g., Almeder 1992, Braude 2003, Fontana 2005, Gauld 1982). Although work conducted by SPR researchers and others was important in the dissemination of the concept of living agency in mediumship (e.g., Leaf 1890), and although their speculations may have been more detailed, the idea is older than that. In fact, it cropped up almost immediately after the rise of Spiritualism. Our review will present examples from the early mesmeric and spiritualistic literature (see also Crabtree 1993, Podmore 1902).

Some Authors Writing on Living Agency and Mediumship Previously to the Foundation of the SPR

The notion that the psychic powers of the living played a role in mediumistic communications attributed to the dead was present in the mesmeric movement. Writing in the journal *Zoist*, English clergyman the Reverend George Sandby (1799–1881) reduced the revelations some mesmeric subjects claimed to come from discarnate spirits to the “old mesmeric principles of thought-reading and clairvoyance” (Sandby 1850:423).¹ In France, lawyer André-Saturnin Morin (1807–1888) disagreed with the belief that mediumistic communications could be explained only by the action of spirits of the dead. In an account of a specific phenomenon, he wrote: “To imitate writings he has never seen . . . the medium reads the thought of

the consultant and sees the name of the evoked deceased [person] and the writing at the same time” (Morin 1858:96). In a later publication Morin (1860:464) felt that the information conveyed by mediums was related to sources such as writings or books located in other places accessed through their lucidity (clairvoyance). Similarly, magnetizer Charles Lafontaine (1803–1892) argued that mediums could perceive the “unconscious thoughts of the persons present” (Lafontaine 1866:116).

Discussions of living agency have also been put forward in the early literature of spiritualism. Often, these authors referred to concepts based or derived from mesmerism and entailing the concept of vital, nervous, or psychic forces that were intimately related to the body of the medium. The projection of such a force was assumed by opponents of discarnate agency to be either an automatic process or one guided unconsciously by the medium. Most of these speculations referred to such physical phenomena as raps, table movements, and movement of other objects.² An early review of some of these publications in the English and French literature was presented by Alexander Aksákow (1832–1903) (Aksákow 1886).³ Many such examples existed (e.g., Oldfield 1852, De Gasparin 1854, Dods 1854, Mahan 1855, Samson 1860, Chevillard 1869, Cox 1879). Some of these discussions included the concept of Od, which became popular in the spiritualistic literature at the time.⁴ An example was English spiritualist Thomas P. Barkas’ (1862) summary of a popular explanation for the phenomena of spiritualism. The explanation rested on the assumption that the phenomena were produced by human agency, among which were

the automatic action of the cerebral, spinal, and sympathetic nerve centers of mediums, acting through the agency of and using an imponderable and all-pervading fluid designated by Reichenbach, ODYLE. (Barkas 1862:15).

Traverse Oldfield (1852)—a pseudonym used by American minister George W. Samson (1819–1896)—argued that the

communications of the clairvoyant and of the spiritual medium, as to facts that can be tested, have been only the knowledge, remembered or forgotten, and the surmise, right or wrong, of the person consulting. (Oldfield 1852:44)

He suggested that the explanation was “a united current of two persons’ nervous influence” (Oldfield 1852:44) in which the thought of one person passed to the other, and then was expressed through rappings or automatic writing. Such process, Oldfield wrote,

is no more mysterious than that, by a connection of electric conductors, and by an excitement of the electric principle, I can control the electric influence of a series of electric conductors, reaching from New Orleans to Boston, and have my thought rapped or written out a thousand miles from the point where I exert the energy. (Oldfield 1852:44)

Physician B. W. Richmond believed that mental phenomena were caused by “mind acting on mind” (Brittan & Richmond 1853:149). The medium, in a magnetic state, was in rapport with another living mind. Phenomena such as automatic writing “follow the law of *mental reflection*—and the *reflected image* often corresponds to other minds than the medium . . .” (Brittan & Richmond 1853:186). He believed that the mind of the medium could not realize that “she is being impressed by a book, a letter, or some human mind” (Brittan & Richmond 1853:204). Furthermore, Richmond asserted that in cases in which a medium produced a facsimile of a deceased person’s signature that was unknown to her, the medium, being in rapport with a person familiar with the signature, “copied” it from that person’s memory (Brittan & Richmond 1853:204). Another author, and one cited by many at the time, was the American writer Edward C. Rogers (1853). He believed that mediumistic physical phenomena were caused by human nervous forces related to the medium’s brain centers. In mental mediums, there was the assumption of a fictitious “influence of external agencies,” and of a “promptness of the brain to give a reflex action of these impressions back upon the outward world through the medium of the automatic apparatus in the bodily frame, or through the odylic agent . . .” (Rogers 1853:176). The medium’s brain, Rogers believed, “may, under certain circumstances in its action, assume any personality, from that of a divinity to that of a toad . . .” (Rogers 1853:171).

The well-known American clairvoyant Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) (see photo) believed in different agencies. In his book *The Present*



Andrew Jackson Davis

Age and Inner Life (1853) Davis wrote that “owing to the extraordinary attributes of man’s mind, many experiences are by some individuals regarded as spiritually originated; which in truth, are only caused by the natural laws of our being” (Davis 1853:160f). Davis believed that 40% of the phenomena were due to discarnate spirits. The remaining possibilities included a variety of medical explanations, with 18% being accounted for by what would later be referred to as the psychic powers of the living. This living agency, Davis wrote, was due to “vital electricity”

projected by the medium's body, and by clairvoyance. Like Davis, other writers accepted both spirit and human agency as explanations for the phenomena of mediumship. One of them, Unitarian minister Adin Ballou (1803–1890), believed the phenomena “sometimes proceed from spirits in the flesh,” and sometimes from discarnate spirits (Ballou 1853:78). For Ballou the mind of the medium was open to “mesmeric and psychological influences, from controlling minds near them . . .” (Ballou 1853:61). However, he believed it was possible to distinguish human from discarnate agency. Another author who accepted the notion of mixed agency was the writer Epes Sargent (1812–1880). In his book *Planchette; or, the Despair of Science* he wrote:

It is not unlikely that many of the minor phenomena, attributed with sincerity by many partially developed mediums to spirits, may be produced by the unconscious exercise of spiritual powers latent in the individual; while other phenomena are of so extraordinary a character that the more rational explanation may be found in the theory of the application of an external spiritual intelligence or force. (Sargent 1869:233)

In Germany, Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) (see photo), famous for his work with the “Seeress of Prevorst,” argued that the spiritistic interpretation of table turning and mediumistic communication was misleading. In 1853, Kerner published *Die Somnambulen Tische*, a booklet in which he described experiences and experiments that had been performed on table turning and related phenomena. Some of the examples presented by Kerner concerned allegedly successful



Justinus Kerner



Carl Gustav Carus

transmissions of mental suggestions by sitters, including cases of xenoglossy. Kerner argued that the peculiar movements of tables and other objects were caused by the “human nerve spirit” of the sitters (Kerner 1853:52), a fluidic force expressed by their organisms. In addition, he attributed the received communications to a subconscious psychic aspect of this nerve spirit that would enable thought-transference and clairvoyance.

Similar thoughts were expressed by noted physician Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) (see photo). Along with Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert (1780–1860), Carus is often regarded

as one of the first writers who had laid foundations for exploring and understanding the subconscious layers of the human psyche. In his book *Über Lebensmagnetismus* (1857), Carus stated that table turning, rappings, and mediumistic communications “can be reduced to the rise of the subconscious into the region of the conscious” (Carus 1857:222). Like Kerner, he attributed table movements to influences of animal magnetism. The mediums would be especially prone to utilize this “stream of innervation” (Carus 1857:225) subconsciously. If veridical elements were contained in the received communications, Carus attributed them to the divining faculties of the human subconscious, sometimes also displayed in dreaming. He regarded the spreading of mediumship and sitter groups as an indication of an epidemic of regressive human madness.

The German zoologist Maximilian Perty (1804–1884) was another critic of belief in spirit communication in mediumship. Like Bruno Schindler (1797–1859) (Schindler 1857) before him, in *Die Mystischen Erscheinungen der Menschlichen Natur* (1861/1872), Perty provided an alternative account of certain supernormal phenomena to that of such previous authors as Joseph Görres (1776–1848) (Görres 1836–1842), who held that they were usually caused by the supernatural agency of angels and demons, while Schindler and Perty proposed they were usually due to the vital or psychic forces of living persons.

Anticipating Carl du Prel’s (1839–1899) philosophy of dissociation in somnambulism (du Prel 1885), Perty argued that the “guides” of somnambulist mediums, often assuming the appearance of deceased loved ones, were usually dramatized personifications from the somnambulist’s own psyche (Perty 1861/1872(1):244ff). Rather than suggesting evidence of spirit identity, Perty held that supernormal knowledge emerging in “spirit guides” was due to the somnambulist’s own unconscious clairvoyance or “magic excitation.” In a discussion of the literary products of Andrew Davis, the famous “Poughkeepsie Seer” and precursor of modern spiritualism we have mentioned above, Perty found them to be a mixture of inspiration and obvious errors, and he concluded that they were a “remarkable product of somnambulist ecstasy” (Perty 1861/1872(1):339), combining certain cultural influences that Perty presumed Jackson must have been exposed to, but with glimpses of genius and supernormal knowledge. Similarly, in a contribution to the problem of demonic possession, Perty held that, in most cases, the possessing entities were “products of the own divided [entzweiten] psyche of those concerned” (Perty 1861/1872(1):341), even if apparent possession episodes were accompanied by supernormal physical or mental phenomena. The second volume of *Die Mystischen Erscheinungen*

opens with a chapter dedicated to the phenomena of spiritualism, i.e. table rapping, and automatic writing and speaking (Perty 1861/1872(2):1–77). Perty criticized spiritualists claiming that a “spirit’s” opposition to views held by a medium counted as evidence for the alleged spirit’s autonomy, for our normal dream life was replete with instances of opposing viewpoints of the dream self and the waking self (Perty 1861/1872(2):10–11). Perty therefore concluded: “In a considerable number of cases, the so-called spirits turn out to be products of the magically excited psyche of the mediums, appearing to be autonomous extraneous beings” (Perty 1861/1872(2):60).⁵

Concluding Remarks

The material discussed in this note could be extended. It shows that explanations of veridical elements arising from the living medium rather than from discarnate influence preceded the founding of the SPR. Moreover, such ideas had been put forward during the early days of the SPR without being influenced by the SPR (e.g., von Hartmann 1885a, 1885b). Nonetheless, the early ideas were often not exactly equivalent to those held by SPR workers and later writers engaged in controversies (e.g., Gasperini 2011) and discussions of the so-called hypothetical construct referred to as super ESP (e.g., Gauld 1982, Hart 1959, Sudduth 2009). Instead early ideas were frequently associated with unorthodox concepts of force not discussed by the SPR workers who wrote about mental mediumship.⁶ In addition, although earlier writers knew about such processes as those akin to unconscious cerebration, the SPR (and later) workers laid more emphasis on less physiological conceptions of subconscious processes that had a wider scope. The later interest took place in the context of observations of and research on dissociation and the subconscious mind during the late 19th century (Alvarado 2002, Crabtree 1993, Ellenberger 1970). Similar to secondary personalities and the states observed in hypnosis, in hysterical patients, and in other circumstances, mediumship was discussed by some as an example of dissociation and of the existence of the subconscious mind.

Although other authors have discussed some of these ideas of the living medium as the source of veridical information before the foundation of the SPR (see the reviews of Aksákov 1894, Crabtree 1993, Podmore 1902), or early after its foundation and independently from it (von Hartmann 1885a, 1885b), the literature we present is largely unknown among current writers. We hope that this note serves as a reminder that the concept of living agency in the interpretation of the phenomena of mediumship has a history that extends back to the middle of the 19th century.

Notes

- ¹ On spiritualistic mesmerism, see Crabtree (1993:196–212). See also Alvarado (2009).
- ² Discussions of concepts of force in relation to mediumship include the works of Alvarado (2006, 2008b), Crabtree (1993), and Podmore (1902). Later authors who discuss such forces in the 19th century include Collyer (1871), Cox (1879), De Rochas (1897), and von Hartmann (1885a, 1885b). For example, referring to the medium’s “nervo-vital fluid” affecting tables and other objects it was stated: “When this fact is admitted, there is no necessity of ascribing the phenomena to spiritual causes” (Collyer 1871:110). It should be kept in mind that believers in discarnate agency also accepted the existence of forces to explain the phenomena of mediums (e.g., Ballou 1853, Kardec 1863). But they postulated that spirits made use of such forces to produce both mental and physical phenomena.
- ³ This review was later included in his influential work *Animismus und Spiritismus* (Aksákow 1894).
- ⁴ According to Baron Karl von Reichenbach (1849/1851), Od was a universal force similar to animal magnetism, that could be found in minerals, crystals, and living organisms including the human body, but that was also generated by several other means such as heat, light, friction, electricity, chemical reactions, and magnetism. The concept was used by many in the mid-19th century to explain mediumship and other psychic phenomena (e.g., Brittan & Richmond 1853, Guppy 1863, Mayo 1852, Rogers 1853, see also Alvarado 2008a). Although in general spiritualists did not like phenomena explained in terms of Od—the writings of Samuel B. Brittan (c. 1815–1883) is one example (Brittan & Richmond 1853)—there was widespread interest in the topic, as is evident in articles published in 19th-century spiritualist periodicals (e.g., Gregory 1872, Howitt 1860). However, von Reichenbach himself didn’t relate the concept of Od to mediumistic communications. When he wrote about mediumistic processes, he was more interested in physical phenomena (see, e.g., his presentation of the experiments he had performed on table turning in von Reichenbach 1867:108–148). On Reichenbach and Od, see Nahm (2012).
- ⁵ Perty (1861/1872(2):65) also provided a brief discussion of the role of cryptomnesia in mediumship. That is, mediums seem to generate new information whereas they only reproduce forgotten memories without being aware of doing so.
- ⁶ The pre-SPR British literature on mediumistic forces in general (e.g., Cox

1879, Crookes 1874, Guppy 1863), and of ideas of forces involved in mental mediumship in particular (Alvarado 2008c) notwithstanding, the discussions of mental mediumship published by SPR leaders followed a mentalistic approach. Where force was discussed it was in the context of physical phenomena, Lodge's (1894:334–335) and Myers' (1903(2):544–546) works being examples.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank Nancy L. Zingrone for useful editorial comments.

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