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EDITORIAL

In addition to the usual array of interesting papers and reviews, this issue of the *JSE* features a debate that I consider especially noteworthy. The topic of the debate is hypnosis and the participants in the dialogue are all recognized authorities on the subject. However, the backgrounds and perspectives of the participants are also quite different, and so the discussion of the issues is commendably broad and wide-ranging.

I've often wondered whether *JSE* readers noticed and were puzzled by the fact that hypnosis has received little (if any) attention in the pages of this *Journal*. It has certainly puzzled me. Granted, unlike some of the phenomena (or alleged phenomena) discussed in the *JSE*, the existence of hypnosis is not generally disputed. However, the process and nature of hypnosis, and the implications of hypnotic phenomena for our understanding of the mind, remain acknowledged mysteries. To be sure, a small number of researchers cling obdurately to the belief (associated perhaps most often with Nicholas Spanos) that hypnosis is nothing but social compliance or role-playing designed to please the hypnotist.[1] But the transparent absurdity of that position becomes clear as soon as one considers some of the more dramatic hypnotic phenomena—for example, failing to register pain during major surgery (e.g., limb amputation, the removal of 100-lb scrotal tumors [yes, that's right], and the removal of toenails by the roots), and also the prevention of well-known involuntary responses to other noxious stimuli, such as ammonia placed under the nose and needles inserted in the mucous membranes of the eyes. Clearly, the subjects in these cases aren't simply complying with the wishes of the surgeon by (say) feigning a lack of pain. These are *paradigm* cases of genuine and profound—and poorly understood—altered states, and they're quite different from the non-reactions to relatively mild pain (e.g., hands in ice water) considered by Spanos.

Readers unfamiliar with this literature might be amused (or disheartened) to learn that Spanos and others defend their role-playing view of hypnosis by adopting the straw-man reasoning all too familiar from the skeptical literature in parapsychology—namely, generalizing from the weakest cases. Spanos's tactic was to focus on experiments which *at best* would illustrate only very modest or relatively uninteresting forms of hypnosis—that is, which even those sympathetic to hypnosis would regard as marginal and relatively easy to simulate unconsciously. Spanos systematically (and I'd say, knowingly) either ignored or passed quickly over the phenomena he

should have highlighted, the dramatic phenomena of hypnosis (e.g., hypnotic anesthesia of the sort reported by Esdaile and others).[2] These are precisely the cases most difficult to explain away as forms of social compliance.

Perhaps the mystery of hypnosis is undervalued because, unlike (say) ESP or PK, it's easily replicable and conspicuously useful. For example, one well-known study reports the effective use of hypnosis to prevent bleeding in a large number of surgical dental procedures on hemophiliac patients (Lucas & Tocantins 1964). And that's not an isolated report.[3] But how is this physiological control possible? No one has a clue, any more than we understand the details of placebo and other psychosomatic effects. Actually, for those topics there is a substantial literature (although it's not terribly strong on theory),[4] and so you'd think the scientific community would devote at least as much effort to unraveling—and not simply documenting—the puzzling mind–body connections demonstrated in hypnosis. But you won't find much serious or sustained attention either to theory or to the most challenging hypnotic phenomena in journals devoted broadly to the study of consciousness, and there's not even much in hypnosis journals or books on hypnosis. One exception, a book only modestly interesting theoretically, is Rossi and Cheek (1988); and see Barušs (2003) for a good summary of recent research and theory.

Sadly, the neglect of major puzzles concerning hypnosis is nothing new; in fact (as I'll explain below), the scientific community has a history of dropping the ball when it comes to some hypnotic mysteries. But why should these mysteries be discussed so infrequently in the pages of the *JSE*? In the early days of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) at the end of the nineteenth century, hypnosis received penetrating and scholarly treatment in many issues of the Society's *Proceedings* and *Journal*. In those days, many believed that hypnosis was not only intrinsically interesting and poorly understood, but that along with other dissociative phenomena (such as divided consciousness) it promised great insights into the workings of the mind. These days, however, one almost never sees mention of hypnosis in parapsychological journals. It's now mostly in the hands of specialists, and accorded scholarly treatment primarily for its practical (e.g., clinical, medical, psychiatric, or forensic) consequences.

That's fine, as far as it goes. But consider this. In its early publications, the SPR frequently examined ways in which hypnosis (mesmerism) linked to various ostensible psi phenomena such as community of sensation, clairvoyance (including diagnosis of disease), and thought-transference (including willing at a distance). Many of the articles make for rewarding reading even today—perhaps especially the papers by F. W. H. Myers and Edmund Gurney.[5] One paper of particular importance is Myers's

1886 report on hypnosis at a distance (Myers 1886). It marks a stage in a strange and protracted history of noticing, and then neglecting, one of the potentially most disturbing hypnotic phenomena—disturbing because of its combination of metaphysical and ethical implications.

Hypnosis at a distance (or telepathic hypnosis) had been noticed from the beginning—by Mesmer himself. But since so much of what Mesmer and his followers were doing was strange, telepathic hypnosis didn't stand out at the time as being particularly noteworthy. Later, in the early nineteenth century, Mesmer's disciple Puységur wrote that suggestion at a distance was "magnetism's" most characteristic feature. But that was countered by a report from the French Academy of Sciences claiming that animal magnetism was nothing more than manipulation of the imagination in unbalanced people.

After several more unsuccessful attempts during the mid nineteenth century to attract sustained attention to *le sommeil à distance*, several prominent investigators—including Pierre Janet and Charles Richet—began studying a subject, Léonie, a simple peasant woman who, according to a Doctor Gibert of Le Havre, would fall asleep merely from his mental suggestion for her to do so. Janet conducted a series of successful experiments with Léonie, including having her carry out post-hypnotic commands given mentally. Richet later duplicated these results with Léonie and three other subjects.[6]

But then this research screeched to a halt. Instead of acknowledging and following up on the potential significance of what they had observed, Janet and Richet each went back to less interesting and momentous areas of research. And no one else at the time picked up where they left off. It was as if the possibility of influencing others at a distance was simply too disturbing to pursue.

Later, in the 1930s in Soviet Russia, the physiologist L. L. Vasiliev successfully demonstrated hypnotic induction at a distance in some clever experiments (Vasiliev 1976). Apparently, this work had been done furtively during the Stalin era, and so nobody outside Russia learned of it until the 1960s. But again, it seems as if researchers ran away from the implications of influencing people at a distance. No more work on the subject followed, although some efforts were made to influence lower organisms including insects, rats (of course), and fungi. For more detailed accounts of this peculiar history, I strongly recommend Jule Eisenbud's essay, "How to Influence Practically Anybody (but Fellow Scientists) Extrasensorially at a Distance" (Eisenbud 1992), and also Alan Gauld's monumental history of hypnosis (1992).[7]

You won't find telepathic hypnosis covered in the debate featured in

this issue of the *JSE*. But there's plenty of other serious work still to be done on the subject of hypnosis specifically and altered states generally, and this issue's dialogue takes a step in the right direction by addressing some basic conceptual and empirical matters. Note, by the way, that the current issue also features an interesting paper on drug-induced hallucinations and telepathy. As far as I'm concerned, the general topic of altered states likewise could be featured more regularly in the *JSE*, although as the recent Cardeña and Winkelman volume seems to indicate, that's an area of research receiving the sustained attention it deserves. Regrettably, no more papers either on hypnosis or altered states are currently in our editorial pipeline. But I hope that the spasm of attention to those topics in this issue is itself not an anomaly. We still have a long way to go before we can claim to grasp the significance of hypnosis and other altered states for our understanding of the workings of Nature generally, and ourselves in particular.

Notes

[1] See, e.g., Spanos (1983), Spanos, Weekes, and Bertrand (1985), Spanos and Chaves (1989), Spanos and Hewitt (1980).

[2] See, e.g., Esdaile (1846, 1852), Elliotson (1843).

[3] See also Swirsky-Sacchetti and Margolis (1986), LaBaw (1992), Lebaron and Zeltzer (1984), Lucas (1975), Fredericks (1967), Fung and Lazar (1983), Dubin and Shapiro (1974), Newman (1971, 1974).

[4] But see White, Tursky, and Schwartz (1985), and another valuable new addition to the literature is Cardeña and Winkelman (2011).

[5] For a representative sampling, see, e.g., Gurney (1884a, 1884b, 1884c, 1887a, 1887b, 1888a, 1888b), Gurney and Myers (1885), and Myers (1885, 1888).

[6] Janet (1885, 1886), Richet (1885, 1888). For an interesting and detailed summary of the case of Léonie, see Dingwall (1967(1):264ff).

[7] Especially pp. 466–467 in Gauld (1992).

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