

EDITORIAL

This issue of the *Journal* contains the material on physical mediumship originally scheduled for the Spring *JSE*. The plan for that issue had been to focus on the Felix Experimental Group (FEG) and its medium Kai Mügge, and Michael Nahm and I had each written very long papers describing and evaluating our detailed and extensive investigations of the group. But as I mentioned in my Editorial in the last issue, *JSE* 28:1 (Spring 2014), as we were preparing to send the Spring issue to the printers, convincing evidence of fraud surfaced in the case, and the current issue now contains substantial revisions of those two long papers, reflecting what Nahm and I have learned and concluded in the interim. But first, since some (maybe many) *JSE* readers lack the background to put these contemporary investigations of physical mediumship into context, a few words on the subject are perhaps in order.

As regular readers of our Historical Perspectives papers will know, physical mediumship flourished during a roughly 80-year period beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The widespread emergence of physical mediums corresponded to the beginning, and then the heyday, of the Spiritualist movement, which began in the United States in the 1850s, and spread quickly to Europe. Spiritualism in the West fostered a more secular spiritism—the view that personal consciousness persists after bodily death, and that although some people are especially gifted mediumistically the rest of humanity can also experience a direct connection to “the other side.” While mental mediums claimed to deliver messages from the deceased, say through automatic writing or trance impersonations, physical mediums purported to provide evidence of survival in various physical forms. The most common of these were “raps” or knocking sounds, either in the séance table or elsewhere in the room, typically answering “yes” or “no” questions by the number of sounds (e.g., two for “yes” and three for “no”). Sometimes, instead of raps, the séance table would tilt up and down several times, and in more dramatic cases the table would levitate fully. And in the most dramatic of those cases, sitters would report that the table carried people up and around the room with them, and many reported that they were unable to move the levitated table back to the floor once it was aloft. More dramatically still, many mediums purported to materialize objects resembling the deceased—for example, a disembodied hand and wrist (perhaps with characteristic deformations), or an image of the deceased’s face, or a full-figure materialized human form. Although most spiritists

insisted throughout that these physical phenomena were manifestations of the deceased mediated by the living, many investigators entertained and then gradually accepted the view that the carefully controlled (and presumably non-fraudulent) phenomena were actually psychokinetic productions of the living.

Undoubtedly, many factors contributed to the decline of the Spiritualist movement and the apparent retreat of physical mediums to relatively inconspicuous enclaves or sinner groups. Not surprisingly, one of those is the richly documented history of mediumistic fraud perpetrated by soundrels only too willing to take advantage of grieving and gullible sitters. Nevertheless, and contrary to what many like to claim, it would be a mistake to think either that all physical mediums were frauds or that nobody managed to weed out the charlatans among them. First of all, investigators exposed many hundreds of fraudulent mediums during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of those investigators were self-styled skeptical debunkers—scientists or laypersons who made reputations for themselves by exposing mediumistic duplicity, and most of whom believed that spiritualistic phenomena simply couldn't be genuine. But others combined careful and critical research with a sympathetic or at least open-minded attitude toward the paranormal.

One of the reasons this period is so important is that some physical mediums clearly stood out from the crowd. No matter how carefully they were controlled, and no matter how alert, competent, and familiar with conjuring were their investigators, these mediums produced effects that couldn't plausibly be dismissed as fraudulent or attributed to malobservation. In fact, one of the strongest bodies of evidence comes from the 1908 Naples sittings with Eusapia Palladino. Eusapia's three investigators were England's most experienced debunkers of fraudulent mediums. They knew the tricks of the trade (indeed, two of them were skilled conjurers); they knew what Eusapia's sometimes suspicious methods (and occasionally outright but simplistic tricks) were; they knew how to control for them; and the phenomena occurred in decent electric light and often at a distance from the medium. The investigators traveled to Naples believing they would establish once and for all that Eusapia was nothing but a trickster, and they left Naples grudgingly convinced that the nearly 500 phenomena they documented over eleven sésances were not fraudulent.

Moreover, as I noted above, some of the phenomena reported during this 80-year period were mind-bogglingly dramatic. For instance, in the case of D. D. Home, accordions reportedly played either untouched or held at the end away from the keys; substantial, fleshy, and warm hands—ending at the wrist—reportedly moved around the room, carried objects,

shook hands with séance participants, and then dissolved in their grasp; and despite the efforts of many to restrain them, heavy tables moved around the room, sometimes with several people on top. And those were just a few of the startling phenomena associated with Home's mediumship. (For more on the physical phenomena from the heyday of Spiritualism, see the Commentary by Michael Nahm and the Commentary by Carlos Alvarado in this issue, both about W. J. Crawford's investigations.)

Now physical mediumship never really disappeared, although it certainly faded from public view. Indeed, even a cursory Internet search today will demonstrate that physical mediums still practice, that some of them at least charge hefty fees for their services, and that many of them have a rabid following of transparently credulous and uncritical supporters. And when one digs a little deeper, it becomes clear (a) that many of these mediums sedulously avoid producing their phenomena under any controls, (b) that those who claim to accept controls in fact allow only those that can easily be circumvented, and (c) that many of those who purport to apply the controls have little if any grasp of what's really required to rule out chicanery. For example, some mediums boast of allowing their wrists to be secured to the arms of their chair by means of straps, and their investigators proudly claim that they thereby prevented the medium from moving into the darkened séance room. One would never guess from reading these reports that it's actually quite easy for a medium to ensure that the straps are not tight, so that the medium's limbs can be freed and later (after the mischief is done) reinserted into the straps.

As far as I've been able to discover, the only contemporary physical medium currently allowing any serious, sustained, and competent physical control, including a strip search and continuous hands-on control *while the phenomena are occurring at a distance*, is Kai Mügge. The reason this is particularly noteworthy is that Kai, who is deeply immersed in and influenced by reports of the old spiritist séances, ostensibly produces phenomena not seen under decent conditions since the heyday of Spiritualism. This includes raps and other sounds occurring in all parts of the séance room, object movements at a distance from the medium, full table levitations occasionally rising to the ceiling and remaining there for some time, and the production of copious amounts of mobile ectoplasm from which hand and arm-like appendages emerge, and in which faces form before sitters' eyes. So Kai and the FEG present the first opportunity in many decades to investigate and document these puzzling phenomena with the technology now at our disposal.

One of my biggest surprises, when I began seriously to investigate the data of parapsychology, was that the majority of so-called authorities in

the field had very firm opinions about the worthlessness of the evidence for macro-PK generally and physical mediumship in particular, despite the fact—which was easily confirmed by posing only a few pertinent and elementary questions—that they really had no idea what the evidence was, and that their certitude was merely a prejudice based either on poorly considered a priori assumptions or else equally ignorant secondary literature. Few parapsychologists, I discovered, had actually read any of the primary material, and so of course they had no idea how shoddy much of the secondary literature was.¹

Under the circumstances, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that most *JSE* readers or SSE members are likewise ignorant of the data and relevant issues.² So I wouldn't be surprised if they approach the two FEG reports in this issue with some familiar negative predispositions—if indeed, they dare to approach the two reports at all. Of course, this is not the place for a comprehensive review of physical mediumship. Nevertheless, I'd like briefly to survey several crucial matters about the reliability of eyewitness testimony. This is a topic that I suspect will be foremost in many readers' minds as they consider the FEG reports in this issue by Michael Nahm and myself, and which are therefore worth reviewing before the process of reading the current articles gets under way.

Eyewitness Testimony

One of the common myths about physical mediumship is that it's nothing but deception taking place mostly in darkened séance rooms. We've already had a glimpse of why that's false, and the best cases easily demonstrate the emptiness of that charge. Another myth concerns the alleged unreliability of human testimony—in particular, that spectators are too liable to make mistakes, either in general or at least under the conditions prevailing during séances. So one question many ask about séance reports is: "Why should we trust what the witnesses tell us?" But suppose we reply, "Why not?" After all, we rely on observation and testimony all the time, often quite successfully. So even if we grant that eyewitness reports are *fallible*, it doesn't follow that they're unreliable to a very high degree, or simply too unreliable to be trusted in this context. But in that case, what reasonable and *specific* concerns might a skeptic raise about eyewitness accounts of physical mediumship?

Before answering that, it's important to note that observation reports are never absolutely (or categorically) acceptable. At best, they can only be *conditionally* acceptable. Granted, sometimes the conditions are clearly satisfied, and so some reports can be highly reliable. Nevertheless, several factors influence whether or not (or to what degree) we accept a particular

observation claim. Probably the most important are: (a) the capabilities, condition, interests, and integrity of the observer, (b) the nature of the object(s) allegedly observed, and (c) the means of observation and the conditions under which the observation occurred. When we evaluate reports of paranormal phenomena, we weight these factors differently in different cases. But in general, it matters: (a) whether the observers are trained, sober, honest, alert, calm, prone to exaggeration, subject to flights of imagination, blessed with good eyesight, and whether they have strong prior interests in observing carefully and accurately; (b) whether the objects are too small to see easily, whether they're easily mistaken for other things, or whether (like fairies, extraterrestrials, and unicorns) they're of a kind whose existence can't be taken for granted; and (c) whether the objects were observed at close range, with or without the aid of instruments, whether they were stationary or moving rapidly, whether the observation occurred under decent light, through a dirty window, amidst various distractions, etc.

Presumably, then, what's at issue here is not the integrity, in general, of observation and testimony. Rather, it's whether (or to what extent) the best cases satisfy sensible conditions for reliability. So the specific question before us is: Do we have good reasons for discounting or distrusting eyewitness reports in the strongest cases of physical mediumship? That is, do we have good reasons for thinking that the phenomena in these cases didn't occur as reported?

That's not to say it's unreasonable ever to question the reliability of human testimony in mediumistic settings. However, it takes only a little reflection and an acquaintance with the evidence to dispel those concerns for the best cases. Of course, the topic of eyewitness testimony is huge, interesting, and multi-faceted, and we clearly can't examine all its nooks and crannies here. But for present purposes, the following quick review of some major points will suffice.

Perhaps the most familiar skeptical gambit in this context is to claim that the reports in question are examples of biased testimony—that is, that witnesses of paranormal physical phenomena, mediumistic or otherwise, are predisposed to see either miraculous things generally or certain paranormal phenomena in particular. But in that case (so the argument goes), they're likely to be guilty either of motivated misperception or outright fabrication. Initially at least, this *Argument from Human Bias* might seem perfectly reasonable. After all, there's no doubt that some people misperceive or lie, and there's also no doubt that their predispositions might be one reason for these lapses. Nevertheless, on closer inspection this argument turns out to be remarkably flimsy, for several reasons.

First, even if witnesses were biased to experience paranormal

physical phenomena, that wouldn't explain why independent reports agree on unexpected and peculiar details, such as the raining of stones or excrement in the homes of poltergeist victims. Second, an argument from bias could be used to undermine virtually every scientific report requiring instrument readings and ordinary human observation. After all, it's not just parapsychologists and "plain folk" who have strong beliefs, desires, and predispositions about how the universe works. Mainstream scientists have at least as much at stake and at least as many reasons for perceptual biases as do witnesses of the paranormal. They might even have more, considering how success in the lab can make or break their careers, especially when their research is novel and potentially groundbreaking.

Third (and even more important), the *Argument from Human Bias* is double-edged. Obviously, biases cut two ways, against reports by the credulous *and* the incredulous. So if a bias in favor of psi phenomena might lead people to misperceive or to lie, so might biases against psi phenomena. And those negative biases are arguably at least as prevalent—and certainly sometimes as fanatical—as those in favor of the paranormal. In fact, the history of parapsychology chronicles some remarkable examples of dishonest testimony and other reprehensible behavior on the part of skeptics.³ These include subsequently discredited reports that certain séance phenomena failed to occur. So, we adopt an indefensible double standard if we distrust only eyewitness testimony in favor of the paranormal.

Fourth, it's obvious that many who investigate the paranormal are motivated primarily by curiosity and the need to know (whatever the outcome). In fact, in some of the best cases, witnesses of mediumistic phenomena have clearly been biased *against* the reported phenomena. As I noted earlier, one of the most compelling examples of this comes from the 1908 Naples sittings with Eusapia Palladino.

Fifth, although many observers may be *open to the possibility* of psychic phenomena, that's not the same as being biased in their favor. For example, one can be open to the possibility of a phenomenon (say, alien visitations) while thinking that its actual occurrence is highly improbable. In fact, one can be open to the possibility of a phenomenon and also biased *against* observing it. For instance, poltergeist victims often had the prior belief that although the phenomena were possible, such things would never happen to *them*.

Sixth, the possibility of motivated misperception increases as conditions of observation deteriorate. But in the best cases—obviously, the ones that matter—witnesses observed phenomena collectively, near at hand, in good light, with clear heads, and with ample opportunity to examine the phenomena while they occurred. It's irrelevant to point out, as critics often

do, that witnesses give inaccurate reports concerning small-scale, fleeting phenomena thoroughly under the control of the medium, and from séances conducted in near or total darkness.

But (you might wonder), we know from so-called “staged incident” experiments that people can be guilty of outright malobservation. In these studies, subjects are presented with an unexpected and carefully prearranged confrontation or dispute. Later, when questioned about the incident, it turns out they often failed to observe what happened, and sometimes they report things that never occurred. However, these results are irrelevant to the most impressive cases of physical mediumship. For one thing, the magnitude of error demonstrated in staged incidents (while undoubtedly important for determining guilt or innocence in a court of law) is much smaller than what’s required to explain away the best evidence from mediumship. But more important, whereas staged incidents *encourage* malobservation and misreporting, the best mediumistic cases were actually *conducive* to accurate eyewitness testimony. In those latter cases, observers were not taken by surprise; they often knew in advance what to look for (including what sort of deception to look for); lighting was good; and the phenomena often lingered long enough to permit sustained and repeated observation and careful hands-on inspection.

Similar considerations apply to skeptical concerns over the alleged unreliability of memory. Perhaps most important, much of the best testimony from mediumistic cases was written down at the time or soon thereafter. In fact, in the Palladino case observations were sometimes dictated on the spot to a nearby stenographer.

At this point, critics sometimes make last-ditch appeals to the possibility of collective hypnosis or mass hallucination. Significantly, however, the smartest and best-informed skeptics usually avoid this line altogether, and it’s easy to see why. First, regarding hypnosis: There simply *is* no evidence that the appropriate kind of mass hypnosis has ever occurred—that is, inducing people to issue the same or concordant observational reports in conditions widely recognized as being unfavorable to hypnosis, and despite the well-known and great variability in human hypnotic susceptibility. Also, considering the amount of good evidence, *from different mediums*, proponents of this view would have to explain the sheer multiplicity of apparently untrained but prodigiously gifted hypnotists, all of whom were mysteriously able to do what no one has ever explicitly demonstrated—that is, to transcend the variations in human hypnotic susceptibility and induce collective and concordant experiences in unselected subjects, many of whom were taking specific precautions against suggestion. In fact, if a medium could, through suggestion, get different people simultaneously to

experience and report the same phenomena, and also do this under conditions unfavorable to suggestion, arguably that ability would be as paranormal as what it's supposed to explain away. In fact, it looks suspiciously like telepathic influence. Moreover, the hypothesis of collective hypnosis is difficult to square with the permanent physical records of the reported phenomena—for example, mechanically recorded measurements, or broken heavy tables shattered from descending too rapidly from previously levitated positions.

The second hypothesis, of collective hallucination, is simply ridiculous. It can't even remotely account for the *continued* success under good conditions, and often for many years, of mediums like Home and Palladino. Since witnesses weren't engaged in something like mushroom rituals, there would have to be a lot of spontaneous hallucinating going on, over many decades, remarkably resulting in people having the same or similar nonveridical experiences. Besides, this hypothesis fails to account for the causal relevance of the medium's presence. If the medium had nothing to do with witnesses' allegedly false observational reports, why were the witnesses hallucinating in the first place? But if the medium was responsible, then (since mediums weren't dispensing hallucinogens) it looks like this hypothesis is really just the hypothesis of collective hypnosis, which we've seen is clearly inadequate to the facts.

As I mention in my paper in this issue, I don't yet consider the FEG phenomena, and in particular the conditions of observation, to meet the standard set by the best cases from the heyday of Spiritualism. And of course the recent evidence of at least occasional fraud has tarnished the case as a whole. Nevertheless, on some of the occasions described in this issue's reports, the controls were far from negligible—indeed the best that any physical medium has permitted in decades, and clearly superior to those in the usual cases cited by skeptics. Moreover (thanks in part to those controls), some FEG phenomena have not yet been discredited and remain very difficult to discount—especially the table levitations and some of the object movements occurring at a distance under intrusive bodily control of the medium. And I believe it's fair to say that Nahm agrees with me on this point. Where we disagree is on the issue of whether at least the strongest FEG phenomena are perhaps worth pursuing further. Nahm seems inclined to disagree. I'm not so sure. The FEG still provides the only opportunity for contemporary researchers to join their predecessors in the careful study of phenomena that are not merely puzzling, but (in light of the hints they provide about the scope and refinement of PK) potentially very important as well. And as I hope will become clear both from the foregoing considerations and the reports in this issue, the evidence gathered so far

can't be dismissed simply by the all too familiar and unacceptably glib and sweeping rejection of eyewitness testimony.

So, should we now abandon investigation of the FEG altogether (assuming that Kai continues to cooperate)? I encourage readers to form their own opinion.

STEPHEN BRAUDE

Notes

- ¹ For prime examples of both pseudo-scholarship and sleazy dialectic applied to the heyday of Spiritualism, see Brandon (1983) and Hall (1984). And for palate-cleansing, see the review of the former in Inglis (1983) and the review of the latter in Braude (1985).
- ² Useful starting points, for intrepid readers, would be Braude (1997) and Inglis (1977, 1984).
- ³ See Braude (1997:Chapter 1) and Inglis (1977).

References

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