

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS ARISING FROM A REPORT OF TELEKINESIS

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I. INTRODUCTION

For students of abnormal psychology the more or less commonplace phenomena of hallucinations are, perhaps, the least understood of the obscure material with which they have to deal. Often linked as they are with psychotic symptoms it was some time before it was fully realized that they played a part in normal life and then that they had to be sharply distinguished from the more easily understood illusions of the senses. Indeed, apart altogether from the well-known hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, the occurrence of even the more complex hallucinatory phenomena has been noted among persons who certainly could not be called insane, although in these cases such phenomena were rarely experienced many times during the subject's lifetime.

With the coming of mesmerism and the hypnotic 'sleep' it was possible to embark on a new technique for the experimental production of hallucinations, but these experiments were limited in scope and did not touch a number of hallucinatory phenomena. Moreover, it was very difficult to determine how far a hypnotized subject experienced such visual hallucinations as those, occurring, for example, with Nicolai or Staudenmaier, as it was possible that the subject was merely behaving as if he were experiencing the situation suggested by the operator. In spite of these limitations, however, moderate advances in our knowledge were made, and the attempt to show that certain classes of these phenomena appeared to be connected with events normally unknown to the percipient pointed the way to a closer analysis which, it was hoped, might throw light upon their genesis and meaning. Moreover, it was soon seen that hallucinations might provide an explanation for some of the more startling phenomena reported as occurring with certain mediums, such as the levitation of objects and apparent movements without contact. Similarly, it was recognized that certain phenomena widely reported among Roman Catholic communities, such as moving pictures, bleeding statues and apparitions of holy persons might all be classed as hallucinatory, although presenting features which are still little understood and which sometimes appear to violate the rules commonly supposed to be linked with the emergence of these perceptual disturbances.

Attempts to show that many of the physical phenomena of mediumship were due to visual or auditory hallucinations were not particularly successful. It was easier to explain them by fraud, malobservation or lying, as all these factors were known to be of common occurrence. Those versed in the psychology of testimony were aware of the numerous sources of error (such as faulty recall of an observed act) which had to be avoided, and advances in photography indicated that many of the phenomena, whatever their nature and explanation, were objective and not due to any kind of hallucination on the part of the observers. In the case of the more startling and better attested phenomena, especially

where the theory of fraud seemed difficult to accept, it was often suggested that collusion on the part of the observers or even the investigators seemed the best explanation. Unfortunately, these cases were reported at a time when photographic technique, especially in the dark, was not much developed, and thus no satisfactory photographic records of the more complex phenomena are extant. All we possess is a consensus of opinion among a large number of men and women, distinguished in various walks of life, that they had certain experiences which they described often in identical terms and which they were completely unable to explain to their own satisfaction.

Among persons in whose presence these well-nigh incredible events were reported was the medium D. D. Home (1833-86), one of the most enigmatic personalities of the nineteenth century. For some twenty years he was lionized by literary and artistic circles in England, giving dozens of séances at which were present such prominent people as the Brownings, the Cowper-Temples, John Bright, Ruskin and many others⁽¹⁾. In France he gave many sittings to Napoleon III, and the letters of the Empress Eugénie⁽²⁾ bear testimony to the wonder he caused in court circles. The same story was repeated in Germany and Russia. Everywhere he went similar phenomena were reported as occurring in his presence. Tables rose in the air in well-lighted rooms and knocks resounded: sometimes armless hands were seen, touched and grasped by the observers, who reported that when the grasp was maintained the hands dissolved leaving no trace.

One difficulty hitherto found in appraising these reports is the fact that very few contemporary and fully detailed accounts, compiled by persons above reproach and with keen powers of observation, are extant. Most of the material is anecdotal, composed by persons with little knowledge of or even interest in scientific procedure, which in those days was not sufficiently developed to deal with such problems. If we omit the experiments that Mr (later Sir) William Crookes had with the medium, we can say that the testimony regarding Home's powers are merely accounts by untrained and often credulous observers of what they saw and heard at the séances they attended. It is, however, true to say that they are usually in complete agreement as to what they did see. The phenomena observed, whatever the explanation, were described in the same way in England and the Continent. What was lacking were the details which might enable us to judge how far credence could be placed in the accounts and how far it was possible, on the existing evidence, to explain the observations on the basis of hallucination, fraud or confederacy.

II. AN UNPUBLISHED RECORD

A short time ago information reached me that a manuscript dealing with D. D. Home was in existence in the library of the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres and that it contained material of very considerable interest. Through the courtesy of Lord Crawford I am now able to draw the attention of psychologists to this manuscript. It contains one of the most detailed accounts of the phenomena of D. D. Home that we possess and, owing to the character of the narrator and his companions, the record does not seem to me to suffer from the same doubts that are to be felt about so many other contemporary accounts.

Owing to pressure of space I propose to deal with only one of the manuscripts in the volume. It is a lengthy letter from the 25th Earl of Crawford (1812-80) to his sister-in-law,

Mary Anne Lindsay, the daughter of Lieut-General James Lindsay of Balcarres (*d.* 1885). In this letter are described some sittings with D. D. Home in Florence in 1856. These sittings took place in a villa belonging to Major Charles Gregorie, formerly of the 13th Regiment of Light Dragoons, who lived there with some relations, a Mrs Crossman (widow of a clergyman) and her two adult daughters, Miss Crossman and Mrs Baker. Meeting Robert Lindsay, brother-in-law of Lord Lindsay (as the 25th Earl of Crawford was at that time) at the club, Major Gregorie invited him and later Lord Lindsay and his wife Margaret Lindsay to visit him at his villa and be present at a few sittings with Home, whose phenomena had puzzled him completely. Lord Lindsay and his party accepted this invitation very willingly, and he begins his letter by saying that it will be a 'letter of marvels' for '*our* ghosts have all appeared in broad lamplight and around the tea-table and their manifestations and communications have been unaccompanied by any of the usual apparatus of humbug and delusion'.

Of the three sittings described by Lord Lindsay, he himself was present only at the last, the records of the first and second being taken down almost immediately afterwards from Robert's own lips. We have, therefore, records of three séances of which the details were written out immediately after the sittings and of which one is a first-hand account by Lord Lindsay himself.

The content of the letter reveals the writer as a remarkably careful and acute observer. It is full of vivid and meticulous detail regarding Major Gregorie's house, the history of his relatives, the appearance and family story of the medium and the nature of the phenomena observed. Of these phenomena I intend to choose but two in order to illustrate the kind of experience to be explained and the difficulty of accepting the theory of hallucination, a theory discussed in the letter and rejected as quite inadmissible.

The sittings were held in the drawing room, the party being seated round a heavy table 'of the size at which seven people can sit comfortably in a circle. It had a cloth upon it, hanging over on all sides about three inches'. On this table stood one of the Carcel oil lamps in common use at the period, and Robert Lindsay records that it was at the first sitting that he observed the levitation of the table which was constantly observed at Home's séances. Lord Lindsay writes: 'After the party had sat down to the table and placed their hands on it, tappings were heard immediately upon the table and on all the tables in the room, very violent—the table then began to tremble—swayed backwards and forwards—then suddenly and violently rose up from the ground to the height of five feet, higher than the heads of the persons sitting at it, and as violently descended—but was redeposited on the floor as softly as a feather. . . . There was nothing under the table for Robin [*i.e.* Robert Lindsay] stooped down and crawled under it.'

At the end of the sitting, the company got up, the lamp was removed and tea brought in. While they were all talking round the fire, 'suddenly a marble table at the further end of the room—that is a table with a loose marble slab on the top of it—violently rose up to the height of three feet, and redescended in the same manner, and also tilted over—while the slab, and a pencil and paper which lay upon it, remained stationary. It bent almost down to the ground, and when Robin asked it questions, it answered by three plunges for 'Yes' and one for 'No'. Robin tried with his utmost strength to force it back into its natural position, and had the greatest difficulty in doing so.'

At the third sitting, at which the writer himself was present, he declined to sit with the circle at the table as he thought that if he were outside he might not be influenced by any

suggestions, since he says he was aware of the explanation which maintained that the phenomena were subjective.

After the rest of the circle had taken their places, with Home sitting between Mrs Baker and Miss Crossman, the usual manifestations occurred. Taps began almost at once on the under side of the table, and then 'the table began to vibrate, and then the chairs; and then the floor and then the whole room trembled and shook, while the china rattled on the table at the further end of the room'.

On looking under the table Lord Lindsay saw nothing except the feet of the persons present [and presumably the central leg which supported it]. But immediately afterwards the table 'rose suddenly straight up to the height of four feet—remained suspended in the air for about half a minute, swaying about in different directions—I again looked under the table, while it was moving about, but there was nothing visible—and then came down again quite gently....'

It will be observed that the experience that Lord Lindsay had was very similar to that previously reported to him by his brother-in-law, Robert Lindsay. The large table gave them the impression of rising three or four feet into the air, and in the case of Lord Lindsay it is said to have remained suspended for about half a minute. Similarly, the marble-topped table was reported by Robert Lindsay to have risen into the air when nobody was very near it, and it was with great difficulty that he forced it to the ground.

III. THE CHOICE AMONG EXPLANATIONS

Now if these phenomena occurred at all (and they are similar to those observed with Home in other parts of Europe and in England) then they must have been produced either by normal or by some other means. If by normal means, then it is quite clear that Home must have induced one or more of the party to act as his confederates in order to deceive the rest of the company. This appears to me very unlikely when we consider the nature of the company and the character of the event observed. As every conjurer knows satisfactory levitation of tables without detection under these conditions is very difficult, and in the case of this heavy table it would have been clearly impossible for Home to have done it unaided and the confederacy of either Major Gregorie or Robert Lindsay or both would have to be assumed. Even if we go so far as to assume this to be the case, it does not begin to explain the movements of the marble-topped table reported by Robert Lindsay. Moreover, if we assume confederacy in order to explain these table levitations in Home's presence, we must, I think, put forward the same explanation for most of the other occasions on which the same phenomena were reported, thus dragging in a considerable number of confederates not one of whom ever confessed to having thus assisted the medium. Since during the whole of Home's active life, there was the most violent controversy both over his phenomena and his character, and intense jealousy on the part of the many fraudulent mediums whom he castigated so soundly in one of his books, it is, to say the least, rather curious that no reliable witness came forward to confess to active assistance during any of his séances at any time.

It would seem, therefore, that the theory of fraud coupled with collusion can hardly be sustained. We are, it seems, driven a step nearer to the theory of hallucination which Lord Lindsay found himself unable to accept. This would imply that Home was able to influence persons he had never before met and, without their knowledge, and without

any of the usual preliminaries to hypnosis, to induce in them visual and tactile hallucinations which they believed at the time to be objective experiences. Now, if this be possible I have never heard of any experimental evidence, even with the most powerful hypnotist, to support it. It may be urged that such phenomena as moving pictures and bleeding statues indicate that visual hallucination under certain conditions can be generated in ordinary persons without resort to any hypnotic procedure and that Home's phenomena were merely another example of the same process. It ought, however, to be pointed out that these obscure visual hallucinations are very different from those which, on this theory, occurred with Home. For in the latter case there occurred not only visual but auditory and tactile hallucinations, unless it be supposed that the phenomena were due to a combination of a number of factors such as fraud, etc., coupled with visual hallucinations. It will doubtless be urged that in the case of the Indian Rope Trick, it has been shown that such hallucinations can be induced in apparently normal spectators and that this miracle can be legitimately compared with those of Home. I am, however, far from satisfied that any of the stories of photographing the Rope Trick with ordinary and cinécameras (cf. de Croisset⁽³⁾) are reliable; I believe that simpler explanations would suffice. Moreover, it would have to be assumed that, in the case of Home, scores of persons taken from the educated classes of Europe fell under the same influence and that on no single occasion did one sitter maintain that, while others saw these most remarkable occurrences, he (or she) saw nothing whatever. Although I know of one case resembling this (cf. Dingwall⁽¹⁾, pp. 127-8) it had features which sharply distinguish it from those present with D. D. Home, but it is true that in a number of instances when the armless hands appeared and were seen to move material objects, some of those present stated that they saw a hand moving the object, others saw only a luminous appearance and others merely saw the object moving through the air. In these cases, however, the details are not sufficient to enable us to ascertain with any degree of certainty how far this conflict of opinion may have been due to varying acuity of vision in the observers, or to different angles of vision from which the phenomena were observed.

The importance of the Earl of Crawford's manuscript lies in the fact that through it we seem forced to choose between a very limited number of alternatives. If hallucination be accepted then it is certainly not a kind of hallucination of which we have any detailed knowledge or, indeed, any experience whatever. But in the case of the marble-topped table the only three explanations appear to be that Robert Lindsay invented the whole story with the agreement of the others, or that both he and the rest of the company were suffering from hallucinations of an exceedingly peculiar and unknown kind, or that the event occurred as described and remains inexplicable in the present state of our knowledge.

Whatever may be the explanation preferred, it is obvious that when the opportunity occurs further investigation with adequate photographic technique is urgently required. For if the theory of hallucination be the true one, then an inquiry into the scope and character of such suggestion must throw much light on the psychology of testimony. Since we know of no medium to-day comparable to D. D. Home (whose phenomena were as different from those of the miserable frauds of his day as they are from those of our own times) it would seem likely that an examination of one of the many cases of moving pictures and the like might yield material of much value. It is much to be regretted that so many psychologists turn away from these problems as unworthy of attention, although

it is true that a full appreciation of them involves the acquisition of knowledge and a practical experience that few psychologists possess or are willing or even able to gain.

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(Manuscript received 17 May 1952)