

Inter-Relation of Supernatural Phenomena

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PREFATORY NOTES

[Page 4] THE following paper was read last Autumn before a mixed gathering of artists and literary and scientific men, all of considerable culture, but very few of whom had even an elementary knowledge of Occultism. The writer laboured, therefore, under the disadvantage of being unable to use the most ordinary technical terms familiar to Theosophists and Occultists, and was compelled to endeavour, with very poor success as he feels, to translate them into words familiar to his audience. He believes, however, that the paper served its purpose in bringing home some of the elementary doctrines of Occult Science to minds to which before it had been a dead letter, and rousing them to further thought and inquiry. He hope? that the present publication of his paper may extend this influence more widely. [Page 5]

To speak seriously on such a subject as this requires in these days a certain amount of courage, for by common consent only two ways of treating it have been admissible — either the humorous, in which funny stories of what are called superstitious fancies are dressed up for the amusement of an audience; or the scientific, in which those persons who are so benighted as not positively to deny the existence of phenomena which transcend science are treated as a species of mild and harmless lunatics, and their so-called delusions or hallucinations are scientifically traced out to an origin in diseased brains or nerves, excited by solar myths, or some kindred matter. In neither of these ways do I intend to approach the subject. Indeed, I am almost at a loss to define what is supernatural — the boundary between it and the natural is so slight and shadowy. On a hot and hazy summer's afternoon look across the shimmer of the sea; the eye at one moment is on the waves breaking at our feet, the next it is scanning the soft grey clouds overhead; but it fails to define the horizon veiled in the soft mist wreaths. Nay! further still. The old town at Bologna stands firmly rooted on the rock — immovable through the centuries: yet, to the dreaming eye of Dante, it seemed to catch a rhythmic motion from the drifting clouds. Thus the mental eye, scanning the phenomena presented to it, fails sometimes to distinguish those bearing the imprimatur of Science as being *real* from those which Science with lofty scorn pronounces to be beyond its ken, and either imposture or delusion. Nay, sometimes even a well-known phenomenon, with all its scientific explanation, and the testimony of many professors to its reality, may seem to show faintly the reflex of some forces and some inner meanings, whereof Science herself is ignorant.

Meanwhile, as the materialistic spirit of today claims Science as an infallible guide, it may be well to note how easy it is to reach a point where Science leaves us utterly bogged and floundering. Take such a simple object as a drop of water, or a dried pea. Magnify it to the size of the earth — we see that it

consists of an agglomeration of ultimate atoms, each about the size of a cricket-ball. In the late Professor Clifford's lectures [Page 6] you may learn much as to their shape and qualities, and their incessant vibratory motion — but one important fact is that our cricket-balls are *not in contact*, are in fact separated from each other by more than their diameters. What holds them in place ? Science, with considerable hesitation, says, "the attraction of cohesion". This is a learned confession of ignorance, and pure nonsense besides; for, in the first place, the atoms not being in contact do not cohere; secondly, if you split the pea, no power on earth will make the two halves cohere. Science leaves us floundering in a morass, but without the aid of Science we know that there must be a force acting on the atoms, and that the area of operation of the force is precisely within the configuration of the dried pea, for if you add one other atom to its circumference it will not cohere. Now, we propound a problem to Science — is it possible to take away the material atoms without destroying the force which holds them together, just as the bar of the horse-shoe magnet may be taken away, but the attractive force of the magnet remain undiminished ? Until Science can give us something more definite than the vague expression, "attraction of cohesion", it is illogical to deny such a possibility, merely because Science as yet cannot see how it is to be accomplished. Meanwhile, for the present I will leave this stone where I have thrown it — merely suggesting that a solution of this problem would render very simple the performance of many apparent marvels, such as the appearance and disappearance of material objects, etc.

Mathematicians are familiar with another explanation of the same and kindred phenomena, such as are commonly produced by the Hindoo jugglers, and by a certain class of mediums among ourselves, based on the geometry of the 4th Dimension, which has been well treated upon lately under the title of Transcendental Physics. But, of a truth, such phenomena are so very little beyond the ordinary sphere of material science that they scarce deserve the name of Supernatural.

But since it is in the name of Science that all the flouts and sneers are levelled at what men please to call superstition, we may well pause a moment to ask how we know anything. By the medium of our senses, is the ready answer. Translated, that means that certain rhythmic thrills pass through certain nerves — optic, auditory, or other, producing some effect on nerve ganglia, which some unknown power within us is capable of translating into indications from without. We say we see a tree, but all we really know is that certain vibrations have thrilled the nerves of the retina. We say we hear a song, but all we know is that a vibratory motion of the air or something else has excited a vibration of the nerves of the tympanum. The message which these vibrations convey is caused by something without, a tree for instance, or a singer, and is interpreted by some intelligence within, whose nature and powers are beyond the ken of Science. But one naturally asks: are there not other nerves in the body [Page 7] which thrill sometimes, and may not their vibrations be also messages from without which we might interpret if we would? What about the great epigastric nerve centre and its strange pulsations ? Here we are just, on the confines of Science, where her limits are very vaguely defined, for Science tells, us of blind people who have been able to distinguish the colour of objects laid on the pit of the stomach, and similar stories.

That effects could be produced on man from external causes through these nerves must have been well known to the ancient Greeks when they called the seat of the emotions "σπλάγχνοι", or *bowels*, as it is rendered in the Authorised Version. Do we not, in fact, often get impressions otherwise than through our five senses ? Whence come the lovely forms that haunt the dreams of artist and poet ? Memory and

fancy ! says the materialist philosopher. I should like some wise man to explain to me what memory is. A worthy doctor, professor of physiology I believe, or some such thing, once told me that when a strongly-marked series of vibrations had once thrilled the nerves there was a constant tendency to reproduce the same series, forming a faint mental image of the original cause. But consider one moment. Supposing you play the same tune on a violin ten thousand times, will the strings have any tendency to reproduce those vibrations rather than others ? Clearly it must lie far deeper than this. On the other hand, consider this view of it. You go out on a starry night, and look at Sirius, or some other of the distant sparkling orbs; astronomy tells you that the light which now strikes your eye left that star many thousand years ago, that for all we can tell the star itself may have been extinguished before the Christian era. But think again what that involves; if the inhabitants of Sirius have eyes or telescopes keen enough (and who shall say they have not?), they may be now looking upon the earth of the pyramid builders, while at the same moment the dwellers on some nearer star may behold the world of Julius Caesar or of William the Conqueror. Thus, too, in individual existences the image of every deed we have ever done, the sound of every word we have ever spoken, are somewhere indelibly impressed on that strange subtle ether which permeates all space, which conveys the star-beam to us, and which records and permanently treasures up our deeds, our words, nay, it may be our very thoughts. Is it then a very wild hypothesis that the intelligence within us which can translate the thrills of the optic nerve into the glow of a summer landscape or the lineaments of a lovely face may be able also to translate thrills sent from these distant images on the ether through some nerves as yet unexplored, and to produce therefrom the images of scenes long past in what we term memory, and that artist and poet may be sensitive enough to catch and re-combine these shadowy indications, and thus to re-create them for us in poem or picture ?

We are not all artists and poets, and herein lies a very special truth [Page 8] viz., that the sense enabling us to perceive these strange and subtle indications is faint or perhaps absent in many persons; others there are, again, who are abnormally sensitive, and to these the existence of what we may call a sixth sense is as plain and undeniable as the existence of any of the ordinary five. But with those who have it not it is useless to reason. Consider one moment. Suppose a blind man should deny that anyone can see — how would you go about to convince him ? You tell him you can see; he retorts that it is hallucination, the product of your own disordered fancy. You give proof by telling him of a tree a mile off, and then leading him up to touch it. He says it is imposture or coincidence. So do Materialists argue if you tell them you have a sixth sense. But let the Materialist go alone in the dark and silent night, when no message reaches the soul through any of the five senses, in the gloom of some ghostly old house. Often and often have I noticed the most determined of Materialists become so conscious of strange unseen presences as not to dare to look behind, but to take a candle to the looking-glass to see if anyone were behind them. Fancy! Superstition ! they will say in broad daylight; but in the night, when the enforced closing of some senses renders others specially acute, *they know better*. They know, though, as a rule, they dare not admit it even to themselves, that the creeping fear, the cold shiver, the consciousness of a presence, are caused by a presence actually there, and dimly perceived by the sixth sense. The proverb says, "Among the blind the one-eyed is king", but it is not so in the world. Among the blind the one-eyed is flouted and sneered at, till he would fain close his eye, or, at all events, pretend to be as blind as the rest, and to guide himself only by touch, for the sake of peace.

Whether the impression conveyed by senses, other than the ordinary five, ever physically affects the ordinary nerves of sense it is almost impossible to tell. The senses are so interlocked and intertwined that if by any means we know of a thing we *almost* see it — that is to say, the retina nerves thrill

sympathetically because an impression has been produced on some other set of nerves. Hence, the Banshee wails around the house of death. The gifted seer beholds the winding-sheet around the form of the dying. But does any physical thrill vibrate through optic or auditory nerves, or does the approach of death, known through other senses by some strange sympathy of nerve, reveal itself in these familiar forms ? We cannot tell. Look over a landscape when the sun is behind a cloud — all seems dull and grey: but let the cloud roll away, and though no single leaf or blade of grass has changed in position, colour, or texture, yet to the artist's eye a thousand glittering hues of yellow, gold, and orange bring the glad tidings that the sun is shining.

Can we know anything about these presences, so dimly perceptible even to the most sensitive ? Clearly the knowledge, if by any means it is [Page 9] to be had, would be as valuable as all knowledge is and must be, but the attainment of that knowledge lies hidden deep in the very mystery of life where science is more hopelessly befogged than in its pursuit of material atoms. Take this one thought — how does a living man move ? He wishes his hand thrust out — it goes; he wants it drawn back again — it comes. But how ? Science tells us something. The nerves control the circulation; nerve and blood-vessel together draw up or relax a complex series of perfectly-arranged muscles. At will, a discharge of some force akin to magnetism traverses the nerves, and the limb moves; the force will affect a galvanometer whose needles are set on the nerve — so then there is some force which some philosophers have called animal magnetism, entirely under the control of the will, and permeating the whole body.

Withdraw that controlling will and living magnetism altogether, and the man is dead; but the animal life of the particles composing his body still remains, only their connection into one individual whole is severed and disintegrated into various other forms of life — worms at first, it may be — then into the lush grasses and rank weeds of the churchyard. But while the magnetism and its controlling will remain, the man can act and think as a living individual; his thoughts, though no single muscle should move, will cause currents of that magnetism to pass through the nerves of the brain; and therefore I said a while since that our very thoughts perchance remain indelibly impressed on the universal permeating ether, for this ether carries magnetic thrills as well as rays of light (if, indeed, the two are not the same). Now, since man's will by magnetic currents can control his own body, can he not exert its influence beyond ? Whoever has seen *bona fide* experiments in thought-reading can scarcely doubt this. Or to take a more familiar instance still; do we not all know how quickly, by some strange sympathy, without even a word or look, women and children, who are always ultra-sensitive, will divine our changes of mood. Surely there is no need to look out for other explanation of these phenomena than the simple one. Man's will can control certain magnetic currents which move his own limbs. These currents, to a certain extent, can act beyond his own body, and their effect be perceived by others. The stronger the power of concentration of the man, the more fully will he control the magnetic currents; the greater the sensitiveness of nerves, the more clearly will their effect be felt. Carry this a little further, and you have the phenomena of thought-transference, or telepathy, which even the most bigotted Materialists now find it impossible to deny. A little further still, and all the phenomena of Mesmerism come within the scope of the principle.

The strong power of concentrating all the will and faculties on a single, object, coupled with a sensitive recipient, enables the mesmerist to impress the images of his own brain on the brain and nerves of his subject, and to [Page 10] dictate actions accordingly. Those who are curious as to the extent to which this

may be carried should study the records of recent experiments by Dr. Charcot: and others in Paris. The most lucid translation of this principle into ordinary language would seem to be that the action of a powerful will actually creates magnetic images which may be perceived by sensitive subjects, and which nearly every living man or woman is capable of perceiving if they only strive to develop, instead of closing, these extra gates of knowledge, which everyone has, consciously or unconsciously, within them. These magnetic images are created whenever there is strong concentration of thought and will. They do not need the actual formed wish or intent to create and impress them on another mind. Thus when any great crime is committed, and human passions are strongly stirred, it is not wholly an extravagant idea that vivid magnetic images may be generated from the sternly-concentrated wills and fierce impulses brought into play; and these may, and we know they often do, produce vague uneasy feelings in the minds of many persons who stay long near the scene; and it is not wholly extravagant to assume that to exceptionally-sensitive nerves these indications may be clearer and more distinct, till in some cases the history of the crime itself may be plainly read.

It must always be borne in mind that the images so formed are in themselves far more vague and faint than those which impress the ordinary five senses, and therefore we naturally expect to find them only where the conditions are most favourable. In a populous city, for instance, the number of constantly-acting human wills and the constant magnetic currents generated thereby, would tend to neutralize and destroy any individual magnetic image, but in the sudden and otherwise unaccountable waves of popular excitement and feeling, political or religious or otherwise, we may see an obvious effect of the same cause.

But in solitary places, where there is little of magnetism of any kind generated, a strong vivid image of the kind I have mentioned is likely to be persistent and definite. Climatic influences, too, have something to do with it. In low-lying damp localities magnetic currents are more easily generated and more persistent, and the magnetic images less likely to be rapidly dispersed. Now, all the experience of mankind in all ages shows that these probable conditions are actually fulfilled. Where is it that we hear of the most vivid ghost stories? — notoriously in lonely, damp and dismal places — rarely in cities: so rarely, indeed, that whenever a ghost story of a London house is told to us, we at once conclude that it must relate to some crime of far more than ordinary atrocity. With regard to every tale of spectral appearance, we naturally expect some story of crime or sudden death, or something wherein human thoughts and passions have been strongly moved as a reason for the restlessness of the perturbed spirit—our instincts are right, or rather I should say, we — ordinary men [Page 11] and women, that is — vaguely and dimly perceive facts and phenomena which are no less *real* because our power of perceiving them is weak and faint. But here a caution is needed — our ordinary senses are liable to be deceived, and we sometimes see things which are not there, or see falsely; that is to say, the message from without transmitted through the nerves to the inner consciousness becomes blurred or distorted in transmission through the imperfection of the instrument, and if this is the case with the ordinary and well-exercised five senses, much more is it likely to be the case with that faint and undeveloped perception which I have ventured to call a sixth sense, though I might, with more justice, say a whole bundle of extra and as yet unclassified senses. But though we grant these senses may be deceived, are we, therefore, on that account to reject altogether the information we derive therefrom?

As reasonable would it be, after a visit to a clever conjurer, to resolve henceforth that, because our eyes had been deceived, we would for the rest of our lives keep them tight shut; the wise man, on finding his senses deceived, strives to train them to greater acuteness and accuracy, and thus, perhaps, from a mere feeling of vague uneasiness, we may attain to a distinct perception of these external influences, which I have called magnetic images, and a clear translation of their meaning.

An obvious objection may be raised here, that a magnetic current is not a magnetic image; but look for one moment at so common an object as a drum-head, capable, we will say, of giving one definite sound in response to a blow from the drum-stick, capable of marking time for men to march by, and rousing certain feelings by the rhythmic succession of its beats, and capable of nothing more. Nay ! but let us simply modify our drum-head to the membrane of the phonograph, and, lo! it talks to us with the very tone and accent of a friend who, perchance, is dead; the image of voice, and the thought which animated the words are there, though physically there is nothing but the pulsation of air waves stirred by a reverberating drum-head. If then the strong thought, the vehemently-stirred passions of men, can produce these magnetic images with sufficient force to be impressed on other men's consciousness, what of the magnetism which was the man's own, part of his own self, the magnetism whereby he lived and moved, which was the connection between his will and his physical nature ? The man dies — the will ceases to operate — the magnetic currents no longer pass through the nerves — but is that magnetic image at once disintegrated and dispersed ?

Before we could assert this we should require much more complete knowledge, of its nature than we have at present, or apparently are likely to derive from the line of investigation which our scientists adopt. But assume (and it is not a very preposterous assumption) that this magnetic image remains, or at all events disintegrates very slowly, and we have [Page 12] a reasonable explanation of many ghostly phenomena which otherwise must remain a mystery. Thus, in case of sudden death the magnetic image would be strong and complete, and would disintegrate slowly. In the case of the aged and feeble who die of old age, the magnetic force is nearly drained before the time of death. Then these magnetic currents naturally pass and circle in and out among material objects, and thus the houses where men lived, and where perchance the images, projected by their own thoughts in life are most prominently present, are most likely to catch and retain their own magnetic images when dead. So, too, only a few will be sufficiently sensitive to perceive them. Even among the most ordinary and insensitive of ourselves we notice many varieties of susceptibility, especially to magnetic influences.

Some persons know without fail of an approaching thunderstorm, others hardly know, except by the physical evidence of thunder and lightning that a storm is going on at all. So it is with these fleeting magnetic shells, ghosts as we call them; some are conscious of their presence, some are not. Some might be conscious, but dare not allow themselves to perceive all that they could; and some, the extra sensitive — the seers — can perceive these shadowy presences as clearly as any physical presence, can tell their nature and whence they come, can hold communion with them as with living bodies.

This brings me to a phase of the subject which is most probably in the minds of most of my readers

already, and about which, sooner or later, everyone is sure to enquire, viz., the so-called Spirit-mediums; and this again is a branch of a much wider subject, viz., how far man can control these magnetic images. It would seem plain and indisputable that if man can so far regulate the magnetic currents of his own body as to force his own images on the consciousness of another, by the same means he can control the various images — ghosts, spectres, call them what you will, that are constantly all round us — by a strong direction of his own magnetic force he can oblige the images around to move as he directs, and even to give information; or, perhaps I should more accurately say, impress some part of their own individuality on his own consciousness. Such power, however, is very rare, involving, as it does, extreme concentration of will with extreme sensitiveness of nerve; therefore, we more commonly find the force exercised by a powerful and concentrated will to throw the images on the consciousness of another naturally sensitive, and rendered artificially more so by hypnotism; and thus we get clairvoyance and its attendant phenomena. What to say of the ordinary spiritualist *séance* I hardly know. Occasionally phenomena take place, genuine enough, if of a low and uninteresting order; very often there is a large amount of imposture, and vulgar and clumsily-performed conjuring tricks. I believe the common life-history of a medium is that he commences as a sensitive by nature; being [Page 13] conscious himself of perceiving strange and weird things, which he usually utterly misinterprets, he endeavours, with partial success, to make others perceive them also, and to make a living thereby. Gradually, as is natural under such conditions, his powers wane, and the temptation to supply by imposture what can no longer be honestly produced becomes irresistible. The late Mr. Lawrence Oliphant's romance of "Masollam", if somewhat overstrained in parts, illustrates such a descent.

I should, advise no one really desirous of investigating the subject to have recourse to the professional medium, or to have anything to do with the guinea *séance*; there are plenty of honest inquirers in London, working patiently at the subject, and very willing to give help to anyone who really desires to know.

Another question is, whether it is desirable, and here the inquirer will do well to pause. Most people have read Bulwer's magnificent "Zanoni", and to them I would say, " Ponder well the story of the *Dweller on the 'Threshold'*." This no fiction, but a reality. It is open to anyone to increase his susceptibility, to develop his perception till what is called the world of spirits becomes an objective reality to him; but are you prepared for what you may see ? At all events, test it; let your present perceptive powers, dim as they may be, have the fullest chance. Go in the still and silent night alone to some house where the memory of a crime or ghostly traditions point to the probability of some eery visitant — let eye and ear be on the alert for any indication — while the wind moans through the dark trees without, and the wainscot creaks and moves, and flickering gleams of moonlight make weird patches on worm-eaten floors. Then, after an hour or two of watching, ask yourself seriously — *dare you*, then, at that moment, meet a visitor from the world of souls ? Probably to no other human soul in the world would you confess your feelings, nor need you do so — but if you feel any shrinking, or any fear then, pause and go no further. There are at this moment, in our lunatic asylums, many whom a real, or perhaps even a fancied, spectral appearance has scared out of such wits as they ever had.

To avoid misconception I may say here that I have used the word magnetic, merely because I know no better one. I am perfectly aware of the slight distinctions physiologists draw between the subtle force

which traverses the nerves, and what is scientifically defined as the magnetic fluid. But on the other hand the terms both of ancient and modern mysticism are open to misconception. I might have spoken of "odic" or "astral" bodies or influences; but without a paper nearly as long as this has been to explain my meaning, I should not have been understood — therefore it is in no spirit of dogmatism, but merely as using the nearest word I can get to represent my meaning, that I speak of *magnetic* bodies, etc.

In conclusion, all these so-called Supernatural phenomena are purely [Page 14] and simply natural, lying very little over the borderland of physical Science, and belonging mainly, if not entirely, to the as yet unexplored and but dimly-perceived properties of that magnetic force which is not indeed the germ of life — for that is divine — but the connecting influence whereby life permeates matter, and this force man, by his sensitiveness, may perceive and know, by his will may control; both the will and the sensitiveness may be developed by appropriate exercises, and this simple proposition is in fact the key to the Inter-relation of Supernatural Phenomena.