

CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURE

MYSTICISM AND THE
WAY OUT

IVOR LL. TUCKETT

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CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURE

MYSTICISM AND THE WAY OUT

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BY

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CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS

AN excellent tradition limits the Chairman's remarks on these occasions to the brief discharge of two duties : he is expected to make some graceful allusion to the attainments of the lecturer, and to preface the lecture with a few remarks which will serve as *hors d'œuvre* to whet the appetite or the impatience of the audience for the more solid repast to follow.

In discharging the first of these duties I am conscious of an embarrassment ; for it surely savours of absurdity that some one whose activities have a direction rather remote from the common interest which assembles here this evening should presume to commend to your attention a worker whose services to Rationalism need no cataloguing or appraisal before this audience. Neither the readers of his published work nor those of us who have been privileged to come into closer contact with his personality need reminding that Dr. Tuckett, in addition to a long schooling in the disciplines of scientific research, brings to his consideration of a problem a rare combination of critical acumen with a disinterested love of truth. I feel therefore that your mood of expectant appreciation can dispense with any encomiums on my part.

When I come next to my prefatory remarks I feel that my presence on this platform requires some explanation. During the preparation of his lecture it occurred to Dr. Tuckett that certain important discoveries made

and elaborated during the last thirty years in the province of medical psychology had an important bearing on his subject, and with characteristic promptitude he immediately subpoenaed one of his friends engaged in this work to act as his Chairman. Now, while I think that his choice of an exponent was somewhat rash, I feel that his intention has much to commend it.

As you are aware, the science of psychology has for some time been going through a stage exactly comparable to the development of biology after the tremendous impetus it received from the researches of Darwin. Indeed, the analogy is striking in more ways than one; for while the researches of Professor Sigmund Freud have proved as momentous for psychology as were those of Darwin for biology, it is noteworthy that they were received with a similar outburst of angry incredulity which similarly is spending itself against a patiently marshalled array of verifiable data. Moreover, the researches of Freud, like those of Darwin, have far-reaching implications which obtrude themselves into many widely-separated fields of inquiry, and which cannot be ignored in any serious discussion of mental phenomena.

But since one result of this and other discoveries has been to divert the energies of psychologists from the study of the cognitive aspects of mental functioning to the investigation of the more obscure territory which might be covered by the word *impulse*, and since the study of impulse has led the inquirer into regions of the mind which are not, except under special conditions, accessible to introspection, and which have been labelled with rather forbidding names like the "Unconscious," the Rationalist may be excused a certain

amount of misgiving as to what the present preoccupations of psychologists portend for him. With what status will Reason emerge from this novel scrutiny?

At first sight she appears to stand condemned, or at best to be discharged with a caution. It has been abundantly proved that a very large percentage of our thinking and acting which we suppose to be rational is in reality motivated by obscure and powerful impulses the very existence of which may be unknown to us. Much of our reasoning has been stripped of its pretensions and branded with the name of "rationalization." But I would point out that the exposure of a pretender is a help rather than a hindrance to the secure establishment of the rightful sovereign; and, to revert to my original metaphor, so far as the Freudian psychology is concerned, Reason in a rehabilitated sense leaves the court without a stain on her character.

To put the matter with the utmost brevity, according to Freud the mind functions in two ways, one of which (the pleasure-pain principle) is ontogenetically and phylogenetically older, and is typified by the mental operations of children and savages and by those of adults in their childish and primitive moods and in their dreams and reveries and mental disorders; while the other, which he calls the "reality principle," is a later and painfully acquired mode of mental functioning seen at its best in the toilsome achievements of scientific research.

Now the older mind, which is buried in all of us, is incessantly weaving fantasies of imaginary wish-fulfilment, and one of its important characteristics is that it tends to read into phenomena the projected fulfilment of its indestructible cravings. Especially is this the case when Fate withholds their satisfaction in the

external world. Then, like the poet, it would (and in fantasy does)

.....grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
And, having shattered it to bits,
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire.

Here, I think, we have the key to the remarkable renaissance of superstitious beliefs during and since the War. When reality is too bleak and forbidding, as it has been for millions during recent years, the ancient Wish-mind is stirred to abnormal activity, and weaves in full daylight a thousand wish-fulfilments, some pathetic and understandable, others so bizarre and archaic that we have to turn to anthropology to discover their parallels.

But it is only when the fantasy-weaving part of the mind is thwarted by repressive training and cramped by lack of satisfactory outlets that it erupts in the individual as a nervous illness or eccentricity, and in the community as what the newspapers call a "wave" of crime and superstition. When its energies are directed into proper channels; when the poet, the artist, the inventor, the creator, and doer of every sort translate their wish fantasies into products or activities which are of value to humanity; when Reason in its best sense and imagination in its best sense are thus fruitfully wedded, then I imagine no Rationalist present would forbid the banns.

MYSTICISM AND THE WAY OUT

THE subject of my address would, I think, have had the approval of Dr. Moncure Conway. For, as his Autobiography shows, he took considerable interest in the exposure of spiritualistic fraud, and was continually encountering mystical tendencies and superstition hiding behind verbal mystification. "Mysticism" was used by the late Professor Münsterberg, of Harvard University, for spiritualistic beliefs, and it appears to me a better term than supernaturalism or spiritualism, because it can be applied not only to belief in the supernatural nature of the voice of conscience, of mystical visions and experiences, and of revelations through priests and prophets, but also to communications supposed to come from discarnate intelligences, whether received through a Maori Tohunga a hundred years ago or through a medium in England to-day. And a tendency to such belief, none the less powerful for

being characteristic of children and primitive people, is very prevalent at the present time. I hope, then, that you will think my subject appropriate to the memory of Moncure Conway, and that I shall treat it adequately. But I must warn you that it is difficult to find an argument which will convince any one with a bias in favour of mysticism ; for, as I shall try to show you, such belief rests on emotional factors and inherited modes of thought rather than on rational intellectual grounds ; and the present wave of superstition can be understood only by realizing its psychological source in deep-seated infantile tendencies.

The "Mysticism" which is the subject of this address may be defined as the mental attitude of persons who believe in hypotheses which elude empirical inquiry and are satisfied by merely verbal explanations of phenomena. This attitude is the reverse of that of Huxley, who, you will remember, proclaimed himself an agnostic in problems where the evidence is insufficient or of such a nature that it cannot be verified. And while the mystic is satisfied with an explanation which may be opposed to the every-day experience of mankind and quite incongruous with the whole body of organized knowledge, the trained scientist demands that the evidence in support of any hypothesis

shall be strong *in proportion* to its improbability before it can be said to be proved.

Now, perhaps it may be objected that experience is both subjective and objective, and that belief in an entity like soul depends on evidence of a wholly subjective nature, and so incapable of experimental proof. And I can quite sympathize with this attitude, which was that of Kant ; so I shall have to discuss whether, in the light which the study of "wish" or purpose as the unit of behaviour has thrown on psychology, it is necessary any longer to oppose "subjective" to "objective." But before doing so there is a great deal of ground to be cleared in connection with so-called psychical research. For it may also be objected that many spiritualists and members of the Society for Psychical Research cannot be called mystics, because they profess to have furnished experimental proof of the survival of some entity endowed with memory when the body decays. I shall therefore endeavour to show that their belief is based on a mystical bias, and not on scientific evidence. But, as McDougall points out in his book on *Body and Mind*,¹ if a pencil held by an automatic writer repeatedly made state-

¹ *Body and Mind: A Defence of Animism*, chap. xxv.

ments which could be verified and proved to be true under conditions where it was certain that the facts revealed were unknown to any human being, and if such veridical statements were made sufficiently often to exclude the possibility of coincidence, then experimental proof would be furnished for discarnate intelligence.

As an example of such an experiment I may recall to you the fact that Frederic Myers, nearly fourteen years before his death, wrote a message which he showed to no one, with a view to reproducing it through some medium after his death. Myers died in January, 1901; and the sealed envelope containing the message was left in the care of Sir Oliver Lodge. Shortly after this Mrs. Verrall, of Cambridge, developed into a facile automatic writer; and one of her scripts was considered to contain a message inspired by the spirit of Myers. So a special meeting of the S. P. R. was convened at which the envelope was opened.¹ There was no correspondence between the message and script. But, if there had been, it will be obvious to you how difficult it is to get scientific evidence for the survival of personality. On the one hand, this experi-

¹ *Journal of the S. P. R.*, vol. xii, p. 11, Jan., 1905.

ment could never be repeated under the same conditions, so that coincidence could not be absolutely excluded; and, on the other hand, believers in telepathy might maintain the theoretical possibility that Myers, while writing his message, influenced his friend Mrs. Verrall or some other mind which subsequently had a telepathic influence on her. However, if such an experiment came off repeatedly, there would be good grounds for belief in the supernormal nature of the phenomenon, whether it was called spiritistic or telepathic. For, as I have argued in my book, *The Evidence for the Supernatural*,¹ scientific proof is based on probability. But, as a matter of fact, such an experiment has never been carried out successfully. Either the conditions have been so lax that it is impossible to exclude all sorts of fallacies; or, if the conditions have been really good, only a negative result has been obtained.

It is, of course, impossible here to discuss in detail the evidence for the supernormal or supernatural. What I think can be read in my book or in articles contributed to *Bedrock* during 1912-1913, and elsewhere. But I may

¹ *The Evidence for the Supernatural*; Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co.; 1911.

say that, after trying during the past twelve years to find some evidence for the supernatural, I have failed in my search. And I cannot agree with McDougall either that "During the last thirty years the Society for Psychical Research has investigated *in a strictly scientific manner* certain obscure phenomena....." (the italics are mine),¹ or that "The evidence for the reality of telepathyis of such a nature as to compel the assent of any competent person who studies it impartially." This difference of opinion almost certainly depends on bias. For it happens that McDougall and I were contemporaries at Cambridge and had an almost identical scientific training there. To him, apparently, the hypotheses of a ghost-soul and of telepathy do not appear so improbable and in conflict with that knowledge of the universe acquired through the application of scientific method as to make the evidence too weak to support them; while he might say of me that *the will not to believe* biases me against the evidence. This may be so; but

¹ *Body and Mind*, pp. 347, 349. While admitting that the S. P. R. deserves credit for collecting the best evidence for psychic phenomena, I maintain that its publications have sometimes shown a lack of a strictly scientific and unbiased attitude, and that they have not always been edited impartially.

at any rate I am aware what is the standard of evidence I demand before I can admit that such hypotheses have been proved. And if my bias is inspired by a love of truth, it is unlikely to lead me into error ; for I am aware that I have reached my present position in the face of conflict with a strong mystical tendency, resulting from my early Quaker training, to believe in an immortal soul, prayer, and telepathy.

The reason why it is very difficult to convince any one against his bias is that, while he thinks he is weighing the value of the evidence in a purely rational manner, a sub-conscious "complex" charged with emotion may be influencing his judgment, so that the arguments weakening the evidence never come into consciousness. Many examples of this will occur to any one who has listened to the arguments of religious fanatics, party politicians, or zealous spiritualists. Thus not only do supernatural hypotheses appear more or less probable and so in need of no specially strong proof, but, also, the evidence appears quite strong enough to support them. For instance, I once attended a debate on spiritualism near Hanwell asylum and heard a speaker testify that he had seen *invisible* hands carrying

a musical-box through the air. In much the same way, probably nearly every one in this room was sufficiently under the influence of the desire that England should beat Germany as to have his critical faculty dulled when the legend arose during September, 1914, that 100,000 Russians had passed through England. This legend is a particularly good example of a wish fathering a belief. Then, again, the legend of the Angels of Mons,¹ which had its origin, as we know, in an article contributed to the *Evening News*, is still believed by many. Its author, Mr. Arthur Machen, afterwards wrote a pamphlet to explain that it was purely a work of his imagination; but this, of course, has made no difference to those who believe in the legend on the ground that they know better, as the spiritual truth of the story constitutes internal evidence of a convincing nature. As regards external evidence, the only testimony I have seen is that of Private Cleaver, of the 1st Cheshire Regiment, who made an affidavit to Mr. G. F. Hazlehurst, J.P., of Birkenhead, that "I personally was at Mons, and saw the vision of angels with my own eyes"; but his

¹ See the *Literary Guide*, Oct., 1915, pp. 149-51; and the *Daily Mail*, Sept. 2, 1915.

veracity can be tested by the fact that the regimental records show that he was in England at the time.

There is just one more instance I must narrate. In 1916 the Bishop of London wrote a pamphlet, in which he stated that Lord Roberts shortly before he died wrote a letter to a friend in which he said: "We have got the men, we have got the guns, we have got the money; what we now want is a nation on its knees." Mr. Horatio Bottomley saw this and wrote to the Bishop to ask where he could find the letter. The Bishop replied on November 11, 1916, and referred him to Canon Burroughs, of Hertford College, Oxford, who had published the story in a book of sermons. Canon Burroughs admitted that he had never seen such a letter, but said that he had heard of it from Dr. Richardson, of the Church Army Headquarters. Dr. Richardson was then applied to, and courteously replied that he believed some visitor to C. A. H. had told him about such a letter; and he advised Mr. Bottomley to write to a well-known member of Lord Roberts's family. Mr. Bottomley did so, and received a reply authorizing him to state that there was not a word of truth in the story. Yet, after this, the Bishop of London issued a book, entitled

Cleansing London, in which he wrote: " ' We have the guns, we have the men, we have the munitions ; and what we want is a nation on its knees, ' cried Lord Roberts with his latest breath." Comment is needless.

As, then, it is very difficult to convince any one against his bias, I am merely going to summarize what I consider are the questions every man (or woman) should ask himself before expressing belief in the "supernormal" on the evidence published by the S. P. R., and leave it to each of you to apply this method whenever you hear of a new case of spirit manifestation, of telepathy, or of psychic force.¹

1. *Were the conditions of the experiment (or experience) such that fraud was physically impossible?* To say that the medium was respectable and unlikely to commit fraud is no scientific argument. For respectability has repeatedly been found associated with all sorts of motives for fraud ; and, quite apart from conscious fraud, it is a commonplace of psychopathology that mediums, owing to their well-known tendency to dissociation of personality, are peculiarly liable to be the

¹ A book, entitled *The Road to En-Dor*, by E. H. Jones (John Lane, London, 1920), illustrates excellently by practical examples the truth of my argument.

victims of sub-conscious motives for deception.

2. *Can it be shown that the statements in utterances or scripts supposed to exhibit supernatural knowledge can never have been known to the medium?* To say that the medium asserts that she had no knowledge of the facts is again no scientific argument; for, quite apart from fraud, it merely states that the medium has no memory of ever having had this knowledge. In fact, it is essential to know all the conditions of the experiment and have an exact record.

3. *Have the observations been made by persons trained for the research in question?* For psychical research the necessary training is of course in experimental psychology, and without it observers are unlikely to be aware of the fallacies introduced not only by conscious and unconscious fraud, but also by their own defective sense-perceptions and bias.

4. *Is there anything in the past record of the investigators to suggest bias and the probability of prejudice rendering their observations and inferences untrustworthy?* Thus it is essential to know in cases of supposed spirit communications received through a medium not only what answers were given to fishing questions, but also whether hints were given

by unintentional signs on the part of the sitter. Consequently, an exact record of all that was spoken is not sufficient evidence that the medium got no help from the sitter.

5. *Have the observations been repeated and verified by others?* For, if they cannot be repeated, the evidence must be extraordinarily complete, and vouched for by observers who are known to be free from bias and who made documentary records at the time. It is notorious how memory is untrustworthy even of striking events.

6. *Are the conditions under which the phenomena occurred (or occur) sufficiently understood for it to be possible to get further verification by making deductions which enable us to foretell or explain other phenomena?* Thus, in the case of thought-readers, who use a code, it is possible to prophesy failure when an irregular figure which cannot be described in words has to be transmitted.

7. *Have all possible explanations derived from verified and proved scientific knowledge been tested before invoking some new hypothesis?* In short, the argument from the known to the unknown is always the most probable unless the evidence in support of some new hypothesis is exceptionally good and reliable.

Now I propose to illustrate the method of applying these questions to any new hypothesis by contrasting the evidence for telepathy with that for the existence and properties of radium.

Up till the time of the discovery of radium by Professor and Mme. Curie scientific men believed that the atom of any chemical element was indestructible, and that "transmutation of metals" was merely a dream of the old alchemists. But now it is recognized that there is reliable evidence to prove that the atom of radium spontaneously decomposes and loses weight, while some other element (or elements) is formed. *Firstly*: there is no possibility of fraud. The salts of radium and its properties can be studied by any one who will prepare himself by the necessary training to do so. *Secondly*: we have an accurate record of the facts. *Thirdly*: the observations have been made by trained chemists. *Fourthly*: there is nothing in the past record of Professor and Mme. Curie or of other chemists to suggest prejudice in favour of alchemy. *Fifthly*: the observations have been repeated and verified. *Sixthly*: deductions from the properties of the radiant group of elements have yielded convincing explanations of other phenomena. For instance, the origin

of the curious markings called Pleochroic Haloes in a variety of mica named Biotite is now understood.¹ *Seventhly*: as no hypothesis derived from previously accepted chemical knowledge will explain the facts, and as these are so well supported by evidence, the theory of chemistry has been altered.

The evidence, then, for the existence and properties of radium is convincing and adequate to support a new chemical hypothesis. But by contrast how weak the evidence for telepathy appears! I will begin by stating the difficulties, that you may realize what strong evidence that hypothesis requires before it can be said to be proved. (1) The experience of every-day life teaches us that our knowledge is derived from sense perceptions. The sense organs consist of specialized nerve-endings, and, when physical stimuli excite them, nervous impulses are propagated from the organ to the central nervous system, and the process of perception is completed by changes set up in the cortex of the cerebral hemispheres. (2) The integrity of all these parts is essential to our getting true knowledge of the universe, so that, if the brain be

¹ *Bedrock*, vol. i, part iv, p. 453; 1913. *Pleochroic Haloes*, by Prof. Joly, F.R.S.

destroyed or affected by an anæsthetic or altered blood supply, consciousness itself is lost. And, while disturbances of the end-organs may lead to abnormal sense impressions, disturbances of the brain result in hallucinations and other mental abnormalities.

(3) The nerve-endings are specialized, so that sensations of sound cannot be produced by light waves nor smell by tactile stimuli, etc.

(4) All the facts of physiology and biology tend to show that mind has been evolved from the power of primitive protoplasm to respond to its environment.

Now, there is no evidence for the existence of any sort of wave in the air or ether which can stimulate the brain directly; nor is there any part of the brain which suggests it is a specialized end-organ. Yet telepathy, or the transference of thought without the use of the senses, assumes the existence of some sort of faculty for receiving psychic impressions, though there is no agreement among psychical researchers as to the conditions under which telepathy can take place. If you go through the *Proceedings* of the S. P. R., you will find that, while some writers profess that success can be attained by the "agent" concentrating his attention on the thought to be transferred, others—and they constitute the majority—lay

stress on the sub-conscious nature of the process. Similarly, there is disagreement as to what kind of thought can be conveyed. People who have been impressed by the skill of Mr. and Mrs. Zancig in their performance at music-halls believe that definite numbers or the description of a unique coin can be transferred; while the more cautious writers on "Cross-Correspondence" claim to have got evidence for a form of spiritual telepathy, which to my mind is so vague that I think Professor William James's remarks about the ghost-soul theory of consciousness may fairly be applied to it, substituting "telepathy" for "consciousness." His words are: "I believe that 'consciousness,' when once it has evaporated to this estate of pure diaphaneity, is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumour left behind by the disappearing 'soul,' upon the air of philosophy."¹

Thus not only is the hypothesis of telepathy in conflict with every-day experience and accepted psychological knowledge—in what

¹ *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p. 2; New York, 1912.

text-book of Psychology will you find any space given to telepathy?—but also there is no agreement about its nature. Consequently, on the one hand, such an hypothesis requires particularly good evidence to support it; while, on the other hand, the existence of fraud, illusions, hallucinations, and delusions is a matter of common knowledge. But what do we find if we put our seven questions? The bulk of the evidence consists of observations made by untrained persons—often emotional and credulous—which can never be repeated, of phenomena which occurred under conditions of which we cannot be certain. Sometimes the record is so inaccurate and unsatisfactory that we cannot be certain if the phenomena said to have occurred really did so at all. Then most of the experimental evidence has been obtained by so-called psychical researchers without any training in experimental psychology—good examples are Sir William Barrett and Sir Oliver Lodge, in whose past record strong bias for the supernormal can be demonstrated—and there is no uniformity in the results. The few apparent successes can more easily be explained by coincidence or by the natural association of ideas in minds preoccupied with the same themes, and have been recorded under conditions which preclude

the possibility of repetition or verification, and which sometimes do not exclude the possibility of fraud or sub-conscious deception.

Yet, in spite of the poverty of evidence, the majority of educated Englishmen probably believe that the reality of telepathy has been proved. And I am well aware why they do so, as I have myself experienced the same tendency to believe and am always coming across it in others. The reasons for it are principally three. The *first* is that it requires training to realize how difficult it is to avoid fallacies in any psychological experiment. And if we are impressed by our own amateur observations, we are liable to invoke telepathy and to ignore other possible explanations. For instance, a man may be at a theatre and "will" some one sitting in front of him to look round. If the person does look round, he is much impressed by the fact, forgetting other occasions when the experiment failed, and taking no account of the chances in favour of coincidence. Again, two people may have been looking at something or discussing a matter which started a train of thought in both their minds. Subsequently one of them asks a question which corresponds to the other's thoughts at the moment. If the latter has forgotten the incident which started the

train of thought, he will be much inclined to invoke telepathy as an explanation.

The *second* reason is that when a man hears some story—occasionally, but seldom, first-hand—about a sensory hallucination or a telepathic impression of events occurring at a distance from a friend whom he regards as trustworthy and actuated by no motive to deceive, he is inclined to accept the story at face-value. And, since he cannot give a natural explanation to the facts as told him, he at once accepts telepathy, and gets intellectual satisfaction from this form of verbal mystification. For he never realizes the difficulties involved, nor does he stop to ask himself if there can be any doubt about the facts. When I am asked to explain such a story, I generally notice that it causes a flutter of surprise when I reply that it is mere waste of time to discuss an explanation till we are certain of the facts to be explained, and still more when I go on to mention M. Vaschide's research.¹ This psychologist collected as many as 1,374 cases of subjective hallucinations supposed to have been experienced by thirty-four persons from among his own

¹ *Les Hallucinations Télépathiques*; Bloud & Cie., Paris, 1908.

personal friends and acquaintances. Of these, 1,325 were thought by the subjects of the hallucination to correspond to some real fact—in other words, to be veridical. But M. Vaschide found, on making inquiries, that such was really so in only forty-eight cases—that is, there were 1,277 cases, or ninety-six per cent., in which the subject of the hallucination had imagined a veridical coincidence. And in these forty-eight cases there was no certainty that an hallucination had ever occurred. But, assuming some of the cases were genuine, coincidence, combined with anxiety starting a train of thought ending in an hallucination, would explain the facts.

The *third* reason is that it is difficult to realize that men of scientific eminence can be guilty of credulity. Thus the researches of Crookes, Barrett, and Lodge are regarded as conclusive evidence by members of the unscientific public like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.¹

¹ I take him as my example because he is a zealous spiritualist who professes to have been convinced by the weight of evidence; and before this phase he was a member of the R. P. A. In the *Outlook* for Jan. 17, 1920, he refers to Dr. Crawford's experiments with Miss Kathleen Goligher at Belfast in terms which leave no doubt that he is convinced by them, and that he has no clear idea of the nature of scientific evidence and method.

I myself find it difficult to realize always the extent to which any one—however eminent he may be—can get his powers of criticism and observation blunted if he subjects himself to the hypnotic influence of experimenting under unscientific conditions. For, by accepting the limitations imposed by a medium, he yields to the suggestion that the conditions, in spite of its being impossible to exclude deception for certain, are trustworthy, because the medium or his friend or the telepathic “agent” or “recipient” is respectable, or has never been detected in fraud, or has no obvious motive to deceive. And no one would waste his time in experimenting if he knew that he was going to be deceived. Therefore the mere fact of experimenting under conditions where fraud cannot be excluded implies that the investigator thinks that fraud is more improbable than not; and this is a suggestion charged with power to mislead its victim, as it rests on no certainty.

When I began to prepare this lecture I was studying Dr. Crawford's observations of so-called “psychic force” in the Goligher Circle. Various friends during the past four years had asked my opinion about them; but I could give no answer, as during the War I had no time to devote to such matters.

Now, I had partially forgotten what my previous study of the writings of Sir William Crookes, Professor Zöllner, and other exponents of "transcendental physics" had taught me about the hypnotic influence of experimenting under a medium's conditions; and when I read Dr. Crawford's detailed account of how he had observed Miss Kathleen Goligher's weight to increase as a table rose in the air and to decrease when he asked the "spiritual operators" to abstract matter from her body, I experienced a "stop" in my mind. For I said to myself: "Dr. Crawford is a lecturer on mechanical engineering at Belfast and a Doctor of Science; and his observations were made with weighing machines, and deal with mechanical forces about which he should be an expert. It is inconceivable that, if there was deception, he can have been so blind as not to detect it." And as I could not find a normal explanation of the facts as described by Dr. Crawford, I was for a short time inclined to think that here at last there might be some evidence for the "supernormal." But I then asked myself the questions which I have already propounded; and I realized that by this standard the evidence was very weak, and that no real precautions against deception had been taken; for his observations

were made under the medium's conditions—poor illumination with a red light, etc. And when my friend, Mr. William Marriott, the most experienced exposé of mediums in England, told me that he was prepared to make his weight increase and decrease and a table rise in the air under conditions identical with those of the Goligher Circle, I realized that the explanation of the phenomena was very simple. Consideration for Dr. Crawford's capacity as a Doctor of Science, combined with forgetfulness of the fact that he had no training for doing psychical research and had experimented under conditions which no psychologist would have accepted, had prevented me from seeing it at once, though I had recognized while reading his two books¹ that bias in favour of the "supernormal" had made him write a great deal of nonsense.

To return to telepathy. There is a little experimental work which has been done under more or less scientific conditions and in accordance with scientific method. But none of this research provides any evidence for telepathy. Thus an investigation published by the Leland Stanford Jr. University² was entirely

¹ *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena and Experiments in Psychical Science*; Watkins, London.

² See *Proceedings, S. P. R.*, vol. xxx, p. 261, 1918.

negative ; and the few experiments made by Professor Gilbert Murray in order to throw light on his occasional power of being able to describe a complicated subject, like a scene from a novel, thought of by his daughter, went to show that he was guided by subconscious auditory impressions.¹ The best example, however, of this type of abnormal power is the case of Beulah Miller, investigated by the late Professor Münsterberg.² Beulah Miller was a country child, ten years old, who lived with her parents and sister, aged twelve, in a cottage in Warren, Rhode Island. She could more often than not, while she sat in a corner gazing at the ceiling, guess what playing-card her mother or sister was thinking of, or spell out letter by letter some word that they had in mind. This power had been developed by practising tests with her mother and sister since it had been noticed two years before, during family games of "Old Maid," that she always knew in whose hand the dangerous queen was to be found. Münsterberg satisfied himself that there was no evidence for conscious fraud, although her power ceased when her mother or sister was

¹ *Proceedings, S. P. R.*, vol. xxix, pp. 46-111.

² *Psychology and Social Sanity*, p. 141 ; Fisher Unwin, 1914.

not in the room or when she was blindfolded. He also gives a good deal of evidence and satisfactory reasons for thinking that her power depended on the subconscious perception of minute unintentional signs made by her mother or sister. This explanation would not need more than twenty-six signs—the number of letters of the alphabet—which would be a fairly simple code. Münsterberg did not determine what the code was; but, as he gives some evidence that she had an abnormal degree of sensitiveness for sound, I think it not improbable that it had something to do with the rhythm of respiration. The fact that she lost the power when blindfolded does not exclude the possibility of sound being the source of her knowledge; for it may be that she needs her eyes open because the seeing of her mother or sister—though only with the peripheral parts of the retina—may heighten by auto-suggestion her sensitiveness for the perception of slight signs.

Turning from the subject of telepathy, I now propose to pass on to so-called “subjective” experience, without saying anything more about spirit-communications, spirit-photography, materialization, or psychic force, because, poor as is the evidence for telepathy, that for spirits is still poorer. I may, how-

ever, refer those who are interested in *Raymond* to a review I wrote in the *Journal of Mental Science*.¹ I have talked at this length about telepathy because I think so many people firmly believe in it, and because it naturally leads up to the subject of prayer and the "sub-conscious," which is supposed by many to be the seat of the soul. As Miss Harrison said in her lecture a year ago, no thoughtful person now believes in prayers for material benefits, like rain or wealth, being answered; but if the hypothesis of telepathy were once proved there would be a *prima-facie* case for believing in the possibility of communion between an omniscient transcendental mind and man's mind.

Probably all of you have some idea of what is meant by sub-conscious processes; but in order to start my remarks with clear ideas I will relate an experience of the late Mrs. Verrall.² One day she was crystal-gazing, when she saw a mantelpiece with a particularly ugly clock on it. She had no remembrance of ever having seen such a clock before; so you can judge of her surprise when, a few weeks later, she went into the house of an old

¹ *The Journal of Mental Science*, vol. lxiii, p. 408; July, 1917.

² *Proceedings of the S. P. R.*, vol. viii, p. 477, 1892.

servant of hers and saw just such a mantel-piece and clock. And then she remembered that she had been in the same house before, and so could account for the fact that the image of such a clock had been retained in her sub-conscious mind, though it had made no conscious impression on her. Now this is an example of how all experience leaves its mark, and illustrates the difficulty of getting any satisfactory evidence for telepathy in that it is almost impossible to be certain what impressions may have been retained.

The "sub-conscious," then, is all that part of the mind on which attention is not focussed; and is a term generally applied not only to deeply suppressed tendencies, but also to preconscious processes and those on the fringe of consciousness. Now, if you ask me what is consciousness, I can only reply in the words of E. B. Holt¹: "*It is not a substance, but a relation—the relation between the living organism and the environment to which it is specifically responding, of which its behaviour is found to be this or that function; or, in other words, to which its purposes refer.*" And here I should recommend you to read his small book, entitled *The Freudian Wish*, as the

¹ *The Freudian Wish*, p. 96; Fisher Unwin, 1914.

most readable and best account I know of the implications in Freud's work and of the nature of mind. He there shows that where there is specific response the behaviour of a living organism differs from that of non-living mechanisms like a rocket or a pistol. For whereas the movements of a rocket depend on its stored-up energy, the direction in which it happens to be lying, and the immediate stimulus (viz., the application of fire to the touch-paper), the movements of a living organism show purpose. And purpose results from the integration of reflex arcs. A simple reflex arc is comparable to a rocket; but the behaviour of an insect like an ant or a bee, in which there is a considerable degree of integration, can be understood only by taking account of its environment. Its behaviour as a whole cannot be explained in terms of its stored-up energy and the immediate stimulus. It is true that the movements of a bee at any instant can be explained as simple reflex action in terms of the immediate stimulus and of muscle and nerve (that is, ultimately of ions), but its behaviour as a whole requires the idea of "home" as an explanation. And "home" is a very complex situation, of which hive, locality, co-workers, queen, flowers, and honey are all related components. Accord-

ingly, when a bee is described as a citizen of a state and is said to be storing honey in its home—which, after all, is actually what it does—the environment to which it responds is almost an abstract idea, very different from the immediate stimulus, which may be the stimulation of its visual or olfactory organs by a flower or of its antennæ rubbing against another bee of its own hive.

In just the same way, the behaviour of a child, as it grows up, can less and less be described as a function of the immediate stimulus. At first it is learning how to respond to its immediate environment; but as its reflex arcs become more and more integrated, the environment, of which its behaviour is a function, becomes increasingly complex, when its purposes refer to such situations as business, politics, knowledge or truth, love of mankind and the universe. And character is only an “assemblage of purposes.”

Holt defines purpose (or “wish,” in the Freudian sense) as “*a course of action which some mechanism of the body is set to carry out, whether it actually does so or no*”;¹ and he argues to my satisfaction that, while “thought”

¹ *Id.*, p. 4.

is the interplay of latent purposes, "will" is the actually carrying out of purpose by some mechanism of the body being put into action, and results in behaviour. Now, if such is the case, behaviour, since it can be studied objectively, will really give us truer information about a man's thoughts (purposes) than what he can tell us himself; for he may lie, or may be unaware of his sub-conscious purposes. Consequently, Freudian psychology marks a great advance; for it gets rid of the old subjective method of introspection, which never led anywhere, since thoughts regarded as the secret possession of the "subject" cannot be studied by others objectively. Further, if you agree with Holt that mind is a state or relation between a living organism which knows and some object or aspect of its environment which is known, then there is no need to retain the "subjective." For in this relationship there is practically identification of subject and object. Object, subject, and mind are components of one whole—knowledge. You may say either that the object to which your purposes refer exists in your thoughts, or that you, the subject of the cognitive relation, are projected into the environment. This point of view not only avoids the difficulties of psycho-physical

parallelism, but also meets the arguments of animists for a ghost-soul.

As you probably know, it can be shown by means of psycho-analysis that every one has tendencies or purposes more or less deeply suppressed. Some are so unobjectionable that they can readily get into consciousness, as in the case of certain forms of wit which give an outlet to suppressed wishes and feelings of envy, malice, vanity, etc. Similarly, in order that wit be appreciated, it is essential that the joke should appeal to the suppressed wishes of one's hearer, and not shock him too violently. Consequently, the type of joke which it is safest to make is one describing how some person sat down on a pin or slipped on some orange-peel. For the desire to get on in the struggle for existence better than one's neighbour is almost a universal wish, sometimes not suppressed. Another example of wit, which will offend no one, is Mark Twain's "When in doubt, tell the truth"; for there is nothing vicious about it. Holt gives a delightful example of a witty remark, which would probably shock many people if it were not so skilfully worded as to cloak its deep sarcasm, when he tells the story of how some one, after attending a religious service, said: "The Rev. Mr. Blank gave us this

morning the most eloquent prayer which has ever been presented before a Boston audience."

Dreams even better than wit give evidence of the existence of suppressed wishes or purposes. And it was chiefly by the study of dreams that Freud discovered the importance of "wishes" as psychological units. Such a large amount of work has now been done on Freudian lines in regard to dreams that I feel it unnecessary to treat seriously the contention of some psychical researchers that they are inspired by spirits or by telepathic influences from other minds. Indeed, there is abundance of evidence to show that wishes, more or less suppressed, will explain all dreams. The reason why some dreams appear to be foolish or nonsensical is this: if the suppressed wish is much in conflict with the sleeper's character,¹ it can only get into consciousness, even when he is asleep, by "camouflage"—that is, by expressing itself under symbols which conceal its real nature. In other cases a dream is a compromise between conflicting wishes. As an illustration, I will give you a dream recorded by Freud. A medical student, named Pepi, who

¹ In Freudian literature the word "censor" is used for the dominant purposes, which form the character and control what thoughts shall appear in consciousness.

was fond of lying in bed late, but whose duties took him to the hospital early in the day, had this dream on being "called." He saw himself in one of the hospital beds, above which there hung a neat card with these words printed on it: "Pepi, H., student of medicine, aged 22." He was sufficiently awake to say to himself: "Well, as I'm already at the hospital, there's no need to get up." So he turned over, and went soundly to sleep.

There is one word used in Freudian psychology which I must now say something about; and at the same time I shall try to show how "integration" should proceed normally if a child is wisely trained. That word is "sublimation," and I can best explain its meaning by giving you an example. Some young children after a violent row in the nursery are apt to say to their mother or nurse, "You nasty old thing! I wish you were dead," or words to that effect. Now, such words really do express a genuine desire which exists in the mind, although it does not represent the purposes of the developing character which may be called the potential adult personality. If such a child is handled wisely—that is justly, firmly, and gently—this wish that its mother or nurse were dead will be transformed or sublimated into a form

which is not abhorrent to its dominant personality, and will be integrated or built up into it. Perhaps it will take the form of a resolution (conscious or sub-conscious) to become a great person when grown up, and prove to the world that it is wiser or stronger or cleverer than she. Then, if this takes place, all the emotional energy attaching to the wish will be transferred to the new resolution, and will add to the driving force or *élan vital* of the growing personality. But if the child is unjustly or cruelly treated, the desire to kill retaining all its energy may be suppressed, and will then continue to exist in the "sub-conscious" (supposing, as is probable, the wish is in conflict with its character), and may in later life lead to mental symptoms.

Thus, if our suppressed desires are in conflict with the rational, moral, or ethical standards of our character, they will not be able to find expression normally in consciousness, but will none the less always be seeking expression by indirect means and influencing our thoughts. And here, I think, is a lesson which Rationalists would do well to note. For our tendency is to think that, because we aim at being rational, our conduct will be guided by purely rational considerations, whereas it is not improbable that hardly any

one can escape from being influenced at some time or other by sub-conscious purposes of which he is quite unaware.

I can now return to the subject of prayer. If a man was taught as a child to pray, and fervently believed that God answered his prayers, this tendency¹ may influence him all the rest of his life, even though with increasing knowledge he gives up belief in the efficacy of prayer and discontinues its practice. And this, I think, is the explanation of the widespread feeling that there may be some truth in prayer regarded as communion between God and man's soul, even when it has been found by experiments, like praying for rain or victory, that there is no evidence for its efficacy. At the same time, it is of course impossible to prove that "spiritual" gifts cannot be obtained by means of prayer. And a feeling of the truth of spiritual communion is probably aroused in many persons by such lines as :—

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed ;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

¹ Since Holt's definition of purpose is based on the facts of integrated reflex-arcs, he calls such a tendency as this "motor-set," for it essentially tends to express itself in action along definite nervous paths.

But now consider how this description of prayer might almost have been written by Freud. After all, it merely states that man has aspirations; and few here, I imagine, would deny their existence or value. Certainly not I. For, in my opinion, aspirations are the expression of the last phases of integration in a sane, upright, and intelligent mind.

I have already explained how the immediate stimulus recedes more and more in importance as integration proceeds and behaviour becomes a function of increasingly abstract aspects of man's environment. And I see no difficulty in thinking that the integration of purposes with the widest possible reference, embodying a longing to be in touch with all that is best and noblest, would be likely to produce a feeling of unity and peace, which Miss Harrison told us last year was characteristic of the saint. Indeed, do we not all feel wonder, tinged with awe, at the thought of the unknown Mystery of the universe, without pretending to be able to understand its power or define its nature? And since matter and force are obviously forms under which It is manifested, and since our bodies consist of matter and exhibit force, may we not regard ourselves as part of this Mystery? I hesitate to use the word "God," as it connotes in most

minds so many ideas which I regard as false. But in this sense may we not admit that God is immanent in man? Such an admission does not imply a belief in supernatural guidance or in the immortality of a ghost-soul, whereas it does imply that all our aspirations and feelings of communion can be explained as the orderly result of an almost infinitely long series of natural processes which have been going on in living matter through evolution and integration. And though I should hesitate to express an opinion as to what developments may or may not arise, I am confident that only with the recognition of these facts will the Earth ever become a place where Peace and Goodwill are dominant.

As, then, there is no experimental evidence for the efficacy of prayer, and as a natural explanation can be given of aspiration and feelings of divine immanence—such as those, for instance, contained in the lines,

Mine inmost soul before thee inly brought
 Thy presence owns, ineffable, sublime.
 Chastised each rebel self-centred thought!
 My will adareth Thine—

which are from Clough's poem, entitled "Work is Prayer" ("Qui laborat, orat")—there seems no reason for seeking a mystical or supernatural explanation. And as know-

ledge can advance only by arguing from the known to the unknown, this natural explanation is also the simplest and most probable. Thus what Clough says in the above lines is that, when he turns his attention inwards, he realizes the existence of aspirations (latent behaviour) which are tending to make the world happier through the "sublimation" of self-centred or individualistic purposes inherited from his animal ancestry going back to monocellular forms of life.

But perhaps it may be asked how are we to distinguish between aspirations which are trustworthy and feelings of guidance of a delusive nature. And this is an important question. For the Quaker doctrine of the trustworthiness of the voice of conscience or "Inner Light," which in normal persons is a perfectly rational guide to conduct, can be most dangerous if it be regarded as an absolute or universal rule. The history of Quakerism affords several examples of this, and perhaps the best is that of James Nayler,¹ who rode into Bristol on October 24, 1656, with a company of seven admirers, behaving as if he was Jesus. His conduct shocked the

¹ *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 241-78, by Wm. C. Braithwaite; Macmillan, 1912.

Bristol authorities so much that they referred his case to Parliament, where, after a debate lasting nine days, he was condemned to be whipped through the streets of London, have a hole burnt through his tongue, and the letter "B" (for Blasphemy) branded on his forehead. Of course, he would have been treated very differently to-day. It would take too long to explain why delusions arise in some minds rather than in others; but I may say that James Nayler's delusion was probably caused by a phantasy or day-dream of being Jesus, formed in early childhood, which had lain dormant in the "sub-conscious" and had been brought up into consciousness by the special circumstances of his environment and the unbalanced adulation of his admirers. Such a case shows clearly the value of the objective method of testing ideas by conduct. And every one should realize that individual thoughts, if sharply in conflict with the corporate sense of the community, are probably irrational and delusive.

I have now endeavoured to show that there is no evidence adequate to support any "mystical" hypothesis; and in doing so I have indicated how mystical tendencies can be avoided. Thus it only remains for me to put into concise form the three keys which

will unlock the door of "Mysticism" and enable us to escape therefrom. These are—*First*: to understand the nature of scientific evidence and method, and to apply tests in accordance therewith to every mystical hypothesis. *Secondly*: to realize the character of sub-conscious processes, and to allow for their influence in our judgments. *Thirdly*: to submit our individual beliefs to group guidance—the "group" being those of our contemporaries who show by their conduct that they are unbiased seekers after Truth.

APPENDIX

THE CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURESHIP

At a general meeting of the South Place Ethical Society, held on October 22, 1908, it was resolved, after full discussion, that an effort should be made to establish a series of lectures, to be printed and widely circulated, as a permanent Memorial to Dr. Conway.

Moncure Conway's untiring zeal for the emancipation of the human mind from the thralldom of obsolete or waning beliefs, his pleadings for sympathy with the oppressed and for a wider and profounder conception of human fraternity than the world has yet reached, claim, it is urged, an offering of gratitude more permanent than the eloquent obituary or reverential service of mourning.

The range of the lectures (of which the eleventh is published herewith) must be regulated by the financial support accorded to the scheme; but it is hoped that sufficient funds will be forthcoming for the endowment of periodical lectures by distinguished public men, to further the cause of social, political, and religious freedom, with

which Dr. Conway's name must ever be associated.

The Committee, although not yet in possession of the necessary capital for the permanent endowment of the Lectureship, thought it better to inaugurate the work rather than to wait for further contributions. The funds in hand, together with those which may reasonably be expected in the immediate future, will ensure the delivery of an annual lecture for some years at least.

The Committee earnestly appeal either for donations or subscriptions from year to year until the Memorial is permanently established. Contributions may be forwarded to the Hon. Treasurer.

On behalf of the Executive Committee :—

(Mrs.) C. FLETCHER SMITH and E. J. FAIRHALL,
Hon. Secretaries.

(Mrs.) F. M. COCKBURN, *Hon. Treasurer*, "Pera-
deniya," Ashburton Road, Croydon.

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