

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GENERAL MEETING ON

January 25th, 1889.

The thirtieth General Meeting of the Society was held at the Westminster Town Hall, on January 25th, 1889.

THE PRESIDENT, PROFESSOR HENRY SIDGWICK, IN THE CHAIR.

Mr. T. Barkworth read a paper on "The Analogy between Hypnotic Phenomena and Certain Experiences of the Normal Consciousness."

The President delivered the following address:—

I.

In an address which I delivered six months ago I endeavoured to give a brief survey of the work done by the Society during the six years of its existence. But time did not allow me to deal adequately with the whole subject, and one branch of our inquiry in particular, which occupied an important place in the original view of the objects for which the Society was formed, I reserved for separate treatment. I mean the investigation of the physical phenomena attributed by Spiritualists to the agency of intelligences other than human. In reserving this for separate treatment, I was influenced by the fact that our action in this department has been subjected to a good deal of criticism, public and private, in which, as I understand, some members of our Society have taken part.

In noticing this criticism, my chief object is to explain the course that we have adopted, not to refute any opponents. I have always held that in so novel and difficult an investigation as that in which we are engaged, our object should be to obtain as much criticism as possible, and to extract from it thankfully all the instruction that we can, even though a good deal of it may seem to us to go wide of the mark.

The only criticism against which I am disposed to protest, is the judgment that, as we have now had this question before us for nearly seven years, we ought to have come to a conclusion about it one way or the other. I think that such a proposition is hasty and unreasonable, whether the critic really means that we ought to have come to a positive conclusion, or that we ought to have come to a negative one. Taken in the former sense, I must be allowed to say that such a demand implies a remarkable ignorance of the ordinary rate and manner of progress of scientific knowledge in any department. Considering the enormous importance of the conclusion that a definite and measurable

part of the changes that take place in the world of our sensible experience is referable to the action of unembodied intelligences,—considering the revolution that the scientific establishment of this conclusion would make in the view of the universe which the progress of modern science has hitherto tended to make prevalent—it is not too much to say that if the undivided labour of the best scientific intellects in the world were employed for a generation in the investigation that established this as a scientific truth, their labours might be regarded as unusually fruitful. If, on the other hand, the critics' real meaning is that we ought before this to have arrived at a negative conclusion, I should reply that we *may* have been rash in commencing our enterprise, and endeavouring to bring under orderly scientific cultivation this wild region, in which vulgar credulity and superstition are so rampant; but that, having once undertaken the task, it would show deplorable levity in us to abandon it, until the strong reasons that induced us to undertake it—reasons set forth in our original statement of objects—have been shown by further experience to be invalid. And this, in my opinion at least, is by no means the case. My view of the evidence for the physical phenomena of Spiritualism has, indeed, been importantly modified during the last six years; but the weightiest part of the reasons that induced me to undertake the investigation of them still remain weighty.

In short, holding as I do that we had good ground for declaring the question of the genuineness of so-called Spiritualistic phenomena an open one, and worthy of serious and systematic investigation, I think we should be very slow to close the question, until we have obtained decisive arguments, either for a positive, or for a negative conclusion.

At any rate I think we can fairly claim that our prolonged suspense of judgment on this question is not due to any inert shrinking from the labour of investigation, or any timid avoidance of the responsibility of the decision and of the attacks to which it might subject us. I remember that in one of the satirical references to our proceedings that occur from time to time in the novels of the day, the President of the Society for Psychical Research was introduced as saying only two words, "I doubt." The satire seems plausible enough, when attention is directed only to our dealings with Spiritualism: but it should be borne in mind that the time of our investigators has been largely occupied with other inquiries which have not ended in doubt. During the six years of our existence, while one committee has pronounced decisively in favour of telepathy, on the basis of evidence requiring 1,200 octavo pages to set it forth, another committee has pronounced no less decisively against the claim of marvellous powers for Madame Blavatsky, which the Theosophists urged on our attention. Against the charge of feebleness and indecision, therefore, we have both a positive and a negative instance to bring forward. And I venture to think that

whoever will examine the work of our investigators in either case—whether or not he may agree with the conclusions arrived at—will admit that they entered on the inquiries with the utmost attainable openness of mind, spared no pains in studying closely and carefully the evidence offered, and having arrived at a conclusion, positive in one case, negative in the other, declared such conclusions without hesitation or reserve.

This comparison reminds me of another misunderstanding which I should like to remove. It is sometimes thought that those of us who declared in favour of telepathy thereby became hostile to the Spiritualistic hypothesis; that having once identified ourselves with telepathy, we have a morbid attachment to the idea, and are disposed to force it on phenomena that more naturally suggest a Spiritualistic explanation. In truth, there is not one of us who would not feel ten times more interest in proving the action of intelligences other than those of living men, than in proving communication of human minds in an abnormal way, if only we had as decisive grounds for the former conclusion as we believe ourselves to have for the latter. But before we introduce, in explanation of any phenomena, a cause unknown to science, we hold ourselves bound to try all that can be done in the way of explaining the phenomena by known causes; and as we regard telepathy as established, we are bound to treat it for this purpose like any other known cause.

It is not, however, with telepathy that we are chiefly concerned, in considering how far the physical phenomena of Spiritualism are explicable by known causes; but with an agency of a more familiar kind: the deception conscious or unconscious of human beings. In the original statement of the objects of this Society the widespread operation of this cause was expressly recognised; and it is to the peculiarly elusive quality of this agency, and the indefinite variety of the forms it is capable of assuming, that the special difficulty of the investigation and the characteristics of the scientific method appropriate to it are mainly due. In view of this, I recommended in my first address to the Society, as the result not of *a priori* reasoning but of long experience, that we should as much as possible keep aloof from paid mediums. This rule has been, in the main, adhered to by our investigators. An exception was made, under strong pressure, in the case of Eglinton; but the experience obtained in this exceptional case was not such as to encourage any further deviation from the rule.

But even when we confine our attention to phenomena where no pecuniary motives to fraud can come in, the necessity of a methodical and rigorous exclusion of fraud is not lessened. For even where personal knowledge renders it impossible for us to attribute conscious fraud to a supposed medium, it cannot exclude the possibility of unconscious deception. I have evidence of such deception having

actually occurred in cases in which the moral character of the medium rendered it in the highest degree improbable that it was conscious, and we have evidence of a different kind to show that supposed mediums are often in an abnormal physiological condition, which may not improbably be accompanied—we have positive reason for thinking that it is sometimes accompanied—with a tendency to unconscious deception. Apart from this, the value of an *investigator's testimony* to the genuineness of such marvels stands or falls with the completeness of his exclusion of possible deception. If he has not accomplished this the investigator has done nothing, however high the medium's character may be, however morally improbable that he should deceive; if the experimenter cannot show us that the conditions of his experiment exclude deception, deception may be still an improbable explanation, but he has added nothing to its improbability; he has simply left it where it was, depending entirely on the character of the medium; his experimental apparatus is, therefore, without result, and might as well have been dispensed with.

I lay stress on this, because the main difficulty of our investigators has been to find private mediums, manifesting phenomena *prima facie* inexplicable, who are willing to submit to the rigorous conditions and repeated experiments which are absolutely required, if the experiments are to be worth anything at all. This unwillingness is very natural, and we entirely understand it. The conditions inevitably suggest suspicion; the repetition of the experiments suggests that the suspicion is of an obstinate kind: the private medium, being of unblemished character and honourable life, accustomed to receive full and ungrudging confidence from all persons with whom he or she associates, naturally dislikes and resents being treated as a suspicious character. The difficulty thus caused is great, but we still hope that it may not be found insuperable. I fully admit—indeed I would earnestly contend—that it is the investigator's duty to use his utmost efforts to minimise the difficulty by courtesy and tact, and by avoiding anything in language or manner that can aggravate the suggestion of suspiciousness which his method of investigation inevitably involves.

But something may be done to remove the difficulty on the other side, if it can only be generally understood that whatever seems offensive in the conditions imposed by our investigators is due not to any quality of their individual disposition, moral or intellectual, but to the method which they think the scientific aim of the inquiry renders necessary. And the main desire that has prompted these remarks has been by making this point clear, to diminish, if possible, the obstacles to this part of our investigation; in which I personally take a strong interest.