

SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH.

I.

THE CANONS OF EVIDENCE IN PSYCHICAL RESEARCH.

Address given by the PRESIDENT, PROFESSOR SIDGWICK, at the thirty-second General Meeting of the Society, held at the Westminster Town Hall, on May 10th, 1889.

I may begin by apologising for the pretentiousness of my announcement, which will, I fear, lead those who read it to expect a more precise and detailed statement of the rules to be followed in such an investigation as ours than I am at all prepared to offer.

As will appear, my view is that the investigation is inevitably of too obscure and tentative a kind to render it possible to treat it by any very exact method; but there are certain general, though vague, principles which seem to me reasonable in dealing with the kind of evidence that comes before us, and which the very obscurity and tentativeness of the inquiry renders it desirable to put forward for discussion.

I mean by "the kind of evidence" evidence for marvels; evidence tending to prove the intrusion—if I may so call it—into the world of ordinary experience, material or mental, either of causes that find no place at all in science—i.e., in our systematised knowledge of the world of experience—or of unknown modes of operation of known causes.

That there is an immense divergence of opinions among thoughtful persons as to the manner in which this evidence should be dealt with is shown in other ways than in the criticism passed on our work; it is shown, e.g., in the controversies that from time to time go on between the representatives of orthodox theology and the lights of modern science. But the question of the evidential value of narratives of miracles, as credentials of a prophet or teacher sent from God, is complicated with profound philosophical and ethical considerations which do not enter into the question with which we are concerned. Most thoughtful writers on Christian evidences in the present age would, I think, agree that the evidence which the marvellous narratives of the Gospels afford of the Divine origin of Christianity must be taken in connection with the direct appeal that Christianity makes to the moral and religious consciousness of the individual; thus, e.g., if we had similar evidence tending to show the Divine origin of such a religion as Mormonism, we should certainly refuse to regard it as conclusive.

In this religious controversy, therefore, we do not have the question of the right scientific attitude to take up towards evidence for marvels as such, presented in a simple form. To find it so presented, we must turn to our own inquiry. Any member of our Society who has followed the controversy to which our publications have given rise must have felt that, as regards what is to most the most interesting subject of our investigation—the possible action of intelligences other than those of living human beings in the world of our experience—we occupy a very peculiar position. It is not only that we are attacked with equal vigour by Materialists and Spiritualists: but that each of the opposing parties attributes to us an extreme and irrational bias in favour of the other extreme. Our materialistic opponents seem to hold that there is practically no difference worth considering, in respect of credulity and superstition, between admitting the evidence of Spiritualists to be deserving of serious and systematic consideration, and accepting their conclusions; while the Spiritualists seem to think that the manner in which we treat their evidence shows that we are as obstinately prejudiced against their conclusions as the most bigoted Materialists can be.

I do not infer from this that the position which we thus occupy between the extremes is necessarily a right position: for, granting that truth generally lies somewhere between extreme views, it is obvious that the wider the interval between the extremes, the greater the chance that any particular position taken up in this interval may itself be remote from the truth. My object is rather to show how vast the intellectual interval is between the opposing extremes, when our intermediate position is thus viewed on either side as almost indistinguishable from the opposite extreme.

What, then, is the cause of this immense divergence as to the right manner of dealing with the evidence? Is it possible by any reasoning to diminish it, and to bring the divergent extremes to something more like a mutual understanding? These questions naturally force themselves on us: and from our intermediate position, subjected as it is to vehement attacks from both sides, we are, I think, very favourably situated for considering the question.

It is this question that I wish briefly to deal with this evening. I wish to show that in such inquiries as ours it is inevitable that there should be a very wide margin within which neither side can prove, or ought to try to prove, that the other is wrong: because the important considerations, the *pros* and *cons* that have to be weighed against each other, are not capable of being estimated with any exactness. And therefore there is properly a very wide interval between the point—as regards weight of evidence—at which it is reasonable to embark upon an inquiry of this kind, and the point at which it is reasonable

to come to a positive decision. Moreover, it would save useless controversy to keep in mind, that the considerations in favour of accepting the evidence for the marvels as real is necessarily and reasonably taken at a different value by different persons, according to the different relations in which they stand to it.

Let me first state briefly why the decisive considerations cannot be estimated with any exactness. In considering whether the evidence for a marvellous fact is to be taken as true and adequate we have necessarily to compare opposing improbabilities: it is improbable that the marvel should have really happened, and it is improbable that the testimony to its happening should be false—otherwise the testimony would not be what we call evidence at all.

Now these opposing improbabilities are quite diverse, and we have no intellectual scales in which we can weigh them accurately one against the other. Some of our opponents offer us, by way of such scales, Hume's summary argument against miracles: "It is contrary to experience that miracles should be true, and not contrary to experience that testimony should be false." But in saying that a marvel is contrary to experience we can mean no more than that it is unlike previous experience—or rather that it is unlike that portion of experience which has been collected, handed down, and systematised by competent persons. But this only means that it is entirely novel and strange: and in the course of the life of the human race, during the period in which it has handed down and communicated experiences, different portions of mankind have been continually coming across things that were at first entirely novel and strange, though further acquaintance has rendered them familiar.

Let us take the strangest of the marvels that we are investigating, the physical phenomena of Spiritualism: and let us grant—for the sake of argument—that they are as strange to human experience as they certainly are to modern science. No one will maintain that it is impossible that the human race should ever come across anything so entirely novel in the course of its accumulation of experiences; they can only say that it is highly improbable. What is impossible is to estimate this improbability with anything like exactness: since to make such an estimate we should require to ascertain the proportion that what we do know about the universe bears to what we do not know about it; and that proportion is certainly one of the things that we do not know.

We are, therefore, in this position—not very satisfactory to the logical mind, but one that we are bound to face: we must admit that the statement of a fact novel beyond a certain degree of novelty is in itself an improbable statement, and that the improbability grows as the novelty grows: but we must admit that no one can pretend to lay down

at what rate the improbability grows. The improbability of course vanishes when we come to understand the conditions of the marvel, since this process of "understanding"—as we call it—brings it into harmony with the rest of our experience: but till we have reached this understanding the improbability must remain solid but indefinite, and all we can do is to weigh this improbability—not in any scales furnished by exact science, but in the rough scales of common-sense—against the improbability that the testimony should be false. The greater the marvel, the better must be the testimony; of that common-sense has no doubt; but it is impossible to say precisely what accumulation of testimony is required to balance a given magnitude of marvel.

Some of the advocates of Modern Spiritualism are inclined to join issue with common-sense on this point. They say, If you admit that the marvel in question is not strictly impossible, and the testimony would be amply sufficient, in quantity and quality, to establish any ordinary fact, would be accepted without hesitation in law courts, and in the ordinary affairs of life, you ought not to treat it with exceptional suspicion because the fact is novel and extraordinary. Now, doubtless, as Dr. Butler says, "Probability is the guide of life," and, therefore, when it is highly improbable that testimony should be false, we treat this improbability as if it were equivalent practically to negative certainty in ordinary affairs. But this only happens when there is no opposing improbability of equal weight: when in law courts, or in ordinary life we are met with conflicting improbabilities—as (*e.g.*) when two generally trustworthy persons contradict each other—then the degree of improbability of either being wrong has to be roughly estimated and is estimated for practical purposes. And, similarly, when the improbability of a marvel is met by the improbability of testimony being false, we have to make some kind of estimate of the latter, and in so doing to take note carefully of different sources of possible error. I need not dwell on these sources of error, as our *Proceedings* have by this time made us all very familiar with the different species. The chief are (1) alteration of a narrative or tradition, when it is not obtained at first hand; (2) errors in memory, when the narrative is told after lapse of time; (3) errors in the actual apprehension of fact, partly through failure to observe material circumstances, partly through the mingling of inference with observation. But as regards this last source of error, it may be worth while to observe that an important part of our work—in collecting evidence for telepathy—was free from it, and was thereby in a decidedly advantageous position as compared (*e.g.*) with the inquiry into the physical phenomena of Spiritualism. For in the proof that "Phantasms of the Living" are sometimes "veridical"—*i.e.*, correspond to deaths or other critical events in the life of the persons they represent—we are only concerned with observation of a

mental fact, as to which the observer cannot be mistaken : in his statement that a distant friend appeared to be in his room, there can be no erroneous inference ; error only comes in if he infers that the friend was physically there. The fact of the *apparition* is undeniable, and that fact is all we require for our argument. But in dealing with the evidence for physical phenomena this source of error has to be guarded against. If a man tells us that he saw a table get off the ground with no one touching it, though the fact that he had this impression is interesting and noteworthy, it is not complete proof of the levitation of the table ; we have still to inquire whether the impression on his mind could be produced otherwise than by the physical fact. If there was anyone else there, it is *prima facie* possible that he may have produced an illusion in the narrator's mind ; therefore it becomes needful (1) to study the art of producing illusions, and (2) to examine how far the situation and circumstances of the narrator at the time at which the impression was produced, gave opportunities for the exercise of this art. We have also, of course, to consider the possibility of the observer having been in an abnormal state of nerves or mind, tending to make self-deception natural—and even perhaps deception of others.

My object now is not to emphasise these sources of error ; but rather to show how in every case the probabilities are only capable of being vaguely estimated ; and how in many cases they must necessarily be estimated differently by different persons, according to their knowledge of the persons concerned. It is for this reason that I feel that a part of my grounds for believing in telepathy, depending, as it does, on personal knowledge, cannot be communicated except in a weakened form to the ordinary reader of the printed statements which represent the evidence that has convinced me. Indeed, I feel this so strongly that I have always made it my highest ambition as a psychical researcher to produce evidence which will drive my opponents to doubt my honesty or veracity ; I think that there are a very small minority of persons who will *not* doubt them, and that if I can convince them I have done all that I can do : as regards the majority even of my own acquaintances I should claim no more than an admission that they were considerably surprised to find me in the trick.

Perhaps my hearers may be inclined to ask me whether, having reduced the arguments on both sides to this degree of indefiniteness, I wish to leave the matter in this hazy condition. No ; that is just what I do not wish to do. But I think it will be a long process getting it out of this condition, and one that demands patience. What anyone has to do who is convinced himself of the reality of any alleged marvel, is *first* to try, if he can, to diminish the improbability of the marvel by offering an explanation which harmonises it with other parts of our experience ; and secondly, to increase the improbability on the side

of the testimony, by accumulating experiences and varying conditions and witnesses.

And may I conclude by saying again what I said last time, that considering the difficulties in which our investigation is involved, I think it unreasonable to complain at our slow rate of progress. I feel confident that if at the end of the next seven years we and our cause have made as much way as has been made in the seven that have elapsed, the whole attitude of at least the progressive part of the scientific world, in relation to the subjects that we are studying, will be fundamentally changed.