

INTERNATIONAL STUDY GROUP
ON UNORTHODOX HEALING
APRIL 27 to MAY 1, 1954

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1954 a group of investigators of varying backgrounds, disciplines and orientations were brought together at Saint Paul de Vence, France, as an International Study Group on Unorthodox Healing for a few days' discussions. It was of course hoped that, somewhere along the advancing frontier of parapsychological studies, points of departure might be found into the ancient but still largely unexplored territory somewhat broadly labeled as "unorthodox healing."

As old as man are his bodily infirmities and his methods of treating these to bring about healing, restoration of function or at least relief from misery and pain. Only in comparatively recent times—notably in the last seventy-five years or so, the era of great advance in bacteriology, physiology and pathology—has so-called "official" medicine begun to lose close touch with man in its narrow preoccupation with the physical mechanics of disease. Before this, with only poor claims to the status of a scientific discipline, medicine had unavoidably to concern itself with man as he was in his family, social and religious setting, a creature of fear and longing in a world of heartache, privation and uncertainty. Man's many complex involvements outside the anatomical boundaries of his skin and bones—those he sought as well as those thrust upon him—were well known to the physicians of yesteryear to be inseparably linked to what ailed him. And in this setting the administration of medicaments and purges went hand in hand with spiritual counsel and prayer, the main emphasis being on healing, however brought about, rather than on a search for the ultimate agency responsible for it.

But even the physician of days gone by, thankful as he was for whatever help came to his suffering patient from some dimly perceived agency of which he was—and generally professed to be nothing other than—an instrument of mediation, took little heed of powers that from time immemorial were alleged to be capable of bringing about more than the hoped for normal course of healing, if healing there was to be at all. In the annals of the commonfolk everywhere there were stories of strange, unexpectedly rapid or highly unlikely healings brought about by magical practices, or through the sudden conversion of the sick one to profound religious faith, or by the laying on of hands or perhaps only the mere presence of some person who, responding to an inner call, had become not necessarily a learned doctor but a *healer*.

One of history's greatest unorthodox healers was Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). Himself a physician, Mesmer brought upon himself the violent opposition of the medical world of his day by his therapeutic application of what he called animal magnetism, which he thought to be a property similar to that found in magnets and which was allegedly carried by a universally diffused fluid operating reciprocally between the heavenly bodies, the earth and living things. Mesmer's claims—that "this principle will cure immediately all diseases of the nerves, and mediately all other diseases"—were investigated in 1784 by a committee of the Faculty of Medicine of the French Academy of Sciences and found to be somewhat extravagant. The *theory* of animal magnetism, at all events, was rejected out of hand. That something allied to healing must have occurred in certain cases, however, is implied in the conclusion of the committee's report, which states: "That which . . . has been proved to us in a clear and satisfactory manner . . . is that man can act upon man at any time, and almost at will by striking his imagination; that the simplest gestures and signs can have the most powerful effects; and that the action of man upon the

imagination may be reduced to an art, and conducted with method, upon subjects who have faith." Unfortunately the savants of the day, very much of the temper of the majority of the medical men of our own time, felt that the "powerful effects of the imagination," no doubt only irregularly observed and in any case quite outside the theoretical framework of medicine proper, did not have much place alongside the *materia medica* and God's grace when it came to serious illness in those not morally or mentally unbalanced. At any rate they imposed an official ban on the medical use of animal magnetism, thus throwing out the baby with the *bacquet*, as Mesmer's tub-like major stage prop was termed.

Throughout the transformations through which mesmerism passed until it became the still little understood battery of suggestive and hypnotic procedures of today, psi phenomena of various kinds have been reported in connection with bodily changes associated with the cure of disease. Practically every volume of the *Zoist*, a journal of cerebral physiology and mesmerism appearing between 1843 and 1856 under the editorship of the great and greatly persecuted English physician Elliotson, carried reports of incidental psi features—"clairvoyance," "community of sensation," etc.—associated with the mesmeric healings to which it was chiefly devoted; and in the 1880's there was a rash of reports, some by highly competent scientific investigators, of remarkable therapeutic success brought about by "*le sommeil provoqué à distance*." But we can hardly be said to be much further along in our understanding today of what the connection is between faith, prayer, suggestion, psi factors and healing than was Liébeault, one of the great pioneers in the medical application of hypnosis, when in 1891 he published his *Thérapeutique Suggestive*. Besides maintaining that diseases could arise from mental disturbances, that disorders produced by the mind could ultimately lead to organic changes, even cancer, and that under certain conditions these processes were reversible,

Liébeault had a great deal to say in this book about the strange psi phenomena he had encountered in his practice as a healer.

The papers summarized in this volume represent a fair record of what was accomplished at the 1954 Parapsychology Foundation Conference on Unorthodox Healing. Quite apart from the number of interesting subjects touched upon, the possibly fruitful insights and valuable research suggestions presented, what emerges very clearly is a need for more adequate definition of the boundaries and dimensions of the problem of "unorthodox healing" in respect, first, to the verifiability of the data, and in so far, second, as it is to be related to the subject matter and methods of parapsychology as differentiated—and here of course is where we are still begging a question or two—from the subject matter and methods of religion, let us say, or psychosomatic medicine, or psychiatry. At what point, it might be asked, does an improbable or at least unexpected turn of events in the course of an illness take on the character of "paranormality"? In terms of what criteria can this be judged or measured? To what extent might it be possible, directly or indirectly, to relate such an occurrence to a variety of factors considered doctrinally, theoretically or empirically to be within the "normal" province of one or another of the special disciplines? And to what extent, finally, might it be possible to relate these for the most part separately-conceived factors within these several provinces to one another?

What also emerges very clearly, if I may be permitted in conclusion to speak of the Devil, is the strikingly arbitrary delimitation of the subject matter of the conference to "unorthodox" or "paranormal" *healing*. If there is such a thing as what might be termed paranormal (let us say in the fairly well-defined parapsychological sense) influence on bodily states, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that such influence might operate in the direction of morbidity and disease as well as, under presumably

benevolent auspices, toward relief of suffering and restoration of health. Here again we may cite the annals of the commonfolk of all times and places, as well as the extensive anthropological literature that exists on this subject. That this side of the picture is not represented in these *Proceedings* is, to my mind, indicative of a generally shared orientation—I might even say bias—that may very well be related to the fact that the enigma of man is so long in being unravelled.

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