

HYPNOSIS AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY:
A SHORT HISTORICAL SURVEY

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SERVADIO: An international conference on hypnosis was held in Paris from April 28 to 30, 1965. Exactly 65 years had elapsed since a meeting on this topic was organized on an international level. Oddly, in the more than 80 papers that were presented and discussed, not one word was said about the possible parapsychological implications of hypnosis.

This was all the more strange because, first of all, parapsychology had made the advances we all know of in those 65 years, and secondly, because it was in Paris that Mesmer, from whose work hypnosis originated, fought his most important battles. Perhaps you will recall that in his famous work *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal*, first published in 1779, Mesmer wrote that "sometimes the somnambulist [as he was then called] may perceive the past and the future through an inner sense of his." In 1784 one of Mesmer's followers, the Marquis de Puységur, observed that an uneducated peasant possessed the strange power of sometimes perceiving thoughts that he—de Puységur—himself had been thinking but had not expressed.¹

Another of Mesmer's followers, Dr. Bertrand, first suggested psychological and not physical interpretations of "magnetism," believing that the influence resulted from the interpersonal psychological "rapport" between the active and the passive subject. He observed that his subjects sometimes obeyed his mental suggestions. He then began some experiments that were in truth slightly cruel, but highly significant. Dr. Bertrand noted that when he gave a verbal order to a subject, while he himself was thinking exactly the opposite, the subject fell into a state of confusion: he was distressed,

didn't know what to do, and remained in this state until Bertrand made his verbal suggestion agree with his secret mental suggestion.²

It is obvious for anyone with some knowledge of psychodynamics that the instrumental factor in the induction of psi phenomena in the magnetized subject was the "rapport" with the experimenter. The magnetizer took the role of the good parent, sometimes domineering, sometimes seductive, and allowed the passive subject to go through all sorts of regressions and cathartic manifestations, including the expulsion of "bad objects." It is not at all surprising that the "rapport" in question should facilitate the manifestation of psi phenomena, just as it happens today in the psychoanalytic transference situation.

On several occasions³ I tried to show that there is a very special phase of the particular Gestalt between the analyst and the analysand which is the conditioning element of psi occurrences, such as telepathic dreams, etc. This is important from a theoretical viewpoint: there is hardly anyone today who would give a purely physical or neurological interpretation of the hypnotic phenomena. The interpretations that consider hypnotic phenomena as largely due to psychological interaction of a special sort between individuals, receive a lot of support from the parapsychological occurrences described. These always imply some meaningful contact between two people. Many students of hypnosis could ameliorate the theoretical contention of hypnotic phenomena if they took into account the fluctuating but omnipresent parapsychological aspect.

The great rehabilitation of hypnotic phenomena by the scientific world took place in 1843, with the publication of Braid's classic work.⁴ In this year the term "hypnosis" was coined. Elliotson and Esdaile, with exceptional courage, were the first to introduce hypnosis into anesthesiology. They performed a considerable number of major operations, including the amputation of limbs, with use of the hypnotic suggestion of the absence of pain as the only anesthetic.^{5,6} Elliotson also executed some daring experiments on what he called the "community of sensations."⁷ He observed that when he carried out very simple actions, such as smelling a scent, tasting a substance, or being pricked by a pin, the hypnotized subject, although unable to see what the experimenter was doing, experienced the same reactions. That is to say, the subject seemed to be tasting that particular taste or seemed to be pricked in just that area of the body.

An episode of remarkable psychological interest in Elliotson's career deserves to be mentioned. It clearly shows the influence unconscious factors can have on certain phenomena, as they are conditioned by the

way we consider them. In 1865 Elliotson said that, for reasons incomprehensible to him, the "magnetism" had lost much of its effectiveness. In other words he was no longer capable of operating and experimenting in the same way as twenty years earlier. He felt that the change was not in himself, but in the "magnetic power." I think this phenomenon gives us a clue to the understanding of the well-known historical fluctuations of hypnosis.

In 1882 the Society for Psychical Research was founded. Strange as it may seem, one of the proposed subjects of investigation was "that large group of controversial phenomena referred to as mesmeric, psychical, etc."

Meanwhile, in France, Pierre Janet and Charles Richet described their successful experiments of hypnosis at a distance with their famous subject, Léonie.⁸⁻¹⁰ Their results seem very interesting even today, including their subsequent intriguing behavior. One would have expected them to be carried away by wild enthusiasm and to pursue their experiments without interruption, even—if necessary—giving up their other interests in order to devote themselves exclusively to this research, which opened up new prospects for the study of the deepest enigmas of human personality. They did nothing of the kind. Janet devoted himself solely to psychiatry, and Richet gave up his research on hypnosis.

RAO: Is it possible that they suspected that something was wrong with their earlier observations?

SERVADIO: Yes, I realize what you mean, this can come as a consequence. Practically all of us who have done parapsychological experiments, have wondered after some time whether there wasn't some gap in the methodology; whether we had not made a mistake somewhere. This may be what happened to Janet and Richet, but now we know the real reason: it is because of our resistances; it is because of our own repression mechanisms. This happens continually in this field.

I think I have a few explanations for the fluctuations of hypnosis. It is certainly true that in the very beginning and during its periods of popularity, hypnosis was contaminated by charlatanism, theatricalness, and cheap occultism. Hypnosis, moreover, often failed to live up to its promises. We have the case of Elliotson, already mentioned, and the famous case of Freud, who gave up hypnotism, which he considered unreliable, and introduced other methods of psychological investigation and psychotherapy. Hypnosis as an anesthetic is not as important today as it was in the old days of Elliotson and Esdaile. But I really don't think that these reasons

constitute the whole explanation. I think that two comprehensible reactions take place in those who witness the "wonders" of hypnotic phenomena: one conscious and the other subtler and unconscious. The former may take the form of enthusiasm, astonishment, the wish to examine more closely such an extraordinary and enthralling subject. The other reaction is deeper and very different. Hypnosis shows that a person in perfect physical and mental health can become the passive instrument of psychological forces he is unable to control. Hypnotic commands can temporarily wipe out certain distinctions such as that between reality and unreality, between true and false, which are the pivots of our psychical security.

AARONSON: Why passive?

SERVADIO: Because in the classic formulation of the hypnotic situation there was an active subject (the hypnotist) and the so-called passive subject (the one hypnotized).

AARONSON: *Apparently* passive. It doesn't follow that he was in fact passive.

SERVADIO: I agree. That was only a superficial description. As we all know today, the hypnotized subject is not just a piece of wood in the hands of the hypnotizer. The typical situation, as it appeared to many people, was that a person could subject another person to all sorts of influences.

AARONSON: We've all been victimized by Svengali.

SERVADIO: Yes.

TART: I've done a number of very interesting hypnotic experiments in which the emphasis was shifted to the subject. The hypnotist is put in a very minor role as someone who is around to provide guidance, but the subject is the main active person producing the experience.

SERVADIO: It would be very good if this new concept of the relationship between hypnotist and hypnotized person became more popular. Through hypnosis man finds himself suddenly face to face with his innermost self, which is powerful and irrational. In this situation the psychic apparatus never fails to mobilize defense mechanisms sooner or later. Faced with alarming psychic contents, people automatically defend themselves, using a number of unconscious mechanisms: forgetting, refusing, minimizing, isolating. All this has happened in the case of hypnosis.

However much one may try to limit and circumscribe it scientifically, hypnosis contains elements that tend to place the ego in contact with disquieting irrational aspects of the personality. In their presence the ego itself, at unconscious levels, sets up defense mechanisms. In addition to the motives mentioned, there is the fact that sooner or later scientists who work on hypnosis are bound to find themselves in the presence of the "paranormal."

BELOFF: Excuse me, could you go back to the point you raised earlier, about Elliotson and the decline of his power? In what terms would you explain it?

SERVADIO: I think that Elliotson's behavior was due to the reasons I pointed out. He obviously developed some resistances, but I cannot say of what kind.

BELOFF: I wonder if your explanation applies to this case. There are various examples of this kind, where a person's hypnotic powers seem to desert him. I have no theory to offer, but I wonder whether your denial theory would really account for such cases.

AARONSON: Hypnosis in my terms is a programming situation. When our personality alters as we grow older, our attitude toward relationships also changes. The extent to which one would succeed in involving a subject would be very different.

OWEN: It seems to me that the point Professor Servadio is making is that this is an unconscious mechanism and consequently couldn't possibly be shown in conscious recall.

SERVADIO: Yes, except under certain conditions. I quite agree with Dr. Beloff that there may be other elements besides apprehension, avoidance, and alarm. There could be changes in the personality itself, with different kinds of adjustments taking place. As we analysts would say, the "libido cathexis" can be shifted for many reasons.

LUDWIG: I found Dr. Servadio's summary very intriguing. One of the difficulties in terms of the scientific investigation of hypnosis deals with the mutual relationship between hypnotist and subject. When one first starts hypnotizing, it is not just the subject who is under a spell: the hypnotist likewise is entranced by his own powers and abilities. The hypnotist gets so emotionally involved that, if at a later time he gets interested

in scientifically investigating the hypnotic state, he feels an inbuilt contradiction. There seems to be an inverse relationship between his proficiency as a hypnotist and his objectivity as an investigator.

SERVADIO: In this last part of my presentation, I would like to call your attention to the fact that an upward trend in the history of hypnosis is recognizable since 1920. Some experimentation was performed at Duke, especially by Dr. Fahler, with the Zener cards and hypnotized subjects.^{11, 12} The results were of slight significance, but this fact may be ascribed to the well-known monotony of the card tests. Finally, you are all aware of Dr. Rýzl's experiments,^{13,14} which seem rather promising. Let me quote Professor Vasiliev:¹⁵

The important problem at present is the nature of the factor that transmits the suggestion at a distance, an unknown brain factor of a nature that we must assume to be energetic. We can already point out two of its characteristic properties: propagation at a great distance, and penetration of all obstacles. We must look for something different, something new. It has happened more than once in the history of science that the recognition of new facts, unexplainable in any known way, has led to the discovery of aspects of the being that were quite unforeseeable and unforeseen.

ULLMAN: Thank you very much, Dr. Servadio. You have called our attention to the unexploited possibilities of hypnosis in parapsychological research. I would now like to call on Dr. Tart to give us his views on constructing models for understanding the operation of hypnosis, psi, and psychedelics.

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