

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON TABLE-MOVING.

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THE mystery which appears to surround the experiments connected with Table-Moving, has prevented many intelligent persons from arriving at a satisfactory conclusion as to the true cause of such singular results; and the celebrated Faraday has failed to convey to other than scientific minds that precise information upon the subject which he himself may be presumed to possess,—while others have involved the question in technical language, quite unintelligible to the public. The real nature of the case appears to me to be capable of a simple elucidation, which I will endeavor to place clearly before the Royal Society, in the hope that it will, at the least, create a discussion upon this curious and interesting subject.

It must be premised that whenever the will is exercised, and is unobstructed in its operation, that operation is immediate. Contemplated corporeal exertion is no sooner willed than it is attempted by the obedient muscles. When the will is weak, or enfeebled by disease, or confused by intoxication, its servants the muscles, cease to operate with the same exact and instantaneous obedience; and thus the man “sick of the palsy,” fails to impart motion to his paralysed limbs,—the sufferer from ague vainly endeavors to compose and quiet his agitated body,—and the drunken man strives unsuccessfully to move his perplexed members with their natural strength and regularity. Moreover, it is evident that, when the mind wills a certain result, it not only constrains the muscles to act, but to act in the manner and direction most likely to produce that result.

Now, when a person proceeds to try the experiment of “Table-Moving,” he is instructed to keep his whole body perfectly quiescent, and to will at the same time, that a certain effect should be produced upon the table.

It is clear, then, in such a case that the mind is influencing the will with respect to two operations utterly opposed to one another: the one, that the muscles should act, the other, that they should remain quiescent; and the immediate result is in accordance with the idea which is impressed most strongly on the mind,—which idea at the outset, is invariably that the muscles should remain quiescent; consequently, no immediate movement of the table occurs. After some time, however, the idea that the muscles should remain quiescent becomes fainter, while the idea of the projected movement, which is being continually impressed upon the mind, becomes more and more deeply implanted, until it is completely dominant, and the movement accordingly, takes place; but the idea of quiescence, which at first influenced the will almost entirely, still retains much of its force, and causes such confusion in the mind as to prevent it from realizing the fact that the movement in question is the direct consequence of volition.

Thus, when it is intended by persons seated round a table, with their hands placed upon its margin, that one side of the

table should be elevated, the person whose hands are placed at that side pushes the table, the person opposite presses downwards and pulls, while those who occupy the other sides force the table, by a lateral pressure, in the direction in which it is pushed—all these movements being such as are best calculated to effect the object in view, when the hands are so placed as above stated. The result is that the side of the table is raised where the legs are situated near its centre (so that the centre of gravity is easily displaced)—or that the table is moved along the floor where the legs are situated near the table's margin, especially if the floor is smooth.

The conclusion, therefore, at which I have arrived is, that the motion of the table is caused by the muscular action of the persons who place their hands upon it; which action appears to them to be involuntary, on account of its not taking place in immediate consequence of volition.

It follows, then, that the effect is produced independently of direct electrical, or electro-biological, influence, engendered by the usual contact of hands completing the circle. This is demonstrated by the fact that the motion takes place without such contact of the hands. In fact, similar effects are produced, within the ordinary period of time, by the hands of one operator only.

In order to demonstrate that the result is effected by muscular action alone, I threw a light cloth over a polished round table. The persons who placed their hands upon it,—not in contact—willed that the table should turn towards the left. In a short time the cloth began to move in front of one person only, becoming tight on the right, and wrinkled on the left of his position; then the same effect was produced in the case of another. But it was only when the hands of all the operators were in decided motion from right to left that the whole cloth was moved round equally—the table remaining quite stationary all the time.

The next experiment was to raise the table entirely from the floor by placing the palms of the hands on the margin of the table, and the thumbs underneath—the operators willing that the table should rise—which was successfully performed within the usual space of time.

The succeeding experiment was to raise the table by placing the whole hand flat upon the margin,—the operators willing, as before, that the table should rise; but the hands alone were elevated—the table remaining unmoved, as might have been expected.

My next deduction was, that this peculiar operation of the will might be applied to any kind of muscular exertion, the truth of which was demonstrated by the following experiments:—In the first, two persons took one end each of a piece of twine, and willed that the twine should break. Accordingly, their hands began shortly to move in opposite directions, and the movement increased in force until the twine gave way. Then, two persons stood up together, and willed

themselves to walk. After a short time one felt the weight of his body thrown on his right leg, and, by degrees, the right leg moved forwards; but it did not appear inclined to plant itself on the floor,—so that the operator was obliged to resort to direct volition, in order to save himself from falling backwards. The other operator experienced similar sensations, excepting that his right leg moved.

Being anxious to discover whether there were any tendency in these operations to bring the mind under electro-biological influence, I placed half-a-crown in the hand of one of the operators, and told him to regard it earnestly for ten minutes,—the usual time being twenty minutes. After he had done so I bade him raise his head and shut his eyes. Then, drawing the point of my finger downwards over the lids after they were closed,—in order to convey to his mind the idea of my power to keep them shut,—I told him that he could not open them; and he only succeeded in doing so after many and violent efforts. I tried one or two more experiments which satisfactorily proved his susceptibility of the influence. He had never tried the experiment before, nor had I. It is, however, possible that he may be at all times very susceptible of electro-biological influence.

The whole of the foregoing experiments were performed in immediate succession.

With respect to the declaration of numbers by the successive movements, up and down, of the side of a table, I cannot but wonder at the superstitious feelings with which many persons regard such experiments; for a little reflection would, I think, convince them that the results, when accurate, deserve to be considered as no more than good guesses, produced by the influence of the majority; that is to say, if “the table is to tell” the number of keys in a certain bunch—there being six operators,—the first of whom thinks of the number 4, the second of 5, the third of 7, the fourth of 6, the fifth of 6, and the sixth of 8,—the result would probably be the average of those numbers, namely, 6,—which, if correct, could only be regarded as a good guess. There is no doubt that some correct, and, therefore, apparently supernatural guesses have been made; but the failures have been far more numerous;—the memory of them, however, being soon obliterated by a very few instances of notable success. It is only those who are too superstitiously credulous to believe that the motion of the table is caused by muscular action, resulting from embarrassed volition, who will imagine that the minds of men sitting round a table, under circumstances of peculiar restraint, are more nearly omniscient than they are found to be when in the enjoyment of perfect freedom,—or that they are then capable of infusing into, or evoking from, inanimate matter the sensibility and power which belong to creatures endued with life.

Shakspeare makes Hamlet well say “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy;” but such a sentiment does not justify, respecting

certain effects, conclusions which are opposed to reason,—especially when a reasonable explanation can be given of those effects, and a reasonable cause of them assigned.

The safest rule for our guidance, with respect to matters which appear to be mysterious and unaccountable, is to believe what is beyond our reason only upon reasonable testimony, and to reject at once what is evidently contrary to reason. Acting upon this rule I have been led to make such an investigation of the subject of table-moving as to warrant conclusions which seem reasonable to myself, and which will, I trust, appear satisfactory to others, at least to those who bring to the consideration of the subject minds free from prejudice or superstition.

