

THE MOTIVES OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

Among the greater problems of the Case of Madame Blavatsky has, to the writer, been those of the determination of the intent and motives of the Committee in the institution, paradoxical transformation, and curious termination---so out of character with the beginning and with the ideals of its creators---of the inquiry.

The curious explanations for these problems, given by apologists for Madame Blavatsky have been both various and extraordinary. On the one hand, downright fraud has been attributed to the leaders of the S.P.R.

“What stands out prominently is the fact that the ‘Society for Psychical research’, has not investigated the phenomena for the purposes of ‘psychical research’, but their motive was to stem the current of thoughts and ideals expounded by H.P. Blavatsky for the enlightenment of humanity, to destroy the Theosophical Society, and to build on its ashes their own organizations.” (Vania, p. xii)

“Hodgson’s prepossessions in favour of Madame Blavatsky...! Why, his whole report contradicts him. Professor Sidgwick, the materialist, the medium hunter, did not pay this young sleuth’s expenses to India to have Madame Blavatsky vindicated if possible but to have her condemned if possible; and he knew his man.” (Hastings, N. Universe, 4, p.18)

“The S.P.R. sought only for a fraud---and so, inevitably, they found one---or rather made one.” (Kingsland, CA, last page.)

From suggestions of base motive to the explanations pass to milder indictments.

“These extraordinary happenings, if they were real, could not be ignored. Occult phenomena had intruded themselves into ((the)) circumstantial world of familiar fact and experience; there they were, and they could not be accounted for by any known theory. Fraud,

therefore, was the only “comfortable” explanation of them, the alternative being an acceptance of the revolutionary views of the theosophists. Thus the relation of the London Society for Psychical Research with the Theosophical Movement was far more than an ‘investigation’ of certain phenomena and of the occult powers of Madame Blavatsky; it was the collision of two radically opposed and fundamentally incompatible theories of knowledge. The dramatic character of the phenomena precipitated this trial of theory, and the force of prejudice---the moral inertia of the age---predetermined the result.” (The Theosophical Movement, p. 103)

“It should be kept in mind that these were persons of literary, academic and other distinctions, some of whom were accustomed to spiritualistic investigations; but none who knew anything of the rationale of Occultism, or of unusual yogic powers. Yoga was to them a completely unknown science. They had no qualifications whatever which would render them competent or reliable judges of such matters.” (Ransome, p. 211)

“Indeed it is hard to understand---were not history full of similar injustices perpetrated on those who are ahead of their time---how such men as are named above could lend themselves to, and lead their Society into, the unjust and cruel action of the publication of this infamous Report.” (Besant, HPB & MW, p. 98)

“Something much more than friction disturbed the course of theosophical work in this country, and completely changed the character of our relations with the psychic Research Society... The 30th of June was the day of the disaster and Colonel Olcott its unfortunate author... Colonel Olcott had become possessed of an absurd little Indian toy consisting of a figure of Buddha, and made of tin if I remember rightly, mounted on little wheels. By moving it about it was supposed to represent some idea connected with the Buddhist faith, but at best it was a very childish symbol. When the toy attained a ghastly celebrity it was referred to by Madame

Blavatsky as Olcott's 'Buddha on wheels.' Evidently my wife intended to warn her about it that she might stop Olcott from showing it to people who would be alive to the bad taste of it... as events turned out we all went that evening to a meeting of the Psychic Research Society where in the course of the proceedings Colonel Olcott got up, uninvited, and made a speech in his worst style, exhibiting and making much of his grotesque 'Buddha on wheels.'

"Of course he set everybody's teeth on edge. Madame Blavatsky with her quick psychic perceptions felt that something dreadful had happened. As a matter of fact the chill suffered by the Psychic Research leaders owing to Olcott's clumsiness on this occasion led up step by step to the famous Hodgson report which denounced Madame Blavatsky as an impostor." (Sinnott, *Early Days*, pp. 58-60.)

Madame Blavatsky herself---as we may postulate---surrounded from birth by phenomenal proofs as multitudinous as they were scarce in the lives of her critics, and no better qualified to appreciate the incredulity of the critics than they were to sympathize with her convictions, gave a harsh verdict:

"How could the London Psychical Society pronounce in favor of all the phenomena described in The Occult World and elsewhere without risking its title of 'scientific'? How would its acceptance of all that was attributed to me by the phenomenalists have been received by the scientists who deny wholesale the existence of intelligent forces outside of man? It was a question of life or death, of the to be or not to be, or Hamlet. Once that the calumnies of the spiteful woman, driven by vengeance, and helped by the entire black army of missionaries, were published in the evangelical organ of the latter, the Psychical Society---or rather its Theosophical founder ((Myers))---was forced to choose between the horns of a dilemma. One or the other; (a) either to declare publicly that the charges of the Coulomb lady were inventions---and in that case

he and his learned Society would have to share the sorry jeers flung at the Theosophists and be drowned in a flood of ridicule; would forever have lost caste, as they say in India; or (b) sailing with the current, to keep from sinking it would have to proclaim that all the phenomena, the Mahatmas and their agents, were a huge imposture.

“Compromise was impossible; it was a case of taking or leaving it. The Psychical Society had gone too far, and was committed too deeply.” (Le Lotus, June 87, pp. 193-03)

Of the apologies offered for the Committee, it may be seen that the most charitable of all has come from the pen of Col. Olcott, whose own “honor” in turn, it was said by Myers, “could be saved, in the opinion of the Committee, at the expense of his intelligence.” (J. v1, p. 424.)

“Here were we laying bare a series of personal experiences which had for us a most private and sacred character, for no possible benefit that could accrue to ourselves, but solely that our testimony might help the cause of spiritual science and give comfort to other students not yet so favored as ourselves; going before the Committee with no prepared case, but answering the questions sprung upon us, and hence putting ourselves at the mercy of those who had none of our enthusiasm, whose policy was to criticize, analyze and pick flaws in our statements, and who in rendering their final judgement were unsparing of our feelings, skeptical as to our motives, and merciless to a degree. Worst of all, they were then incompetent through inexperience of psychic laws, misled by the conclusions of an agent---Dr. Hodgson---whom they sent out to India to verify our statements and collect evidence, and by an utterly incompetent handwriting expert’s report...” (ODL, 3, 100-1.)

Before proceeding to an inquiry into consideration of whether we must place any determinative value in explanations of this sort, it may be proper to state that the writer’s position is, in some important respects, radically divergent from that normally held by the

Theosophical apologists. He rejects, without qualification, the idea that competent students of Psychical Research cannot from that fact alone qualify as just appraisers of the testimonial and material evidence on Theosophical or occult phenomena. He rejects without reserve the idea that the declared principles of Psychical Research, as expounded by the founders of the S.P.R., are incompatible with a true inquiry into or rightful resolution of any physical question on the reality of any phenomenon. While it is undoubtedly true that the imperceptible aspects and processes of a phenomenon may be, at least at present, wide open to surmise, whether on physical or parapsychical hypotheses, so long as the phenomenon may not be undoubted fraud---and that is where the writer may appear to differ as radically from the Committee itself---it seems fundamentally certain to him that the tangible evidence for any phenomenon must be amenable to the rigours of scientific examination, subject only to the limit of human detection.

If any phenomenon can ever be shown, by a thorough and scientific consideration of all related evidence, to be the proven product of known physical processes that phenomenon would gain no psychical value by whomever examined nor by whatever hypothesis explained. If one must subscribe to some occult philosophy, or practice certain occult disciplines in order to be fit to determine the physical reality of some parapsychical alteration of matter, or if one must entertain some occult hypothesis as the sole alternative to an hypothesis of deception, then, in the first instance, the phenomenon is not worthy of intelligent discussion, and in the second, the phenomenon---whether parapsychically authentic or false---is not worthy of public presentation.

If any query should ever be made as to why, after almost seventy-five years of official and universal discontent, the participants of the Theosophical Movement and the devotees of Madame Blavatsky have made no appreciable headway towards her vindication on the analytical grounds of psychical research, it will have to be answered that, more respectful of occult

hypotheses than the writer, they have not shared his profound appreciation for the professed methods of Henry Sidgwick and his Fellow co-founders.

Let us then, if we can, determine why the proof lies before us that, in the case of Madame Blavatsky, at least, those professed methods were ever forsaken. There are various alternative hypotheses which may be tried for an answer.

The first theory being that the Committee did not have the evidences---that therefore they cannot have omitted parts thereof.

That this is incorrect is shown by:

- (1) The fact that both points of analysis and evidence which had been previously acknowledged as of importance for the Theosophical hypothesis, in the Preliminary Report, were omitted both by body and reference in the final Report.
- (2) The fact that new evidence, of undoubted value to the Defence, such as those portions of the original Netherclift report dealing with the Mahatma Letter scripts, the explanations of Madame Blavatsky acknowledged to embrace at least 7½ pp. of foolscap, which she had written and submitted expressly for Hodgson's information, etc., which they acknowledgedly possessed, were omitted in substance and in brief.
- (3) They had full knowledge of the existence of the Coulomb pamphlet, the Gribble pamphlet, H.P.B.'s explanations as embodied in the London Lodge pamphlet, the Report of the T.S. Committee, the full C.C.M. articles, as well as additional relevant material, much of which they must undoubtedly have read---such as the Coulomb pamphlet (in the Library of the S.P.R., annotated by Hodgson and others) and the Coulomb pamphlet, inscribed by Frank Podmore, which a critic of Madame Blavatsky informed me he possessed. Nor can it be argued that they through

ignorance of the principles of detection may have supposed such a piece of evidence as Mme. Coulomb's personal narrative would not have contained a wealth of material favorable to the Defence, were Mme Coulomb falsifying.

- (4) Interested as they must have been to obtain decisive evidence one way or another in the matter, learned as they must have been in the stringent demand for evidence in any scientific investigation, attentive as they should have been to those axioms of inquiry they themselves had elevated---which call for "full critical discussion" and investigations "as thorough as possible" (H. Sidgwick, "The Responsibility of the SPR Journal, v-1, p. 425)----it is impossible to believe they were not cognizant of the need for obtaining any such evidence had they not possessed it. Nor is it to be believed that, over a period of months, and with the Theosophists and the Coulombs and their sponsors equally anxious to provide the Committee with their respective evidences (or as Hodgson himself affirmed, "I thus had every opportunity of examining the witnesses for the Theosophical phenomena..." R, p. 208), the Committee could have remained wanting in evidence that was widely known and commonly available---unless it was evidence they did not want.

Theory two would be that the Committee, while having the evidence, and having followed their own counsel, by examining (at least, not carelessly reading) they were unable to discern those points which have been shown to be omitted and in favor of the Defence.

This hypothesis can not be valid because:

- (1) They undertook the case at the beginning, with every expressed intent, and every mental capability to follow those axioms of full and impartial inquiry upon which

they had founded the SPR.

- (2) The Preliminary report shows they were capable of discovering impressive considerations in favor of the Theosophical evidence, considerations which no one else had previously given nor have since repeated; and, that they even amply fitted to discern serious flaws in---and arguments against---the Coulomb evidence, for instance, which no one else detected. Taking the Coulomb case as it stood, they displayed the remarkable and unfettered powers of discernment then at their command with illustrations of points for Madame Blavatsky and against her critics, illustrations of analysis which were in fact omitted from their later Report. (vg, see concluding para., “Note on the Coulomb Charges,” pre. rpt.)
- (3) The very fact that narratives and documents are given, at times, in part only and that, when ascertainable, the very parts missing are, almost without exception those particular portions embodying the material best calculated to provide the Defence with its strongest arguments, particularly against the given remainder---that in fact the parts omitted are generally those portions dangerous to the prosecution and which a pleader would prudently suppress---is proof that the character of these portions was readily discerned and knowingly, and with improper design, omitted. (For examples see: ((Discussion of the details of the fall of the Vega “packet” at Howrah, as given in the Prelim. Rpt., omitted by H. Report. /postscripts and marginal additions to the “Blavatsky-Coulomb” letter re: cigarette ph. omitted by Report 2; Parts of Netherclift Rpt dealing with Mahatma Letters stricken out with no hint as to the nature of suppressed parts; Shrine wall curtain omitted from Hodgson’s shrine plan, etc.)

The Third theory would be that these portions were left out unconsciously, BUT WITH DELIBERATE DESIGN AND INTENT ON THE PART of the subconscious minds of the investigators, individually and collectively.

The writer is willing to make some small concession that this may be remotely so--- though he must, for all practical use, disregard it as a constant consideration in this report. It maybe likewise true that the heirs of these great patriarchs are today operating unconsciously when they examine, reject, and ineffectively suppress en toto such detailed and explicit reports--- disagreeable to them---as with writer's "Letter Respecting Dr. Gustave Galey and the Charges of Rudolph Lambert." Perhaps psychology---and especially parapsychology---is in for a cruel and shocking surprise that will some day force acknowledgement that---for minutes and hours---the eyes and brains and tongues and pens of men of the highest intelligence are under the domination and irresistible control of ruthless, deceitful prejudices---that confined, paralyzed, and unsuspecting, their brains are asleep while their subconscious holds rein. The occasional operation of some such form of complete intellectual irresponsibility may be readily imagined in the case of some solitary reporter known to be so peculiarly susceptible to unconscious influences as Hodgson (*-re: RH & "Imperator", see Story of Psychic Science otherwise I do not profess to see how such an hypothesis could be stretched to cover the complete facts in the case of the Committee as a whole.

The fourth hypothesis would be that the important points for the defence were, in the final report, suppressed as part of a cunning plot to destroy Madame Blavatsky, and the Theosophical Society at all costs and in callous defiance of all moral precepts. Such a theory would postulate that the plot began before the appointment of the Committee and that the Preliminary Report was designed for no more purpose than to serve camouflage, concealing the

existence of the plot and leading Madame Blavatsky and her followers into the trap. The purpose and the goal would have been to secure the public's attention at her expense, and to thus provide themselves with an argument of merit---as astute detectors and investigators---to secure the respect of the world of science, converting disinterest and ridicule to esteem and compliment.

This unworthy suspicion, which has more than once provided an excuse for an attack on the methods of Psychological Research, must be denied for several very good reasons with, no one, for the sake of argument at least, will deny that the impelling desire of these investigators was to establish themselves or their Society as the base for a new field of science and as the channel, authorised by scientific and public recognition, for ultimate verification of those unseen powers and faculties that promised so much to man and progress. From this it follows that they would not, for the paltry returns of ephemeral celebrity, knowingly block any apparent possible source by which they might secure the means to attain this ambition. In their first published notice of the Theosophists, (J, v-1, p. 156) Prof. Sidgwick, speaking of the evidence by which he and his coworkers might most readily obtain their projected success, and after stating, "...we ought to relax no effort to obtain it..." concluded his address to the Society with the remark that "the marvels related by the Indian Theosophists" provided one such "special source of interest."

Madame Blavatsky was indeed, at that time, their strongest possible prospect in this direction, which was the compilation by personal witness of experimental proof of parapsychological phenomena produced at will. In fact there was no other more promising source in sight, nor indeed is there any record that the leaders of the Society ever subsequently approached any subject with as much relative optimism, or ever discovered such a well-evidenced source of alleged consciously repeatable phenomena. And as there is no known scrap of evidence to show that before late July or August of 1884 they could have received what

would, for them, have had to be decisive evidence or possibly proof of her fraudulency---as it is impossible to believe they would have knowingly blocked the promising opportunity before them on less grounds---they certainly would not before that date have hatched any such conspiracy---quite aside from their moral integrity (which we have no reason to doubt.)

Accordingly, we must consider the investigation was put under way with good intent (at least towards themselves)---which fact alone would guarantee their every effort to preserve good relations with Madame Blavatsky, at least until her honest was checked. Additionally, we have, by good fortune, private notation by Henry Sidgwick, in his personal diary (*) that “Madame Blavatsky is either genuine or she is a most clever and remarkable trickster,” a declaration which may be considered genuine if only because its author appears to have made no effort to draw it to the attention of others, and for which, published posthumously, there was doubtless no foreseeable need, from any viewpoint, during the author’s lifetime.

Thus whatever may be said to the moral atmosphere surrounding the inquiry’s termination, the beginning, in the opinion of the writer, can be considered above suspicion.

Thus as, on the one hand, the force of facts as revealed in the systematic and careful suppression of evidence dangerous to their final case, compels us to assume the existence of a conscious conspiracy by the middle of 10885, and as the evidences of November 1884 guide us with equal insistency to acknowledgement of no such deplorable conduct at that earlier date, there remains a task of reconciliation. It is altogether unlikely that six persons of so commendable a declared and demonstrated moral sense would undergo a radical reversal of virtue in so short of time. And as any postulate of a conspiracy involving the investigators against Madame Blavatsky would, as set forth, require that they first reach a point of irrevocable conviction that her phenomena were fraudulent or that all hope was lost to secure through her

requisite proof if the phenomena were genuine:---

No moral conspiracy was ever involved because (a) On the one hand belief that the phenomena were false would have brought a moral conviction that it should rightly, out of regard for truth, be exposed; or, (b) On the other hand, as any immoral conspiracy would come into existence only accompanied by the conviction that (1) phenomena at issue possibly were genuine, and (2) there was no possible prospect of acquiring evidence of their authenticity, it too must be rejected as a possible explanation because these persons were clever enough to know from experience and personal observation that their suspicious attitudes, in examination of Theosophists and Theosophical evidences, would, in direct correspondence with the degree of doubt shown, strengthen the barrier between themselves and the possible fulfillment of their ambitions. Before they would have instituted any immoral conspiracy they would have, at least privately before Madame Blavatsky, ostensibly diminished their circumspection and did everything in their power to otherwise ingratiate themselves with her---for the sake of the very cause to which any immoral conspiracy would itself necessarily have been dedicated! But this they did not do---on the contrary they publicly declared that they were “in no way concerned” with her teachings---which were, however one may look at it, the source of her chief self-satisfaction---they examined Billing’s evidence, and in words to fire public suspicion against her, told her so---they dug up Kiddle, displayed his wares, and polished them for public purchase---they declared their serious reservations, and sent Hodgson to visit Madame Coulomb, without discretion---far from remedying any sense of mutual distrust that might stand in the way of opportunistic ambitions, they steadily aggravated and increased it from the day of their first interview. (See Arundale on Myers and raps, “returns, voicing his suspicions, early 1884.) To suppose that they would have stooped so low as to hatch a base conspiracy to destroy with

dubious evidence and by suppression of what was considered by them to be fact or possibly fact,
to destroy a