ARE THERE OBJECTIVE APPARITIONS?

This article, by Alfred Russel Wallace, was briefly noticed a few weeks ago in "Light." It appeared in the January number of the "Arena." Anything written upon Spiritualism or kindred subjects by a man of such great talent and experience must be more than ordinarily worthy of perusal, and I regret that the publication in which the paper appears will be seen by few in England who take an interest in psychical phenomena, as it is published in America, besides being too high priced to be generally attainable. I propose to make a few extracts from the article which, I think, cannot fail to interest those readers of "Light" who are unable to obtain the "Arena."

The object of Mr. Wallace's essay is to prove the objectivity of many cases of apparitions, as well as of other spiritual manifestations or phenomena, in contradistinction to the theories so persistently advocated by the Society for Psychical Research that such apparitions are almost entirely to be accounted for by subjective hallucination or by telepathy.

Mr. Wallace commences by recognising with gratitude the work done by the Society for Psychical Research both in England and America, in collecting such a vast number of cases of psychical phenomena, the evidence for which they thoroughly sift and examine before allowing an account of them to appear in their "Proceedings." But he deplores their method of discussing all the classes of phenomena separately by themselves, without correlating them with other kindred phenomena. Still, the mere fact of bringing such subjects prominently before the public must advance the cause of truth, and stimulate personal interest and inquiry into matters of such deep moment.

Mr. Wallace writes:

"The number of men eminent in literature, art, or science who have joined the society and have contributed to its "Proceedings" has given the objects of its inquiry a position and status they did not previously possess, while the earnestness, the thoroughness, the literary skill, and philosophic acumen with which the evidence has been presented to the world has compelled assent to the proposition that the several classes of apparitions known as doubles, phantasms of the living or dead, spectral lights, voices, musical sounds, and the various physical effects which occur in haunted houses, are real and not very uncommon phenomena, well worthy of earnest study, and only doubtful as regards the interpretation put upon them. . . . . The only explanation of the various classes of apparitions suggested by the more prominent working members of the society is that they are hallucinations due to the telepathic action of one mind upon another. These writers have, as they state they felt bound to do, strained the theory of telepathy to its utmost limits, in order to account for the more important of the phenomena which they have themselves set forth; and the chief difference of opinion now seems to be whether all the facts can be explained as primarily due to telepathic impressions from a living agent—a view maintained by Mr. Podmore—or whether the spirits of the dead are in some cases the agents, as Mr. Myers thinks may be the case. But in order to give this telepathic theory even a show of probability, it is necessary to exclude or to explain away a number of the most interesting and
suggestive facts collected by the society, and also to leave out of consideration the whole class of phenomena which are altogether at variance with the hypothesis adopted.

In reading several of the "Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research," with which I have been favoured by the kindness of one of the members, I have been almost amused by the efforts made by the writers to adapt their telepathic theory to all the facts they have collected. They have taken as their point of departure the hypothesis of the "unconscious secondary self," a marvellous personage, who appears to be capable of supporting any number of characters, imitating exactly their handwriting and modes of expression, as well as being conversant with the smallest details of their lives. Only do the aforesaid writers admit of the possibility of the consciousness or intelligence being otherwise than in the body or self or some telepathic influence emanating from members of the circle when some bald fact is stated which cannot by any possibility be known to anyone present, and which, therefore, it is most difficult to corroborate, though this has frequently been done.

Mr. Wallace next proceeds to enumerate those phenomena which he thinks distinctly suggest or afford direct proof of the objectivity of the appearances. These he classifies under five heads, as follows:

1. Collective hallucinations, or the perception of the same phantasmal sights or sounds by two or more persons at once.
2. Phantasms seen to occupy different points in space, by different persons, corresponding to their apparent motion; or the persistence of the phantasm in one spot, notwithstanding the observer only has the power of seeing it.
3. The effects of phantasms upon domestic animals.
4. The physical effects apparently produced by phantasms, or connected with their appearance.
5. The fact that phantasms, whether visible or invisible to persons present, can be and have been photographed.

Mr. Wallace then proceeds to give numerous examples of each of these classes of phenomena. In the last four categories are almost entirely derived from the published "Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research," and from "Phantasms of the Living," and are therefore cases which have been thoroughly examined into and sifted by experts, who have spared no trouble in the work. The fifth class of phenomena, that of transcendentental photographs, is derived from the hands of the society, and the account which Mr. Wallace has compiled, is from well-authenticated sources, and in many cases from facts within his own knowledge. Having myself some practical and satisfactory experience of this phase of spiritual phenomena, I have read Mr. Wallace's account of it with special interest, and do not think it will be waste of time to give a brief treatment of the evidence in support of this assertion, if imposture there were; yet they all declared that there was and could be no imposture.

It would be easy to give a score or more of cases in which phantasms, especially those of a visible form, have been presented in print that they have obtained recognisable photographs of deceased friends when they themselves were quite unknown to the photographer, and even when the deceased persons existed. In all such cases, however, the objection is made that the figures are more or less shadowy and that the supposed likenesses may be imaginary. I, therefore, propose to give a number of the most remarkable instances of the appearance of other figures besides those of the visible sitters. Perhaps the most remarkable cases of experiments ever made on this subject are those carried on during three years by the late Mr. John Button, a retired photographer of twenty years' experience, and Dr. Thomson, M.D. (Edin.), a retired physician, who had practised photography as an amateur for twenty-five years. Their two experiments are the most remarkable, because in both cases from facts within his own knowledge. Having myself seen the phantasmal sights or sounds by two or more persons at once.

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In the cases hitherto given, the phantasms or photographs have been invisible to all present except the mediums, and sometimes even to them; but we have also experimented with a number of cases in which the phantasmal figures were connected with what persons of reputation have stated in print that they have obtained recognisable photographs of deceased friends when they themselves were quite unknown to the photographer, and even when the deceased persons existed. In all such cases, however, the objection is made that the figures are more or less shadowy and that the supposed likenesses may be imaginary. I, therefore, propose to give a number of the most remarkable instances of the appearance of other figures besides those of the visible sitters. Perhaps the most remarkable cases of experiments ever made on this subject are those carried on during three years by the late Mr. John Button, a retired photographer of twenty years' experience, and Dr. Thomson, M.D. (Edin.), a retired physician, who had practised photography as an amateur for twenty-five years. Their two experiments are the most remarkable, because in both cases from facts within his own knowledge. Having myself seen the phantasmal sights or sounds by two or more persons at once.

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longer continue to ignore it, because they have entered on the task of collecting the whole of the evidence for psychical phenomena, and of fairly estimating the weight of each of the group under which that evidence falls. Now I submit that this photographic evidence is superior in quality to any that they have hitherto collected, and for two reasons. In the first place, it is experimental evidence, and experiment is rarely possible in the higher psychical phenomena; in the second place, it is the evidence of experts in an operation, the whole details of which are perfectly familiar to them. And, I further submit, this evidence can no longer be ignored, because it is evidence that goes to the very root of the whole inquiry and affords the most complete and crucial test in the problem of subjectivity or objectivity of apparitions. What is the use of elaborate arguments to show that all the phenomena are to be explained by the various effects of telepathy, and that there is no evidence of the existence of objective apparitions occupying definite positions in space, when the camera and the sensitive plate have again and again proved that such objective phantasms do exist? Such arguments, founded on a small portion only of the facts, remind one of that literary jeu d'esprit: "Historic doubts as to the existence of Napoleon Bonaparte"; and to those who are acquainted with the whole range of the phenomena to be explained are about equally convincing.

I have now very briefly summarised and discussed the various classes of evidence which demonstrate the objectivity of many apparitions. The several groups of facts, while strong in themselves, gain greatly in strength by the support they give to each other. On the theory of objective reality all are harmonious and consistent. On the theory of hallucination, some require elaborate and unsupported theories for their explanation, while the great bulk are totally inexplicable, and have, therefore, to be ignored or set aside, or explained away. Collective hallucinations (so-called) are admitted to be frequent. That phantasms often behave like objective realities, in relation to material objects and to different persons, is also admitted. This is as it should be if they are objective, but it is hardly explicable on the subjective or telepathic theory. The behaviour of animals in the presence of phantasms, the evidence for which is as good as that for their appearance to men and women, is what we might expect if they are abnormal realities, but involve enormous difficulties on any other theory. The physical effects produced by phantasms (visible or invisible) afford a crucial test of objectivity, and are far too numerous and too well attested to be ignored or explained away. And, finally, comes the test of objectivity afforded by the photographic camera in the hands of experts and physicists of the first rank, rendering any escape from this conclusion simply impossible.