

Ambroise August Liébeault and Psychic Phenomena

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Abstract

Some nineteenth-century hypnosis researchers did not limit their interest to the study of the conventional psychological and behavioral aspects of hypnosis, but also studied and wrote about psychic phenomena such as mental suggestion and clairvoyance. One example, and the topic of this paper, was French physician Ambroise August Liébeault (1823-1904), who influenced the Nancy school of hypnosis. Liébeault wrote about mental suggestion, clairvoyance, mediumship, and even so-called poltergeists. Some of his writings provide conventional explanations of the phenomena. Still of interest today, Liébeault's writings about psychic phenomena illustrate the overlap that existed during the nineteenth-century between hypnosis and psychic phenomena - an overlap related to the potentials of the mind and its subconscious activity.

Keywords: Ambroise August Liébeault; hypnosis; history of hypnosis; hypnosis and psychic phenomena; mental suggestion; clairvoyance; mediumship; psychical research.

In this paper, I will discuss aspects of Liébeault's interests, which more broadly conceived, are consistent with a portion of modern historical writings on hypnosis (Gauld, 1992; Crabtree, 1993; Méheust, 1999a; Plas, 2000). Not only was seemingly "psychic phenomena" a part of the history of psychology and hypnosis, but the investigation of such phenomena, among other factors, contributed to the development of concepts such as dissociation and the subconscious mind (Alvarado, 2002; Ellenberger, 1970; Le Maléfan, 1999; Shamdasani, 1993).

Hypnosis was one of the developments of the nineteenth-century that led a variety of individuals to explore the potentials of the mind, including the existence of the subconscious, the capabilities of memory and its alteration, and the influence of the mind over the body (Crabtree, 1993; Gauld, 1992). In fact, hypnosis was

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considered a particularly useful exploratory tool for these concerns. In the words of physiologist Henry Beaunis (1830-1921), “hypnotism constitutes . . . a true method of experimental psychology; it is for the philosopher what vivisection is for the physiologist” (Beaunis, 1887, p. 115). Such interest consisted mainly in the therapeutic use of hypnosis and in the study of a variety of cognitive, sensory-motor, and physiological functions and processes. Nonetheless, a small part of that hypnosis movement included phenomena that were referred to at the time as supernormal, psychic, or what some French called the “marvelous” (Durand (de Gros), 1894). This paper will focus on Liébeault’s observations about these phenomena as they have received little attention. This is due, in part, to the fact that they represented a small part of his overall contributions to hypnosis.

Most contemporary psychologists and students of hypnosis are generally not interested in such phenomena today. Others may take a stronger stance and maintain that the only proper attitude toward psychic phenomena is one of dismissive skepticism. I believe that the history of hypnosis—and the history of psychology—should be more than an evaluation of the validity and “reality” of past research findings and theory. To have a complete history of our subject we need to pay attention to the so-called marginal and unorthodox. That was the direction of Ellenberger (1970) in his study of the influence of mesmerism on the concept of the unconscious mind. Attention to all topics and movements important to the individuals we study has led to a more complex and complete history of psychology and hypnosis (e.g., Alvarado, 2002; Crabtree, 1993; Gauld, 1992; Plas, 2000). Liébeault believed psychic phenomena to be a proper part of the intellectual environment of the individuals he studied. A summary of his writings on psychic phenomena ought to contribute to a broadening of our understanding of what was then considered, by some, to be an acceptable topic of discussion. Willingness to seriously examine Liébeault’s concepts and thinking about the so-called psychic phenomena may also reveal a process by which scientific thought evolves.

Hypnosis and Psychic Phenomena

The mesmeric literature contains many descriptions of these phenomena including such manifestations as healing, clairvoyance, and mental suggestion (Crabtree, 1993; Dingwall, 1967-68; Gauld, 1992; Méheust, 1999a). The hypnosis movement also showed an overlap with psychic phenomena. The Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in London in 1882 to study phenomena such as thought-transference, mediumship and apparitions, published in their *Proceedings* much about hypnosis (Gurney, 1884; Gurney & Myers, 1885).¹ The writings of Frederic W.H. Myers (1843-1901) were particularly important regarding the theoretical interface of the supernormal and the hypnotic (e.g., Gurney & Myers, 1885; Myers, 1886).

Journals such as the *Revue de l'hypnotisme et de la psychologie physiologique* published papers about such topics as lucidity (De Rochas, 1889), mental suggestion (Joire, 1898), and mediumship (Lombroso, 1892). Indications of this interest include a section in Max Dessoir’s (1867–1947) *Bibliographie des modernen Hypnotismus* (1888, Chapter 7) that presented references which mention the remote action of medicines and drugs, mental suggestion, and telepathy or thought-transference. Many books about hypnosis—such as the writings of Azam (1893, pp. 347-355), Binet and Féré (1887, pp. 40-44), Crocq (1900, Chapters 11, 12, 18, 19), and Moll (1890, pp. 362-366)—referred to some of these phenomena, even if many authors were skeptical of such manifestations.

There are examples of researchers and clinicians generally interested in the conventional phenomena of hypnosis and its clinical application that investigated psychic phenomena. Both Hippolyte Bernheim (1840-1919) and Georges Gilles de la Tourette (1857-1904) mentioned their failed attempts to obtain evidence for mental suggestion (Bernheim,

1888, p. vi; Gilles de la Tourette, 1887, p. 167). Others, such as Beaunis and Charles Richet (1850-1935), were more positive in their assessment (Beaunis, 1887, pp. 267-271; Richet, 1889). Méheust (1999b, pp. 163-174) has discussed many nineteenth-century attempts to explain claims for clairvoyance during the hypnotic trance using hyperesthesia as an explanation.

The above mentioned publications are evidence of a common history between hypnosis and psychic phenomena in which conventional hypnosis researchers crossed over into psychical research and psychical researchers were concerned with hypnosis. This common history, which included much criticism, came from the fact that some psychic phenomena were thought, and reported, to have taken place under hypnosis. But both psychical and hypnosis research shared the goals of understanding the subconscious mind and human capabilities (Alvarado, 2002; Plas, 2000). A case illustrating these issues is that of Liébeault.

Liébeault and Hypnosis

Ambroise August Liébeault (1823-1904) was a French physician who became known for his use of suggestion for psychotherapeutic purposes (on Liébeault see Barrucand, 1987; Bernheim, 1907; Carrer, 2002; Gauld, 1992, pp. 319-324). Liébeault was born in Farrières, Meurte-et-Moselle, in the Lorraine region of France. He came from a peasant family, and while he attended seminary school and was expected to become a priest, he started medical studies at Strasbourg, obtaining his medical degree in 1850 with a thesis about femorotibial dislocations (Liébeault, 1850). Liébeault became interested in magnetism while he was a medical student but did not pursue this interest for several years. After graduation, he established himself as a country physician at Pont-Saint-Vincent. In 1860 he moved to Nancy and opened a clinic there. He charged for conventional medical treatment but treated patients using hypnosis for free.

His first publication, *Le sommeil provoqué et les états analogues considérés surtout au point de vue de l'action du moral sur le physique* (1866) focused on similarities between natural sleep and induced sleep (or trance) and on aspects such as the features of hypnotic states, the induction of sleep and its relationship to the nervous system, and such phenomena as hallucinations.² A later writer said that Liébeault discussed “all the issues related to the various states of sleep with perfect competence and profound sagacity” (Liégeois, 1889, pp. 71-72). However, the book and the work was largely ignored by the medical profession. Liébeault only achieved prominence later when he was brought to the attention of Nancy physicians in 1882. The most important of these physicians was Bernheim who was instrumental in bringing Liébeault’s work to the attention of the medical world (Bernheim, 1907). Influenced by Liébeault, Bernheim eventually became the leading proponent of suggestion to account for hypnotic phenomena. Bernheim (1884, p. 3) argued that while suggestion was proposed by Faria, and was applied by Braid, it was perfected by Liébeault.³

This work was further developed and articulated by the Nancy School of Hypnosis headed by Bernheim, a group that included Liébeault as well as others such as the above mentioned physiologist Henry Beaunis and law professor Jules Liégeois (1833-1908). The Nancy School actively opposed the more somatic and psychopathologically-oriented Salpêtrière School headed by Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893).⁴ Ellenberger (1970, p. 87) argued that while Bernheim was the leader of the Nancy School, Liébeault was the school’s spiritual father. There is no question that Liébeault was held in high esteem by many when he died in 1904.⁵

The reader is reminded that what follows represents but a small part of Liébeault’s writings, and is not representative of his overall hypnosis work. It illustrates the overlap of interest in hypnosis and psychic phenomena that can be argued to have existed during the nineteenth-century.

Liébeault and Psychic Phenomena

Liébeault was in contact with members of the SPR and sent accounts of what he perceived to be psychic phenomena to the Society. In addition to the above mentioned Frederic W.H. Myers, other members of the SPR, Edmund Gurney (1847-1888), and Arthur Myers (1851-1894) visited Liébeault and saw some of his patients (Gurney & Myers, 1885, p. 423; Myers, 1886, p. 6). On the recommendation of Myers, Liébeault was elected as a Corresponding Member of the SPR (Meeting of Council, 1885).⁶

What follows will summarize Liébeault's writings about psychic phenomena. This is not to argue for the existence of the phenomena nor to evaluate the methodological conditions under which such work was done, but rather to give specific examples of Liébeault's writings as an illustration of the types of approaches to psychic phenomena taken by some scientists and clinicians interested in hypnosis in Liébeault's day.

The Magnetic Force

Liébeault was part of the late nineteenth-century "magnetic" movement (Alvarado, 2009). In his book, *Étude sur le zoomagnétisme* (1883), he expressed his belief in a physical emanation between magnetizer and patient to account for healing effects on children. He used the term zoomagnetism to refer to this physical influence described as a "neurility exerted by a living being on another living being" (p. 5). After observing healing with small children treated magnetically while asleep, Liébeault stated he had to "admit a direct action of the neurility transmitted from man to man" and that this principle could "restore the physiological functioning of organs" (p. 24). However, in a later publication he accepted that *suggestion*, both direct and indirect, could explain the observed effects (Liébeault, 1891, p. 268). Nonetheless, Carrer (2002, p. 18) has argued that Liébeault never completely abandoned his ideas about a magnetic force.

Mental Suggestion and Clairvoyance

The clairvoyance of hypnotized subjects was seen by Liébeault as enhanced sensory functions. He wrote: "I have looked for those phenomena . . . and when they have presented themselves, I have always found them to be linked to the normal operations of faculties and organs" (Liébeault, 1889/2002a, p. 119).

Some phenomena, Liébeault wrote, were taken by magnetizers to be evidence for a sixth sense. In his view, those magnetizers were not aware "that sleepers in isolation perceive with all their senses what takes place around them and that by asking them questions, on the location of an object for instance, we suggest to them . . . to direct their focused attention on anything that concerns said object . . . A whisper, a movement, the agitation of air around them, etc.; nothing they feel escapes their focused attention . . ." (Liébeault, 1889/2002a, p. 80).

Liébeault believed hypnosis could enhance the senses. Some of his observations included measuring the required distance between the eyes and the pages of a book to assess the effects of hypnosis on vision. He found that in the hypnotic trance several individuals were able to increase the distances when compared in the waking and hypnotic state (Liébeault, 1889/2002a, p. 87). Liébeault also discussed the enhancement of other sensory modalities such as hearing and tactile sensations.

At the end of his book, Liébeault (1889) presented a note (sort of an appendix) recounting two "feats" of mental suggestion he observed at his home in Nancy with a hypnotized woman on January 9, 1886. Present at the tests were several guests, including poet Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897). It is not clear if Liébeault interpreted the success

reported in the note as an example of enhanced sensory perception due to hypnosis. But he stated at the end of the note that there were “facts” recorded in SPR publications “that cannot be explained by a betrayal of thought” (Liébeault, 1889/2002a, p. 263).

Finally, the following is an account of lucidity that Liébeault reported in his book *Thérapeutique Suggestive* (1891; which has been translated, Liébeault, 1891/2002b) that he seemed to believe could not be explained by the principles of enhanced perception previously discussed. The first observation of a young somnambulist called Camille S. was done with Beaunis.⁷ Liébeault wrote:

First Mr. Beaunis, who had often put her to sleep, acted on her via passes performed from an adjacent room without her suspecting it, or at least without her conscious self being aware of it. He thus managed to place her in a state of somnambulism quickly, and several times. He repeated this identical experiment on the same person without her knowledge, this time positioning himself on a mound in my garden surrounded by a thick fence of Virginia creeper, some 29 meters from where the subject and I were located. The mound could not be seen, and besides a small wood also separated Mr. Beaunis from his subject. In spite of the obstacles hiding the operator, Camille S. fell into somnambulism 18 minutes after Dr. Beaunis had sent his passes from the mound where he was hiding . . . (Liébeault, 1891/2002b, p. 292)

In another test, Liébeault reported that his colleague Liégeois had presumably induced a trance using mental suggestion from a distance. Liébeault’s consideration of conventional explanations for the phenomena is illustrated by the following: “It can be objected that, the previous experiments having always been conducted between eight and half past nine in the morning, the expecting subject must have fallen into somnambulism out of habit during this short period of time. This objection is not without foundation, but how can one explain why she fell into somnambulist sleep only on the days we conducted the experiments, which were always kept apart” (Liébeault, 1891/2002b, p. 293)? Liébeault speculated about vibrations transmitted at a distance that could be perceived by special people.

Mediumship and Motor Automatism

In his 1889 book, Liébeault discussed mediumship and table turning as forms of dissociation and motor automatism that did not require paranormal explanations. Motor automatism was explained as the function of the doubling of attention and the creation of independent pathways of action and of memory. In terms of the movement of the pendulum, the dowsing rod, and turning tables, Liébeault postulated that the doubling of attention led the mind to produce motor acts unconsciously that were originally present in the conscious mind, although he did not use this terminology.

He felt that the trances of mediums were similar to those of hypnotized individuals. Both showed “concentration of the mind in order to enter their dreams in action, isolation, automatism, insensibility and loss of recall upon waking” (Liébeault, 1889/2002a, p. 224). The ideas mediums recalled during trance allowed them to create fictitious spirit communications. Furthermore, Liébeault believed mediums were not insane, however, he thought they could become so. This was due to their continuous entrance into a passive state - a practice potentially leading to a more permanent passive state that could lead into insanity (Liébeault, 1889/2002a, p. 235).

In a communication sent by Liébeault to the SPR on September 4, 1885, he discussed a case of veridical mediumistic communication. This case appeared in French in the SPR's *Journal* (Liébeault, 1885) and was later published in English (Gurney, Myers & Podmore, 1886, Vol. 1, p. 293; Myers, 1903, Vol. 2, pp. 169-170). Liébeault related a case of a young woman from a French family living in New Orleans. He had successfully treated hypnotically a young Mlle. B, a member of the family, for anemia and a nervous cough. The induction of hypnotic trance suggested to the family and to Mlle. B that she could become a medium (the "lady of the house" was thought to be a medium). The young woman became a writing-medium, which she first manifested during breakfast when the impulse to write came over her. Liébeault, who believed the date of the incident was February 7, 1868, wrote:

She wrote the same words again and again ... , and at last ... it was possible to read that a person called Marguérite was thus announcing her death. The family at once assumed that a young lady of that name, a friend of Mlle B.'s and her companion ... in ... high school, must have just expired. They all came immediately to me ... and we decided to verify the announcement of death that very day. Mlle B. wrote to a young English lady who was also a teacher in that same school. She gave some other reason for writing—taking care not to reveal the true motive of the letter. By return of post we received an answer in English of which they copied for me the essential part ... It expressed the surprise of the English lady at the receipt of Mlle B.'s unexpected and apparently motiveless letter. But at the same time the English correspondent made haste to announce to Mlle B. that their common friend, Marguérite, had died on February 7th at about 8 am. ... (Myers, 1903, Vol. 2, pp. 169-170).

A Poltergeist Girl

In another letter Liébeault sent to Myers dated February 1, 1888, he wrote a short account of a case of noises and objects thrown in a closed room. There was also "one young girl, raised from the ground and undressed in the dark, though in the charge of several persons who were holding her" (Liébeault, 1888, p. 227). The girl was taken to Liébeault's so as to deal with her nerves. After hypnosis she left having been calmed. But the manifestations started again and the police became involved, producing a report consistent with the previous account.

Precognitive Information about Death

Myers (1895, pp. 528-529) presented the following case he received from Liébeault. The case, which happened to a patient, also appeared in Liébeault's later book (1891). Liébeault wrote that on December 27, 1879, his patient, then 19 years of age, consulted a "necromancer" and was told that he would lose his father in a year's time to the day. He was also told that he would become a soldier soon, that he would marry, have two children, and will die at 26 years of age. When all the events, except, of course, his own death, had taken place, including the death of his father on December 27, he came to Liébeault hoping to avoid his death. "On this and the following days I tried to send ... [the patient] into profound sleep in order to dissipate the impression that he would die on the February 4, his birthday ..." (Myers, 1895, p. 529).

Trying to avoid self-suggestion, Liébeault sent the patient to consult one of his somnambulists and was told by him that he would die in 41 years. The patient seemed to cease being worried and he did not die on the 4th of February.

As Liébeault further wrote: “I had forgotten all this, when at the beginning of October I received an invitation to the funeral of my unfortunate patient, who had died on September 30th, 1886, in his 27th year, as . . . foretold . . . I have since learnt that the unfortunate man had been under treatment for biliary calculi and died of peritonitis caused by an internal rupture” (Myers, 1895, p. 529).⁸

Liébeault in Context

As mentioned before, Liébeault’s writings on psychic phenomena should be seen in the context of his times. While he represents an interest that some of his colleagues involved with hypnosis shared, it was an interest that was by no means universal and, indeed, was controversial at the time. When defending the reality of magnetism he was part of the late magnetic movement represented by such men as Émile Boirac (1851-1917), Julian Ochorowicz (1850-1917), and Albert de Rochas (1837-1914) (Boirac, 1893; De Rochas, 1887; Ochorowicz, 1887/1891). So, even considering the decline of the magnetic movement in the late part of the nineteenth century, Liébeault was not alone in his initial belief of the influence of a magnetic force on the human body (see Alvarado, 2009).

A similar point can be made about clairvoyance and mental suggestion in late nineteenth-century France (Plas, 2000). Liébeault’s explanation of these phenomena in terms of heightened sensory perception in the hypnotized subject also paralleled interesting literature discussing hyperesthesia in the hypnotized and using the concept of hyperesthesia to explain apparent psychic phenomena. Some assumed that enhanced vision could take place to the point that a hypnotized subject could read very small type normally unreadable (Bergson, 1886). A French doctor suggested that enhanced hearing could explain his efforts to induce sleep of subjects placed in an adjoining room (Ruault, 1886). In his view possible changes in the pulse rate of the hypnotizer at the moment of sending a silent command could perhaps produce the effects. Some of this literature was criticized by Myers (1887) for its exaggerated conception of hyperesthesia.

Liébeault also speculated about the transference of information at a distance through vibrations. He only mentioned this in passing but seemed to refer to something different than hyperesthesia. In fact, his ideas seem to belong to that group of nineteenth-century theorists who explained telepathy by physical signals (vibrations, waves) emanating between one person and another (Alvarado, 2008).

In addition to his discussion of observations about enhanced perception to explain clairvoyance, Liébeault’s ideas about dissociation and automatisms show that he was part of a French intellectual tradition in which accounts of mediumship and other phenomena could be explained through conventional principles assuming the normal functioning of the human mind. Such tradition has been discussed by Le Maléfán (1999) and includes many other individuals such as the well-known Pierre Janet (1889).

However, Liébeault’s observations with Camille, show that he was willing to consider the existence of mental suggestion-at-a-distance which was otherwise unexplained by conventional mechanisms. He may not have been in the same camp as Richet and Myers, but neither was he fully with those who believed solely in conventional explanations.

Concluding Remarks

While Liébeault’s cases were interesting and his observations were consistent with those of other authors, there is no evidence to suggest that he conducted systematic studies of these phenomena. In fact, his writings about psychic phenomena represented only a

fraction of his intellectual work. Nonetheless, they are an example of the overlap that existed between hypnosis and the supernormal during the nineteenth-century. The work of Beaunis, Janet, and Richet provide other important examples. Such an overlap reflected common interests in the potentials of the human mind, and in the workings of the subconscious.

Interestingly, not all of Liébeault's discussions about psychic phenomena referred to manifestations he believed could not be explained by known principles. He also wrote about the enhancement of sensory perceptions during hypnosis and about unconscious automatisms. These ideas were consistent with the established science of the era.

In reporting observations of the phenomena that were shunned by the establishment Liébeault was consistent with the attitude that led him to champion hypnosis during his early years before he was discovered by Bernheim and others and brought into prominence. That is, his discussions of psychic phenomena illustrated the same pioneering spirit and independence of mind he showed in his writings and therapeutic uses of hypnosis. Although Liébeault's writings about psychic phenomena were not as influential as those of some of his contemporaries, and regardless of the skepticism modern students of hypnosis have for seemingly psychic phenomena, he should be remembered as one of those figures who, on occasion, "walked" the borderline of hypnosis and psychical research.

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Footnotes

¹The standard study of the SPR in the nineteenth-century is Gauld (1968). On SPR work and theory on hypnosis and dissociation see Alvarado (2002) and Gauld (1992, pp. 389-400).

²Later publications included a revised edition of the 1866 book (Liébeault, 1889), a discussion of the use of suggestion for therapy (Liébeault, 1891) and for other purposes (Liébeault, 1895). Carrer (2002) has translated some of Liébeault's writings to English.

³This was a reference to José Custodio de Faria (1756-1819) and James Braid (1795-1860). On the work of these men see Gauld (1992, pp. 273-277, 279-287).

⁴On these schools and the controversies generated see Crabtree (1993, pp. 164-168), Gauld (1992, pp. 324-336, 353-356) and Nicolas (2004).

⁵Liébeault received a medal (Leroy, 1899), and his memory was honored in a meeting of the Société de Hypnologie et de Psychologie (Bulletin, 1904, p. 1). After he died there was a ceremony to present a bust of him that involved the attendance of many personalities involved with hypnosis and psychotherapy and the delivery of speeches, the reading of a poem, and a banquet (Inauguration, 1906).

⁶Other hypnosis researchers and therapists such as Beaunis, Bernheim, Féré, Janet, Liégeois, and Schrenck-Notzing were also corresponding members of the SPR (List of Members and Associates, 1889).

⁷See also Beaunis' (1914) report of observations in which Liébeault was present. On Camille S. see Carroy (1991, pp. 82-84) and Liégeois (1889, pp. 325, 702-709). The latter wrote: "Camille S. . . , 18 years [of age], is a very good somnambulist; M. Liébeault and I have known her for close to four years" (pp. 702-703). An abstract of a conference presentation on the topic appears in Liébeault (1897).

⁸For another case see Liébeault (1891, pp. 284-285).

Author's Note

Research for this paper was funded by a grant from the Society for Psychical Research (London). I am grateful to Nancy L. Zingrone for editorial suggestions to improve this paper.