

Is Belief in Spiritualism  
Ever Evidence of Insanity Per Se?

BY

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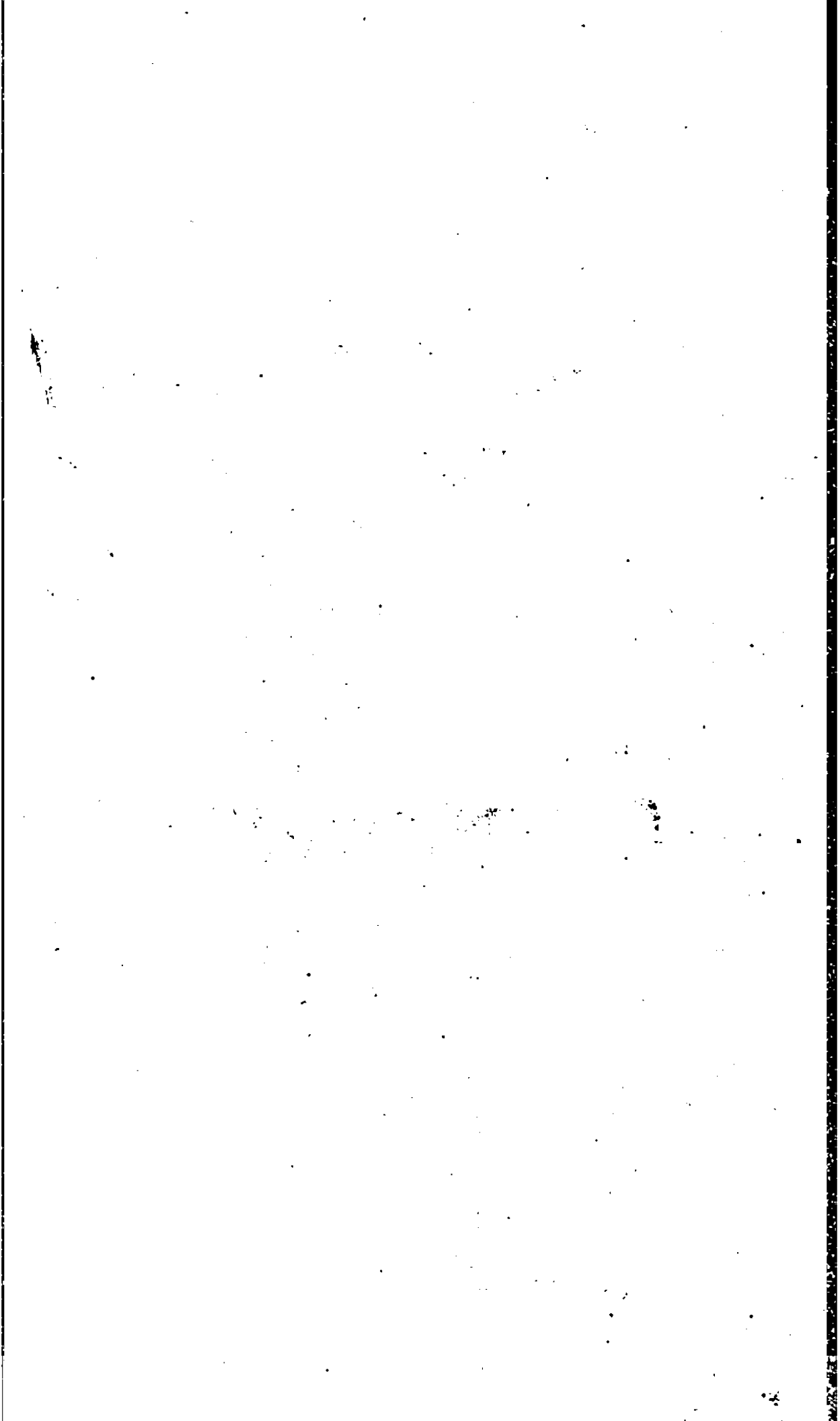
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## IS BELIEF IN SPIRITUALISM EVER EVIDENCE OF INSANITY PER SE?

BY MATTHEW D. FIELD, M.D.

Read at the June Meeting of the Medico-Legal Society.

**M**UCH interest has been recently shown by the public in this question. The developments that resulted in placing certain persons in the Tombs, and their indictment, have led people to ask what is the mental condition of one of their prominent believers, who had given a large amount of property to place the "Science" on a sure foundation. Is this gentleman capable of filling a position of trust, requiring skill and judgment? Was his firm belief in the reality of the manifestations that he saw evidence, in itself, of mental degeneration, of defective judgment sufficient to indicate insanity?

A will contest is now going on in an adjoining State, where it is claimed that the testator was influenced by spirits, and acted in accordance with information that he received from the unseen world.

Last year I was a witness in a case where the the testamentary capacity of a gentleman, who died leaving a large fortune, was attacked before the Supreme Court in this State. Besides other evidences of insanity, it was shown, during the course of the trial, that this gentleman had for some years previous to the execution of the will been in the habit of receiving communications from the dead, and from the living whom he knew to be many miles distant at the time; that he conferred and advised with these spirits upon matters of business; and also that his actions were governed, in certain instances, by these spirit communications. It was also shown that this gentleman's second wife was a spiritualist, and had written quite extensively upon that subject. The lawyers for the defence attempted to

ignore all other evidences of insanity except those of his conversing with the spirits, and, of course, held that belief in spiritualism was no proof of insanity.

Examinations of medical literature show very little that has a direct bearing upon this question.

In this case I held that it was necessary to divide the question, or, rather, to classify the believers in spiritualism.

Those who have an abstract belief in the communion of spirits I did not consider at all; for no abstract belief is evidence of insanity *per se*, no matter how absurd it may be. And again, as most religions treat of a future life, and of the participation of the soul or of the spirit in the enjoyments or miseries of the hereafter, and that spirits have communion one with another, it is but a step to believe that spirits may return to this earth. As is related in the Bible, Elias and Moses appeared unto Christ when he was accompanied by Peter and James and John. It is only when the individual himself participates that insanity may be suspected. In insanity the ego is always involved. People may believe that God can talk to us; this may be, to some, the most reasonable belief, or, to others, the most absurd. The belief that He can, or cannot, speak to us here assembled has naught to do with insanity; but, if an individual states to you, in sober earnest, that he hears God speaking to him, and his actions show beyond peradventure that he does believe this, then we question his sanity. For, even though we believe God may talk to us, and that He did talk to Moses and many others in the Bible times, yet this introduction of the ego convinces us of mental alienation. We may believe that the ass spoke to Balaam, and assume that it is so simple because the Bible says so, and accept the Bible as sufficient authority for our belief, and we may believe that God can make any beast speak; but, at the present time, if a person says, and evidently believes, that a beast was talking to him, we think he is insane, and we think this because the ego participates. Therefore, leaving the belief in spiritualism in the abstract out of the question, we come to the consideration of the so-called spiritualist, and of these I make three classes:

First, those who make it a business to delude and mystify, i. e., the so-called mediums.

Second, those who attend seances, and are deluded and mystified; being caused to see curious things, as hands and faces of the dead; or faces produced on virgin canvas, apparently by unseen agencies; or hear rappings and voices, and receive written communications in the same inexplicable manner; and things are told them that they supposed nobody else knew but themselves. By these things are they so astonished, and so incapable of understanding how they could be accomplished except by supernatural agency, they believe; but this class never receive these manifestations, nor see the dead, except through the instrumentality of members of the first class.

This class embraces a large number who are, undoubtedly, of weak mind; those who are superstitious, and of an unstable and neurotic organization; and those who require but a slight cause to render them insane. Yet many persons of fine intelligence and of brilliant mind are found in this class. There would not be sufficient in this belief alone upon which to base an opinion of mental incapacity.

In the third class I would place those who actually believe that they see the dead, and those at a distance, face to face in the material form, and that they communicate with them, hearing their voices distinctly and clearly. All of this class I believe to be insane; at least, of the large number that have come under my observation, I never saw one who did not demonstrate his insanity in other directions as well.

It may be a very difficult matter, in some instances, to distinguish between the first and third classes; but I think the rule would hold good in every case. The difficulty would be to determine what individuals actually *believed*, and what ones only assumed and claimed to believe for the purpose of deception, gain, and self-glorification.

To distinguish between these two groups is very important, for one set is deserving of pity and kind care, and the other of reproach and punishment. This distinction once made, it is an easy matter to determine the treatment each class deserves.

In the middle class, or those who, after attending seances and being mystified, believe, many will be found who are insane, and those who are of an unstable and neurotic organization. Yet I am sure no one would consider that belief, under such circumstances, would be evidence of insanity *per se*. The communications, materializations, and other manifestations, are always received through the instrumentality of members of our first class. The perceptions, under such circumstances, are real; there is an actual external object produced in some manner by the so-called medium. The belief in supernatural production, and that the communications received are actually from the dead or those at a distance, is delusion, beyond doubt; yet this false belief cannot be justly considered an insane delusion. However, such belief, taking strong possession of an individual of mature years, of acknowledged good judgment, whose intelligence and will had always dominated his emotions, would arouse strong suspicion of mental deterioration. Whenever we discover *alteration* in an individual's mode of thought, actions, and emotions, we are sure of some mental change as well; yet it may be only the beginning, and proper care and treatment may arrest insanity; still, such alteration is always a grave symptom.

This belief, held by persons who we know have always been emotional, superstitious, and fanatical, would be of slight significance, as it would be in harmony with the usual mode of thought of such a one. We have already mentioned that among the middle class are found many unstable and neurotic organizations; these individuals are more easily upset, and become insane from causes that would not affect those with strong and healthy nervous systems. These people are always drawn to everything mysterious and all that appeals to the emotional side of their nature; many minds of this class are unbalanced and destroyed by every public excitement, where the feelings and emotions are thoroughly aroused.

What could more strongly excite the emotions, at the expense of the intellect and will, than a spiritualistic seance, with its dim and ghastly light, the expectation of super-

natural communication, being often startled and astonished by what is seen and heard? Much insanity is unquestionably caused by this means; and, I believe, great misery and distress results from every outbreak that brings this subject prominently before the public.

I must, in justice, say that the delusions of many insane take the direction of spiritualism, where spiritualism itself had really nothing to do with the production of insanity. An insane person may believe that the spirit of Abraham told him to sacrifice his child, and he acts in accordance with this command. Another is told by the spirit of his dead child to reward people in this world for kindness done him while living, and he does as requested. A third hears the voice of God, proclaiming him to be the second Christ.

The insanity, in each of these causes, may have come from the same cause; and that cause may have been masturbation. The false belief following, and being dependent upon, false perceptions; that is, an individual of diseased brain has an hallucination; by this I mean a sensory hallucination; an involuntary preception, without corresponding external object. If the false perception be, as in the cases cited, that of hearing, the insane individual does, as a sane person would do, tries to explain how this voice reaches him. He fails to do one thing that a sane man would do, namely, correct the false perception by the other senses, and by his intelligence. But, notwithstanding that he fails to correct the false perception, he nevertheless tries to explain, and does explain to his own satisfaction. He does not see the individual who is speaking, and he looks to some mysterious agency. One satisfies himself that it is the spirit of Abraham; the second, that it is the spirit of his dead child; and the third, that it is the voice of God. A fourth might believe the voice was that of a witch; and a fifth, that it was a telephone. Had there been no spirit, God, witch or telephone known to the world, these people would all have become insane, had hallucinations of hearing, but would have explained them in some different way, and have built up some other delusion, in accordance with the other explanation. It is quite probable that the larger

number of persons, who I place in my third group, and who I would consider insane, may never have been believers in spiritualism, and never have attended a seance in their lives. They first become victims of hallucinations of the senses, and these false preceptions become fixed beliefs, and the delusions were founded upon these; the spiritualism being only the means of explanation to their own minds. After they have once turned their thoughts to the subject, they dwell thereon, and their disordered brains build up new and more elaborate delusions in that direction. Whatever subject there may be most prominent in the community at a given time, which has about it the greatest element of mystery, will most likely shape the direction of insane delusions at that particular time. A few years ago, and very often now, the telegraph, telephone, and electricity played a large part in the delusions of the insane, and spiritualism has been correspondingly less prominent, and witchcraft insignificant. To illustrate how easily delusions may be built up from sensory hallucinations, I can state that I have seen at least a score of insane people who believed that Mr. Jay Gould was persecuting them; the steps in the foundation of this delusion in these cases were as follows: First, the hallucination of hearing; second, explanation must come by telephone; third, Mr. Gould controls all the telegraphs and telephones, and it must be he who is persecuting them.

The eminent editor of the *Alienist and Neurologist*, in the latest number of that periodical, after quoting freely from a recent sermon of the Rev. Dr. Talmadge on "Spiritualism and Insanity," observes: "The superintendents of American and foreign asylums for the Insane will bear out this theologian's statements that spiritualism makes many lunatics, and the counter-statement that lunacy makes spiritualists. . . . All alienists must concede from observation that spiritualism has destroyed some of the brightest intellects."

It hardly seems necessary to devote much time to the consideration of my reasons for considering all of those insane who would come under my third class. I restricted



this class to those who actually believe that they see the dead, and those at a distance, face to face, in the material form ; and that they communicate with them, hearing their voices distinctly and clearly. Here I would emphasize the actual belief in the reality, and the fact that this class see and hear by themselves when not aided by any medium or second person. These individuals are the victims of well-defined sensory hallucinations ; and that, as they actually believe in their reality, it is evident that they do not correct their false perceptions by other senses, or by their intelligence, but rather build up a distinct false belief. I can imagine that my legal friends are running over in their minds many questions that they would like to ask on cross-examination of one expressing these views upon the witness stand, as they have in their minds so many examples of hallucinations occurring in the illustrious men of great intellect—as Martin Luther, when he threw the ink-stand at the devil ; Goethe, when he saw his own shadow walking before him ; Sam Johnson, when he heard his mother's voice calling him "Sam," when she was miles away. These examples might be greatly multiplied ; but we have only to reply to this that, while certain illustrious men have become insane with sensory hallucinations as among the most marked manifestations of their insanity, others being subject to hallucinations have been able to correct these false perceptions, in the reality of which they never had a fixed or permanent belief.

