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FREDERIC MYERS AND THE SUBLIMINAL SELF

BY

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I

One of the deep excitements of a life in psychical research is the opportunity to talk about Frederic Myers: the man, his ideas, his temperament, his achievements, his place in history; to inquire how his challenging theories sprang from the heart and mind of an extraordinary human being.

We shall represent Myers first in his social context. And this is going to mean roughly the Darwinian period, the Gilbert and Sullivan period, the mid-Victorian period. What an extraordinary period! In the 1880's the Society for Psychical Research as well as the *Pirates of Penzance* came into being. We must remember that Myers was a Victorian, a "second Elizabethan" in a sense, and that he belonged to an era of great cultural intensity in which the universities had an extraordinary opportunity to give proper leadership to the lively, ever-strenuous, confident, out-reaching attitude which belonged to the science, the art, the culture of the period. I suppose the evolutionary spirit would be the thing that would strike the scholar first, because Darwin and, above all, the implications of Darwinism marked the conception of human progress.

Frederic Myers, born in 1843, offers us the picture of a boy reaching out eagerly, idealistically, confidently, to face the new winds of doctrine which were then everywhere to be encountered. Although protected by the idealism of the clergyman's family into which he was born, he plunged almost immediately, after the first years of naive belief in inspired or traditional religion, into the doubts of the period. We have a fragment in an autobiographical study which I think is appealing: the pity and the sympathy which Myers, as a small child, felt for the animals around him as he saw them suffer and die. Once, he tells us, he came upon a little mole that had lost its life under the wheels of a cart. He comforted himself with the thought that its soul would find its way to heaven. When his mother explained in candor that the poor creature had no soul and would not live again, Frederic burst into tears of helpless despair (12, pp. 7-8; 1, pp. 39-40).

This paper is based on a lecture given by Dr. Murphy at a meeting of the Society held on January 26, 1970.—Ed.

This conception of Myers as belonging to an age of turmoil and challenge, a world that was beginning to take religious comfort away from mankind, and his desperate need to persuade himself that there could be a life—even for a little mole—beyond death, gives us a feeling of the nineteenth-century struggle to make sense out of the picture of a confusing and frustrating world which science in general and Darwinism in particular were painting.

Myers' education consisted essentially of what a gentleman would receive in a prosperous stratum of British life at that time; and when we learn that he was a Cambridge scholar, everything seems to fall into place. He was known for both his poems and his prose writings, expressing a deep adhesion, a deep sense of attachment to the great classical tradition.

What would the young English aspirant, eager to understand human nature and its ultimate destiny, as far as science can find answers to such questions, expect the university to offer? What was there to be had at Cambridge? There was, of course, Platonism. You will remember in Plato an earnest confrontation of the problem of the nature of man, the nature of the soul, the possibility of conscious existence independent of the body; learning from Pythagoreans some of the finer points of reincarnationist theory, but also pursuing, in the words that we have received from Socrates through Plato, the feeling that the first evidence for survival lies in the spiritual qualities of man rather than in the type of evidence which the reincarnationist might tend to stress.

At Cambridge, with emphasis on Latin and Greek, there was nevertheless the transition through neo-Platonism to later forms of Greek philosophy, and to the medieval philosophies which finally developed into a dogmatic rather than a gently inquisitive search for survival evidence. The dogmatic position was being generally challenged on the grounds of the fact that science must be a matter of empirical evidence and must displace dogmas—even the beautifully intricate and systematic dogmas of the later Platonism and of the thirteenth-century philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas.

What had happened was that science had been pushed into the position—which had earlier been pre-empted by the Church—of guiding serious people in their attempts to make some sense out of this confusing world. Darwinism offered its picture of progress, the survival of the fittest, and at the same time suggested a quick and miserable doom for all those, whether animals or men, who did not have the ruggedness of body and of mind necessary to make possible successful adaptation to real difficulties in life; and it could of course offer no hereafter. In other words, Myers could not at Cambridge assure himself of the simple, straightforward

answers to life's problems which would have been acceptable in an era less deeply imbued with the meaning of science.

Now there was, of course, in every university, as there is now, a philosophical group which detached itself somewhat from the formal philosophy which the professors offered. And in Cambridge of those days there were undergraduates who wanted to know what the world was all about, as perceived at a late adolescent level of imagination and argument. Myers was sometimes in and sometimes out of these deliberating groups, but he was, as I have already noted, deeply concerned with questions of the adequacy of the Christian religion—especially as known through the Anglican Church—and in this period reached the conclusion, which a great many other young men were reaching, that the Church had only its own authority to stand on and could not command the loyalty of serious thinkers.

II

But during this middle period of the nineteenth century there were two other intellectual factors at work, both of them well represented, for example, in the life of William James, who was going through Harvard and a German education at the same time that Myers was at Cambridge. The first of these factors was a preoccupation with the new kinds of evidence regarding the meaning of human personality coming from medicine and particularly from psychiatry. The French were the leaders in this movement. You all know the story of Freud visiting Paris in 1885 and being impressed by Charcot, the famous clinician and teacher, who suggested that there are psychological forces at work which can cause physical symptoms. The removal of a *psychological* condition can cause a *physical* change—astonishing thought! And in Nancy, the great Bernheim was demonstrating hypnotic techniques and by his skill as a hypnotist was convincing the hard-boiled physicians of the period that it might be possible through manipulating the psychic factors in the individual to remove all the panoply of functional problems in a syndrome loosely termed "hysteria." William James and our young Myers were ready to turn more and more to data such as these, which suggested that instead of relying heavily upon religion, the source most rich and meaningful for understanding the human predicament might lie in recognizing that psychological forces battling it out within the character of the individual could entail physical consequences such as blindness, paralysis, or other types of physical suffering. These, then, were sources of information which a thoughtful young man would take seriously as indicating the enrichment of human

powers through hypnotic suggestion, and at the same time the capacity of such suggestion to remove symptoms which caused distress. But there was more; there was a richer conception of human nature in which *ideas* could really control the body.

The second intellectual factor at work during this period was concerned with a great wave of new religions, most of them offshoots of Christianity. You will think of Swedenborg, of Mrs. Eddy, and later of New Thought. There were literally dozens of these movements, and they were all seeking some new meaning for this seemingly cold, material universe with its dire picture of suffering individuals, most of whom fall by the wayside according to the Darwinian theory of evolving life. The new religions were devices for a quick understanding and a quick inner remaking of the spirit so that the individual, by his new orientation, could feel at one with the deity or the cosmos, and find immediate direction and guidance in his day-by-day life with his fellow men.

In this period of manifold new religions, there was none more important than the spiritualist movement. Organized spiritualism began in the middle of the nineteenth century and developed so rapidly that by the time Myers was at Cambridge it was widely known as one of the comforting forces which offered something practical and realistic by way of a message. There were then, as now, mediums who gave advice concerning both physical and psychical problems; and there were teachings which led on from the popular Christianity of the day to a confident asseveration of a life beyond death. The lack of convincing evidence in relation to the magnitude of the conclusion to be reached did not portend a very favorable situation from a scientific point of view, but to Myers there was a strong attraction and a strong challenge. Perhaps just as hypnosis might give a person new powers, new understandings, might free him of a paralysis, might repeat some of the miracles of the New Testament and make them a part of modern life, so the new spiritualism might have a message to give regarding the presence of meaning in the universe as a whole, and at the same time a sense of continuity with the deceased who were on the other side and capable of communication.

What were the phenomena that made up the spiritualist world to which Myers was subjected as a Cambridge student? There was clairvoyance, the ability to perceive by "second sight" something not visible to the physical eye; telepathy, the transmission of ideas or thoughts or feelings from one mind to another by means other than the normal channels of sense; precognition, the awareness of a future event which could not have been rationally inferred; retrocognition, the direct contact, aside from memory, with past events; and also the more complex phenomena of haun-

tings, poltergeists, and, of course, messages allegedly from the deceased. These phenomena were all a part of the story, even in the early days of organized spiritualism, and they were the bath into which the young Myers was dipped, along with the others who wanted to make as much sense as they could out of such reports.

This, then, was the sort of material which the spiritualists had to offer. And for Myers, as time went on, it began to take shape within the context of the close personal friendships which he established, particularly with Henry and Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, Richard Hodgson, Oliver Lodge, and William James, for it was only in an atmosphere of a collective endeavor that one could make sense out of such a bewildering array of phenomena.

III

Now let us see if we can indicate what the actual world was that Myers felt he was confronting. He was confronting, in the first place, an evolutionary product: these were, he believed, higher phenomena which had emerged. Telepathy and clairvoyance, for example, were powers which represented a higher level of human achievement; instead of being merely vestigial phenomena, they were expressions of a new accretion: something new had been added. And the world of sleep and dreams became a world of imagination and creativity. Genius, the highest level of creativity, was regarded as arising from the same world in which relatively simple and often pathological phenomena also appeared. And what Myers was trying to do, as he worked with the other members of the Cambridge group, was to find a normal way of grouping and categorizing and interconnecting all these strange phenomena of the new psychology, and of the French psychiatry in particular, with the phenomena of the new religious movements such as the spiritualist movement. For Myers, they all began to fall into one unified picture.

Myers began to write almost simultaneously with the founding of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. In his early papers in the S.P.R. *Proceedings* (e.g., 6, 7, 8, 9, 10), he emphasized the phenomena of split-off consciousness, of automatism, as he called it, in which the hand or eye or memory would work independently of the rest of the person. He was beginning to put together the kinds of problems that he saw the French psychiatrists and the spiritualists struggling with, trying to formulate a working conception. In time it became clear that the conception of a deeper, underlying unified self was emerging.

In a recent book (1, Ch. 12), Alan Gauld has reopened the old question whether Myers really did quite literally believe, as a result of all this new evidence, in a subconscious or subliminal mind—something independent of the ordinary, normal mind—which, if it exists, could be used to explain automatic writing or automatic speech or the kind of failure of coordination when we do something quite alien to what we had intended to do, as in slips of the tongue. Did Myers really accept the idea that there is, in addition to our conscious, central, organized personality, a half-conscious or literally sub-threshold consciousness—a kind of consciousness which is below the level of awareness? And did he really believe that by virtue of the presence of many levels, from the clearest down to the most obscure, there may be a rational basis for understanding the automatisms which occasionally appear to act as vehicles for telepathy and clairvoyance? It seems to me that Myers himself answers these questions in the following passages:

I suggest, then, that the stream of consciousness in which we habitually live is not the only consciousness which exists in connection with our organism. Our habitual or empirical consciousness may consist of a mere selection from a multitude of thoughts and sensations, of which some at least are equally conscious with those that we empirically know. I accord no primacy to my ordinary waking self, except that among my potential selves this one has shown itself the fittest to meet the needs of common life. I hold that it has established no further claim, and that it is perfectly possible that other thoughts, feelings, and memories, either isolated or in continuous connection, may now be actively conscious, as we say, "within me," in some kind of coordination with my organism, and forming some part of my total individuality (10, p. 301).

I hold . . . that this subliminal consciousness . . . may embrace a far wider range both of physiological and of psychical activity than is open to our supraliminal consciousness . . . The spectrum of consciousness, if I may so call it, is in the subliminal self indefinitely extended at both ends. . . .

I [believe] telepathic and clairvoyant impressions . . . to be habitually received, not by aid of those sensory adits or operations which the supraliminal self directly commands, but by aid of adits and operations peculiar to the subliminal self, and falling under some system of laws of which supraliminal experience, if standing alone, could give us no information. And I believe that some of these impressions . . . which we include under clairvoyance do in some sense transcend the limitations of time as well as of space within which all supraliminal consciousness necessarily falls (10, p. 306).

Thus, Myers' theory of the subliminal is not a theory of the morbid, although it deals, as William James (3) pointed out in

his review of *Human Personality*, with a realm in which both the morbid and the highly creative can coexist. The works of genius can come along with pitiful, deteriorated, disorganized, non-human types of stuff. The Myers conception is broad enough to be ethically significant, while not insisting that all the materials of the subliminal are ethically significant. It is the structure of the mind and its capacity for functioning at many levels and reaching this broader articulation that is most significant for Myers.

Curiously, the idea of the subliminal, which many of us take as a matter of course, is still hotly debated today by some psychologists. You may say: "But didn't Freud establish the reality of the unconscious?" Yes, but in terms of experimental methods which are regarded as really stiff and adequate to test such a view, some psychologists are not yet certain; it is almost as if we were still walking on the same treadmill as when Myers first presented these ideas. The issues are, in fact, inordinately complicated because what is involved is the notion that there is a kind of consciousness of which we are not conscious. We are conscious of our immediate present surroundings—the people around us, their voices, the evening sounds out there—and many other things at different levels of awareness. Some things are not in consciousness until I mention them, like the pressure of the clothing on one's body or the breeze coming in from the open window, for example. Until these things were mentioned, perhaps they were not in awareness at all, but they can easily be lifted into awareness. The actual status of that which is both conscious and non-conscious is actually partly a metaphysical question and partly an experimental and scientific question. And I think if you get the feeling of Myers as troubled about the nature of all these strange awarenesses and impulses that are often thrown into action without our deliberate intent, you will see why he found it so urgently necessary to dig deeper and to try to get an empirical answer as to what is involved.

IV

It is now time to refer to Myers' great two-volume work, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (11), which he started writing almost as early as 1882, the year of the founding of the S.P.R. It was not quite finished at the time of his death at the turn of the century, but through the devoted labors of his S.P.R. colleagues, Richard Hodgson and Alice Johnson, it finally saw the light of day in 1903.

Human Personality is laid out in such a way that everything seems rather obvious, interrelated, and clear. First we have to distinguish between that which is integrated and that which is automatic. The

term "automatism" is defined by Myers "as expressing such images as arise, as well as such movements as are made, without the initiation, and generally without the concurrence, of conscious thought and will" (11, Vol. I, p. xv). You will note that Myers makes a distinction here between sensory and motor automatisms. The motor automatisms are those which spring from the muscles of the fingers, the hands, the arms; the voluntary musculature is thrown into activity involuntarily in a task such as automatic writing. These motor automatisms are often easier to produce than the sensory automatisms, which involve visual or auditory effects. In the sensory automatisms there may be an image or an articulate sound that comes to mind, as it were, in spite of yourself and without your bidding; this may occur as you fall asleep, or as you awake, or as you gaze into a crystal ball or hold a conch shell to your ear.

While both motor and sensory automatisms may sometimes be self-defeating, they can also lead us on into activities of a very complex order, as in a great novelist's or a great dramatist's realization of a denouement, or the solution of a difficult problem through a sudden integral performance. For example, R. L. Stevenson used to tell his little "brownies," as he called them, to work on a series of story themes. He would then go off to sleep and upon awakening would find that the "brownies" had achieved an intricacy and beauty of plot which he could not possibly, as R. L. Stevenson in his conscious mind, have achieved (17). Or take the celebrated case of H. V. Hilprecht, Professor of Assyriology in the University of Pennsylvania. For many weeks he had struggled to work out the meaning of two fragments of Babylonian agate marked with cuneiform characters. Despairing of finding a solution, he fell asleep one night and in the course of a vivid dream he encountered a priest in his high robes who explained to him that if he would place the two fragments together, he would find the answer to his problem. The next morning he examined the fragments again and to his astonishment found that they did indeed belong together; research carried out several months later in a distant museum proved that they had originally been a part of "one and the same votive cylinder" (13; also cited in 11).

Isn't Myers saying that experiences such as these are *subliminal* and yet at the same time isn't he saying that they are *integrative* in the sense that they bring together the brilliant light of pure consciousness at the highest creative level of genius? Indeed, this is one of the many contradictions, partly verbal, partly conceptual, that still dog us. In the closely similar issues which confront psychoanalysis with regard to the nature of the preconscious, there is also the question of dynamics: Can you say that the ego—the

highest central, organized, directive force of the individual—is responsible for the little furtive activities attributed to the pre-conscious? This question would seem to raise the same complex conceptual and clinical problems which Myers was beginning to struggle with in the 'eighties and 'nineties.

To return to *Human Personality*, there is a chapter on sensory automatisms and one on motor automatisms; there are chapters on disintegrations of personality, on genius, on sleep, and on hypnosis. And there are chapters on phantasms of the dead; on trance, possession, and ecstasy. All these give life to a system of the subliminal which Myers believed constitutes the real extent and range and depth of the personality; they all belong to his one general, unified scheme.

Then we finally come to the adventure par excellence which makes all the earlier passing references to telepathy and clairvoyance seem almost incidental; namely, the task of pulling them together into a conception of human communication. Myers, while writing a book on human personality—on memory, imagination, dreaming, genius, hypnosis—ingeniously allowed all the phenomena of psychical research, the phenomena of telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and all the rest, to slip into the interstices wherever they belonged. For example, a telepathic dream comes easily into the midst of a discussion of the dream as a subliminally guided process. In the same way, the precognitive impression, the clairvoyant vision, are regarded as subliminal phenomena which sneak past a sort of psychic censor, a process similar to that of censorship in the psychoanalytic theory of dreams. There is a process by means of which the hidden material is allowed easy access to a higher level. And you begin to think of the mind, then, as a series of levels, like a series of concentric disks with each smaller one a little higher than the one below it; it is as if you had a tower made of very large disks at the bottom, and then higher and smaller until you finally get a brilliant, shining little orb at the very top. Thus we have, with Myers, a perfectly normal and easy way to slip the telepathic, the clairvoyant, the precognitive into the texture of the same divided, multi-level self.

Now what kind of personality manifestations would we be concerned with at the highest levels of this analysis? We would be concerned with meaningful communication from person to person whenever the message is deep and significant; a message regarding values, regarding ideas, regarding aspects of human living which are most precious. That is what we should be able to communicate through these subliminal strata of our personality. For the ordinary tasks of daily living, it may be sufficient to work with simple, conscious symbolism. But if one is in need of communicating

something vastly significant and broadly human, it may require the use of all the levels at once, so to speak. It may require a telepathic message which is more than a telepathic message.

V

I now want to refer to some experimental work which began to be published in the psychological journals about twenty years ago under the term "subception." The term indicates "subconscious perception," or responses of a perceptual order which are made at a subconscious level: organized, systematic interpretations of the environment despite the fact that the symbols which are being interpreted do not get into consciousness. Now, this kind of problem began to agitate not just psychical researchers, but also experimental psychologists on a rather large scale. I will give you an illustration which I think is quite dramatic:

This is called the "rebus effect." You will all remember that a rebus is a kind of puzzle in which pictures of objects, by the sound of their names, suggest another word: for example, the picture of an Ax followed by the picture of a Cent (penny) is a rebus for the word Accent. If you see the picture of an Ax and then the picture of a Cent, you will think of Accent. Now, what would happen if these two stimuli were presented to you at a subliminal level? What would happen if you were shown the picture of the Ax and the picture of the Cent at a level of illumination so low or at such a rapid exposure that you simply couldn't see anything at all? If, in responding to this, you began to think, say, of people talking with a French accent or a Russian accent, it would indicate that the stimuli had begun to summate or to integrate into a new pattern, though plainly neither the Ax nor the Cent got above the threshold.

A colleague of mine at the Menninger Foundation, Howard Shevrin, with Lester Luborsky, now an analyst in Philadelphia, has been working with the rebus technique for a number of years. The one experiment that appealed to me the most was one that used the rebus Tiny (15). They showed the picture of a Tie (a man's necktie) and the picture of a Knee (the knee bent very sharply as if one were kneeling). The Tie and the Knee were shown at an exposure of only one-fiftieth (in later experiments at one-hundredth) of a second, which is merely a blinding flash. At one-hundredth of a second, no matter what the illumination, you are not conscious of seeing anything meaningful at all. But what happened was that even though the rebus pictures were shown at that exposure, the subjects' images and associations were clearly

related to the rebus. In the light of experimental results like these, it is hard to see how anybody can still deny the reality of subliminal perception.

VI

So Myers was concerned with the subliminal, the below-threshold self, the kind of self which we all represent as deeper than the conscious thoughts that go through our heads all the time. From 1882 on, he was constantly working on this central problem at the same time that he was working on dozens of related problems. He was working and writing on telepathy and clairvoyance, precognition and retrocognition, on apparitions and hauntings; on communications coming from distant living persons and on those which purported to come from the deceased. And he was trying to build all of these phenomena into one coherent theory or system of ideas regarding the subliminal self.

An outstanding feature of Myers' theory of the structure of the mind is its interpersonal quality; on his view, each individual at a deep subliminal level becomes one with every other individual. As René Warcollier, the French chemical engineer, put it, "We are the electrons in the atom of Humanity" (18). And the principle which meditation in a Hindu or Buddhist or Sufi tradition would stress can find itself resonant to Myers' conception of an interpersonal flow as the basis for self-realization.

Then, of course, the Myers theory of the subliminal has to be extended beyond the limits of the type of communication which is established in the laboratory or the clinic. The theory claims to be significant for all of human communication, both horizontally and vertically. By "vertically" I mean to refer to each level of the mind from its most conscious, brilliant, central point to that which is deeply unconscious or subliminal; and by "horizontally" I mean capable of communication laterally with all our fellow men insofar as we crave such communication.

And it is here that Myers finds a place for possible communication between the living and the deceased. After periods of profound doubt and depression, after a "long struggle to seize and hold the actual truth amid illusion and fraud" (12, p. 40), survival became for Myers a more and more probable reality as he studied the new evidence such as the phenomena of Mrs. Piper, the great medium discovered by William James, who had worked first in this country, then in Great Britain with close attention from the S.P.R., and then again in the United States under the direction of Richard Hodgson (2). The Piper phenomena fitted easily and naturally into Myers' scheme because it seemed to him that the

deep strata of human personality can permit communication not only with the deep strata of other living personalities, but also with personalities no longer involved with the physical soma.

There still remains, however, the question whether the evidence for survival is good enough: Are there enough strong cases, for example, in which mediumistic communications, with their reference to private facts distinctive of the communicator, patently could not be attributed to the knowledge of any living person? Are there enough strong cases which indicate continuing purposeful interactions between surviving personalities? Most of you are familiar with the big breakthroughs in survival evidence such as the Willett and Leonard material (5, Ch. 7) and Ian Stevenson's studies of cases of the reincarnation type (16), all of which challenge the simplicity of the Christian heaven as it was represented a century and a quarter ago in the England in which Myers was growing up. Survival evidence has taken on all sorts of new forms since Myers' day.

But we still have to ask whether there is a strong enough theory of the self, whether it be Myers' theory or any other, to make it meaningful to speak of survival. What could disincarnate existence be like? For a psychologist it is peculiarly difficult to try to make sense out of the conception of a personality minus the entire complex protoplasmic system upon which the sending and receiving of messages depends. And yet, what the Myers theory will *not* do is to crumple up and die simply because it is not in harmony with the laboratory type of biological thinking. The work of biology and physiology is very important, as is the work of psychical research very important. But the psychical research which follows in the Myers tradition does not regard final answers about human personality as coming from any single theory or approach; it attempts a broader view. And new theories in psychical research will have to be ready to consider the survival problem and to ask whether there is anything in the personality as we know it which is independent of the time and space barriers which ordinarily define our physical existence. What aspects of personality are capable of transcending our narrow, competitive individuality in some sort of on-going, permanent quest in which all humanity could be involved?

An interesting speculation, which I have on other occasions discussed, is that in the last months of his life Myers, looking forward eagerly to the encounter on the other side and to the self-discovery which he believed each of us achieves, must have been planning how he could prove his own continuing existence. And in fact after his death there were extraordinary messages purporting to come from him through the automatic writing and other automatisms of

the S.P.R. group of sensitives. You will probably remember reading in our *Journal* or elsewhere the story of these "cross correspondences," as they were called (4). You will also probably remember that through the very "non-classical" Mrs. Piper came a series of communications purportedly from Myers which involved remarkably appropriate replies to questions designed to test his memory of the classics (14).

Frederic Myers' point of view would have been: as Myers was before death, so Myers will be after death, eager to make clear the various depths and levels of human potentiality, and at the same time eager to create a framework broad enough to say something meaningful about the intercommunication, the joint mutual fulfillment of people by one another. The Myers theory is still highly vital and significant for clinical work, for experimental psychology, for psychical research, and for the broadest conception of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of human personality.

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