

COMMENTARY

The Influence of Reichenbach's Concept of Od

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

carlos@theazire.org

Submitted 10/27/12, Accepted 10/31/12

Michael Nahm's (2012) recent article about Reichenbach and his concept of Od, in *JSE* 26:2, Summer 2012, reminds us of important work done in the past that has been forgotten by many current students of psychic phenomena and related topics. I find particularly interesting how the concept of Od influenced a variety of conceptual developments, something I would like to briefly discuss in this Commentary. While Nahm is aware of this, and addresses the issue briefly, he appropriately in my view did not make this the focus of this paper because his purpose was a general overview of Reichenbach for the modern reader.

One of the main influences of Reichenbach was how his work was used by others to develop and support the development of unorthodox concepts of force in relation to psychic phenomena, a model that existed before in the mesmeric movement and in other contexts. A prominent example of this was how Reichenbach's Od was one of the inspiring factors behind the development of ideas of forces to explain physical manifestations such as those associated with mediums during the beginnings of spiritualism. This is clearly seen in American books published during the 1850s in which various authors speculated on the powers of the living medium to explain various mediumistic manifestations. A prominent one was Edward C. Rogers' *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents, Human and Mundane* (1853). Reichenbach's work was used by Rogers repeatedly throughout the book to justify his acceptance of the existence of a new force associated with the nervous system. This was basically a biophysical force coming from the bodies of mediums and others, an idea that allowed him to apply the concept of a non-spirit-based agency to explain spiritualistic manifestations such as movement of objects, raps, and luminous effects. He wrote in his Introduction:

In our researches with regard to the phenomena treated in the following pages, we have found so many of the characteristics of an agent differing so

essentially from those of Electricity and Magnetism proper, and bearing so many of the characteristics of identity with the Odyle of Reichenbach, that we feel forced to admit this identity. (Rogers 1853:20–21)

Rogers also used Reichenbach as a guide to analyze several cases, such as the so-called electrical girl Angélique Cottin, a once-well-known poltergeist case, in whose presence objects were reported to move (Owen 1864, Tanchou 1846). In his view the attraction and repulsion phenomena of Cottin followed Reichenbach's ideas of polarity. He also related Od to the phenomena of the divining rod (p. 272).

The concept of Od was also important to support the notion of forces responsible for mediumistic phenomena in other writings (e.g., Guppy 1863, Mahan 1855). An interesting example of the centrality of Od in speculations of this sort were the ideas of physician B. W. Richmond presented in his book with Samuel B. Brittan *A Discussion of the Facts and Philosophy of Ancient and Modern Spiritualism* (Brittan & Richmond 1853).

The Od-force of Reichenbach [wrote Richmond] comes to our aid in the "modern mysteries." It is an imponderable fluid The human body having it in abundance transmits it to inanimate matter—the human will having control over it—as easily grasps and impels it, when chairs and tables have been charged with it, as when a muscle or a nerve has been charged with it. (Brittan & Richmond 1853:70)

Such influences were not limited to the United States. Od made its way to the writings of individuals in other countries. Examples in England and in Germany were Herbert Mayo (1851) and Carl du Prel (1899/1907), respectively. The latter, who was discussing the subject in the later part of the nineteenth century, believed that: "The key of magic is in animal magnetism, what Reichenbach has designated with the name of *od*. It is the *physics of magic* . . ." (du Prel 1899/1907:13). In his view Od accounted for psychic phenomena and other manifestations.

The influence of Reichenbach was also evident in France in the work of Albert de Rochas. In fact, de Rochas greatly popularized Reichenbach's work in France in several books (de Rochas 1887:45–50, 1891, 1895:2–5, 189–190). A presentation of Reichenbach's lectures was preceded by various essays authored by de Rochas introducing the Baron and presenting a discussion of those who conducted work relevant to his.

Like Reichenbach, de Rochas believed Od was a vital principle related to the human body. He wrote in *Le Fluide des Magnétiseurs*:

The odic movement, called a *current*, comes mainly from the brain, descends down through the nerves of the face and goes to its corresponding branches. Finally, it is exhaled in the air, rendered sensible by impressions of heat and cold that it causes on the sensitives, is made visible in the form of effluvia in plain day, and as lights in darkness. The whole body seems bright; the head seems to have an aureole; the hands, the fingers, and the toes throw long streams of odic light. (de Rochas 1891:104)

Reichenbach's Od was an important part of the context in which de Rochas (1895) conducted his well-known studies of the exteriorization of sensibility. In a later work entitled *Les Frontières de la Science*, de Rochas (1902) discussed the concept of a psychic force and Reichenbach's work and referred to him as "the man who is, without any possible comparison, the one who has studied the issue with the most care and talent" (de Rochas 1902:29). He organized the discussion of psychic forces in sections about the precursors of Reichenbach, Reichenbach's work, and Reichenbach's successors. Interestingly, de Rochas also related Od to the astral double (de Rochas 1906).

Spiritualists received the gospel of Od in different ways. Some were not convinced that it had the explanatory power to account for spiritualistic manifestations in the way Rogers, Mahan, and others suggested, as was the case of Samuel B. Brittan (Brittan & Richmond 1853). Others had different views. One of them stated:

Mediumship seems to depend upon the presence in, and evolution from, the persons of its subjects, of a very subtle fluid—that which the German Von Reichenbach calls "human-od." When this "od" is electrical or negative, the party becomes a rapper or "physical medium." When it is positive or magnetic, the subject is a trance or mental medium of some sort . . . (Randolph 1860:27)

John W. Edmonds wrote about the existence of an electric body, a principle bridging the soul and the physical body. According to Edmonds: "In the earth-life its presence is manifested by that odic light of which Reichenbach speaks . . ." (Edmonds 1874:119).

In later years French spiritist Gabriel Delanne (1900) discussed Reichenbach's Od. He implied that such a principle was consistent with spiritist teachings. In particular he referred to the idea that spirits of the dead cannot act on matter without taking the "necessary force from a living being" (Delanne 1900:641). This force, Delanne said, was visible to "the *sensitives* discovered by Baron Reichenbach, and by some magnetic or hypnotic subjects . . ." (Delanne 1900:641).

Reichenbach's work served yet another function. A small group of people utilized Reichenbach's work to argue for the power of the mind to create illusory phenomena, a topic discussed before in relation to mesmerism and other phenomena. The individuals in question saw the performances of Reichenbach's sensitives as the product of suggestion and expectation. This was the case of James Braid in *The Power of the Mind Over the Body* (1846). As he wrote:

But it is an undoubted fact that with many individuals, and especially of the highly nervous, and imaginative, and abstractive classes, a strong direction of inward consciousness to any part of the body, especially if attended with the expectation or belief of something being about to happen, is quite sufficient to *change the physical action of the part, and to produce such impressions from this cause alone, as Baron Reichenbach attributes to his new force.* Thus every variety of feeling may be excited from an *internal or mental* cause . . . (Braid 1846:6)

Later writers—Thomas Laycock (1851:389), William A. Hammond (1870:240), and William B. Carpenter (1877:31), among others—presented variations of Braid's ideas assuming the influence of suggestion and expectation. Henri Beaunis (1884:197) stated that Reichenbach's tests showed the "influence of imagination, or, better, of a dominant idea in the production of sensations . . ." However, the discussions presented by those men were less detailed than Braid's.

In summary, like the theoretical construct of animal magnetism, Reichenbach's concept of Od had many influences and uses. It provided the basis for speculation about a physical force to account for spiritualistic phenomena, and it inspired many to develop the idea of imagination to account for the unexplained perceptions of luminosities. The discussions and reactions to the concept of Od affected the conceptual development of spiritualism and psychical research.

CARLOS S. ALVARADO
carlos@theazire.org

References

- Beaunis, H. (1884). *Recherches Expérimentales sur les Conditions de l'Activité Cérébrale et sur la Physiologie des Nerfs* (Volume 1). Paris: J. B. Baillière.
- Braid, J. (1846). *The Power of the Mind Over the Body: An Experimental Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Phenomena Attributed by Baron Reichenbach and Others to a "New Imponderable."* London: John Churchill.

- Brittan, S. B., & Richmond, B. W. (1853). *A Discussion of the Facts and Philosophy of Ancient and Modern Spiritualism*. New York: Partridge & Brittan.
- Carpenter W. B. (1877). *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c.: Historically & Scientifically Considered*. London: Longmans, Green.
- Delanne, G. (1900). Les recherches de Reichenbach et la science moderne. *Revue Scientifique & Morale du Spiritisme*, 5, 641–648.
- de Rochas, A. (1887). *Les Forces Non Définies: Recherches Historiques et Expérimentales*. Paris: G. Masson.
- de Rochas, A. (1891). *Le Fluide des Magnétiseurs*. Paris: Georges Carré.
- de Rochas, A. (1895). *L'Extériorisation de la Sensibilité: Étude Expérimentale et Historique*. Paris: Chamuel.
- de Rochas, A. (1902). *Les Frontières de la Science*. Paris: Librairie des Sciences Psychologiques.
- de Rochas, A. (1906). New experiments relative to the astral body and magnetic "rapport." *Annals of Psychical Science*, 4, 120–125.
- du Prel, C. (1907). *La Magie: Science Naturelle*. Liège: H. Vaillant-Carmanne. [First published in German 1899]
- Edmonds, J. W. (circa 1874). *Letters and Tracts on Spiritualism* (edited by J. Burns). London: J. Burns.
- [Guppy, S.] (1863). *Mary Jane; Or, Spiritualism Chemically Explained*. London: John King.
- Hammond, W. A. (1870). The physics and physiology of spiritualism. *North American Review*, 110, 233–260.
- Laycock, T. (1851). Odyle, mesmerism, electro-biology, & etc. *British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review*, 8, 378–431.
- Mahan, A. (1855). *Modern Mysteries Explained and Exposed in Four Parts*. Boston: J. P. Jewett.
- Mayo, H. (1851). *On the Truths Contained in Popular Superstitions* (third edition). Edinburgh: William Blackwood.
- Nahm, M. (2012). The Sorcerer of Cobenzl and His Legacy: The Life of Baron Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach, His Work and Its Aftermath. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 26, 381–407.
- Owen, R. D. (1864). The electric girl of La Perrière. *Atlantic Monthly*, 14, 284–292.
- Randolph, P. B. (1860). *The Unveiling: Or What I Think of Spiritualism*. Newburyport: William H. Huse.
- Rogers, E. C. (1853). *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents, Human and Mundane*. Boston, MA: J. P. Jewett.
- Tanchou, S. (1846). *Enquête sur l'authenticité des phénomènes électriques d'Angelique Cottin*. Paris: Germer Baillière.