

COMMENTARY

On Marc Thury's *Les Tables Tournantes*

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

carlos@theazire.org

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I was glad to see a discussion of table turning in a recent issue of the *JSE* (29:4, Winter 2015) in which the author mentioned the work of various pioneer investigators, among them Marc Thury (Gimeno 2015). Because Gimeno only mentioned this work briefly, and due to the few discussions of Thury's work in the contemporary literature (such as Evrard 2016:82–84), I will summarize selected aspects of the work in these brief comments. According to Yung (1906), Marc Thury (1822–1905), born in Switzerland,

was a quasi-universal savant, at times an engineer, a mechanic, an astronomer, a physicist and metaphysician, a botanist, a physiologist and sociologist . . . His curiosity was immense and his aptitudes incredibly varied. (Yung 1906:3)

In *Les Tables Tournantes Considérés au Point de Vue de la Question de Physique Générale qui s'y Rattache*, Thury (1855) discussed his observations of table turning, as well as some theoretical concepts. He wrote in his Introduction that regarding table phenomena there was, for scientists, but one alternative. One could reject the claims “in the name of common sense and the results achieved by science . . . as puerile games” not deserving serious attention (Thury 1855:5). Or, one could study the facts in detail to evaluate the “causes of illusion with which the public is deceived; separate the truth from the false, and shed full light on all sides of the phenomenon, physical, physiological, or psychological . . .” (Thury 1855:5).

One of the main purposes of his book is to present the results of Thury's table turning studies, with and without contact with the hands of the sitters. He was convinced that movements took place in the latter condition. On one occasion:

Five people sitting around a light table, holding their hands three quarters of an inch above the top: The table turned. The test was repeated several times with the same success. We ensured with the light that no finger rested on the top, and also watched the feet. (Thury 1855:16)

There were other attempts to ascertain that the sitter's fingers were not touching the table. Sometimes, Thury wrote, "we saw the table was set in motion, without us being able to catch the slightest touch of the fingers" (Thury 1855:16).

Thury also used instruments to measure the force necessary to move the table. This, and other results, are summarized by Flammarion (1907: Chapter 7). Thury (1855) wrote:

Rubbing of 5 fingers 150 grams of traction. Insufficient, since it must reach the number of 2,000 to 3,000 grams.
 Pressure of 5 fingers 150 grams of traction. Insufficient.
 Pressure of 10 fingers. 1,000 grams of traction. Insufficient.
 The unperceived rubbing of at least 70 to 100 fingers, or the involuntary pressure of at least 20 to 30 fingers, must be supposed, inadmissible suppositions. (Thury 1855:55)

A later section covered topics such as aspects relating to the hypothetical force causing the table movements. Forming a chain by using the hands of the sitters produced good results. As stated by Thury, this worked for de Gasparin (1854), but it was not clear if it was essential. Also, several operators seemed to be necessary. Nonetheless, this did not seem indispensable, "but only a way to increase the force" (Thury 1855:26).

There were also discussions about explanatory concepts. Fraud and electricity, as well as other bodily emanations, were considered and rejected. Unconscious movements, the author was clear, could not explain movements without contact.

The issue of contact was also assessed by putting a layer of flour on the top of the table while movements were produced with hands placed at a distance from the table. But the flour was not affected (Thury 1855:17).

Thury did not accept spirit agency. Referring to communications obtained via the tables, he wrote that "the intervention of spirits could be concluded from the content of the revelations, in case that their content would be such that it could not come from the human soul" (Thury 1855:46). Thury stated, however, that his concern was with physical manifestations.

Emphasis on human agency was clear in Thury's accounts of the experiences of a man referred to as N., who had table seances in his home in which children participated and communications were received. A child

who had been present in some successful seances experienced strange phenomena while receiving a piano lesson. A strange sound came from the piano, which also moved, causing the child and the piano instructor to leave the room. Later, N. was present during a lesson and he also heard the sound (musical and metallic) and saw that the two front legs of the piano were lifted, phenomena that were repeated for 15 days when the child was sitting by the piano. It was stated that the child did not want the phenomena. However, in Thury's view, the issue was not one of lack of a conscious will or intention. He wrote that "sometimes our being splits, talks to itself (dreams), desires unconsciously what it does not want . . ." (Thury 1855:24).

Although Thury separated his own ideas from those of animal magnetism and the like, his explanatory principles were still part of the tradition of unorthodox concepts of force used by many to account for physical phenomena (e.g., Alvarado 2006). Various versions of such ideas were common in writings about table turning, among them those of de Gasparin (1854). The latter speculated that the movements of the table were caused by a fluid coming out from the sitters. He wrote that it seemed that "the table identifies with us in some way, becomes one of our members, and operates movements conceived by us in the same way that our arms do" (de Gasparin 1854:Vol. 1:96).

Thury speculated about a substance on which the soul could act directly, which he called "psychode." In his view this substance was "susceptible to very simple changes under the influence of the soul" (Thury 1855:44, italics deleted). Thury argued that the psychode was a universal substance particular to the organism that was not likely to come out, except in specific circumstances. "The will acts on the psychode" (Thury 1855:44), and through it on what this substance surrounds.

The concept of the psychode was similar to other ideas about an intermediary principle between a spiritual component and the physical body conceived to explain their interaction (e.g., Kardec 1863). In addition, Thury also argued that the psychode was "a particular state of matter, a state that usually occurs within the sphere of the organism," but which may exteriorize under some states, acting similar to diamagnetism in magnets (Thury 1855:45). He added in a footnote about this state: "We propose to name *ectenice* (. . . extension) state this particular state of the organism . . . in which the soul can somehow extend the usual limits of its action; and *ectenice force* that which develops in this state" (Thury 1855:45).

This is but a short summary of Thury's book, and one that does not cover all its content. But I hope that it will motivate those who read French to study the book itself, which is available online at <http://docnum.u-strasbg.fr/cdm/ref/collection/coll12/id/83677>.

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