

# Researching our Spiritual Nature

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In the endless enterprise of knowledge acquisition, two questions have always engaged philosophers, religious leaders and scientists of all times in a quest for answers. They are: “*How is the world made?*” and “*Is there life after death?*”[1]. An astonishing progress has been achieved in the understanding of our observable universe by searching the answers to the question “*How is the world made?*” through rational inquiry followed by scientific observations and data analysis. However, the answers to the question “*Is there life after death?*” have been mostly restrained to different religious beliefs where, in most cases, dogmas prevail over reason and spirituality remains largely disallowed to scientific examination. Nonetheless, there have been a number of successful scientific programs that greatly contributed to our understanding of the spiritual nature of human beings, some of which will be briefly described in this article.

The first attempts to scientifically address the survival of the soul after death occurred in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The famous episode of the Fox sisters, which took place in 1848 in the small town of Hydesville, NY, triggered the first studies involving allegations of communications from a disembodied soul. The teenagers Kate and Margaret Fox, after hearing, for months, unexplained rapping noises in their house, claimed to have succeeded in establishing a communication with the source of those sounds. Using a code based on the number of knocks, the sisters and many other witnesses were told by the source of the rapping sounds that he was the spirit of a peddler who had been murdered in that house five years earlier. Various scholars submitted the two women to rigorous studies, but the genuineness of the occurrences has never been conclusively disproved. A detailed account of the life of the Fox sisters can be found in [2].

The practice of communicating with spirits by decoding rapping sounds or the unattended movement of small objects or pieces of furniture rapidly became a source of entertainment in the US and Europe. A small group of people sitting around a table with the palm of their hands on top, but not necessarily touching it, enabled the table to move up in the air and down. The members of the group then asked questions that were answered by the table according to a pre-arranged code associating the letters of the alphabet to the taps of the leg’s table on the floor. The phenomenon became known as dancing or turning tables.

In the spring of 1855, in Paris, Hyppolyte L. D. Rivail (1804-1869), reluctantly accepted an invitation to participate in a dancing table experiment. Professor Rivail was an educator who taught math, sciences and French and a scholar who wrote mathematics and French Grammar textbooks as well a number of papers suggesting improvements to the French public educational system. His scientific mind scoffed the idea that tables had the

capacity to think. But after attending one séance and conducting some experiments he was very impressed with the results. When he asked the table how it could think without having a brain and a nervous system, the answer was that it was not the table that was thinking, but the souls of people who once lived on Earth. Surprised and intrigued by this revelation he continued conducting these meetings, asking thoughtful questions in order to exploit the scientific, philosophical and religious aspects of this new reality that it was being presented to him by the spirits. After two years of intensive work, asking questions, compiling the answers and adding his commentaries, he published in 1857 *The Spirit's Book* [3] under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec. This book is the foundation of Spiritism, which Kardec defined as *a science that deals with the nature, origin, and destiny of spirits and their relation with the corporeal world* [4].

The growth of the modern spiritualism movement in England (which started in the US following the events that took place at the Fox family's home) prompted the chemist and physicist Sir William Crookes (1832-1919), a Fellow of the Royal Society, to conduct, in 1870, a series of experiments to investigate the validity of the claims that certain people had the capacity to interact with spirits. He did not believe in these claims and thought that there was a lack of scientific evidence to support them. His research program consisted of submitting different mediums to a number of rigorous tests at his home, where he had total control of the environment, in order to avoid any possible behind the scene preparation by the subjects under study. During four years of experimental work with a number of mediums, including Kate Fox, he observed a variety of extraordinary events that could not be attributed to trickery or forgery. The reports of his experiments were published in *The Quarterly Journal of Science* and they are compiled in the book *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* [5].

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the research work initiated by Dr. Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) in the U.S. represented an important contribution to the understanding of our spiritual nature. Dr. Stevenson was the Director of the Division of Personality Studies of the Department of Psychiatric Medicine of the University of Virginia, where he was also a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry. He and his team collected, for the period of 40 years, detailed documentation about children from all over the world who could remember facts that occurred in their previous lives. The analysis of over 3000 cases revealed a match between the children's descriptions of details of their previous lives (such as their own names, the names of relatives or friends, names of places, occurrences, or the cause of their death) and official documentation and/or spoken reports from those who knew the deceased person alluded by the children. In some cases, children's birth marks coincided exactly with the location of the wound (confirmed by autopsy reports) that caused the death of the person, as reported by those children. The Division of Personality Studies also investigates cases of near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, apparitions and after-death communications, and deathbed visions. Its website [6] contains more detailed information about the research programs as well as a list of publications.

The faculty of mediumship has been used in one of the research programs (called VERITAS) conducted by the Laboratory for Advances in Consciousness and Health of the Department of Psychology at the University of Arizona. The group is led by Dr Gary E. Schwartz and Dr. Julie Beischel and its goal is "to test the hypothesis that the

consciousness (or personality or identity) of a person survives physical death.” [7]. Double and even triple-blind experiments have been performed to analyze communications of mediums who report information from deceased individuals who were emotionally close to persons they call sitters. The level of correctness of the information provided by the medium is assured by the multi-blind method where the mediums, sitters and experimenters have no previous knowledge about the content of the information or the relationship between the deceased person and the sitters. The result of their experiments as well as a list of publications by the VERITAS research program can be found in their website [7].

The studies described above – which are not an exhaustive account of the work done in this area to date [8] – reveal strong and compelling evidence that a human being is not only a collection of organs commanded by the brain, but it also contains an essence (called differently by different researchers: consciousness, spirit, personality, etc) that survives the death of the body. Once disincarnated, it preserves its individuality, its knowledge, its ability to have emotions and think, and is able to interact with matter and other human beings. It also shows that this essence might even reincarnate again in another physical body as a next step in its journey

Unfortunately, fraud in this area is, and has always been, a reality and greatly contributes for the general perception that spiritual phenomena are nothing but a pre-staged set of well performed tricks with the sole purpose of extracting money from credulous and uncritical people. Although true in many instances, the generalization that any spiritual phenomenon is a hoax and that any medium is an impostor is an error that blinds those who refuse to accept the possibility of genuine spiritual manifestations.

In the continual pursuit of knowledge, humankind has diligently and successfully (many times against the religious and political establishment of their times) unveiled the workings and mysteries of nature. It is just a matter of time until the scientific community becomes more receptive to the reality of the spiritual realm as an inherent component of our universe and embarks in the endeavor of deciphering its laws and the mechanisms through which they manifest themselves.

## References

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- [6] <http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/personalitystudies/>
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- [8] To add a few more to the list of studies, see for instance,

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- Society for Psychical Research, <http://www.spr.ac.uk/expcms/index.php?section=1>
- A valuable source of research papers can be found at <http://www.survivalafterdeath.org/articles.htm>.