

ESSAY REVIEW

Two Perspectives on Possession

Possession & Exorcism: Understanding the Human Psyche in Chaos by Hans Naegeli-Osjord. New Frontiers Center, 1988. 186 pp. ISBN 978-0945831013.

The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West by Brian Levack. Yale University Press, 2013. 360 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0300114720.

The phenomenon of possession has a long, complicated history and a dark, unsavory side. Nevertheless, it has persisted in one form or another until present times. The books under review afford two perspectives on demonic possession: psychiatric and historical. Both authors are informed in their respective fields. They are critical writers and agree on a basic factual underpinning of the controversial phenomena. The grounds for this concord lie in the recurrence of the phenomena and the cumulatively large number of recorded witnesses.

Both are aware of the academic prejudice toward the alleged realities of possession. Historian Brian Levack is interested in the historical and performance dimension of the untoward effects, and plays down their ontological strangeness and implications. The Swiss psychiatrist Hans Naegeli is more concerned with these implications, for example, for psychiatry, noting the unhelpfulness of standard materialist outlooks. The books are mainly complementary and affirm the reality of some of the strangest phenomena in the history of psychophysical anomalies.

Naegeli's book was published in 1988, so let's begin there. Concerning a case of possession that ended in the courts, he writes: "I do not doubt at all the possession of Anneliese by transcendental demonic spirits" (p. 132). Naegeli thinks that the evidence for possession cases is evidence for discarnate existence and agency. In his ontology, we find claims not only for ordinary incarnate souls surviving but also for pure spirits and archetypes that act as agents of demonic destruction. However strange this sounds, there are enough stories to make the reader wonder.

On the basis of historical study and on all he has personally witnessed, Naegeli holds that no argument based on the personal unconscious could

account for the sheer otherness of the possessing personality. He was not alone in this view. Raymond Firth wrote in the foreword of *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (1969):

Sometimes it has been hard for the anthropologist to persuade himself that it is really the same person as before whom he is watching or confronting, so marked is the personality change. (p. x)

There are, moreover, specific details that reinforce this impression of otherness. The possessed subject is reported to speak in languages unknown to him or her such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, etc. Known as *xenoglossy*, this is important because language-speaking ability cannot be explained by telepathy or the ingenuity of the unconscious.

The possessed person behaves in ways that are totally alien to his usual self. He (or more probably she) blasphemes and acts out violent loathing of the conventional sacred symbols; is, moreover, tormented by physical contact with them; demoniacs recoil in pain from holy water sprinkled on them (think of actor Bela Lugosi shrinking from the sight of a cross or mirror). The moral otherness of demoniacs *looks like* an invasion from without; to view it as “merely” a revelation of something repressed within is no less uncanny. Can such total antagonists to our normal being really be lurking in our subliminal selves? Another symptom of possession is said to be the preternatural strength displayed by demoniacs. Naegeli thinks that these are earmarks of something intruding itself *from outside into* the possessed person.

He therefore finds the prevailing psychiatric paradigm wanting for a basic reason: It leaves out the psyche and all its peculiar problems. He feels that we need to expand our vision of human personality and also our concept of the healing arts. The demoniac world that Naegeli exhibits is a world in turmoil; the possessed are also the dispossessed, people whose souls have been raped, violated, wounded.

Naegeli and C. G. Jung share the assumption that to understand the human psyche it is best to observe it *in extremis*. Extreme states often reveal the hidden potentials of mental life. Examples would be unexpected moments of inspiration, near-death experiences, and prophetic, shamanic, and mystical states. All these are known to give rise to extraordinary, transformative experiences. Possession is another form of psychic extremism that offers material for reflection. However, it is one that forces us to reflect on the disturbing outer limits of human personality.

The book offers a wealth of German sources for the phenomena, new to Anglophones; and has an excellent foreword by the historian Martin

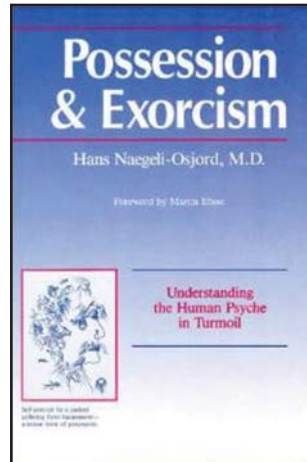
Ebon. Naegeli had various suggestions for how psychiatry might advance; e.g., he emphasized the importance of “subtle bodies” to aid our grasp of demonic influence. He also argues that some forms of possession may be positive, which in turn he linked to the polarity of psychic function. If demonic forces can possess us, why not angelic forces? Naegeli, I should add, witnessed many of the phenomena described in his book. Because of his experience he entertains strong and independent views, but he never comes across as dogmatic or inflexible in his views.

Naegeli’s study led him to acknowledge the power of polarity in the psychodynamics of possession. He inferred two practical points from this. First, the higher the saintly aspiration, the more the Devil is moved to spring into action: Challenges increase as one moves toward perfection. Second, and more general, the polarity is essential to the life of the dialectic, the creative struggle to maintain the balance of opposing forces.

The book has twenty chapters, and is broken down into two parts. The first ten chapters cover the history and modern views of possession, basic ideas like the demonic, good and evil, and the positive forms of possession as noted. Three chapters deal with types and techniques of exorcism. For the psychiatrist this is the heart of the matter: Given the various forms of possession, obsession, harassment, and infestation, the psychiatrist sometimes has to be an exorcist. In Chapter 10, he discusses medical exorcism, Brazilian models, and the method of the American doctor Carl Wickland. Naegeli describes his own method of exorcism, which borrows from Catholic procedures (he’s not Catholic, he says), using, for example, “holy” or blessed water and images and invocations of St. Michael the Archangel.

He discusses the work of Wilson Van Dusen, who developed methods for interrogating the hallucinations of psychotic patients and found there were two types (that seemed to conform to Swedenborg’s model): the common type of low-grade, chattering destructive voices, and the higher, silent archetypal hallucinations that served to guide, strengthen, and encourage patients.

The second half of the book consists mainly of detailed descriptions of possession cases. One of the most detailed was published in 1882 by Pastor Blumhardt of Zürich. A girl, Gottliebin Dittus, was victimized by



hauntings, noises, and blows from burning hands that marked her body; she spoke in different languages; her body became bloated; physicians could not understand why she vomited “buckets” of water, while “unimaginable amounts of blood flowed from body openings and gushed from a point high in the middle of her head” and there were “the repeated emission of crooked, rusty nails, pins, sewing needles and pieces of iron” (p. 73) from her mouth.

Other effects were said to “surpass every human capacity” that involved “paranormal materialization or apport phenomena.” Gottlieb is said to have gone on clairvoyant excursions to Far Eastern countries in which she witnessed and described volcanic eruptions and sea-quakes exactly as they were reported in newspapers days later. I am touching lightly on the actual reports in this one case that surely boggles the imagination, and leave it to the reader’s discretion to confront and ponder the original materials.

As I said, the book provides report after report of truly bizarre possession-related phenomena, many observed by the author, especially cases of “harassment” and “infestation” that are slightly less severe types of possession. (In “true” possession, the mind of the host body is fully expelled, but not in harassment or infestation.) Chapter 13 is titled “Unusual Cases of Possession,” involving groups of boys (the famous Illfurt case) or nuns (of Loudun and other locales). Naegeli concludes there are probably many more hidden cases of the possession type that go unnoticed or unreported because such things are not supposed to be possible according to the then-prevailing outlook.

Our second, historical perspective on possession does nothing to take the edge off Naegeli’s broad claims, despite the different emphasis and approach. I cannot cover the rich detail of Levack’s study, but will make two main points: one on the “symptoms” or characteristics of the alleged possessions, the other on the author’s concept of possession as performance.

In modern secular times, demonic possession is usually explained as the result of fakery or physiological disease. While some cases, or parts of cases, may so be explained, they fail to account for all reported cases. Levack’s book is on possession and exorcism in the Christian West. Broadly, he demonstrates the autonomy and persistence of possession from ancient to modern times, while showing in detail the ways culture and thought-world shape the occurring experience. It makes a difference if the possession is politically implicated with witchcraft or not; if it is experienced through the psychic lens of a Catholic or a Protestant; if it occurs before or after the rise of seventeenth-century mechanist science, and so on.

Chapter 1 gets right to the heart of our concern: It describes the sixteen or so “symptoms” that identify an incident of possession. (Not every case of possession displays all the symptoms.) The term *symptom* and the frequent

use of the term *pathology* are too sweeping and premature, however. A more neutral term like *sign* or *indicator* seems better. And for *pathological*, I would simply say *extraordinary* or *strange*. Pathologizing terminology gives a comforting sense of classification; to say something is an illness can be a way of writing it off.

Levack, however, is no reductionist; but, unlike Naegeli, he is not concerned with exploring the unexplained or truly strange features of possession; therefore, he discreetly brackets the problem, and gets on with the historical issues and complexities that most interest him. But Naegeli is eager to confront and make a sharp detailed issue of the outlandish phenomena. This may have been caused by an appropriate sense of urgency he felt in light of his role as psychiatrist, i.e. as a “soul-doctor.”

Levack’s list of symptoms is consistent with Naegeli’s account of the basic historical facts. Levack is very careful to list all the good reasons for doubting the claims regarding them, but

... authors may have exaggerated the activities they had witnessed or read about, but they had little reason to invent the entire narrative ... accounts of possessions that were witnessed by large numbers of people, sometimes in public venues, must be granted at least a measure of credibility, especially when observers who disagreed on the causes of the demoniac’s behavior did not deny that they had witnessed it. (p. 5)

The sixteen signs of possession may be grouped as changes mainly of physiological function, but also changes of cognitive and of moral function. It appears as if an external force has indeed taken physical and mental control of the possessed person, in the course of which it stretches and deforms her body beyond its normal appearance and capacities. Convulsions are the first indicator of the apparent alien invasion, the effects of being crashed and seized by a massive, unwieldy energy from outside—(or at least, from *down there*, in the subliminal psyche). Subtle and soul-shattering pain is a plausible correlation of convulsions. Demoniacs suffer all manner of hideous pain. One Venetian demoniac called her assailant *La Draga*. Her pain annihilates her. “He eats my guts and destroys my legs and my throat and he takes my memory, and he does not let me eat, and he wishes to kill me” (p. 6).

The next two signs are a team: rigidity of limbs and the muscular flexibility of a master contortionist. The pair indicate a polarity at work, the body’s potential ranging from super-ordinary stiffness to waxy flexibility. The possessing agent seems to be showing off, that is showing mastery over the shape and texture of embodied existence. Another physical symptom is a game-changer—levitation, preternatural lightness, which may also manifest as preternatural heaviness. Demoniacs levitate, but so do their

polar opposites, saints and mystics. In possession states, something seems to be playing with gravity, reducing or intensifying it at will.

Next to this playful treatment of gravity, we're not surprised to learn that another indicator of possession is the acquisition of preternatural strength. For example: "One of the nuns possessed at Auxonne in 1658 was reported to have hoisted a heavy marble vase full of holy water with two of her delicate fingers" (p. 8). As many as five men have proven unable to pin down a possessed girl.

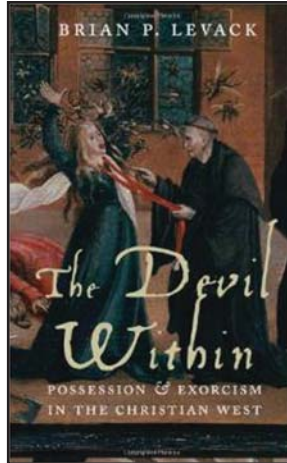
Still summarizing the physical signs of possession, Levack moves on to the more grotesque; and indeed the next two also are connected: swelling and vomiting. More frequent than levitation are reports of demoniacs in Scotland and Mexico whose eyes, tongues, and stomachs swell to the point of deforming them, only to return to normal size at the touch of a relic or holy water. Swelling suggests an alien presence pressing and deforming from the inside out; in the next symptom, the force expels or regurgitates alien objects, commonly pins and needles. However, "the (full) list of ejected substances includes nails, glass, blood, pottery, feathers, coal, stones, coins, cinder, sand, dung, meat, cloth, thread, and hair" (p. 9). Naegeli's study describes the same type of report, which, if real, a parapsychologist would describe as about "apports" or "materializations."

Levack describes another symptom as "loss of bodily function." This is the polar opposite of preternatural strength; the demoniac temporarily loses her sight, hearing, or (often) voice. There may be loss of feeling, hence impassivity to pain; this loss may blend into a kind of catatonic receptivity, in which possession may shade into ecstasy. Sometimes the loss of voice leads to another indicator of possession; a new voice is heard, deep and animal-like, utterly unlike the voice of (say) a young boy or girl. Moreover, the new voices apparently are projected from different parts of the body; from the stomach, for instance, or throat but without any movement of the lips. It is as if the vocal emanations of the organism have temporarily become nonlocal or at any rate been delocalized.

One indicator in particular of possessed states suggests discarnate agency. Demoniacs reportedly speak in languages—Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Polish, etc.—unknown to them. It appears as if an entity that did know how to speak the languages possessed the brain and vocal chords of the demoniac. Conceivably, the entity might be an angel, a demon, or an excarnate human.

The ability to speak in a foreign language is a cognitive sign of possession, to which we may add "trance experiences and visions," a "symptom" also found among enraptured saints and mystics. Also among the signs we find clairvoyance—used loosely to denote a general expansion of the direct outreach of consciousness.

Finally, there are certain dramatically counter-moral indications that behavior is caused by an alien will and force; these clearly give the impression of seizure by an external agency. The possessed demoniacs pronounced curses, blasphemies, heresies, and obscenities; and they recoiled in pain from relics, holy water, or any sacred symbol. These behaviors also seemed to be dramatic proof of the presence of an alien personality. Whether or not that is so is up to the reader to decide; what we can say is that historian and psychiatrist agree on taking seriously an elusive factual basis as somehow underlying all the strange reportage.



Levack shows how the basic phenomenon, although recurrent even to the early twentieth century, is interpreted differently in different cultural milieus—Catholic, Protestant, modern scientific, and so forth. The meaning and dramatic intensity of possession phenomena fluctuate depending on the specific historical context.

Given the historical data, the author develops an explanatory apparatus based on the idea of collective performance art, in which all the players have scripted roles to perform. It accounts, he asserts, for fake as well as authentic cases of possession. His argument is compelling in several ways, and in one way it contributes to solving the mystery of the strange preternatural phenomena we are stressing in this review. To identify effectively with a role one is playing, one must—especially in the “play” of possession—believe, intend, and imagine vividly from the inside the part one identifies with.

But these, interestingly, are the psychological variables associated with superior performance in psi-testing, i.e., the so-called “sheep-goat” effect. According to this effect, people who believe they can succeed in a given psi-task, that is who hope, expect, and can imagine such success, are more likely to succeed than people who do not believe, intend, or imagine that such and such is possible.

The combined testimony of the two books suggests that close to the shadow side of the human psyche may lie unknown realms of power, intelligence, and creativity. The concept of possession is related to the idea of secondary and multiple personality and points, theoretically, toward a more elastic notion of self and personality. The elasticity of self may involve (symbolically) downward and upward movements, reflecting an underlying dialectic. The variations of downward possession would include various

shadings such as obsession, harassment, and infestation (see the last half of Naegeli's book); we may be obsessed or harassed and still possess self-awareness, but the latter is lost in possession.

Naegeli and Levack advert to "positive" forms of possession. It is curious that raging demoniacs shrieking hatred and revolt against the traditional sacred concepts are reported to levitate; while some of the best evidence for levitation also comes from the Catholic saints, morally the polar opposites of the demonically possessed. The mystical are in a rapture of unity with the same God, Madonna, and symbols that torment the levitating demoniacs. Is this a dramatic illustration of what some call the *coincidence of opposites*?

As for positive possession, we might at least say one or two things. There is a sense in which anything that deeply and centrally occupies our attention *possesses* us. We are all in different ways possessed by the world around us—whatever seizes our consciousness: the events, the oppressive or privileged economics, the circumambient imagery (horrid or exalted). The personalities and institutions that rule the culture possess us, dominate our attention, again in varying degrees. We are all more or less possessed by something. Most of the time it is our own ideas and obsessions that possess and dominate us most powerfully.

Not surprisingly, there are many who seek to be possessed by something positive and higher than themselves. There are ways of doing so and books have been written on this. People have discovered—been seized by—or actively engaged the higher, the positive forms of possession, or to use a more positive term, *ecstasy*. One thinks of the tradition of prophecy, about which we know a great deal from the Bible, where the prophet becomes an instrument for the revealing words of Yahweh. This is possession that specializes in speaking truth to power (e.g., in the early twenty-first century, Noam Chomsky and Chris Hedges). In the classical world the oracles and sibyls and pythia were possessed by their various presiding divinities. According to Heraclitus, "The Sibyl with raving mouth, uttering things mirthless, unadorned and unperfumed, reaches over a thousand years with her voice through the god." Possession here is linked to freedom from the constraints of time. More modern mediums have teamed up with psychical researchers to produce and assess evidence for the survival of consciousness; the medium has a gift for being possessed by discarnate agents, with the express purpose of producing proof of their postmortem survival. An important, practical type of possession.

Finally, the entire enterprise of mysticism, as a practice, is tied to the idea of ecstatic release from our everyday self by our divine over-self. Mystical possession seems the most interesting type of possession; the most

attractive, certainly, when compared with the sort known for vomiting pins and needles.

My conclusion from the two studies of possession: The phenomenon (or family of phenomena) represents an unmined mystery of human behavior, which, if we follow the trail, might conceivably take us on a fabulous journey from the inferno to the paradiso of the psyche.

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Reference

Beattie, J., & Middleton, J. (1969). *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*. London: Routledge.