

COMMENTARY

The Ether and Psychic Phenomena: Some Old Speculations

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DeMeo's (2014) article about the idea of the ether in the *JSE* brings to mind the historical relationship of this concept to psychic phenomena.

Much more than a simple physical theory of force, the ether was one of those powerful and overreaching concepts that captured the imagination of both scientists and the general public during parts of the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Centuries (on the concept see Cantor & Hodge 1981). As argued by Asprem (2014:222):

Ether metaphysics provided a worldview that emphasized the immanence of the divine, through the all-encompassing, interpenetrating, but invisible ether. This medium functioned as a kind of "world-soul"; it was the seat of animation in general, the source of life, and also the plane on which much mental functioning was thought to take place.

The metaphysical dimensions of the ether connected the topic to philosophical and religious views, as well as to ideas of the unity of nature, the transcendence of the spirit, and of human faculties. Such issues were discussed by Balfour Stewart and Peter G. Tait (1875) and Oliver Lodge (1925) (on the various dimensions of the ether see Asprem 2014, Noakes 2005, and Wynne 1979), among others.

Several interesting speculations about the ether and psychic phenomena appeared during the Nineteenth Century. For example, magazine editor James T. Knowles wrote in *The Spectator* that assuming the existence of brain waves, these could spread via the ether in such a way that each "brain then would become a centre of undulations transmitted from it in all directions through space . . . with the varying nature and force of brain actions . . ." (Knowles 1869:136). Another writer in the *Melbourne Review* speculated along the same line about the possibility of propagation of thought from one person to another via brain waves. This, it was proposed, made sense supposing "the existence of a medium, analogous to that of the luminiferous ether" (Andrew 1876:109).

Several others had similar ideas. French physician Prosper Despine wrote about the possibility of a distant influence from a neuropathic person to another through the “intermediary of an ether fluid which fills all space, which penetrates all our organs, and which puts us in communication with all the beings of the universe” (Despine 1880:132).

American electrical engineer Edwin J. Houston speculated that:

Cerebral energy . . . is dissipated by imparting wave motions to the surrounding ether, and such waves are sent out in all directions from the brain, possibly in greater amount, or of greater amplitude from some of the brain openings, as, for example, those of the eyes. (Houston 1892:490)

Similarly, the idea of vibrations propagating thought throughout the ether was speculated on by William Crookes (1897).

There are also examples of the use of the concept of the ether in nineteenth century Spiritualist publications. Some examples are as seen in Robert Hare’s *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* (1855:160, 163) and Hudson Tuttle’s *Arcana of Spiritualism* (1871:163). Tuttle expressed in a later book that there was a psychic ether “related to thought, as the luminiferous ether is to light.” This ether, he thought, “may be regarded as the thought atmosphere of the universe. A thinking being in this atmosphere is a pulsating center of thought-waves, as a luminous body is of light.” Furthermore: “All the so-called occult phenomena of mesmerism, trance, clairvoyance, mind reading, dreams, visions, thought transference, etc., are correlated to and explained by means of this psychic ether” (Tuttle 1889:5).

Another writer stated:

We have seen that the ethereal medium interpenetrates all transparent bodies, and probably opaque bodies too. . . . The Spiritual body is said to consist of a subtle form of ethereal matter interpenetrating the material body and bearing a definite correspondence to it. (Bryce 1871:126)

Referring to “ethereal” beings, presumably spirits, Alfred Russel Wallace (1875) speculated on the possibility that they could produce physical and visible effects “drawn perhaps from the boundless ether, perhaps from the vital energies of human beings” (p. 45).

The topic of the ether has also appeared in mediumistic communications. One example is discussions of the cosmic ether (as discussed in physics), and another is spiritual discussions about the attributes of God. The cosmic ether always stayed physical, while the spiritual one could continue to evolve, becoming more refined with time. The interplay between both

ethers, as directed by spirits and by God, “have produced the universe, visible and invisible” (Anonymous 1887).

Ideas of this sort come into the twentieth century, as seen in the writings of individuals such as Oliver Lodge (1919), and were also associated with various branches of occultism, such as Theosophy. My purpose here is not completeness, but a brief reminder of the fact that the ether was more than just a physical concept providing the media for the propagation in space of principles such as magnetism and light. For many thinkers it was a construct with wider implications about the nature of reality and of human beings, a meeting ground for matter and mind, a topic ably discussed recently by Asprem (2014).

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