

DECEPTION EXPLAINED BY THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY

Hereward Carrington

Table of Contents

<u>DECEPTION EXPLAINED BY THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY</u>	1
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The object [of this passage] is to enable the reader to see, more easily, how it is that the watchful observer is deceived into believing that a thing is so, when in reality it is not, and vice versa; and also to give an idea of the various methods employed by the medium in order to accomplish his results.

I must first of all call the reader's attention to one or two rules which every conjurer learns at the commencement of his study, and which he learns to apply so constantly that it becomes second nature to him. The first is: Never let the eyes rest on the hand that is performing the "sleight," but always on the other hand, or on some object on the table or elsewhere, as this will have a tendency to draw the eyes of the audience to that point also. The sitters or audience will always look at the point closely watched by the magician—their eyes have a tendency to follow his, and wherever he looks, there will the onlooker look also. Needless to say, the magician makes use of this fact, and many tricks and illusions are dependent upon it for their successful accomplishment. Whenever the magician or medium looks intently at one hand, therefore, the OTHER hand should be watched, as it is a sure sign that THAT is the hand which is performing the trick.

Another fundamental rule that is observed by all sleight-of-hand performers is: Never to let an audience know beforehand what is to be done; i. e., the nature of the trick that it is intended to perform. If the spectator knew what was forthcoming, he would be on the lookout for movements of the performer at certain critical times—just at the periods when close observation is least wanted—and would quite possibly detect the performer in the act of executing certain movements which would show how the trick was performed. But not knowing what is coming, the spectator is unable to watch closely at the critical moment—not knowing what that moment is—and so is unable to detect the trick, his attention being diverted by the performer, just before this movement is made, to some other object or movement.

The methods of diverting the spectator's attention are various. There is the use of the eyes, as before shown. Then there is the spoken word, the performer telling the onlookers to observe some certain object or action, and the effect is to cause them to watch it, as they are told. They follow the line of least resistance. The combined effect upon the spectator of the spoken word and the eyes together is generally irresistible.

Another important factor is this: A performer should always let any suggestion, right or wrong, soak well into the spectator's mind before attempting to change it. This is for two reasons. In the first place, if the suggestion is correct, if, e. g., the performer really DOES place an object in his left hand, and it is shortly found to have vanished from that hand, he is annoyed by hearing some one say that he was not really sure it was there in the first place, as "it was covered up so quickly." If, on the other hand, the suggestion given was a false one, if, e. g., the performer says he has placed an object in his left hand, when, in reality, he has not done so but has palmed it in the right, then it is still necessary to allow a certain time-interval to elapse between the performing of the action which apparently placed the object in the hand, and the showing of the hand empty, for this reason. If the hand into which the object is supposedly placed is IMMEDIATELY shown empty, the natural conclusion of the sitter is that the object was not in reality placed there at all, but was retained in the other hand, which would be the fact. If, however, the performer allowed some time to elapse, between the action of placing the object in that hand

DECEPTION EXPLAINED BY THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY

(supposedly) and the showing of the hand empty, he, meanwhile, keeping his eyes fixed on the hand, suggesting to the sitters that the object IS there, and in every way acting as if it WERE there, the idea will gradually gain a firm hold on the minds of the spectators that the object is there, in reality, and they are correspondingly surprised to find it ultimately vanished. It is just such a knowledge of "the way people's minds work," as a friend once said to me, which enables the conjurer to deceive the public; and it is precisely the same cast of mind that the medium possesses. He is, in fact, a good judge of human nature.

Another fact that must be borne in mind is that, when once a spectator has seen a movement made two or three times in the same manner, he frequently "sees" the performer make that movement on another occasion, when the performer had, in reality, only STARTED to make the movement, and suggested the rest. Thus, if the performer throws a ball up into the air two or three times in succession, and on the fourth occasion merely pretends to throw it up, really retaining it in the other hand, the great majority of the spectators will really "see" the ball ascend into the air on the fourth occasion, and will so state, on being asked. We here depend upon association and habit.[1]

[1] A very similar illusion is mentioned by Professor Hyslop, v. *Borderland of Psychical Research*, Pp. 228–9, in which pellets were apparently placed in a box, really being palmed in the medium's hand.

Professor Jastrow summed up this portion of the psychology of deception very well when he said:[1]

[1] *Fact and Fable in Psychology*, pp. 124–5.

"He (the conjurer) must dissociate the natural factors of his habits, actually attending to one thing while seemingly attending to another; at the same time his eyes and his gestures and his 'patter' misdirect the attention to what is apparently the essential field of operation, but really only a blind to distract attention away from the true scene of action. The conjurer directs your attention to what he does not do; he does not do what he pretends to do; and to what he actually does, he is careful neither to appear to direct his own attention nor to arouse yours."

Prof. Max Dessoir, in a very fine article on "The Psychology of Conjuring," writes as follows: "By awakening interest in some unimportant detail, the conjurer concentrates that attention on some false point, or negatively, diverts it from the main object, and we all know the senses of an inattentive person are pretty dull. . . . When causing the disappearance of some object, the conjurer counts one, two, three; the object must really disappear before three, not at three, because, the attention of the public being diverted to three, they do not notice what happens at one and two. . . . A specially successful method of diversion is founded on the human craze for imitation. . . . The conjurer counts on this in many cases. He always looks in the direction where he wants the attention of the public, and does everything himself which he wants the public to do. . . . If the trick is in the left hand, the conjurer turns sharply to the person to his right, presuming correctly that the spectators will make the same movement, and will not notice what is going on in the left hand. . . . Every sharp, short remark will, for a moment, at least, divert the eyes from the hands and direct them to the mouth, according to the above-mentioned law of imitation."

The successful conjurer has carefully studied beforehand every movement that is made—every word that is spoken—during a conjuring performance, and has seen that these all fit naturally into place, and help conceal the real workings of the trick. The right and left hands must be trained to operate independently, and without the need of looking at either. Many conjurers practice doing two separate things at the same time, one with either hand; and the ability to do this is essential. Above all, the performer must be full of conscious self-possession, and feel himself to be master of the situation, no less than to feel the ability to cope with any emergencies that may arise.

Turning, now, to a consideration of the seance, we find that many of these psychological rules still hold good, and their operation enables the medium to perform many actions which would otherwise be impossible. A certain suggestion is given to the sitters, and imagination and inference do the rest. "Our conclusions as to what we see or hear are always founded on a combination of observation and inference; but in daily life it is seldom necessary to

DECEPTION EXPLAINED BY THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY

distinguish between the two elements, since, when the object and its mode of presentation are familiar, our inferences are generally correct. But it is different when, owing to circumstances, such as a bad light, we have to infer more in proportion to what we perceive than usual; or when some one, e. g., a conjurer or a ventriloquist, is trying to deceive us by presenting one object under the familiar aspect of another, and suggesting false inferences. It is not uncommon to find people at seances encouraging each other in the belief that they see, say, a living human figure, when all that they actually SEE is something moving which is about the size of a human being; the rest is inference." How true these last remarks are is demonstrated by the statement, made in *The Revelations of a Spirit Medium*, that an old wire mask frequently used at materializing seances had been recognized "by dozens of persons as fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, cousins, sweethearts, wives, husbands, and various other relatives and friends. None but the medium knew that it was only a fifty-cent wire mask, hence none but the medium could enjoy the humor of the occasion."

One of the most instructive incidents I know, in relation to this question of the psychology of deception, is the one given by Doctor Hodgson[1]—the case of the officer and the Hindu juggler. In this case, a trick was performed before an English officer and his wife, and Doctor Hodgson happened to overhear this officer telling some travelers of the experience at dinner that evening. "Referring to the movements of the coins, he said that he had taken a coin from his own pocket and placed it on the ground himself, yet that this coin had indulged in the same freaks as the other coins. His wife ventured to suggest that the juggler had taken the coin and placed it on the ground, but the officer was emphatic in repeating his statement, and appealed to me for confirmation. He was, however, mistaken. I had watched the transaction with special curiosity, as I knew what was necessary for the performance of the trick. The officer had apparently intended to place the coin upon the ground himself, but as he was doing so, the juggler leaned slightly forward, dexterously and in a most unobtrusive manner received the coin from the fingers of the officer, as the latter was stooping down, and laid it close to the others. If the juggler had not thus taken the coin, but had allowed the officer himself to place it on the ground, the trick, as actually performed, would have been frustrated.

[1] *Proceedings Society for Psychological Research*, Vol. IV., pp. 385–6.

"Now I think it highly improbable that the movement of the juggler entirely escaped the perception of the officer; highly improbable, that is to say, that the officer was absolutely unaware of the juggler's action at the moment of its happening; but I suppose that, although an impression was made on his consciousness, it was so slight as to be speedily effaced by the officer's IMAGINATION of himself as stooping and placing the coin upon the ground. The officer, I may say, had obtained no insight into the modus operandi of the trick, and his fundamental misrepresentation of the only patent occurrence that might have given him a clue to its performance debarred him completely from afterwards, on reflection, arriving at any explanation. Just similarly, many an honest witness may have described himself as having placed one slate upon another at a sitting with a medium, whereas it was the medium who did so, and who possibly effected at the same time one or two other operations altogether unnoticed by the witness."

In reading through descriptions of slate-writing seances, we very seldom find the statement made as to WHO placed the slates on the table, or under the table, etc., generally the account reading "the slates were then placed on the table," without any qualifying statement as to WHO placed them there. Accounts of this kind are absolutely worthless, from an evidential standpoint. We must at once ask ourselves: who placed the slates in that position? and if it was the medium—as it probably was in the vast majority of instances—then that test, in all probability, ceases to have any evidential weight. Anyone can read over a number of accounts of slate-writing performances, and verify these statements, if he chooses to do so. Frequently, the statement is made that the sitter did actually place the slate on the table, when in reality the medium did so. This error is quite unconscious on the sitter's part, of course, but the account is falsified, nevertheless. Mistakes of this kind are very common, the sitter thinking afterwards that he (the sitter) MUST have placed the slates on the table himself!

DECEPTION EXPLAINED BY THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY

It will be seen from the above that there is a great difference between what ACTUALLY transpired, at any given seance, and what the accounts SAY transpired. The general public cannot get that all-important fact too strongly rooted in its mind: that the events which transpired at a seance may not be reported accurately, so that the report of the seance may be altogether wrong and erroneous, though the sitters, and those who drew up the report, may have been thoroughly honest in their belief that the report is accurate in every respect. The effect of all this is very great indeed. Many spiritualistic seances are quite inexplicable AS DE-SCRIBED, but the description is not a true report of what took place at the seance in question. The facts are distorted. Consequently, the person taking it upon himself to explain what took place at the seance is called upon to explain a number of things which, in reality, never took place at all. We must remember, in this connection, that a number of conjuring tricks, AS DESCRIBED, would be quite impossible to explain by any process of trickery. The description of the trick was not correct.

Let me make this still clearer, and at the same time illustrate the difference between what apparently occurs, and what actually happens, by the following example: A conjurer places a coin (say a quarter) in each hand, and closes his hands. Another quarter is now placed upon the fingers of each hand, so that there is now one quarter in each hand and one-quarter on the fingers of each. The magician announces that, by simply opening and closing his hands—which are held at some distance from each other—he will thereby transfer one of the coins from one hand to the other, so that there will be three coins in one of the hands, and only one left in the other.

Now, if the sitter were writing out an account of what happened, it would most certainly read as follows:

"The magician then tried the experiment—of opening and closing his hands rapidly, and causing the coin to be transferred, as promised— but failed in the attempt, the coins from the back of each hand falling on to the table in rather a clumsy manner. They were, however, again placed upon the backs of the magician's hands; the movement was repeated, and this time successfully. The coins disappeared from the backs of both hands, in one of which was now found three of the coins, while the other hand contained only one."

Such is precisely the description of the trick, as it would be given by the average person, on seeing it, and it would represent his honest opinion of what occurred; as it stands, it is quite inexplicable by trickery. Needless to say, the account is NOT a true statement of what actually occurred, as the following explanation will make clear:

The first time the coins were dropped on to the table, the movement was not so "clumsy" as might have been supposed. It was, in fact, intentional, being the principal factor in the accomplishment of the trick. What ACTUALLY transpired at that time was this: The magician, by a quick movement, dropped both coins from ONE hand on to the table, at the same time dexterously opening the other hand a trifle, and allowing the second coin, on that hand, to fall into the interior of the hand itself. Thus, while both hands are still seen to be closed, one is empty, and the other contains two coins. It is obvious, therefore, that, when a coin is placed upon each of the hands again, the magician has only to repeat the opening and closing movement, and there will be three coins in one of the hands, and only one in the other.

This trick illustrates, in a very simple and striking manner, the possibility of reporting a fact in an entirely erroneous manner, quite unconscious of the fact that this error in reporting has been committed. Just in this same manner, are many slate-writing and other phenomena misreported, and hence an explanation of the seance, AS REPORTED, is rendered impossible. The trouble is that the "report" does not REALLY report what actually occurred.

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Many of my readers may feel somewhat insulted at this accusation that they cannot detect such obvious trickery when it exists, and that they are liable to make such mistakes in recording a seance as those here mentioned. They may comfort themselves with the thought, however, that it is no disgrace to make mistakes and errors of this kind;

DECEPTION EXPLAINED BY THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY

for, as Professor Jastrow pointed out:[1]

[1] Fact and Fable in Psychology, p. 148.

"The matter is in some aspects as much a technical acquisition as in the diagnosing of a disease. It is not at all to the discredit of anyone's powers of observation or intellectual acumen to be deceived by the performances of a conjurer; and the same holds true of the professional part of mediumistic phenomena. Until this homely but salutary truth is impressed with all its importance upon all intending investigators, there is little hope of bringing about a proper attitude toward these and kindred phenomena."

These remarks will make it clear to us why many men of science have been deceived by very simple tricks and fraudulent devices, while investigating spiritualistic phenomena—their scientific culture is no guaranty that they are any more capable of detecting fraud than is the man-in-the-street—in fact their training has made them very much LESS capable of detecting fraud than the average person, who comes more in contact with the world, and is an acuter judge of character and human nature.