

Table-turning (or Table-tipping)

A form of psychic phenomena in which a table rotates, tilts, or rises completely off the ground by the mere contact of the fingertips of an individual or group of individuals. In exceptional cases tables have been known to move or even levitate without direct contact. The familiar form of **séance** in table-turning is that in which the sitters place their fingertips on the table; then the table moves without conscious exercise of muscular force. By relating the **raps** or tilts of the table to the alphabet it becomes possible to receive intelligent messages. (See **movement**)

Historical Background

Table-turning is the simplest and oldest form of communication with extraneous intelligences or the subconscious self. In ancient times tables were used for purposes of divination as "mensa divinatoriae." In fourth-century [Rome](#), [Ammianus Marcellinus](#) described a table with a slab, engraved with the letters of the alphabet, above which a ring was held, suspended by a thread; by swinging to certain letters, messages were spelled out. Tertullian (ca. 155-ca. 222) appears to have been one of the first who knew of table communications with the unseen world.

Table-turning in modern **Spiritualism** dates from the mid-nineteenth century and seems to have originated in America soon after the **Rochester rappings** of 1848. At that time, there was considerable interest in **animal magnetism** or "electro-biology," stemming from the **mesmerism** of [Europe](#).

Mesmerism established the convention of groups of individuals arranged in a circle with a variously named magnetic fluid linking them. After the phenomena of **rappings** in the presence of the [Fox sisters](#) became widely known, groups gathered around other individuals who possessed the same ability to generate raps.

Table-turning and rapping spread like an epidemic throughout America and was brought to [England](#) by such professional **mediums** as **Maria B. Hayden**, who came to London with a lecturer on electro-biology in 1852. An advantage of table-turning was that it did not require a paid professional medium. Amateur groups could sit round a table and obtain the intelligent rappings which had first been manifest only to specially talented individuals, i.e., mediums.

In 1852 afternoon social invitations to tea and table-turning were common. Table-turning was even more successful in [France](#), with its tradition of mesmerism and animal magnetism. One widespread jest was that people no longer asked after each other's health, but asked instead how the table was. "Thank you, mine turns beautifully, and how goes yours?"

Mesmerists welcomed table-turning as a demonstration of animal magnetism or odic force, while Fundamentalist ecclesiastics denounced it as due to Satanic agency. Scientists and doctors thought that the new craze would be a danger to mental health and a committee was formed to find a non-Spiritualist explanation for the phenomenon. They reported in the *Medical Times and Gazette* on June 11, 1853, that the motion of the table was due to unconscious muscular action.

A few weeks later the great chemist and physicist [Michael Faraday](#) reported experiments with a simple apparatus to demonstrate that the movements of the table were due to unconscious muscular action of the part of the sitters, who were by implication the automatic authors of the messages claiming to come from the spirit world. Faraday's apparatus consisted of two thin wooden boards with little glass rollers between them. The contraption was whole bound together with rubber bands and so contrived that the slightest lateral pressure on the upper board would cause it to slip a little way over the other. A hays-talk or a scrap of paper served to indicate any motion of the upper board over the lower.

The conclusion drawn from these experiments was that when the sitters believed themselves to be pressing downward, they were really pressing obliquely in the direction they expected the table to rotate. Other investigators also held the expectation that the operators had much to do with the motions of the table. [James Braid](#) pointed out in the appendix to his book *Hypnotic Therapeutics* (1853) that someone generally announced beforehand the direction they expected the table to rotate.

Among the earliest investigators of the phenomenon of table-turning were Count **Agenor De Gasparin** and Prof. **Marc Thury** of Geneva, who held séances and were satisfied that the movements resulted from a force radiating from the operators, to which they gave the name of **ectenic force**.

The public, on the whole, ignored the conclusions of Faraday and others, preferring the more popular Spiritualist explanation or the pseudo-scientific theories of "electro-biology." Other explanations offered

included **od** or odic force, galvanism, animal magnetism, and the rotation of the [Earth](#). Revs. G. Sandby and C. H. Townshend claimed to have experienced a feeling of fatigue after a table-turning séance as though they had been hypnotizing someone. They reported a tingling sensation in their fingertips, while Townshend claimed somewhat vaguely that spirit rappings might be caused by a "disengagement of Zoogen (an unidentified force in nature) from the System."

Meanwhile various Evangelical clergymen insisted that table-turning was Satanic. Revs. N. S. Godfrey, E. Gillson, and others held séances in which the "spirit" confessed themselves to be either spirits of worthless persons of evil inclination or devils. Both of the "spirits' " confessions caused the reverent gentlemen to denounce the whole practice of table-turning. One of them purposely mentioned the Faraday experiments, stating that the phenomena "appear to be whatever the investigator supposes them to be"—a saying which aptly characterized his own attitude.

The psychical researcher **Camille Flammarion**, whose exhaustive experiments and scientific attainments gave considerable weight to his opinion, offered an explanation of the various phases of table-turning phenomena. Simple rotation of the table he ascribed to an unconscious impulse given by the operators; other movements of the table while the fingers of the sitters rested upon it were ascribed to similar causes. The tilting of the table on the side furthest away from the operator was explained by muscular action. The vibrations in the wood of the table, its **levitation** under the fingers, or extent, its rotation without contact of the operator's hands, he attributed to a force emanating from

the body. In the latter case, the operator was capable of acting at a distance by means of ether-waves. This force, the result of a cerebral disturbance, was greater than that of the muscles, as is seen by the levitation of tables so weighty that the combined muscular strength of the operators would not suffice to lift them.

To the dictating of messages and other intelligent manifestations he gave an origin in this psychic force, which is perhaps identical with Thury's "ectenic force," or "psychode," and which is obedient to the will and desires, or even, in some cases, the subconscious will of the operator. Flammarion did not consider the **spirit hypothesis** necessary.

It is possible that some **fraud** may have crept into the séances investigated by Flammarion, as it has done in so many other cases. There are, of course, those among the most qualified of psychical researcher, who find the hypothesis of unconscious muscular action or deliberate fraud a satisfactory explanation of the phenomena.

The Mechanics of Table-Turning

One common procedure followed by those engaged in table tipping began with those in attendance forming a circle around the table. They placed hands lightly, with fingertips touching, on the leaf, and with lowered lights or in complete darkness, waited for the manifestations. According to reports, if someone with psychic powers was present the table might show signs of animation. The first such sign was often a quivering motion under the sitters' hands; it increased until the table pulsated with a

mysterious energy. The wooden surface appeared to some to act as a reservoir of externalized nervous force.

The psychological researcher [Hereward Carrington](#) said that in his séances with **Eusapia Palladino** the table appeared to be somehow alive like the back of a dog. In one of his stories a similar phenomenon that occurred during the mediumship of medium **D. D. Home** induced Alexander Dumas to fantasize the table as an intelligence itself. The conception of a spirit entering furniture became a favorite idea with French authors afterward.

After the vibratory stage the table might jerk, tilt, stumble about, and eventually become entirely levitated. Apparently, there was believed to be an intelligence behind these movements. If the letters of the alphabet were called over in the dark, the table, by tilting, knocking on the floor, or tapping, indicated certain letters that connectedly spelled out a message, often claiming to come from someone deceased. The intelligence that manifested had personal characteristics. In repeated sittings it was soon noticed by observers that the skill with which the table was manipulated or the eccentricities of its behavior were indications of the presence of the same entity. The strange, stolid, or clumsy behavior of the table immediately denoted that a new visitant was tampering with the contact.

But the table might disclose much more than that. Its motions could express humor, emotion, and personality. It might climb up into the sitter's lap as a mark of affection; it might chase others all over the room in a hostile manner. As an additional means of expression, the table could convey queer impressions by creaking. P. P. Alexander

noted in his book *Spiritualism: A Narrative with a Discussion* (1871):

"At a particular stage of the proceedings the table began to make strange undulatory movements, and gave out, as these proceeded, a curious accompaniment of creaking sounds. Mr. Home seemed surprised. 'This is very curious,' he said, 'it is a phenomenon of which I have no experience hitherto.' Presently my friend remarked that movement and sound together—it reminded him of nothing he could think of except a ship in distress, with its timbers straining in a heavy sea.... This conclusion being come to ... the table proceeded to rap out: 'It is David.' Instantly a lady burst into tears, and cried wildly: 'Oh, that must be my poor, dear brother, David, who was lost at sea some time since.' "

When the table moves under contact there is an obvious possibility for the subconscious mind or a secondary **personality** to convey ideas by unconscious muscular pressure of either a medium or the sitters.

According to **F. W. H. Myers**,

"The subliminal self, like the telegraphist begins its effort with full knowledge of the alphabet, but with only weak and rude command over our muscular adjustments. It is therefore *a priori* likely that its easiest mode of communication will be through a repetition of simple movements, so arranged as to correspond to letters of the alphabet."

But Myers was inclined to attribute to the subconscious mind the movement of the table without contact as well. "If a table moves when no one is touching it, this is not obviously more likely to have been effected by my

deceased grandfather than by myself. We cannot tell how I could move it; but then we cannot tell how he could move it either."

Certainly, there are experiences which bear out this possibility and show how singularly deceptive the interpretation of phenomena may be. George S. Long, an acquaintance of **Richard Hodgson**, narrated in the *Proceedings* of the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (vol. 9, p. 65) a strange experience with a chair. Through a young lady he received what was said to be the most convincing test of spirit return:

"First the chair spelt out my name and showed a disposition to get into my lap; then it spelt out 'George, you ought to know me as I am Jim.' But I didn't, and said so. Then without my looking at the board, it spelt out '[Long Island](#), Jim Rowe' and 'Don't you remember I used to cary you when you were a little fellow,' or words to that effect. I had to acknowledge the truth of it and also to say that as he was an ignorant man he possibly intended 'Cary' for carry. I must own I was puzzled for the moment. To make sure of his power I asked that he count the pickets in the fence. Somehow he could not agree to this, and even the medium objected. As a last resort I asked how long he had been in the spirit land and the answer came, between thirteen and fourteen years. Now to the sequel. First it occurred to me a day or two later, that while all the incidents given were correct the name should have been given as Roe instead of Rowe. Second I was upon [Long Island](#) this summer, and the matter coming to my mind I inquired how long Jim Roe had been dead, and was informed he died last Winter; so when I received this test so convincing to the believers the man was not dead."

The material from which the chair or table was made seemed to make no difference once the available power was sufficient to manifest. The reason why a table was used for spirit communication was primarily convenience; it was piece of generally available furniture which allowed contact around it for a large number of people. Some Spiritualists also thought its surface acted as a receptacle for the generated force and compared the space underneath the table to a medium's cabinet, especially if it was surrounded by a deep hanging table cloth. In the early days of Spiritualism, they often used a table with a hole in the middle through which "materialized hands" could be thrust.

Eusapia Palladino insisted on a séance table built entirely of wood. She considered soft pinewood the best to absorb vital magnetism. She allowed no metal in the construction of the table.

The color of the table made no difference. **Joseph Maxwell** found an advantage in covering it with some white material of light texture. He also insisted that the table should, if possible, be fastened with wooden pegs instead of nails since mediums, supposedly, are sometimes extremely sensitive to metals.

It was reported that with a powerful medium the movement of the table could occur at any time and disclose a tremendous force in operation. Thus Gambier Bolton, writing in *Psychic Force* (1904) observed,

"During any meal with Mrs. Elgie Corner [i.e., **Florence Cook**] in one's own house, and whilst she herself is engaged in eating and drinking—both of her hands being

visible all the time—the heavy dining table will commence first to quiver, setting all the glasses shaking, and plates, knives, forks and spoons in motion, and then to rock and sway from side to side, occasionally going so far as to tilt up at one end or at one side; and all the time raps and tappings will be heard in the table and in many different parts of the room. Taking a meal with her in a public restaurant is a somewhat serious matter."

In experiments conducted by psychical researcher **Harry Price** with the psychic **Stella C.** in 1923, powerful and rhythmical vibrations of tables were obtained, and on one occasion, after violent movements of a table, it suddenly snapped, the top breaking into two pieces, and the legs breaking off.

Table-Turning and Dowsing

The various theories about the rationale of table-turning parallel those advanced for the phenomena of **dowsing** and **radiesthesia**, where there is meaningful movement of a water-witching rod or a **pendulum** or similar indicator. The actual force moving the indicator is still a matter of controversy.

It is generally assumed that unconscious muscular action or nervous energy plays a significant part, but it is still far from clear how information on underground water, minerals, or buried objects is conveyed to the mind, or from the mind to the indicator.

One of the earliest investigators to link the action of table-turning with **divining rods** or pendulums was the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, in his book *De la baguette divinatoire, du pendule dit explorateur et des*

tables tournantes, au point de vue de l'histoire, de la critique et de la méthode expérimentale (1854).

In modern times, table-turning is a laborious method of establishing contact with unseen intelligence. **Planchette** and **ouija board** are more satisfactory and faster. Also, while a number of prominent mediums such as Betty White began their career with a ouija board, they quickly moved beyond. Messages obtained by such methods are often misleading or false. Again, the communications received at circles in general tend to reflect the general interest level of the sitters.

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