

ALLAN KARDEC AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH PROGRAM IN PSYCHIC EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Allan Kardec was one of the first scholars to propose a scientific investigation of psychic phenomena but details of his life and his research work are not well known and have been misrepresented. This paper is a descriptive essay briefly presenting Kardec's biography, the first steps in his seminal research, and several epistemological/methodological guidelines he proposed to develop a comprehensive scientific research program to deal with psychic phenomena. Kardec raised and tested several hypotheses to explain mediumistic phenomena: fraud, hallucination, a new physical force, somnambulism (including unconscious cerebration and clairvoyance), thought reflection (including telepathy and super-psi), discarnate spirits and several other theories. He accepted that fraud, hallucination, unconscious cerebration and thought reflection could explain many phenomena regarded as mediumistic. However, when mediumistic phenomena were studied as a whole, the best explanation would be the spiritist hypothesis, a spiritual origin for the phenomena. He named this hypothesis "Spiritism". Some guidelines he proposed to advance scientific research in psychical phenomena were: to use methods appropriate to the subject of investigation, to avoid both sterile skepticism and credulity, to be open to the novel, and to heed the need for a comprehensive and diversified empirical basis. He stressed the importance of theory for a scientific research program, and that facts are not enough to create certainty. Parapsychology/psychical research has much to gain in better knowing Kardec's and other pioneer's works, not just for a better understanding of the field's history, but also for potential scientific/philosophical tools that may be useful to move the field forward. Deeper studies on aspects of Kardec's work and life are warranted.

INTRODUCTION

Allan Kardec was a pioneer in proposing scientific investigation of psychical phenomena¹ in the middle of the XIX century. To pursue that investigation he developed a research program, including a comprehensive theory he called "Spiritism". Currently, the principle ideas of Spiritism have become a social movement spawning healing centers, charity institutions and hospitals involving millions of people in dozens of countries, most of them in Brazil (Aubree & Laplantine, 1990; CEI, 2008; Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo Neto, 2005). Despite the fact that Kardec's books continue to be very popular, selling millions of copies, his research work and methods are still poorly known by both spiritists and parapsychologists. In both fields there is imprecise information and misunderstandings concerning his work with psychic experiences (Fodor, 1966; Melton, 1966). One probable major source for such misapprehension is a paper published by Alexander Aksakof (1875) when the first English translation of "The Spirit's Book" ("Le Livre des Esprits" the first Kardec's book on Spiritism) was published. Aksakof's paper was entirely based on an interview with the medium Celina Japhet in 1873. This medium had worked with Kardec but later had

¹ Although recognizing the possibility of specificities for each term, in this paper I will use quite liberally and interchangeably the words psychical, parapsychological and mediumistic to refer to the body of phenomena studied by parapsychology, psychical research, and spiritism.

severe conflicts with him. Alvarado has previously called attention to the fact that parapsychologists throughout the 20th century have held imprecise and dismissive views of spiritualists and spiritists. Often they report that spiritists “had simplistic, unitary views about the nature of psychic phenomena” (Alvarado, 2003:76-7). However, as this paper will show, a more in depth analysis of Kardec’s works reveals that this was not the case with him.

The purpose of the current paper is to present a brief description of Kardec’s life and his first steps in the development of the research program he called Spiritism. I will also present some methodological/epistemological guidelines that Kardec proposed for a fruitful investigation of psychical phenomena. Intending to grasp more directly Kardec’s ideas and methods, and not what has been written about him, we focused this paper, as much as possible, on primary sources, that is, Kardec’s writings: his books and the twelve volumes of “*Revue Spirite*”, a monthly journal he edited and published from 1858 until his death in 1869.

ALLAN KARDEC – A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Allan Kardec is a pseudonym for Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, a Frenchman who was born on October 3rd, 1804 (Martins & Barros, 1999; Wantuil & Thiesen, 1979). From 1815 to 1822, he studied in Switzerland at the world famous Yverdon Institute, directed by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the well-known Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer who proposed the development of a science of education and emphasized that education should foster the individual's faculties to think for himself. Rivail, for several decades, was committed in advancing Pestalozzi’s pedagogy in France (Hess, 1991; Incontri, 1996; 2004; Pestalozzi, 2008; Wantuil & Thiesen, 1979).

From his return to Paris in 1822 until his first contact with mediumistic phenomena in 1854, Rivail worked mainly as an educator and writer, who published approximately 21 texts about education and schoolbooks on topics such as grammar and arithmetic. Rivail founded schools and worked as both a translator and teacher. He was a member of several scholarly societies such as the Historic Institute of Paris (*Institut Historique*), Society of Natural Sciences of France (*Société des Sciences Naturelles de France*), Society for the Encouragement of National Industry (*Société d'Encouragement pour l'Industrie Nationale*), and THE Royal Academy of Arras (*Académie d'Arras, Société Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Arts*). The latter awarded to him a prize of honor for an essay on education (Blackwell, 1996; Hess, 1991; Wantuil & Thiesen, 1979).

Rivail always emphasized freethinking, religious tolerance, and the need for using reasoning and scientific knowledge. In a speech in 1834, commenting on the child who receives a good scientific education:

“(…) Then, the children will no longer believe in souls from another world, nor in ghosts; they will no longer believe that *ignis fatuus* are spirits; they will no longer believe in fortune tellers; they will no longer believe in shooting stars as being the sign of the death of a person, (...) they will laugh at the superstitious credulity of the ignorant, their spirits will be widened contemplating the immense and without boundaries space, in which circulates many thousands of worlds (...)” (Rivail, 1998:83).

By 1854, Rivail had been involved with studies on “animal magnetism” for more than 30 years (Kardec, 1858; Leymarie, 1875), but there is not much information regarding this involvement. Anna Blackwell, Kardec’s contemporary and translator of his spiritist books to English, stated that he “took an active part in the labours of the Society of Magnetism, giving much time to the practical investigation of somnambulism, trance, clairvoyance, and the various other phenomena connected with the mesmeric action” (Blackwell, 1996:11). In fact, it was among people involved with magnetism that Rivail had his first contacts with mediumistic phenomena in 1854. It was a magnetizer, Mr. Fortier, who first told Rivail, about turning tables. At first, Rivail was not interested in it because he thought that table’s movement could be due to some physical cause, some new physical force such as electricity or magnetism. Some months later, Rivail heard the claiming that tables could not just move but also answer questions.

Rivail answered:

“I will believe it when I see it and when it has been proved to me that a table has a brain to think and nerves to feel and that it can become somnambulist. Until then, allow me to see nothing in this but a fable told to provoke sleep” (Kardec, 1890/1927:206).

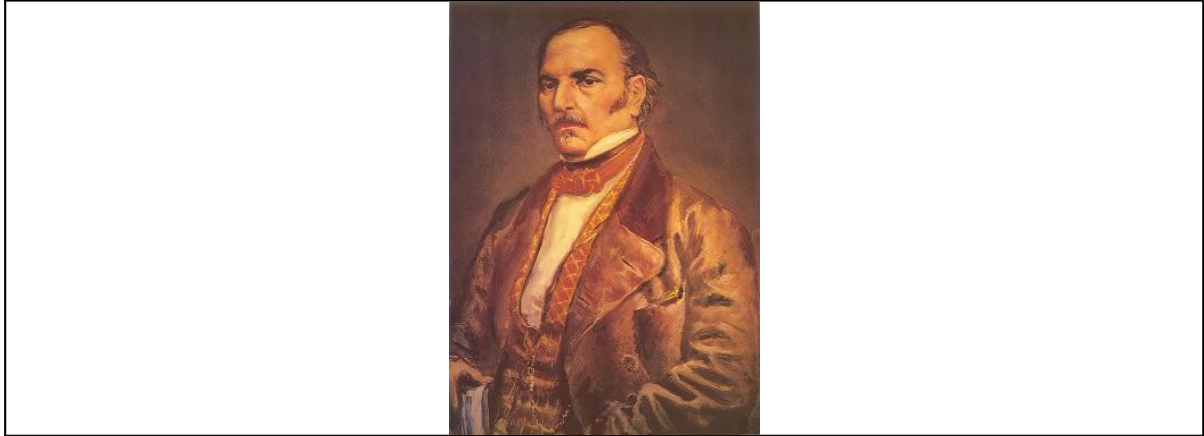


Figure 1- Allan Kardec's portrait by Monvoisin (1790-1870)

In 1855, another Rivail's friend persuaded him to attend a mediumistic séance where he observed table turning and mediumistic writing using a basket (mediums lightly touched an overturned small basket with a pencil attached to it to write upon a sheet of paper placed beneath the basket) After this séance, he decided to start an in depth investigation of these phenomena. He attended regularly mediumistic séances with several mediums.

“I understood from the beginning the gravity of the exploration I was undertaking. (...) the phenomena posed a complete revolution in ideas and beliefs. It was necessary therefore to act not lightly, but, rather, with circumspection, to be positive rather than idealistic, so as not to be carried away by illusions.”(Kardec 1890/1927:209).

In 1857, under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec, Rivail published the first report of his studies, “The Spirit's Book” (“Le Livre des Esprits”). Since then, regarding issues related to Spiritism, Rivail started to be known as Allan Kardec. At the introduction of The Spirit's Book, Kardec created the word “Spiritism”, that was later defined as:

“Spiritism is a science that deals with the nature, origin, and destiny of spirits, and their relation with the corporeal world.”(Kardec, 1859/1999:6).

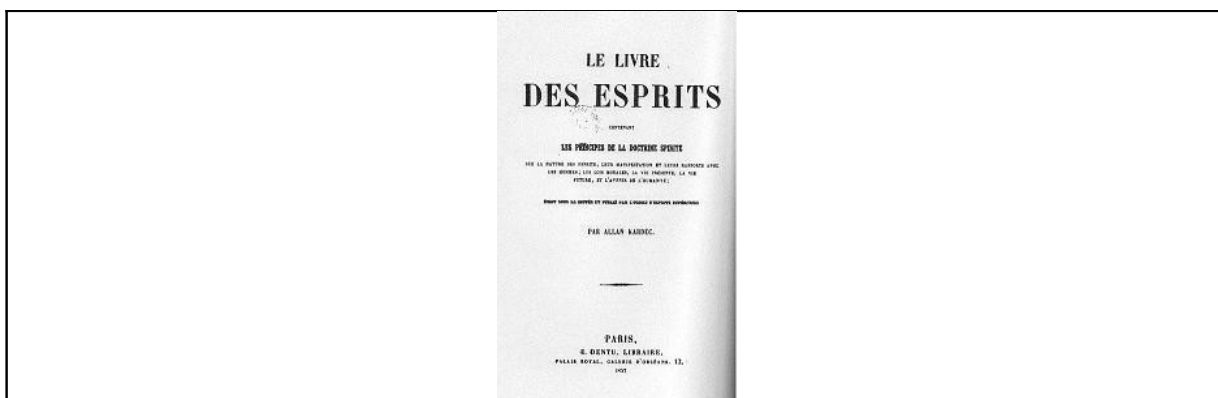


Figure 2 – Fac simile of the first edition of “Le Livre des Esprits” (1857)

In 1858, Kardec founded the *Société parisienne des Etudes spirites*, (Spiritist Society of Paris) and the *Revue Spirite - Journal d'Études Psychologiques* (Spiritist Journal – Journal of Psychological Studies). Kardec directed the society and the journal until his death in 1869. During Kardec’s last 15 years in which he devoted himself full time to the investigation of mediumship, he also published books on several aspects of Spiritism (Kardec, 1868; 1861/1986; 1864/1987; 1859/1999; 1865/2003), traveled to some French and Belgian cities to visit Spiritist groups (Kardec, 1862; 1864; 1864a) and was intensely involved in correspondence with people around the world interested in mediumistic phenomena (Fernandes, 2004).

In the next sections, I will present some of Kardec’s first steps in developing a research program to investigate psychic phenomena. Here, I use “research program” as referred to by the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos (1970), who proposes that a science is characterized by a “scientific research programme” composed of a conceptual framework and guidelines to advance the scientific exploration of the subject investigated. Lakatos’ concept of “scientific research programme” has been one of the most relevant in the contemporary philosophy of science (Chalmers, 1982).

SEARCHING FOR A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO EXPLAIN MEDIUMISTIC PHENOMENA

Kardec did not accept the existence of the supernatural or miracles. He assumed that every phenomenon that happens in nature must have a natural explanation following some kind of natural law suitable to scientific investigation. Something may be unexplained, having its causes unknown at a certain historical period, but it is not unexplainable (Kardec, 1859/1999; 1868). Kardec stressed several times that we should be very careful in attributing to spirits all sorts of phenomena that are unusual or that we do not understand.

“I cannot stress this point enough, we need to be aware of the effects of imagination (...). When an extraordinary phenomenon is produced – we insist – the first thought should be about a natural cause, because it is the most frequent and the most probable.” (Kardec, 1860a:77)

When facing table turning and other mediumistic phenomena, Kardec proposed to use a scientific approach to understand them:

“As a means of elaboration, Spiritism proceeds in exactly the same course as the positive sciences²; that is to say, it applies the experimental method. Some facts of a new order present themselves, which cannot be explained by known laws. It teaches us to observe, compare (...), deduces the consequences, and seeks for useful applications; *it establishes no preconceived theory*. (...) It is rigorously exact to declare that Spiritism is a science of observation, and not the product of imagination. Not until its studies were based on experimental methods did the sciences begin to make serious progress. Although it was believed that this method could only be applied to matter, it is just as well applied to metaphysical things” (Kardec, 1868/2003:18)³.

It is worth noting that Kardec’s books on Spiritism contain basically the theories he developed based on his explorations of mediumistic manifestations, as well as the rational foundations for these theories. His books discuss what he called the “philosophy” that emerged from his investigation. They sometimes contain some brief case reports or empirical evidence to support the theory. He presented case reports and other empirical evidence in the *Revue Spirite*. In that journal he described many cases witnessed by him or by one of his many correspondents around the world. These cases were usually not reported in as detailed a manner as was usual later at the Society for Psychical Research. He used to present reports and to discuss possible explanations of all sorts of physical and mental mediumistic manifestations. He regularly presented hypotheses in the *Revue* to be tested and analyzed by its readers. Kardec considered this journal as a “trial-ground”. Many texts and theories first published at the *Revue* were later published in a developed form in one of his books (Kardec, 1858i; 1868).

Below I will present and briefly discuss Kardec’s first approach to mediumistic phenomena and the main hypotheses he explored in searching for an explanation for the whole group of observed psychical phenomena. In opposition to statements from some parapsychologists that spiritists/spiritualists were not able to realize an alternative explanation to mediumistic phenomena beyond survival, Kardec, like several others, considered a diversity of possible hypothesis, including the influence of the minds of both the mediums and sitters (Alvarado, 2003, Ballou, 1853; Barkas, 1876; Harrison, 1873).

Fraud:

Kardec recognized that many alleged mediumistic manifestations were caused by trickery or charlatanism (Kardec, 1861/1986). He stressed that it is necessary to be always aware of the possibility of fraud and one should denounce it without ceremony. “Spiritism has only to gain in exposing impostors” (Kardec, 1959:96). This having been said, Kardec denied that trickery could explain all kinds of observations. Below I list some of the reasons he provided to support this claim:

- Often the accusation of fraud is raised with no evidence, but just because someone had witnessed an order of facts that he/she is not able to explain (Kardec, 1859/1999).
- Because many mediumistic manifestations can be imitated, it does not imply that there cannot exist a real manifestation. “Abuses exist everywhere; but the abuse of a thing is no argument against the thing itself” (Kardec, 1861/1986:33). It is hard to think that thousands of people involved with mediumship around the world are involved in the same fraud (Kardec, 1859/1999).
- Fraud is much more probable with mediums that make mediumship a source of pecuniary profit, especially when mediums state that they are able to produce mediumistic manifestations at their will. Kardec was always in strong opposition to paid mediums:

² By “positive science”, Kardec meant empirical sciences (“based on facts”), in opposition to “purely speculative” ones (Kardec, 1864a).

³ Always when available, quotations were extracted from published English versions of Kardec’s works. Otherwise, I translated from French original and Portuguese versions. When necessary to improve fidelity to French originals, I made some changes to passages from published English versions when necessary to improve fidelity to French originals.

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“We are well aware that our severity with regard to mercenary mediumship has gained us the ill-will of those who are tempted to make of spiritism a source of worldly gain, and of their friends (...) we do not see how any one can maintain that there is not a greater risk of fraud and of misuse of the mediumistic faculty, when the latter is made a matter of speculation, than when it is exercised with entire disinterestedness and if our writings have contributed, in France and other countries, to discredit the turning of mediumship into a trade, we believe it will not be the least of the services they will have rendered to the cause of Spiritism” (Kardec, 1861/1986:391).

- Physical mediumship is more subject to fraud than intellectual mediumship, because in the latter it is possible to judge the content of the mediumistic communication. It is hard to explain as fraud when mediums show knowledge of facts, even private affairs, and personality traces of late people unknown to them and to anyone at the séance (Kardec, 1861/1986).

Hallucination

Kardec accepted that superstitious or credulous persons often accept as psychic experiences what actually are hallucinations due to a physiological cause. But he stressed that hallucination can not explain all kinds of anomalous perceptions. According to Kardec, the best way to exclude hallucination is when the perception has what he called “intelligent signs”, i.e. when it provides evidence of veridical and verifiable information unknown to the person who has the experience (Kardec, 1860; 1861/1986): “every apparition that does not give any intelligent sign should definitely be listed as an illusion” (Kardec, 1861:196). In addition to these signs, hallucination becomes an unlikely explanation when “several persons are witnesses to the same fact” or when a table is seen to be raised in the air and “is broken in its fall to the floor” (Kardec, 1861/1986:34-5).

Between the middle of the XIX century to the beginning of the XX century, it was common to consider mediums and anyone involved with spiritualism as mentally insane. Kardec wrote several papers refuting this claim using several methodological and epidemiological arguments that are discussed elsewhere (Almeida, 2007; Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo Neto, 2005; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2005).

Physical Cause

As explained in the previous section, physical cause was the first explanation raised by Kardec when he was told about table turning. But the physical manifestations he observed were not merely mechanical; they showed will and intelligence:

“when those movements and raps gave proof of intelligence, when it was recognized that they responded to our thoughts with complete freedom, one was impelled to draw the conclusion that, *if every effect has a cause, every intelligent effect must have an intelligent cause*. Is it possible to accept that a fluid produces these phenomena unless one admits that there must be an intelligent fluid? (Kardec, 1859/1999:26).

After reaching the conclusion that the phenomena observed were real and caused by an intelligent source, investigating the source of this intelligence became Kardec’s main focus. He discussed in more depth three potential sources of mediumistic manifestations: medium’s mind (somnambulism), sitter’s mind (though-reflection), and discarnate spirits (Kardec, 1861/1986). Kardec considered these as high value hypotheses:

“Two objections (to the spiritist theory) still remain to be examined, the only ones really deserving of the name, because they are the only ones founded on a rational basis. Both admit the reality of the material and moral phenomena of Spiritism, but deny the intervention of spirits in their production” (Kardec, 1860/1996:52-3).

I will now present those Kardec's comments about the two hypotheses that he regarded as of high value: Somnambulism and Thought-reflection.

Somnambulism (Unconscious activity, including clairvoyance)

According to this theory, while the medium is in an altered state of consciousness ("waking somnambulism"), there is "a momentary superexcitement of his mental faculties, a sort of somnambulant or ecstatic state, which exalts and develops his intelligence" (Kardec, 1861/1986:39). "In this state the intellectual faculties acquire an abnormal development; the circle of our intuitive perceptions is extended beyond its ordinary limits; the medium finds in himself, and with the aid of his lucidity, all that he says, and all the notions transmitted by him, even in regard to subjects with which he is least familiar in his usual state" (Kardec, 1860/1996:53). Kardec recognizes that this explanation is true for many alleged "spiritual communications" and that in all mediumistic communications there is an influence of THE medium's mind (Kardec, 1861/1986); however he denies that this hypothesis could explain all kinds of observed mediumistic phenomena, among them:

- "the way in which the basket moves under the influence of the medium, through the mere laying of his fingers on its edges, and in such a manner that it would be impossible for him to guide it in any direction whatever. This impossibility becomes still more evident when two or three persons place their fingers at the same time on the same basket, for a truly phenomenal concordance of movements and of thoughts would be required between them, in order to produce, on the part of each, the same reply to the question asked. And this difficulty is increased by the fact that the writing often changes completely with each spirit who communicates, and that, whenever a given spirit communicates, the same writing re-appears" (Kardec, 1860/1996:30).
- Mediumistic answers to questions posed by sitters. Many times these answers are "notoriously beyond the scope of the knowledge, and even of the intellectual capacity, of the medium, who, moreover, is frequently unaware of what he is made to write, since the reply, like the question asked, may be couched in a language of which he is ignorant, or the question may even be asked mentally" (Kardec, 1860/1996:30).
- "we cannot comprehend how trance should make a man write who does not know how to write, or give communications through the tilting and rapping of tables, or the writing of planchettes and pencils. (...) the proofs of the action of an intelligence independent of the medium are so incontestable that they leave us in no doubt in regard to it. The fault of the majority of theories raised in the early times of spiritism is the drawing of general conclusions from isolated facts" (Kardec, 1861/1986:40).

Thought Reflection (Telepathy, Super-Psi)

Kardec called "thought reflection" what Myers would call "telepathy" some decades later (Gauld, 1968). Below we have Kardec's description of this theory:

"The medium is a sort of mirror, reflecting all the thoughts, ideas, and knowledge of those about him; from which it follows that he says nothing which is not known to, at least, some of them" (Kardec, 1860/1996:54).

This hypothesis was Kardec's initial supposition for the origin of the intelligent source that produced mediumistic phenomena (Kardec, 1859/1999). Following his investigations, Kardec accepted that this may happen and actually happens (Kardec, 1858d), but it cannot explain the whole body of available empirical evidence:

“proved by the evidence of facts that the communications of the medium are often entirely foreign to the thoughts, knowledge, and even the opinions of those who are present, and that they are frequently spontaneous, and contradict all received ideas” (Kardec, 1860/1996:54).

“How, again, can reflection of thought explain the production of writing by persons who do not know how to write? replies of the widest philosophical scope obtained through illiterate persons? answers given to questions propounded mentally, or spoken in a language unknown to the medium? and a thousand other facts, leaving no doubt as to the independence of the intelligence which manifests itself? The theory of reflection can only be held by those whose observation is of superficial and limited character” (Kardec, 1861/1986:38).

As the source of the communication was not found to be among the sitters, Kardec finally discussed a last hypothesis, one that would currently be called “super-psi” or “super-ESP” (Braude, 1992; Gauld, 1961;1982):

“The radiation of thought, they say, extends far beyond the circle immediately around us; the medium is the reflection of the human race in general; so that, if he does not derive his inspirations from those about him, he derives them from those who are further off, in the town or country he inhabits, from the people of the rest of the globe, and even from those of other spheres” (Kardec, 1860/1996:54).

In answering to this hypothesis, Kardec uses an epistemological reason, that, when, for a given domain of facts, there are two rival theories with similar explanatory power and other heuristic properties, one usually should choose the simpler of them (Hempel, 1966; Chibeni & Moreira-Almeida, 2007):

“We do not think that this theory furnishes a more simple and probable explanation than that given by Spiritism; for it assumes the action of a cause very much more marvelous. The idea that universal space is peopled by beings who are in perpetual contact with us, and who communicate to us their ideas, is certainly not more repugnant to reason than the hypothesis of a universal radiation, coming from every point of the universe, and converging in the brain of a single individual, to the exclusion of all the others” (Kardec, 1860/1996:54-5).

Regarding theories of reflection and somnambulism, Kardec presented one final aspect against them:

“We repeat (and this is a point of such importance that we cannot insist too strongly upon it), that the somnambulistic theory, and that which may be called the theory of reflection, have been devised by the imagination of men; while, on the contrary, the theory of spirit-agency is not a conception of the human mind, for it was dictated by the manifesting intelligences themselves, at a time when no one thought of spirits, and when the opinion of the generality of men was opposed to such a supposition. We have therefore to inquire, first, from what quarter the mediums can have derived a hypothesis which had no existence in the thought of any one on earth? And, secondly, by what strange coincidence can it have happened that thousands of mediums, scattered over the entire globe, and utterly unknown to one another, all agree in asserting the same thing?” (Kardec, 1860/1996:55).

Miscellaneous Theories

Kardec also discussed a number of other theories developed to explain mediumistic manifestations: cracking-muscle, collective soul (a kind of collective unconsciousness), pessimist theory (only the devil could communicate), optimist theory (only good spirits), and the unispiritist or monospiritist theory (only the Holy Spirit). We will not discuss them HERE because of space constraints. It is possible to read Kardec’s writings on these topics in some of his books (Kardec, 1861/1986; 1860/1996; 1859/1999).

Spiritist Theory

Kardec accepted that fraud, hallucination, physical causes, unconscious cerebration and ESP were the best explanations for many experiences regarded as mediumistic, however, he argued, they were not able to explain the whole body of observed phenomena. As transcribed above, Kardec describes that the mediumistic manifestations themselves proposed the theory that the source of those phenomena were extra-corporeal intelligences, i.e. spirits. However, since the beginning of his investigations, Kardec recognized that one should not accept blindly what is said in mediumistic communications (Kardec, 1860b; 1890/1927). We should always use reason and empirical evidence to judge any theory, proposed by mediums in trance or those in more normal states of consciousness. Following are some phenomena that occurred that encouraged Kardec to accept the survival hypothesis as the best explanation. This list encompasses some important mediumistic experiences not properly explained by other hypotheses:

- Mediums producing accurate information previously unknown or in opposition to their previous opinion and that of any sitter (Kardec, 1858c,d,f; 1859a,b)
- Basket writing when several mediums at the same time just barely touched the basket with the tip of their fingers
- Mediums exhibiting previously unlearned skills such as:
 - o illiterate mediums writing (Kardec, 1861/1986)
 - o writing with calligraphy similar to the alleged communicating personality when that person was alive (Kardec, 1858a,b; 1860a; 1861/1986)
 - o painting, or drawing by mediums who do not have any training or do not show this skill in their regular lives (Kardec, 1858c,g)
 - o poetry (Kardec, 1859c)
 - o xenoglossy or xenography (Kardec, 1860/1996; 1861/1986)
- Mediumistic communications showing a wide range of personal psychological characteristics (such as character, humor, conciseness, choosing of words, likes, dislikes, etc) related to the alleged communicating personality (Kardec, 1858e; 1859d,e,g).

KARDEC'S GUIDELINES TO DEVELOP A RESEARCH PROGRAM IN PSYCHICAL PHENOMENA

Kardec often discussed epistemological and methodological issues relevant to the development of a comprehensive scientific research program to deal with psychical phenomena (Kardec, 1861/1986; 1859/1999; 1868). He proposed several guidelines that may be useful for contemporary researchers. Some examples are:

The use of methods appropriate to the subject of investigation

Kardec believed it is not appropriate to borrow, with no adaptation, research methods from physical sciences (such as physics and chemistry), because the latter deal with inert matter. In the investigation of mediumship we are dealing with an intelligent phenomenon.

“The physical sciences rest upon the properties of matter, which can be manipulated at will; their phenomena use material forces for agents. Spiritist phenomena have, as agents, intelligent beings who have independence and freewill, who are not subject to our caprices, and who, therefore, escape laboratory experimentation and calculations, remaining outside the domain of physical sciences.

Scientists deceived themselves when they attempted to experiment with spirits as they experiment with voltaic batteries. They were unsuccessful, as they well should, because they presupposed an analogy that does not hold. Then, without going any further, they concluded, by negation, that spirits do not exist.” (Kardec, 1859/1999:22)

The investigation should be strongly based on qualitative studies of spontaneous phenomena:

“They want the phenomena to happen at their will. One cannot give orders to spirits; it is necessary to await their will. It is not sufficient to say “Show me such a fact, and I will believe.” It is necessary to persevere and allow time for the phenomena to take place spontaneously. (...) The sought-after phenomenon will happen when one least expects it. To the eyes of the assiduous observer the events will be countless and will corroborate one another, but he who believes that touching the crank is sufficient to make the machine go deceives himself completely.

What does a naturalist do when he wishes to study the habits of an animal? Does he command it to do a certain thing, so as to observe it at his will? No, because he knows well that the animal will not obey him. He observes the spontaneous behavior of the animal and records them when they take place. Simple good sense dictates that one must proceed in the same way with the spirits, particularly since they are intelligent beings with more independence than animals.” (Kardec, 1859/1999:27)

The unwarranted and positivistic view that to make authentic science it is necessary to measure and to use a laboratory (Chalmers, 1982) has many times been advocated by scientists in psychical research/parapsychology, since the XIX century to the present time (Moreira-Almeida, 2006; Parot, 1993; Rhine, 1937). It is worthwhile to remember that Darwin’s theory on natural selection, one of the most powerful and most widely accepted scientific paradigms of contemporary science, was developed using qualitative methods (Darwin, 1958; Ghiselin, 1969).

Avoiding sterile skepticism and credulity; openness to the new

Many researchers in psychical research and parapsychology seem to be waiting for “definitive proof”, a kind of perfect evidence that would be convincing to any observer. For instance, J. B. Rhine stated “truth must be established, before we can accept it, upon actual experimentation, critically and deliberately conducted, which yields results that leave only one possible interpretation” (1937:7). This appears to be especially true among skeptics of the paranormal as a whole and in the controversy regarding survival research (Cook, 1986; Ducasse, 1962; Moreira-Almeida, 2006; Richet, 1924; Rhine, 1956). For more than a century, philosophers of science have shown that this goal is unattainable in any scientific enterprise (Chalmers, 1978; Popper, 1963; Kuhn, 1970):

“scientific hypothesis or theories cannot be conclusively proved by any set of available data, no matter how accurate and extensive. (...) even the most careful and extensive test can neither disprove one of two hypotheses nor prove the other: thus strictly construed, a crucial experiment is impossible in science” (Hempel, 1966:27-8).

(...) “a favorable outcome of even very extensive and exacting tests cannot provide conclusive proof for a hypothesis, but only more or less strong evidential support, or confirmation” (...) (Hempel, 1966:33).

Several times, Kardec recognized that there is no way to provide definitive proof that would be accepted by everyone:

“there are skeptics who deny even the evidence and to whom no phenomenon or argument would be convincing enough (...) Many would be disturbed, if the evidence forced them to believe, for confessing that they had been in error would wound their self-pride” (Kardec, 1859/1999:27).

Kardec asserted that a real scientist should be open to accept well-based hypotheses and evidences even when they are in disaccord with one’s previously held beliefs. He said that this was the case when he accepted the theory of reincarnation (Kardec, 1858h; 1862a). Following is one of his writings on the progressive nature of Spiritism:

“ “[Spiritism] is, and must be, essentially progressive, like all sciences based upon the observation of facts (...) Therefore, it does not regard anything as an established principle unless it has been patently demonstrated, or inferred logically from observation. (...) [It] will always assimilate all progressive doctrines, provided they have attained the condition of practical truths, and left the domain of utopia (...). Going *hand in hand with progress, Spiritism will never be superseded, since if new discoveries happen to show that it is in error on any point, it would modify itself on that point*” (Kardec, 1868:29).

According to Kardec, we should be “on guard against the exaggeration from both credulity and skepticism” (Kardec, 1858i:2). Regarding credulity:

“Exaggeration is always hurtful; in Spiritism, it engenders a too blind confidence in everything that proceeds from the invisible world; a confidence which sometimes becomes puerile, causing people to accept, too easily, and unreasoningly, what reflection and examination would have shown them to be absurd or impossible. Unfortunately, enthusiasm finds it hard to reflect, and is apt to get dazed. Such adherents are more hurtful than useful to the cause of spiritism; they are unfit to convince, because their judgment is not trustworthy; they become the easy dupes, either of spirits who play tricks on them, or of men who take advantage of their credulity. (...) such persons unintentionally put arms into the hands of the incredulous” (Kardec, 1861/1986:26).

The need for a comprehensive and diversified empirical basis

Kardec often stated the need for a wide and diversified empirical base. He stressed that a researcher should try to collect all kinds of phenomena that could be related to one’s subject of study (Kardec, 1858i). According to him, many mistakes and unsatisfactory theories were produced because investigators have based their studies and conclusions in a narrow range of observations covering a poor variety of phenomena (Kardec, 1861/1986). Enlarging the empirical base, making it more comprehensive, was essential to scientific revolutions such as those produced by Galileo and Darwin (Darwin, 1958; Moreira-Almeida & Koenig, 2008).

Kardec requested that reports of mediumistic manifestations from all over the world be sent to him (Kardec, 1858:i). He reported receiving “communications from almost a thousand serious spiritist centers, scattered over highly diversified areas (Kardec, 1864/1987:8). Fernandes, (2004), investigating the amplitude of Kardec’s correspondence, surveyed Kardec’s publications on Spiritism and found published references of contacts related to Spiritism from 268 cities in 37 countries (in Africa, Asia, Europe, and from the three Americas).

The importance of a theory to a scientific research program

In contradiction with the positivistic thought of his time, Kardec highlighted that just collecting facts is not enough to make science, that a theory is essential to make the observed facts understandable and to guide future research (Kardec, 1859e,f,h): “Every science should be based on facts, but these, by themselves, do not make a science. Science is built from the coordination and logical deduction of facts; it is the collection of laws that govern the facts” (Kardec, 1958i:3). He describes his role in the development of Spiritism as “that of an attentive observer who studies facts to seek their cause and extract their consequences” (Kardec, 1868:23).

He also called attention to the fact that proposing complex names to certain phenomena is not the same as explaining them (Kardec, 1859/1999). Another important point is that the theory needs to be comprehensive, explaining a large range of related phenomena and not just a few kinds:

“[a physician who had proposed the theory of cracking muscle] has proclaimed a verdict without having examined the matter in dispute, and must be allowed to regret that scientific men should be in a hurry to give, in regard to what they do not understand, explanations disproved by the facts (...) the characteristic of a true theory is its capability of accounting for all the facts to which it refers; if contradicted by a single fact, the theory is seen to be erroneous or incomplete” (Kardec, 1861/1986:36-7)

Facts are not enough to promote conviction

Also diverging from the positivistic prevailing view, Kardec stated that facts alone many times are not sufficient to persuade even *bona fide* skeptics. Preconceived objections should be first addressed, after that, one should move gradually from what is well known and accepted to more challenging topics. This strategy was also used some decades later by Frederic Myers (2001; Kelly et al., 2007) to present his studies on psychical research.

“It is generally supposed that, in order to convince, it is sufficient to demonstrate facts. Such would indeed appear to be the most logical method; nevertheless, experience shows us that it is not always the best (...) All methodical teaching should proceed from the known to the unknown” (Kardec, 1861/1986:20-1)

“It may even be said that, for most of those who are not previously prepared by reasoning, physical phenomena have but little weight. The more extraordinary these phenomena are, and the more they diverge from ordinary experience, the more opposition they encounter; and this, for the very simple reason, that we are naturally prone to doubt whatever has not a rational sanction; each man regarding such a matter from his own point of view, and interpreting it in his own way. (...) a preliminary explanation has the effect of disarming prejudice, and of showing, if not their reality, at least, their possibility. Those, who begin by an explanation, comprehend before they have seen. Since one has acquired the certainty that the phenomena are possible, the conviction of their reality is easily arrived at.” (Kardec, 1861/1986:26-7)

“When one sees a fact one does not understand, the more extraordinary it is the more suspicion it arouses and the more our thought tries to attribute an ordinary cause to it. However, if it is understood, it is soon acknowledged as rational, and its marvelous or supernatural character just vanishes.” (Kardec, 1859/1999:44).

CONCLUSIONS

Few researchers in parapsychology and psychical research know Allan Kardec and his works on psychical phenomena. In addition to this lack of awareness, there are also several misunderstandings and incorrect facts regarding his life and studies. Referring to a related subject, Alvarado wrote that many “important aspects of our history are sometimes forgotten by modern practitioners”, he emphasized the need to remedy the fact that many “scientifically trained parapsychologists suffer from this lack of historical memory” (Alvarado, 2003:87). We are not aware of any academic study focused on Kardec or his works. There is evidence that Kardec deserves to be remembered as a French intellectual who developed pioneering research on mediumistic and other psychic phenomena. He was one of the first to propose and to pursue a scientific approach to a subject that used to be considered metaphysical or unsuitable for an empirical and rational investigation. He advanced the main theories to explain paranormal experiences that are still debated in parapsychology today. He also produced several very informative discussions on epistemological and methodological aspects of scientific exploration of psychical phenomena. It would be worthwhile to know his work better, not just for a better comprehension of the history of parapsychology/psychical research, but also for potential scientific/philosophical tools that may be useful to move the field forward. More and deeper studies on aspects of Kardec's work and life are warranted.

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