

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUGGESTION

Boris Sidis, Ph.D.

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CHAPTER VII

THE NATURE OF ABNORMAL SUGGESTIBILITY

FROM the condition of hypnosis we turn now to an inquiry into its nature. To do this I think it would be best to examine from a purely empirical standpoint the general states into which the hypnotic subject may fall.

Bernheim finds that there are not less than nine states or stages:

1. Drowsiness.
2. Drowsiness, with inability to open the eyes.
3. Suggestive catalepsy slightly present.
4. Suggestive catalepsy more pronounced.
5. Suggestive contractures fully induced.

6. Automatic obedience.
7. Loss of memory on waking. Hallucinations not possible.
8. Loss of memory. Slight possibility of producing hallucinations, but not post-hypnotically.
9. Loss of memory. Hypnotic and post-hypnotic hallucinations possible.

Dr. Liebault finds that there are only six of them:

1. Drowsiness.
2. Drowsiness. Suggestive catalepsy inducible.
3. Light sleep. Automatic movements possible.
4. Deep sleep. Phenomena rapport manifested.
5. Light somnambulism. Memory hazy on waking.
6. Deep somnambulism. Total amnesia. Phenomena of post-hypnotic suggestion possible.

Prof. August Forel reduces them to three:

1. Drowsiness.
2. Inability to open the eyes. Obedience to suggestion.
3. Somnambulism. Amnesia.

Dr. Lloyd-Tukey gives the following states:

1. Light sleep.
2. Profound sleep.
3. Somnambulism.

Max Dessoir reduces them to two:

1. Voluntary movements show changes.
2. Abnormalities in the functions of the sense organs are added.

Edmund Gurney, the most philosophical of all the writers and investigators on the subject of hypnotism, gives the following two states:

1. The alert state.
2. The deep state.

As a matter of fact, however, the subjects little respect all those quasi-scientific classifications of hypnotic states. Dr. Kingsbury is no doubt right in his remark that "patients vary as much in hypnosis as they do in their features." No doubt there are as many hypnotic states as there are persons; no doubt that it is utterly impossible to give cut-and-dried definitions for the infinite variety of hypnotic stages. Although all this is perfectly true, we

still assert that there is a line of subdivision—a boundary line that separates one region of hypnotic phenomena from that of another. This boundary line is, in fact, implied in nearly all the classifications of hypnosis.

To find this boundary line, let us examine the state of mind of the subject when he is in a light hypnotic trance. The subject is in a passive condition. If during hypnotization he was sitting in a chair, there he will remain until roused, his limbs relaxed, his features placid, making as few movements as possible, occasionally changing his position if it becomes very uncomfortable. If his eyes are closed, he will continue to keep them in that condition. Try now to make a direct suggestion that might in the least interfere with what he considers as his voluntary life, with his freedom of action; challenge him, for instance, by raising his hand and telling him that he can not lower it, that he can not open his eyes; down goes the hand and up goes the eyelid, thus showing us that, passive as he appears to be, he does have control over his limbs. The controlling consciousness is there, only it is inactive, passive, and it requires a special external stimulus to set it going, to put it into activity. My friend Mr. L. told me once he wondered greatly at the passivity in which he was when in a state of hypnosis. He told me he firmly made up his mind that when hypnotized again he would start a conversation on different topics. A few minutes later I hypnotized him, but he remained as passive as usual. To start him into activity an impulse from without was first required. Mark now the peculiarity. The activity set going does not continue longer than the challenged act. I raise the subject's arm and challenge him to lower it; he does lower the arm, but keeps it down there in a passive condition. I tell the subject he is unable to walk, the challenge is accepted; he

makes a step, very rarely two, showing me that he can walk, that he possesses full control over his legs, but remains passively in one place. He makes another step if you challenge him again. The controlling consciousness is in a *passive state*, and reasserts itself at every single challenge to act. The act done, and the controlling consciousness falls back into its form or state—the subject relapses into his passive condition. Hypnotization produces a deep cleft in the mind of the subject, a cleft by which the waking, controlling consciousness is separated from the great stream of conscious life.

Now when the cleft is not deep enough we have the different slight hypnotic states, but as the cleft becomes deeper and deeper the hypnosis grows more profound, and when the controlling consciousness is fully cut off from the rest of conscious life we have a state of *fun hypnosis* which is commonly called *somnambulism*, and in which there is complete amnesia on awakening. That is why we have the strange accounts of hypnotic subjects, especially of those who are on the verge of *somnambulism*, that during hypnosis they were indifferent to the actions of their body—the latter acted by itself; that they were mere spectators of all the experiments performed on them, of all the strange actions, dramas, that transpired during the trance; that it seemed to them as if they themselves, their personality, retreated far, far away. "We have not to wonder that on the question "Where are you?" the subject sometimes gives the seemingly absurd reply of Krafft-Ebing's patient—"In your eye."

There are pathological cases on record which are analogous to this state. The conscious controlling "I" seems to retreat far, far away from the world. Dr. Krishaber brings the case of a patient

who gives the following account of himself: "I myself was immeasurably far away. I looked about me with terror and astonishment; the world was escaping from me. I remarked at the same time that my voice was extremely far away from me, that it sounded no longer as if mine. Constantly it seemed to me as if my legs did not belong to me. It was almost as bad with my arms. I appeared to myself to act automatically, by an impulsion foreign to myself. It was certainly another who had taken my form and assumed my functions. I hated, I despised this other; he was perfectly odious to me."

To return, however, to hypnosis. In the superficial stages, when the subject is not in a very deep trance, we frequently meet with curious phenomena of the following kind: I raise the hand of the subject and put it in some uncomfortable position and let it remain there; there it stays all the while. I challenge him to lower his hand. He does not answer. I repeat again the challenge. No reply. "Answer me: Why do not you lower the hand?" "I do not care to," comes the slow answer. I keep on challenging him for some seconds. At last the stimuli get summated, the controlling consciousness is stimulated, makes strenuous efforts, and the hand, shaking and in jerks, slowly descends. I tell the subject that he forgot his name, that he can by no means remember it. He keeps silent. "You forgot your name, you do not remember it," I assert firmly and positively. "Yes, I do," comes in a low voice the slow and tardy reply. "But you do not know your name." "Yes, I do." "No, you don't." "Yes, I do." And so he wrangles with me for about three or five minutes, until at last he seems to brace himself up and tells me his name. "But why did you not tell it to me before?" "I really do not care to tell my name." The cleft in the mind is here of some depth, and it requires a strong challenge, an

intense stimulus, to set the controlling consciousness into activity.

When the patient sinks into a deeper and deeper hypnotic condition, when the hypnosis is so profound as to verge on somnambulism, the waking, controlling consciousness hangs, so to say, on a thread to the rest of organic life; and when that thread, too, is cut off by suggestion, or by some other means, the waking, guiding consciousness loses all contact with the stream of life.

We can easily state our theory in terms of physiological psychology. The nervous centres of man's nervous system, if classified as to function, may be divided into inferior and superior. The inferior centres are characterized by reflex and automatic activity. A stimulus excites the peripheral nerve endings of some sense organ; at once a nervous current is set up in the afferent nerves, This current in its turn stimulates a plexus of central ganglia, the nervous energy of which is set free and is propagated along the efferent nerves toward glands or muscles; secretions, excretions, muscular contractions, or relaxations are the final result, ingoing and outgoing nervous currents may be modified by the nervous centres; nervous currents may be intensified, decreased in energy, or even entirely inhibited by mutual interaction, according to the law derived by Prof. Ziehen from the general physiology of the nerves—namely: "If an excitation of definite intensity (m) take place in one cortical element (b), and another excitation of a different intensity (n) take place at the same time in another cortical element (c), which is connected by a path of conduction with b, the two intensities of excitation may reciprocally modify each other." Although such a modification may frequently occur, still it remains true that the inferior centres are of a reflex nature. No sooner is the nervous energy of a lower

centre set free than at once it tends to discharge itself into some kind of action, of movement. The physiological process of setting free the nervous energy in a central ganglion, or in a system of central ganglia, is accompanied in the simpler but more integrated, more organized centres by sentience, sensitiveness, sensibility,¹ and in the more complex but less integrated, less organized centres by consciousness, sensations, perceptions, images, and ideas.

Turning now to the superior or the highest nervous centres, we find that they possess the function of choice and will. A number of impressions, of sensations, of ideas reach those will-centres, and a sifting, a selecting, an inhibitory process at once begins. Some of the impressions are rejected, inhibited; others are permitted to work themselves out within certain limits, and others again are given full, free play. Psychologically, this process expresses itself in the *fiat* or the *neget*, in the "I will" or the "I will not." Everyone is well acquainted with the will-effort, especially when having to make some momentous resolution. These superior choice and will-centres, localized by Ferrier, Bianchi, and others in the frontal lobes, and by other writers in the upper layers of the cortex—these centres, on account of their selective and inhibitory function, may be characterized as inhibitory centres *par excellence*.

Now, parallel to the double system of nervous centres, the inferior and the superior, we also have a *double consciousness*, the inferior, the organic, the reflex consciousness, and the superior, the controlling, the choice, and will consciousness. The controlling consciousness may be characterized as the *guardian consciousness of the species*. And from an evolutionary

teleological standpoint we can well see of what use this guardian consciousness is to the life of the species. The external world bombards, so to say, the living organism with innumerable stimuli; from all sides thousands of impressions come on, crowding upon the senses of the individual. Each impression has a motor tendency which, if not counteracted by other impressions, must fatally result in some action. It is not, however, of advantage to the organism always to act, and to act immediately on an stimuli reaching it; hence that organism will succeed in the struggle for life that possesses some inhibitory choice and will-centres. The choice and will-centres permit only a certain number of impressions to take effect; the rest are inhibited. Only those impressions that are advantageous to the life existence of the organism are allowed to take their course; the others are nipped in their bud. The guardian consciousness wards off as far as it is able all the harmful blows with which the environment incessantly assails the organic life of the individual.

Having all this in mind, we can now understand the nature of hypnosis. In the normal condition of man the superior and the inferior centres work in perfect harmony; the upper and the lower consciousness are for all practical purposes blended into a unity forming one conscious personality. In hypnosis the two systems of nervous centres are dissociated, the superior centres and the upper consciousness are inhibited, or, better, cut off, split off from the rest of the nervous system with its organic consciousness, which is thus laid bare, open to the influence of external stimuli or suggestions. Physiologically, hypnosis *is an inhibition of the inhibitory centres*, or, in other words, hypnosis is a *disaggregation of the superior from the inferior centres*, necessarily followed, as is the removal of inhibition in general, by an increase of the ideo-

motor and ideo-sensory reflex excitability. Psychologically, hypnosis is the split-off, disaggregated, organic, reflex consciousness pure and simple.

This theory of hypnosis is, in fact, a generalization in which the views of the two schools, the Salpêtrière and the Nancy, are included. With the Nancy school, we agree that suggestion is all-powerful in hypnotic trance; the hypnotic trance is, in fact, a state of heightened suggestibility, or, rather of pure reflex consciousness; but with the Paris school we agree, that a changed physiological state is a prerequisite to hypnosis, and this modification consists in the disaggregation of the superior from the inferior centres, in the segregation of the controlling consciousness from the reflex consciousness. In hypnotic trance the upper inhibiting, resisting consciousness being absent, we have direct access to man's organic consciousness, and through it to organic life itself. Strong, persistent impressions or suggestions made on the reflex organic consciousness of the inferior centres may modify their functional disposition, induce trophic changes, and even change organic structures. But whatever the case may be with regard to psycho-therapeutics, this, it seems, may be fairly granted, that the process of hypnotization consists in the separation of the higher inhibitory cortical ganglion cells from the rest of the cerebro-spinal and sympathetic nervous systems. Hypnosis, we may say, is the more or less effected disaggregation of the controlling inhibitory centres from the rest of the nervous system; along with this disaggregation there goes a dissociation of the controlling guardian consciousness from the reflex organic consciousness. Dissociation is the secret of hypnosis, and amnesia is the ripe fruit.

The magnitude of this disaggregation greatly varies. If it is at its minimum, the hypnosis is light; if at its maximum, the hypnosis is deep, and is known as somnambulism.

From our standpoint of hypnosis we may say that there are only two great distinct classes of hypnotic states:

1. Incomplete dissociation of the waking, controlling consciousness.
2. Complete dissociation of the waking consciousness.

Stating the same somewhat differently, we may say that there are two states:

1. Incomplete hypnosis accompanied by a greater or lesser degree of memory.
2. Complete hypnosis with no memory.

In other words, hypnosis has two states:

1. The mnesic state.
2. The amnesic state.

Amnesia is the boundary line that separates two different hypnotic regions.

This view of the matter is, in fact, taken by Edmund Gourney; for he tells us that "we might without incorrectness describe the higher hypnotic phenomena as reflex action, in respect of the certainty with which particular movements follow on particular stimuli; but they are, and their peculiarity consists in

their being, *conscious reflex action*."² "The heart of the problem [of hypnotism]" he says in another place, "lies not in CONSCIOUSNESS, but in WILL." In his paper on The Stages of Hypnotism,³ E. Gurney distinguishes two states of hypnosis—the *alert* and the *deep* state. "The question then presents itself," he writes, "Is there any distinction of *kind* between the two states? I believe that there is such a distinction, and that the phenomena needed to establish it are to be found in the domain of *memory*." Gurney, however, thinks that not only is the *deep*, but the hypnotic state as a whole, that is, the alert one, too, is separated from the normal state by amnesia—a proposition which is not borne out by facts. On the whole, however, I may say that Gurney was on the right track; he cast a searching glance deep into the nature of hypnosis.

If we turn now to the classifications reviewed by us we find that they have a change of memory, amnesia, as their *fundamentum divisionis*. Max Dessoir's forms the only exception, but his classification sins against the truth of facts. For there are cases of subjects who fall into deep hypnosis and still there can be induced no abnormal changes in the sense organs. I myself have a somnambule, Mr. F., who can be led through a series of imaginary scenes and changes of personalities, but whose sense organs remain almost normal, perfectly free from suggestion; by no means can I make him see a picture on a blank paper, or feel the taste of sugar on eating salt, or take a glass of water for a glass of wine—phenomena which I easily induce in another somnambule, Mr. W. There are again other cases on record where the sense organs are deeply affected, but no abnormalities can be induced in the voluntary movements. Bernheim brings a few cases of this kind. *Amnesia is the only boundary line in hypnosis, and*

degeneration of consciousness is its source.

Suggestion is at present the shibboleth of many a "scientific" psychologist. Suggestion is the magic key that opens all secrets and discloses all mysteries. Suggestion explains everything. To any question as to hypnosis asked of the suggestionist, he, like a parrot, has but one answer: "Suggestion"! Well may Binet say:⁴ "It is insufficient to explain everything that takes place in hypnotized subjects by invoking the hackneyed term 'Suggestion!' And that suffices for all purposes; that explains everything, and, like the panacea of the ancients, it cures everything. As a matter of fact, theories of suggestion thus invoked amount to nothing less than makeshifts to save people the trouble of serious and delicate investigation." Suggestionists make of suggestion a kind of metaphysical absolute, a Spinozistic *causa sui*, for, according to this trance-philosophy, hypnosis is nothing but suggestion; and by what is it induced? Why, by suggestion! Suggestion is thus its own cause. Absurd as this trance-philosophy of suggestionism is, it is none the less the current view of many a "scientific" psychologist. Still the authorities on the subject do not always talk the suggestion jargon; in their more lucid states they use quite a different language. The pity only is that they do not grasp the full import and meaning of their own propositions; they do not see the far-reaching consequences of their own statements.

Dr. Moll, in his remarkable book on Hypnotism, sums up his theory of hypnosis thus: "We may, then, consider every hypnosis as a state in which the normal course of the ideas is *inhibited*. It matters not whether the ideas have to do with movements or with sense impressions. Their normal course is always inhibited. The idea of a movement called up in a subject in or out of hypnosis

has a tendency to induce the movement. *But in waking life this idea is made ineffectual by the voluntary idea of the subject that he will prevent the suggested movement, the hypnotized subject can not do this.*⁵ The same is the case with suggested paralysis. Sense delusions can be explained in a similar way. We tell the hypnotic subject, 'Here is a dog,' and he realizes it, and sees the dog. The limitation of the normal course of the ideas allows the idea of the dog to become a perception. The subject is unable to control the external ideas, or to put forward his own; the external ones dominate his consciousness. Psychologically speaking, what we mean by attention is the power of fixing certain ideas in the mind and of working with them. Consequently we may say that there is an alteration of attention in hypnosis. But attention may be either spontaneous or reflex. When by any act of will we choose one of several ideas and fix our attention upon it, this is spontaneous attention; but when one idea among several gets the upper hand through its intensity or for some other reason, and thus represses other ideas and draws exclusive attention upon itself, this is reflex attention. Now it is only spontaneous attention which is altered in hypnosis—i.e., the subject's ability voluntarily to prefer one idea to another is interfered with, while reflex attention is undisturbed, and it is through this last that a suggested idea, the choice of which has not, however, been left to the subject comes into prominence.

"Many investigators," continues Dr. Moll, "conceive hypnotism in this way. The works of Durand de Gros, Liébault, and more lately of Beard, Richet, Schneider, Wundt, and Bentivegni, are in the main direct to this point."

It is truly amusing to see how people concede the main

substance to their opponents and still cling to the empty shell of their old creeds. Accepting inhibition of spontaneous attention as the source, as the nature of hypnosis, the psychologist of the suggestion school fully abandons his medical charm, his all-powerful magic suggestion. Inhibition of spontaneous attention, of voluntary control, leaving a residue of reflex attention, what is it, if not the full admission that the hypnotic state is a mental disaggregation, a dissociation of the controlling from the reflex consciousness?

Turning now to one of the leaders of the Nancy school, to the greatest popularizer of suggestionism—Prof. Bernheim—we find him to be still more explicit on this point. I humbly ask the reader's pardon for the lengthy quotation I am going to offer him. I find it will give additional confirmation to my view of the nature of hypnosis. In his book, "Suggestive Therapeutics," Bernheim gives us the following account of hypnosis, an account that practically amounts to a complete abandonment of his omnipotent deity—suggestion: "The one thing certain is that a *peculiar aptitude* for transforming the idea received into an act exists in hypnotized subjects who are susceptible to suggestion. In the normal consciousness every formulated idea is questioned by the mind. After being perceived by the cortical centres, the impression extends to the cells of the adjacent convolutions; their peculiar activity is excited; the diverse faculties generated by the gray substance of the brain come into play; the impression is elaborated, registered, and analyzed by means of a complex mental process which ends in its acceptance or neutralization; if there is cause, the mind vetoes it. In the hypnotized subject, on the contrary, the transformation of thought into action, sensation, movement, or vision is so quickly and so actively accomplished

that the intellectual inhibition has not time to act. When the mind interposes, it is already an accomplished fact, which is often registered with surprise, and which is confirmed by the fact that it proves to be real, and no intervention can hamper it further. If I say to the hypnotized subject, 'Your hand remained closed,' the brain carries out the idea as soon as it is formulated; reflex is immediately transmitted from the cortical centre, where the idea induced by the auditory nerve is perceived, to the motor centre, corresponding to the central origin of the nerves subserving flexion of the hand; contracture occurs in flexion. There is then exaltation of the ideo-motor reflex excitability, which effects the unconscious (subconscious?) transformation of the thought into movement *unknown to the will*. The same thing occurs when I say to the hypnotized subject, 'You have tickling sensation in your nose.' The thought induced through hearing is reflected upon the centre of olfactory sensibility, where it awakens the sensitive memory image of the nasal itching as former impressions have created it and left it imprinted and latent. This memory sensation thus resuscitated may be intense enough to cause the reflex action of sneezing. There is also, then, exaltation of the ideo-sensorial reflex excitability, which effects the subconscious transformation of the thought into sensation, or into a sensory image. In the same way the visual, acoustic, and gustatory images succeed the suggested idea.

"Negative suggestions are more difficult to explain. If I say to the hypnotized subject, 'Your body is insensible, your eye is blind,' the impression transmitted by the auditory nerve to the centre of tactile or visual anæsthesia is that retinal vision exists, but the cerebral perception no longer exists. It seems as if it might be a reflex paralysis of a cortical centre which the suggested idea

has produced in this case. The mechanism of suggestion in general may then be summed up in the following formula: *Increase of the reflex ideo-motor, ideo-sensorial excitability*. In the same way through the effect of some influence—strychnine, for example—the sensitive-motor excitability is increased in the spinal cord, so that the least impression at the periphery of a nerve is immediately transformed into contracture without the moderating influence of the brain being able to prevent this transformation. In the same way in hypnotization the ideo-reflex excitability is increased in the brain, so that any idea received is immediately transformed into an act, without the controlling portion of the brain, the higher centres, being able to prevent the transformation."

Thus we clearly see that when the suggestionist comes to discuss the nature of hypnosis, he abandons his position and admits that a split in the brain cutting off the higher controlling centres from the lower ones is at the basis of hypnosis. The very conditions of hypnosis proclaim this fact, for they are but keen psychical scalpels and have the power to effect a deep incision in the semi-fluid stream of consciousness. Fixation of attention, monotony, limitation of the field of consciousness, limitation of voluntary movements, inhibition—all of them are calculated to pare, to split off the controlling from the reflex consciousness. *The nature of hypnosis, of abnormal suggestibility, is a disaggregation of consciousness.*

1. See G. H. Lewes's Problems of Life and Mind, second series.

2. Mind. October, 1884. P. S. P. R., December, 1884. (Proceedings of the Society for

Psychical Research)

3. Ibid., January, 1884. P. S. P. R., January, 1884.
4. On Double Consciousness.
5. The italics are mine.

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