

Channelling: Sick or Scientific?

by

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From the very earliest times people have claimed that in certain special circumstances they were in communication with 'entities inhabiting a higher dimension of reality than our own'. Nowadays this phenomenon is called channelling.

Modern psychology is interested in the dissociation involved and usually regards the messages as unconscious fantasies of the channel that merely appear to be channelled from outside the self. Most of the channelled information does not elicit much enthusiasm. Nevertheless we see that the social phenomenon of channelling attracts numerous disciples. I have a strong impression that certainly at least some channels have more to offer than is usually admitted. In an overview article, placed on www.dokterdecuypere.be by courtesy of the Society for Psychical Research (www.spr.ac.uk), I present a comprehensive classification: conscious frauds, psychopathology, ego state, transitional forms, authentic channelling.

Furthermore some practical advice is given on how to deal with the phenomenon in a meaningful way.

CHANNELLING — SICK OR SCIENTIFIC?¹by J. -M. DECUYPERE²

ABSTRACT

From the very earliest times people have claimed that in certain special circumstances they were in communication with 'entities inhabiting a higher dimension of reality than our own'. Nowadays this phenomenon is called channelling. Modern psychology is interested in the dissociation involved. The messages are usually regarded as unconscious fantasies of the channel that merely appear to be channelled from outside the self. Most of the channelled information does not elicit much enthusiasm. Nevertheless we see that the social phenomenon of channelling attracts numerous disciples. I have a strong impression that certainly at least some channels have more to offer than is usually admitted. This calls for further investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The literature of psychiatry shows a growing interest in dissociation and related domains. As a consequence, more attention is being given to channelling (a revival of mediumship), a topic which most scientists do not take very seriously. On the other hand channelling is given a lot of credit in the alternative press, although the psychological point of view is rarely elaborated in these treatments.

In the following contribution this controversy is both elucidated and put into perspective. Furthermore some practical advice is given on how to deal with the phenomenon in a meaningful way.

DEFINITION AND HISTORY

Anyone interested in channelling can hardly disregard the standard work of Jon Klimo (1987): *Channeling: Investigations on Receiving Information from Paranormal Sources*. He describes channelling as "a phenomenon in which otherwise ordinary people seem to let themselves be taken over by, or in other ways receive messages from, another personality who uses them as a conduit, medium or channel for the communication—hence the term *medium* or *channel*."

Channelling has been around since the beginning of recorded history. Like mysticism, it has been part of human experience as far back as human records go. The following account is quoted/summarized from Klimo (1987, pp. 1–128):—

The first records of the use of trance to achieve mystical states and converse with the gods come from Ancient Egypt and are many thousands of years old.

Reports dating from early on in Chinese history describe channelling-like communications. From these four-thousand-year-old reports, we learn that the early Chinese called full- and light-trance channels *Wu*. They were seen as shaman-like individuals who could consort with the spiritual world. There was

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even a Han-dynasty Emperor who was known to consult a female *wu* whose source was a princess no longer in the physical world. Her messages were written down and subsequently became law.

The first written reports of trance possession in Japan appear in the eighth century AD. There were two kinds of shamanistic channels: the *kan-nagi* attached to the imperial court, and the *kuchiyose* of the villages.

Early Indian history too contains descriptions of any number of entities engaging in channelling. Indeed Helena Blavatsky and Alice Bailey are just two of the many teachers of the modern era who report having channelled information echoing the Indian view of the after-life and reincarnation.

In Ancient Greece the Dionysian channels of the 6th century BC resorted to physical and mental practices to alter consciousness, in addition to wine and other plant-based drugs. The Orphic school gave birth to that most visible and famous of the Greek channels: the oracles. According to the records some of them were able to allow their systems to fall under the influence of a particular discarnate spirit, which would then speak through them. The paranormal power they were best known for was prophecy, *vide* the pythia (or pythones), a female medium at Delphi. She became ecstatic by inhaling a vapour that rose through a fissure in the earth, and then received her inspiration from Apollo.

With the rise of monotheism around 1000 BC, the early prophets and saints of the world's religious traditions claimed that they were able to hear the voice of a non-physical God, who provided information of extraordinary spiritual value.

It is interesting to note that in the seventh century AD, the prophet Muhammad received his teachings in his dreams, in waking visions and by voice. Indeed many of the books of the Koran, the bible of Islam, stem directly from Muhammad's channelled material. In the Old Testament we find hundreds of examples of Yahweh channelling messages via his chosen in order to spread his word to the people of Israel. Moses could be considered the first channel to become a prophet of Yahweh, followed by David, Solomon, Samuel, Daniel and many others. The fact that in the Bible mediums were outlawed illustrates the tension and the struggle between the many capable of channelling and the chosen few able to monopolize the channelling of 'the one truth'.

Some Christians might find it shocking to entertain the idea that on many occasions Jesus Christ himself seems to channel his guiding force, the Father. The disciple John emphasizes the need for discernment in receiving channelled information when he warns against 'false prophets'. Another part of the Christian legacy is the Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost, who is said to appear as a non-physical spiritual presence capable of being channelled.

Channelling then has gone on throughout history. However, apart from the present, no period has been as rich in channelling and interest in the phenomenon as the mid nineteenth century, when it was known as *spiritualism* (usually termed *spiritism* in Europe). The channelling function was called mediumship, and channels were called mediums. The sources contacted were virtually without exception thought to be the spirits of deceased human beings.

Did you know that the President of the USA, Abraham Lincoln, received several messages from a trance medium named Nettie Colburn? Among other things, her alleged guides counselled Lincoln not to put off acting on the

Emancipation Proclamation, leading him to take the decision to liberate six million slaves.

The 19th century was a great time for performance: tables rocked, objects moved, people experienced psychic touches and there were reports of strange lights and partial manifestations. Believers and sceptics engaged in vehement argument, and even reputable investigators who carefully observed these proceedings and questioned all the participants often disagreed on their findings. Although the whole show was sometimes revealed to be fraudulent, the practice of spiritualism did not die out. Nowadays, at the close of the 20th century, we find, perhaps as a result of the declining influence of traditional religion, people reaching for a renewed sense of transcendent meaning. In order to fill their need they become attracted to the dozens of new books (and new bibles) which their authors claim are channelled.

Various estimates put the number of channels active in the modern world as being of the order of several tens of thousands, with perhaps over a thousand active in Southern California alone. Obviously something interesting and unusual is going on, and on a fairly wide scale.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

What Do Channels Think of the Way they Proceed to Establish Contact?

Channelling occurs in a spectrum of varieties (Klimo, 1987, 185-201): there are different types and classifications where *intentional* is contrasted with *spontaneous*, *classic channelling* with *open channelling* (inspirational speaking where the source is unknown). Other methods which have been described include *sleep channelling* (during the natural sleep cycle or during a nap, an individual may receive channelled information that is not part of a dream), *dream channelling*, *clairaudient* and *clairvoyant channelling*, *automatic writing*, *automatic painting* (and other automatisms). But most often when insiders speak of channelling, they mean *full-trance channelling* and *interdimensional telepathy*.

In *full-trance channelling* the medium or channel appears to fall unconscious or go into a trance, and a purported entity enters the body of the channel and uses it for speaking, writing, walking or even painting. The channel permits 'the guide' (Garfield & Grant, 1984) to take over his or her body, and usually will not subsequently remember what has been said, although occasionally the channel will recall an out-of-body experience. Full-trance channelling has been popularized by the media but is in fact rare.

Interdimensional telepathic communication is more widespread. The channel uses meditation or another method to achieve an altered state of consciousness. The channel then intentionally contacts "the frequency of a disembodied entity at another level of reality, makes the mind blank and then experiences a flow of words or thoughts". This type of channelling implies a considerable surrender, as the channel remains conscious during the channelling process and does not know what the source is going to say until it is said.

What Do Psychologists and Psychiatrists Make of Channelling?

Most practitioners take the view that the human mind is full of surprises and has astounding abilities, but nevertheless remains a *closed system*.

Consequently even the most striking channellings can be nothing else than splendid surges out of the channel's own creative unconscious. To put it simply, in the view of the sceptics "these top channels are suffering from a benign form of schizophrenia put to socially constructive use" (Ryerson, 1989).

Researchers are primarily interested in the phenomenon of *dissociation*, which plays a role in channelling.

Literally dissociation means the division of things which normally speaking are associated with one another. In psychology dissociation refers to a reduced association between various aspects of consciousness. In reality dissociation must be regarded as a spectrum ranging from extremely common forms to the pathological. For example, certain forms of dissociation are part of our daily experience; just think of reading an interesting book or watching an absorbing film and forgetting your immediate environment, daydreaming, or walking along the street while sunk in your own thoughts, so that you are hardly aware of where you are. Such reversible absorption phenomena can be regarded as normal forms of dissociation. You become entirely absorbed in something, but you can return to a more general awareness just as easily.

It is well known that people dissociate when exposed to overwhelming emotions and traumatic experiences which they cannot deal with. One example is the woman who while being raped has the experience of standing apart from her body and watching the whole thing from a distance. Here we see dissociation as a sort of protective reflex.

When dissociation becomes problematic, we speak of Dissociative Disorders. The *DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—4th Edition)* sums them up in a tidy list. The best known is Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). In other words if you go to consult a channel it is not impossible that this person is suffering from MPD. The person is unwell and what he or she calls channelling is simply switching from one personality to the other.

Even so it is more likely that you will meet a person who enters a trance or meditative state in which they try to put their self-awareness—their idea of personal identity—to one side in order to let other forms of consciousness 'come through'. At least that is what they say that they do. According to most psychiatrists then, 'channelling' is simply a sort of focusing or zooming in on a more or less familiar aspect of the personality of the channel; what therapists call an *ego state*.

A COMPREHENSIVE CLASSIFICATION

Channelling is a phenomenon common to all ages and all cultures, although you could also say the same about fantasy and psychopathology.

I for my part believe that channels of outstanding merit do in fact exist. Over the last 10 years I have witnessed hundreds of channelling sessions, usually with the same top channels. All of them have been recorded. They contain interesting and often remarkable information about myself, my family and friends, relating to the usual worries, such as difficulties in relationships, work, health, etc. On many occasions the quality of the information made me think of a psychic radiographic image. In such cases the image does not show the entire anatomy, but what is revealed is really present.

Nonetheless, this personal testimony is not intended to give the impression that everything which might be encountered in modern channelling is as clear as daylight—the very opposite in fact. My experience with many so-called channels is that one must work through a great deal of absolute rubbish before you encounter something useful.

Old though it is, channelling has always been controversial, not least because it challenges our basic assumptions about the nature of reality; for example, ‘Is the human brain a computer or an aerial (or both)?’ Both sceptics and believers find that their preconceptions are largely confirmed by their personal experience and that of those sharing their views. Nonetheless the gulf between sceptics and believers can be narrowed, when they realize that often they are comparing different categories of channels, i.e. they are not comparing like with like. I personally use the following categories, although of course combined forms are also possible:—

Conscious frauds. It is generally assumed that about 5% of all channels are entirely fraudulent. They are not really channelling and they are aware that they are only pretending. They consciously practise to deceive.

Psychopathology (Schizophrenia, MPD, . . .). Once again I must stress that we should not so much wonder whether dissociation plays a role in channelling (to which the answer is yes, always); rather we should determine from case to case whether the dissociation is pathological or not. In other words, is the dissociation a symptom or is it a technique which has to be employed to make channelling possible? Here it is illuminating to quote ‘Seth’, the purported entity channelled by Jane Roberts:—

I do depend upon Jane’s willingness to dissociate [in the text it says Ruburt, Seth’s name for Jane Roberts’s wider identity]. There is no doubt she is unaware at times of her surroundings during sessions. It is a phenomenon in which she gives consent, and she could at any time return her conscious attention to her physical environment . . . You *can* have two doors open at once. In the meantime you must turn down the volume of the first channel while you learn to attune your attention to the second. This process you call dissociation . . . It should be apparent that my communications come through Jane’s subconscious. But as a fish swims through water, but the fish is not the water, I am not Jane’s subconscious. [Roberts, 1970, pp. 58–59]

Analysis of the differences between MPD and channelling is helped by the fact that channels usually have just one source, whereas most MPD patients have several *alters*. Moreover, channelled sources are rarely children, while MPD subjects usually do in fact have children as *alter* personalities.

Ego state (see above). Not everybody who shuts his or her eyes and starts to speak is passing on information from a higher plane. The information could be coming from down here on Planet Earth. It is well known that everybody’s subconscious contains sufficient information to create dozens of personalities. Indeed, this is a capacity which professional actors make grateful use of. Of course in some circles you can make a very considerable impression if you no longer use your own name but start going around saying that you are acting as the spokesman of one or another being, Intelligence, angel or even God himself.

Transitional forms (part ego-state, part authentic channelling). In my opinion and that of several of my fellow researchers this type produces endless

reams of text. The impressiveness of the sheer volume is matched only by their total worthlessness, which, however, is interspersed by the occasional incredibly lucid passage. The subconscious of the channel might be compared to a runaway computer which is churning out a jumble of spiritual junk-mail which has been picked up somewhere or other, combined with the occasional passage of useful (and possibly channelled) information.

Authentic channelling, if I may use that term, can be further divided into the channelling of *entities* and the rare channels who channel an *Intelligence*. Apparently there is a difference between an entity and an Intelligence. An entity is said to function on the astral plane, while an Intelligence supposedly operates from the supramental level and transcends all human emotions and personal characteristics. Intelligences describe themselves as 'beings without a shadow', by which they mean that they have no hidden sides, no subconscious, no unknown impulses any more.

Channels are generally agreed that the information acquired, even by authentic channels, is not equally complete and accurate. "It is true that the message, even from the highest levels, is coloured by the person who receives it, by that person's beliefs, vocabulary, subconscious, etc. . . ." (Maclean, 1980). Indeed, the process can be compared to ringing someone long-distance for advice, with the channel acting as a human telephone. The quality of telephone counselling depends not just on the skill of the expert you're calling, but also on the clarity of the connection. The noisier the line the more the information will be blurred. As a result the more the channel has worked at his house-keeping by eliminating his or her energy blockages and preconceived ideas, the less the information will be unconsciously distorted or filtered out.

If one is fortunate enough to know different channels, interesting possibilities arise. When you are familiar with one reliable channel you can tell the source that you intend to visit another channel (although you have someone particular in mind, you do not have to be more specific) and ask whether the second channel is reliable, and why or why not. (Here you might say you are using a sort of interdimensional quality control). If the second channel is acknowledged, you can consult him or her, and obtain a second opinion about your specific problem. An even more interesting alternative is, without informing the new channel, to ask the second source to explain (parts of) the message you received from the first channel. My experience with such cases has given me the impression that disembodied Intelligences are not only aware of the information their colleagues have already passed on, but will also tend to complete the message of the other. Such cross-checking not only satisfies your curiosity and meets the need to make a thorough diagnosis, it also gives you some assurance that you are not losing your mind in this exotic field. Researchers also refer to the "intuitive consensus approach" (Kautz, 1986), which means that by using the information of a number of channels, you try to form a consensus view about the matter you are interested in.

THE SPIRITUAL AND PRACTICAL USE OF CHANNELLING

Any real consideration of channelling inevitably raises two basic questions, 'How does the message come about?' and 'How useful is the information supplied?'

So far no entirely satisfactory answer has been given to the first question. The subjective and relatively unverifiable nature of channelling means that we can never be absolutely sure of what we are dealing with. However, this everlasting ambiguity should not divert us from the second, far more interesting, question of whether the information is beneficial.

The sources themselves claim to promote human evolution. Some even view the information as a form of group psychotherapy for humanity as a whole. They stress the importance of after-life and reincarnation. They describe the human spirit as a being that survives death and which functions in dimensions other than the merely physical. The universe, we are told, is a multidimensional living Being, sometimes called God, within which all is consciousness in various stages of evolution (Klimo, 1987, p.151). While on the earth we are in a sort of 'classroom', with compulsory and optional subjects (van Leent, 1991), so that we learn to become loving beings that reflect the nature of our creator. The sources want to share this information because mankind's spiritual self is awakening, we are told, resulting in an accelerated desire for evolution and spiritual growth (Roman & Packer, 1987, p.6).

When therapists speak of the use of channelling, they're looking for instant practical advice, and not for general spiritual comfort alone. When channelling deals with the medical or psychological problems of individuals needing help, the utility of the information given is immediate and can be evaluated regardless of the source. By now some of you may well be thinking that I've gone off my trolley, or that I still believe in Father Christmas. However, to be frank I don't really care who's behind the beard as long as he gives me something I can use. In every life there are moments when one must make extremely difficult decisions. To take an example, imagine you are unwell but your doctors cannot agree on exactly how you should be treated. Some advise radical surgery, while others are quite adamant that surgery is inadvisable. In such circumstances you may well be tempted to consult a channel in the hope that you might obtain some extra item of information which would give you an indication of how to act and why. In any case, you must use your own intuition and your own sensitivity (and that of your doctors as well) to assess this information. Suppose the answer of the source gives you a lift and furnishes you with a broader view of the problem while moreover being consistent with the medical information you have already received. In that case I should think you are moving in the right direction.

HOW TO DEAL WITH CHANNELLING IN CLASSICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

Now and then even the practitioner of conventional psychotherapy may find himself confronted with a channelled text, and be asked what he thinks of it. In such cases it is important to encourage the patient to take a *horizontal* rather than a *vertical* approach to the text.

Practitioners taking alternative approaches may, however, often accept such messages vertically simply because they are convinced that the text has been handed down from Above. Such therapists join their patients on what is very thin ice. Sooner or later something is likely to crack. On the other hand the opposite approach also exists. The therapist does not even take the trouble to look at the text and will reject it out of hand with words such as, 'Don't bother

showing that kind of rubbish to me'. This is blind disbelief. The text is filed in the wastepaper basket. Such a lack of flexibility, curiosity and respect for the experiential world of the client means that the therapist loses all credibility. The dialogue is at an end before it has started.

In my view one should take a horizontal approach and encourage the patient to assess the *content* of the message and not to give too much attention to the channel and the alleged source. I encourage my patients to trust to their personal judgement and discernment, just as they would do if a total stranger were to stop them in the street to give his opinion. Unfortunately far from all patients are sufficiently level-headed to take this attitude. As soon as they get the idea that the messages are coming from a Higher Plane, they lose themselves in breathless adoration and good old horse-sense goes by the board. Not infrequently people have to be firmly pulled back down to earth. For example I was once consulted by a lady who showed me a woolly text about ten pages long. It was full of confused and contradictory information. She kept going through it, reading and rereading it, simply because it started with the words, "I the Angel Fiddledidee" (I no longer remember the real name of the angel). I suggested to her that she should try replacing the first few words with "My neighbour says", and then to reread the text. Afterwards I asked her if she thought that the neighbour who said all these things was particularly wise. She smiled and said, "No, I would think he had a screw loose".

CAN CHANNELLING BE DANGEROUS?

Channels past and present appear to be rather average people. Apart from the rare exception they seem to function entirely normally (Klimo, 1987, pp.129-144). It seems that the channel experience is a process comprising various stages of development and maturity (Roman & Packer, 1987; van Meijel, 1991). Like every unusual psychological event of great impact it can threaten and disrupt emotional stability, although most channels feel that it has been only beneficial. They experience accelerated personality growth and find a great deal of happiness and fulfilment in being a channel. Nonetheless this does not mean that they belong to an elite group (Boltwood, 1994). Even when the information has been of the highest quality throughout a period of several years, a focal regression of quality can always occur. Should the channel suffer from unresolved personal problems, the quality of the information relating to that particular area of interest may deteriorate. And of course a general regression in quality may also occur as well. Indeed, the need to produce convincing demonstrations on cue, the pressures of success, publicity and self-aggrandisement can all take their toll and result in a deterioration of the integrity of the channel and hence the quality of the attracted source, insofar as a source is still present (Klimo, 1987, pp.44-45). A good start to the career of a channel is by no means a guarantee that the career will have a happy end.

Furthermore, some channels entertain the illusion that 'predicting the future' is helpful. By doing so they forget that affirmations about the future, especially when impressed with great conviction on a receptive individual, leave a lifelong and indelible memory. To quote a patient, "I feel poisoned. I can never get it out of my mind, whatever I do!" The mediums who make a

living in this way are not therapists, they are mischievous oracles. They do not deliver a person from a painful past. Rather they program the future with harmful effect. Most of them, however, are blissfully unaware of the damage they do.

According to some researchers (Chandley, 1986) one in four people has been abused or neglected in his or her childhood, and it may therefore not be all that surprising that many channels fit that profile. Like everybody else they may experience some difficulty in digesting that unhappy childhood, especially when they have intentionally been doing some mental and emotional house-keeping (which, as we have seen, is highly advisable if you are a channel). They often try to move to a higher level of functioning by undergoing therapy, practising meditation and conducting themselves well. Implicitly the hope is that in time they will eventually attract a 'higher source'. The commitment of many channels, in whom critics no doubt will detect narcissistic traits, has another positive effect as well, namely that channels usually try to maintain reliability by always working with the same source(s).

The discipline practised by channels contrasts starkly with the unprepared youngsters who hold séances for the fun of the thing, using a planchette, or 'Ouija' board. This might at first sight seem like a harmless pleasure, but unfortunately many an adolescent has been given the creeps and as a matter of fact some of the company might be very undesirable indeed. However, not all of the bad language that occasionally emerges should be regarded as 'coming through' from a lower entity: coarse language is typical of the adolescent, and the séance offers a perfect opportunity for its covert use (*see* ego state). Moreover in certain relatively rare instances a séance has proved to be a disruptive event triggering a long train of serious symptoms (disturbed concentration, anxiety, irritability, depressive and sleep disorders, and the sense of being outside oneself), sometimes even bordering on the psychotic. Indeed sensitive people in particular can be left with a lifelong hangover! This is why some authors (over)emphasize the danger of Ouija board experiments (Hunt, 1985).

Public interest in channelling is growing. This is neither wrong nor dangerous for people who use their common sense (*see* above), but for the unbalanced it can be a risky affair. I would dissuade a psychotic or a subject with borderline personality from consulting a channel. Such an experience could unbalance him even further and strain his already fragile contact with ordinary reality.

Channelling can of course also attract a class of people who prefer to abandon their personal sense of responsibility and hand their thinking and decision-making over to various figures of authority. Such persons are constantly running from one channel to another, always in search of new revelations and disclosures. They are to all intents and purposes addicts, or *channeloholics* (*channel groupies*): wherever it itches, someone from Above has to scratch.

CONCLUSIONS

Channelling has been part of the human story from the very outset. It is found in all times and in all cultures. Modern psychology and psychiatry show that there is also a pathology which may be manifested as channelling. We

are therefore more discerning and we must certainly count this an advantage. Nevertheless those among us who try to 'explain away' every incidence of channelling are surely going too far. These people must be regarded as being unduly influenced by the modern social sciences, which leave no conceptual room for channelling.

However controversial channelling may be, certain channels continue to provide us with reliable information. In these cases we must take a cool look at what we can do with the material and how we can map the potentialities. It would not be the first time in history that humanity has turned a phenomenon that it does not understand to good use. Before I close I would like to pass on some advice in the form of a quotation from philosopher Jacob Needleman (1987) to those new to the field and who want to investigate it from top to bottom, "You should be open-minded but not so open-minded that your brains fall out."

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