

Unseen (and Unappreciated) Matters: Understanding the Reformative Nature of 19th-Century Spiritualism

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Those who, accepting spiritualism in its phenomenal aspects, are occupied with its details, and do not realize the far-reaching influence of spiritual thought, may be referred to historical facts, which prove that radical changes in religious ideas have invariably resulted in equally radical changes in society and government. . . . It may, then, be considered highly probable, if not demonstrably certain, that spiritualism, in its large and broad sense, as denoting a system of thought and science which recognizes the sovereignty of the interior, invisible, and permanent spirit or essence, over the external, visible, and transient *form*, involves in its outworkings some change in the present social order corresponding in magnitude to the radical divergency between it and the inherited forms of religious thought.

Alfred Cridge
Woodhull & Chafin's Weekly, 1 October 1870.

Spiritualism, the belief in immortality and the ability of the dead to communicate with the living, is a very old and widespread phenomenon. In the middle of the nineteenth century, it became a subject of great interest in the United States.

Its adherents included the young and old of both sexes, and its appeal crossed class lines. A topic of considerable controversy, it generated so much enthusiasm and ridicule that one historian has claimed: "Scarcely another cultural phenomenon affected so many people or stimulated so much interest as did spiritualism in the ten years before the Civil War and, for that matter, through the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century."¹

During the past few decades, historians have increasingly acknowledged this interest, in part because of the discovery that Spiritualism was linked with the impetus for reform. To recognize the association of Spiritualism and certain reform movements, however, is not necessarily to understand their connection. Indeed, there is an understandable amount of confusion involved in trying to comprehend how individuals whose attention was focused on the idea of an afterlife could, at the same time, be so urgently concerned with changing the conditions of life in this world.

Rather than trace the reformative impulse behind Spiritualism to the idea of spirit communication, I believe it is better and far more easily attributed to a broader interest in invisible causation. There were divisions within the spiritualist community. Not all Spiritualists gained the reputation of being reformers. The Phenomenal Spiritualists, those who desired only to be consoled, remained preoccupied with the phenomena associated with departed spirits. The self-described "Philosophical" or "Modern" Spiritualists, on the other hand, placed their belief in spirit communication within the larger context of a philosophy that stressed the important role of invisible, perhaps mysterious, but lawful relationships.² The discovery of such invisible forces as gravity, electricity, and magnetism, they believed, had huge implications in both understanding and treating the problems of individuals and society.

This change of focus from Phenomenal Spiritualism to Philosophical Spiritualism requires that more attention be paid to the career of Andrew Jackson Davis, his enunciation of a credo stressing the importance of invisible causation, and the work of his largely Universalist associates. Known as the Harmonial Philosophers, these men published a journal during the late 1840s, much overlooked today, that bore the name the *Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher*. Taking a more rigorous look at their ideas and efforts marks a considerable departure from previous treatments of this subject. Thanks to historian Robert W. Delp, Davis has become a familiar name among those conversant with the topic of Spiritualism, but the precise nature of Davis's contribution to the spiritualist movement has remained unclear. As Delp himself admitted of his 1965 dissertation, it was never intended to be an exposition of Davis's philosophy. Consequently, Delp did not delve deeply into Davis's non-autobiographical writings and only surveying the major precursors of his ideas left these connections largely unexplored.³

Subsequent scholarship has not fully addressed these gaps and the result, I contend, has been more confusion than clarity. More than any other scholar,

historian R. Laurence Moore brought the link between Spiritualism and reform in nineteenth-century America to recent attention in his 1977 book *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*. Moore, however, reduced Davis to a minor figure and Philosophical Spiritualism to an interest with little following.⁴ Left pondering the reformative nature of Phenomenal Spiritualism, he rightly recognized the scientific overtones of nineteenth-century “Modern” Spiritualism, but he focused primarily on the positivist notion that spirit manifestations provided empirical evidence for an afterlife.⁵ This perspective was prominent in Mary Farrell Bednarowski’s 1973 dissertation, “Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at a Scientific Religion,” which represented “scientific” Spiritualism as a religion offering tangible proof of immortality to both the grief-stricken and anxious doubters.⁶

Bednarowski made two additional observations that Moore seems to have accepted without question: First, she dismissed mesmerism as an important precursor to Spiritualism; second, she claimed a direct relationship between Spiritualism and Emersonian transcendentalism.⁷ For Moore, Davis’s mesmeric trances amounted to little more than his avenue of communication with the spirit world preceding the Fox sisters. Second, he reduced Davis’s spiritual or “Harmonial Philosophy” with its reverence of “Nature” to a vague pantheism that failed to provide any sure inspiration for reformers.⁸

In fact, in giving the empirical nature of spirit communication such prominence in the minds of all nineteenth-century American Spiritualists, Moore misread what Philosophical Spiritualists understood to be the revolutionary and reformative implications of their faith. Lumping the Philosophical and Phenomenal Spiritualists together, he wound up attributing an interest in reform to many bereaved persons who never showed an interest in the reforms associated with Spiritualism, at the same time that he diluted the real interest in reform among the Philosophical Spiritualists who, by virtue of their new perceptions of religion and science, were moved to seek fundamental changes in American society.⁹ As a result, while many historians have cited Moore’s work as proof that an interest in Spiritualism and reform were linked, the confusion involved in reconciling a faith that directs attention to the next world with practitioners actively striving to change the here and now still remained.¹⁰

As indicated by the title of her book *Radical Spirits: Women’s Rights and Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century America* (1989), Ann Braude seeks to resolve this problem. Building upon Moore’s work on female trance mediumship as a new profession for women, Braude’s book contains a finely nuanced treatment of the gender politics of this phenomenon.¹¹ In doing so, she also discusses many of the causes associated with Spiritualism that appealed to women. However, male Spiritualists were also vigorous supporters of the same causes and, in my opinion, an even better understanding of the reformative nature of nineteenth-century Spiritualism can be gained by a more careful consideration of Davis’s Harmonial Philosophy. Braude acknowledges both Davis’s “central leadership

role” and the “harmonialism” of Spiritualism, but she does not pursue these observations in a sustained manner.¹² As a result, Davis’s influence and the coherence that he lent the movement are largely lost. Her recognition of Davis notwithstanding, then, Braude follows Moore in giving prominence to the perception of Spiritualism as a religion based on spirit communication.

In contrast, my approach in explaining the relationship between Spiritualism and reform is to begin with Philosophical Spiritualists like Alfred Cridge, who identified themselves as spiritualist reformers, who labored to make the reform-minded nature of Spiritualism clear, and who often voiced their frustration at those who continued to “narrowly” define Spiritualism as an interest in spirit communication.¹³

Andrew Jackson Davis and Mesmerism

Modern Spiritualism’s preeminent philosopher, Andrew Jackson Davis, was born on August 11, 1826, in Bloomington Grove, Orange County, New York.¹⁴ The most important fact about his life was his identity as a trance medium and clairvoyant. In his autobiography, he reported hearing voices and experiencing episodes of somnambulism at an early age. Reacting to the death of one of his sisters in 1836, he recalled: “A voice told me that my sister’s present situation was to be envied and sought rather than grieved over; and . . . while I dreaded the dying process, I felt mysteriously drawn to the life which came afterward.” Later in 1839, heeding a voice that he believed emanated from another realm, he persuaded his parents to move to nearby Poughkeepsie, New York.¹⁵

This move to Poughkeepsie set the stage for Davis’s subsequent career. In 1843, Dr. James Stanley Grimes, a travelling lecturer on mesmerism (also known as Animal Magnetism) and mental healing, spoke in the village hall. After his speech, Grimes offered to mesmerize anyone who was willing to come to his hotel room. Davis was one of the young men whose curiosity had been aroused. Grimes’s attempt to mesmerize Davis proved unsuccessful, but his visit generated so much interest that some of the local residents began trying to mesmerize each other. A tailor named William Levington succeeded in mesmerizing Davis where Grimes had failed. When he awoke from his mesmeric trance, Davis was informed that he had read large newspaper letters through his forehead, indicated the time on watches, and described diseases afflicting the observers. Levington attributed Davis’s powers to “clairvoyance,” a term he had come across reading a popular work entitled *Facts in Mesmerism* by Chancey Hare Townsend. Word of Davis’s powers spread and soon he, with Levington’s help, was ministering to the sick of the area’s population.¹⁶

A set of illustrations in Davis’s autobiography offers some clues on how this new and controversial science was believed to work. Each drawing shows two individuals—the magnetic operator and his subject—seated and facing one another. Each is surrounded by an invisible aura or “sphere.” Before the process began, while the subject was still in his ordinary or normal state, his sphere

remains separate or independent from that of the magnetic operator. In successful operations, the spheres surrounding each individual are shown as intersecting with one another in various ways. In the case of medical clairvoyance, for example, the two spheres are blended completely together to form one large sphere surrounding both parties.¹⁷

Although Davis failed to convince many, his activities impressed a number of Universalists. With their help, he attracted national attention a few years later as the “author” of a huge volume of trance dictations entitled *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind*.¹⁸ Over 700 pages, turgid, and often repetitive, this work, also known as *Nature’s Divine Revelations*, has been practically ignored. Although a daunting task to read, the labored nature of its prose must be seen as an integral part of its significance. As Frank Podmore, the early twentieth-century historian of psychic research, has pointed out, trance speaking by its very nature tends to be marked by “the characteristic of automatic utterance—a redundancy of words for words’ sake.”¹⁹ Not enough consideration, then, has been given to its novel means of production or to any of the conclusions that might have been drawn from this process. Signaling its importance in his Introduction, William Fishbough, one of Davis’s many early Universalist associates as well as the scribe who took down his words, declared:

[This volume] consists of the consecutive reasonings and revelations of a spirit freed, by a certain physical process, the philosophy of which is explained, from the obstructing influence of the material organization, and exalted to a position which gave access to a knowledge of the structure and laws of the whole material and spiritual Universe.²⁰

Fishbough followed this with testimonials from several men attesting to Davis’s impoverished background, lack of education, and good character. He asserted that, in his normal state, Davis had been “totally uninformed on all the great leading subjects treated in his book, *until he perused* the manuscript of his own lectures.” He continued: “this book must have been dictated by some other and higher source of information than that accessible to the physical senses. That source we claim to be the SPIRITUAL WORLD.”²¹

Because mesmerism is the key and missing ingredient in understanding the reforms linked with nineteenth-century American Spiritualism, it needs to be discussed more fully. Though mesmerism has ancient antecedents, the wave of interest that brought Grimes to Poughkeepsie has been traced to the work of Viennese physician, Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), who claimed during the 1770s to have discovered, through medical experimentation, the existence of an invisible medium, a superfine, universal fluid that surrounded all bodies.²² To control a female patient’s periodic episodes of hysteria, he attempted to artificially induce these fluctuations to control them. He instructed her to swallow a

solution containing traces of iron and then attached magnets to her body. These measures proved successful, producing a violent recurrence of her symptoms, but after several such sessions both the frequency and severity of these artificially induced “crises” diminished to the point where they completely disappeared. Based on this case and further experiments, Mesmer concluded that he had discovered the existence of a single cosmic medium that linked every orderly process in nature together. He identified this universal substance, which he called Animal Magnetism, as the medium through which sensation of every kind—light, heat, magnetism, electricity—was enabled to pass from one object to another. He also believed that this medium was distributed more or less evenly in a healthy human body. If a person’s supply of animal magnetism was thrown out of equilibrium, one or more of his bodily organs would become deprived of a sufficient amount of this vital force and begin to falter.²³

In the years between Mesmer’s theorizing and Davis’s trance lectures, several Europeans and Americans had either refined or altered the Austrian’s conclusions. They differed upon the exact nature of his medium. French mesmerist J. P. F. Deleuze, for example, argued that animal magnetism was really the soul’s *modus operandi* for influencing the body; consequently, he and others replaced Mesmer’s notion of a universal, superfine fluid with that of a spiritual substance quite independent of material reality.²⁴ And in a development that influenced Spiritualism in America, Mesmer had an impact on French socialist reformer, Charles Fourier (1772-1837).²⁵

By the time America received its “first full dose” of mesmerism in 1836, it bore the additional imprint of the Marquis de Puységur. A member of the French leisure class, Puységur has been described as “Mesmer’s most capable disciple.” He shifted attention away from arguments about invisible fluids to the operations of the subconscious mind. Not all of the crises that Mesmer induced had resulted in violent reactions. Some of his patients went into a deep sleep. When Puységur magnetized patients, they fell into unusual, sleep-like states of consciousness in which most appear much brighter and far more perceptive of nuances in interpersonal relationships. As Davis would later do, many diagnosed diseases and prescribed remedies. A few of Puységur’s patients achieved an even deeper state of consciousness, which he described as one of “extraordinary lucidity.” These individuals reportedly performed feats of telepathy, clairvoyance, and recognition.²⁶

Mesmerism arrived in America closely upon the heels of yet another new mental “science”—phrenology—and together they helped pave the way towards a belief in Philosophical Spiritualism. Phrenology was the brainchild of German physician Franz Joseph Gall (1752-1828). Gall never lectured in America, but his teachings were brought to the New World by his pupil and colleague, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. In 1834, Spurzheim toured New England, promulgating the idea that the brain was composed of a large number of independent faculties (e.g., amateness, combativeness, veneration), each of which was localized in a

different region or “organ” of the brain. Because these traits were not believed to have been fixed by heredity, freethinkers welcomed phrenology as a science of self-improvement. Its Christian detractors, however, condemned it as a materialistic interpretation of human nature and for the challenge it posed to their own ideas on human reformation.²⁷ As one American told Gall’s disciple George Combe, according to this new science of human behavior, sinners should be considered “unfortunate rather than criminal: as ‘moral patients’ . . . rather than fit subjects for punitive justice.”²⁸ Noting its widespread popularity, historian Whitney R. Cross has suggested that phrenology may have done as much as geology or biology to undermine revealed religion.²⁹

Philosophical Spiritualists who would later write about phrenology agreed with this assessment. Unitarian minister John Pierpont, for example, battled with his New England congregation over the attention that he gave to Spurzheim and Combe. So important were these two individuals in Pierpont’s estimation that he claimed to be “more indebted for instruction in the philosophy of mind [to them] . . . than to all other men, living and dead.”³⁰ Even though his method was “incomparably greater value than his system,” Eliza W. Farnham asserted that Gall had fulfilled the vital need for someone with compelling authority to declare that humans were, in every facet of their being, the subject of law no less than the rest of creation. By doing so, she said, Gall had “opened immense possibilities and privileges to the race, not the least of which [was] . . . having a natural history, a privilege which . . . [once] belonged exclusively to the brute animals.”³¹ And Davis, too, while criticizing phrenology as an “external [and] superficial science” based on “appearance and external observation” also embraced it as a genuine step towards a more naturalistic view of humanity.³²

As seen by the Philosophical Spiritualists, mesmerism must also be understood in the same light. Mesmer himself believed that his findings heralded a revolution in both science and philosophy. Speaking before the German medical academy in 1775, he announced that in one fell swoop he had brushed aside both the medical science and the religious supernaturalism of his day.³³ Davis agreed with this assessment. In *Nature’s Divine Revelations*, he offered this phenomenon as an alternative explanation to the “miraculous” events found in the Bible.³⁴ Later he gave his full attention to the relationship between mesmerism and various religious phenomena in the third volume of *The Great Harmonia*. In this work, he described seven progressive mental states or conditions of the human soul. Humanity’s ignorance of these operations of the inner soul, he wrote, had been the source of much misunderstanding, superstition, and even fanaticism. He described revivals as “sympathetic contagions” or mental (i.e., mesmeric) phenomena not unlike wars, panics, and insanities. The declarations of all the “religious chieftains,” he claimed, including Moses, Isaiah, Paul, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Emanuel Swedenborg, Mother Ann Lee, and Joseph Smith, had all been given in the transition state. He described this condition as midway between “mental slavery”—a state in which the mind was still influenced by hereditary

impressions, educational convictions, and prevailing beliefs—and “liberty.” No one who really understood the constitution of the human mind and the principal laws that governed man’s mental organization, he maintained, could ever be “psychologized” into the erroneous belief that the Lord selects certain individuals as the agents of an infallible and supernatural revelation.³⁵ Later, Philosophical Spiritualists would urge that spirit messages not be confused with the “gospel truth”; although proof of an afterlife, they provided no legitimate excuse to engage in unacceptable behavior in this one.³⁶

Defenders of Christianity were quick to recognize what they claimed was the blasphemous nature of mesmerism and Davis’s writings. In a book appropriately entitled *The Infidelity of the Times, as Connected with the Rappings and the Mesmerists, and Especially as Developed by the Writings of Andrew Jackson Davis*, W. H. Corning, wrote:

Infidelity in our day has disguised itself in spirit rappings and mesmeric dreams. To many these seem as miraculous as the miracles of Jesus, and so they yield themselves to the skepticism they introduce. Thus thousands are becoming unsettled in their minds, who would never have been reached by the writings of Paine, Strauss, and others.³⁷

An important as well as striking illustration of the manner in which an interest in phrenology and mesmerism provided a “slippery slope” towards an avowal of Philosophical Spiritualism can be seen in the career of La Roy Sunderland. Affected by a revival in 1804, Sunderland eventually became a Methodist preacher, and he became involved in educational reform and abolitionism during the 1830s. Within the ranks of the Methodist ministry, he created a stir by arguing that instruction was just as important as divine inspiration; it was necessary for educated intelligence to direct religious enthusiasm into the correct channels.

After 1833, Sunderland’s pursuit of his two major interests brought him into conflict with his church. Devoting more attention to radical abolitionism, he presided over the formation of the first Methodist Anti-Slavery Society in New York City, published a number of anti-slavery tracts, and edited *Zion’s Watchman*, which printed abolitionist views of Methodist clergymen ignored by the official church organ, the *Christian Advocate and Journal*. Another significant difference between these two papers was their treatment of phrenology. While the *Advocate* seemed hostile, the *Watchman* under Sunderland’s editorship, was receptive. Sunderland was familiar with the critique of phrenology made by many of his colleagues—that it reduced human life to mechanical operations, opened the door to a fatalistic view of humanity, and denied the reality of the spiritual realm. He, however, had reached the opposite conclusion: phrenology gave liberty an inalienable ontological status in human consciousness, making freedom vital to an individual’s well-being. Seen in this light, his espousal of

phrenology only served to stiffen his opposition to slavery. As a result of his activities, conservatives within the Methodist church brought charges of slander against him at every New England Conference between 1836 and 1840. The vote against him in 1840 and the order to publish the results in the *Watchman* proved to be the last straw; he quit the ministry.

The timing of Sunderland's decision is significant because it occurred at the very time that he was clarifying his own thoughts concerning the psychological dimensions of religion. In his 1838 work *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted*, he had compared the Mormons' claim to be recipients of the infallible inspiration of God and thus the members of the only true Church to similar claims of exclusivity made by the followers of Mother Ann Lee, Swedenborg, Jemima Wilkinson, and Mesmer.³⁸ That some of these claims overlapped and that some contradicted each other only proved to him "the power of the imagination over the nervous system, and how susceptible the human mind is to that influence, which it is the grand aim of all impostors to assume over the credulity of such as come within the sphere of their operations."³⁹ At this time, Sunderland still believed that Methodism was a legitimate form of institutional religion.⁴⁰

A year later, however, Sunderland began investigating mesmerism. Of his first unforgettable experience, he wrote:

The first "Mesmeric" operation I ever witnessed was performed in my house, . . . by Reverend C. S. McReading, on his wife. . . . She had first been entranced under a sermon she heard from me some fourteen years before! Of course, my curiosity was excited when I found, as I did by free conversation with that excellent lady, that "the state" brought on by the "Mesmeric" process of her husband was identical with that produced by my sermon.⁴¹

His discussion with Mrs. McReading, then, suggested that his success at revivals was not due to the inexplicable powers of God, but to an unsuspected talent, his ability to mesmerize people.

After his withdrawal from Methodism, Sunderland's interest in mental phenomena continued to grow. In 1841, he published a series of articles in the *Watchman* under the heading "Mental Phenomena." After the *Watchman* expired in 1842, he edited the *Magnet*, a monthly that dealt with a number of "sciences," but especially the phases of mesmerism. Probably at some point during the early 1840s he combined phrenology with mesmerism and came up with phrenomagnetism, yet another deceptively serious "science."⁴² In 1850, he became the editor of the *Spiritual Philosopher*, the first publication devoted to gathering, reporting, and interpreting spirit messages.⁴³ After the demise of the *Univercoelum*, Davis contributed several articles to this publication during its first year. Later Sunderland himself would decry the trivialization of the signifi-

cance of spirit communication reflected in the growing emphasis on public (i.e., visual) displays.⁴⁴

Because phrenology and mesmerism were often promulgated through vivid demonstrations, Moore and others have pointed to them as precursors to the perception of Spiritualism as an empirical religion. For some individuals, this assessment is no doubt accurate. But for others who possessed a more inquisitive frame of mind, these new sciences served as much more than staged forms of entertainment that anticipated the demonstrations of spirit communication given later by the Fox sisters at P. T. Barnum's hotel.⁴⁵ Phrenology introduced a generation of freethinking reformers to the idea of a mental science that, in turn, paved the way for an interest in mesmerism. From this invisible science of perhaps mysterious, but nevertheless lawful, causation, Philosophical Spiritualism was for many but a short step away.

Andrew Jackson Davis, Freethought, and the Alternative Theology of *Nature's Divine Revelations*

At the same time that the title of Corning's book, *The Infidelity of the Times*, . . . , highlighted the critical role that Davis played in establishing a connection between mesmerism and Spiritualism; it also reproached him for sowing the seeds of disbelief. While Davis may well have been responsible for undermining the religious beliefs of many, it can also be said that he was equally intent on providing an alternative faith for an existing population of freethinkers who had already lost their confidence in orthodox religion.⁴⁶

This goal becomes apparent in light of Davis's opening remarks in *Nature's Divine Revelations* and his background. He began his trance dictations with the statement that humanity possessed rights "founded in principles of Nature." Reason was possessed by humans—and by humans alone—but in some cases these principles had "become obscured and vague, and their legitimate workings and manifestations [had] been misrepresented." In other cases, he declared, "Truths that are eternal have been conceived of, yet smothered by the hand of a dominant and tyrannical ignorance." He blamed this ignorance on "sectarian usurpation" that had "crushed and prohibited the free exercise of moral and intellectual attainment[.] . . . obstructed the progress of human knowledge[.] . . . obscured the main features and manifestations of truth, and thrown a mantle of ignorance and fanaticism over the world." "The *mental* slavery of generations past," he proclaimed, "bears a resemblance to the *physical* slavery of the present." The only hope for amelioration in the world lay in "free thought and unrestricted inquiry."

Davis then boldly proclaimed that the world existed on the wrong foundations. Instead of being united, the world was disunited; instead of being harmonious, it was confused. Institutions, he stated, existed in direct opposition to the interests, feelings, and affections of human nature. As things stood, a person's interest in all likelihood dictated one course of action while his or her sense of duty

and reason suggested another. Stated in yet another way: society was presently arranged to seek the isolated rather than the general good. What was needed, he declared, was a knowledge of the natural laws that governed society.⁴⁷

These introductory comments as well as his later references to Thomas Paine suggest that the sources of Davis's thought emanate from the period of freethinking activity during the late eighteenth century.⁴⁸ During the revolutionary period, freethought was most powerfully manifested in the philosophy of deism.⁴⁹ First expounded in England, deism represented an attempt to reconceive religion along more rational lines in an age that was becoming increasingly captivated by both science and its discoveries. Its main features included a disbelief in a personal God or overruling providence, a belief in natural law, and an emphasis on human reason. Beginning with the period of the American Revolution, deistical thinking spread throughout the colonies and population.⁵⁰ One of history's most "infamous" freethinking works, Paine's *Age of Reason*, was first published during the 1790s.

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, interest in freethought waned and Paine would become a vilified figure among the orthodox.⁵¹ Thereafter older forms of religion and politics better suited to a more stable and authoritarian social structure proved unable to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place in American society. By the time that Davis was born, a rebellion against the status quo in both religion and politics was well underway. During the Federalist era, the clergy and judiciary had acted as the great stabilizing agents in society, stigmatizing dissenters as foes of both God and the law. The rise of Jacksonian democracy then, in large measure, challenged both.⁵²

This demand for democracy found expression in two very different ways: in the rise of evangelical sects associated with the Second Great Awakening and in a renewal of freethinking activity. The proliferation of religious sects during this era signified a remarkably successful struggle on the part of common people to wrest control of religion from the hands of a class-conscious clergy who preached that only a select few were going to heaven. Casting aside the perceived "chains" of authority, tradition, station, and education, these converts of revival activity insisted upon the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Taken to extremes, however, this claim to private judgement resulted in a free market of competing religious ideas where the Bible became "a book dropped from the skies for all sorts of men to use in their own way."⁵³

The cacophony created by these diverse and singular claims to divine inspiration helped to bring about the recurrence of freethinking activity in the mid-1820s. During this time, the most radical freethinkers, who continued to revere Paine, came from the working and lower middle classes. Feeling the brunt of the oncoming Industrial Revolution and finding the orthodox clergy insensitive to the hardships that it was creating in their lives, these individuals helped make New York City the nation's center of labor and freethought activity during the decade of Davis's birth. This development received strong encouragement

from a number of British freethinkers who immigrated to America following the Panic of 1819. This group included Robert Dale Owen, son of British industrialist, economic reformer, and freethinker, Robert Owen; Frances Wright; Gilbert Vale; and George Henry Evans. Together their activities included editing freethought papers, reprinting Paine's works, and sponsoring lectures and debates to consider such subjects as astronomy, physiology, phrenology and mesmerism.⁵⁴ Most of the editors of the leading freethought papers, including the American editor of the *Boston Investigator*, Abner Kneeland, were strong Jacksonian Democrats.⁵⁵ Davis's father was a skilled artisan who experienced a considerable amount of trauma as a result of his unemployment; he is also known to have never been affiliated with any religious denomination.⁵⁶ Because of his early socialization in this milieu, Davis's Harmonial Philosophy had much more in common with the deistic cosmology popularized among large city working class radicals than the Emersonian transcendentalism that emerged out of Concord, Massachusetts.

The same conclusion can also be reached by looking at the religious group that Davis first attracted. Labor historian Bruce Laurie, who has noted the Universalists' pronounced sympathy for workers, has described freethought and Universalism as the "two most important rationalist currents" to emerge from the liberal humanism of the Enlightenment. Although more circumspect than freethinkers who took a certain pride in the label "infidel," Universalists were similarly repelled by what they considered to be the "excesses" of religious enthusiasm.⁵⁷ In his classic study of western New York, Cross found that Universalists were in the forefront of taking up intellectual currents from Europe, including phrenology, mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, and Associationism, in adapting them to the needs of the liberal reform, and thus in redirecting the enthusiasm of the Burned-Over District into new channels.⁵⁸

Illustrative of the prominence of Universalists among Davis's associates is the career of Joshua King Ingalls, who, after witnessing Davis's trance dictations, became one of the *Univercoelum's* original staff writers.⁵⁹ Born in Swansea, Massachusetts, in 1816, Ingalls became a freethinker when the religious fervor of Second Great Awakening resulted in different declarations of sectarian conviction among his relatives. At some point during the 1830s, Ingalls again turned his attention to religion. Drawn to the Universalist Church because of its "broader faith" and its greater receptivity to his passion for discussion and theoretical investigation, he became a minister by 1840. This new vocation, however, did not dampen his interest in economic matters, and in 1841 he was given permission by his society to conduct a public discussion on usury. Four years later, friends who were aware of his interests sent him copies of George Henry Evans's newspaper, *Young America*. Two years later, he attended the Industrial Congress held in New York City, a joint gathering of Land Reformers and Associationists, and began his long career in labor reform.⁶⁰ During the 1840s, many workers became attracted to Associationism, the name given to Fourier's idea of cooperative

communities, which had recently been introduced into the country by Albert Brisbane. Like labor radicals, the Associationists believed that capital was siphoning off the wealth that workers produced in an unfair process of “spoliation.”⁶¹

Ingalls’ first years as a labor activist, then, coincided with the period when he was writing essays for the *Univercoelum*. In his 1897 autobiography, he noted his indebtedness to the persons who had gathered around Davis, including Universalists Samuel B. Brittan, William Fishbough, Thomas Lake Harris, and R. P. Ambler, three of the original Harmonial Philosophers and the editor of another spiritualist journal, respectively. Ambler was indebted to the Harmonial Philosophers. The stated purpose of his own publication was to carry on where the *Univercoelum* had left off.⁶²

The seeds of the alternative faith that these men worked to promulgate are found in the first section of *Nature’s Divine Revelations*, aptly entitled “The Key, or, The Principles of Nature.” Here, a few pages after his opening remarks, Davis made the following declaration:

Association, when based upon true and natural principles, is proper and highly advantageous; but when perverted and arbitrarily formed, it is exceedingly evil and vitiating. It is the nature of man to seek an association, wherein he may breath in an atmosphere of light and liberty; . . . but though it is natural for man to form attachments, these in order to be genuine, must be governed altogether by his *internal* sensibilities and affections. The *sphere* of one man can approach that of another only in accordance with . . . one universal law of Nature. For man possesses a visible form, which serves as a medium through which he associates with things *invisible* and *eternal*.⁶³

This is a critical passage because it shows that Davis understood Associationism to be more than just a scheme of economic reform. Behind Fourier’s idea for planned communities or “phalanxes” lay his notion of “attractive industry.” Fourier believed that what Sir Isaac Newton had done for the physical sciences in discovering the law of gravity, he himself had accomplished for the social sciences in discovering the equivalent of gravity in the social world, namely, “passional attraction.” In an elaborate theory of human motivation, he argued that in requiring the performance of a task by an individual, the “Creator” connected that person’s happiness with its exercise by endowing him or her with a passion or attraction for it. As he saw it, all of this was in complete accord with the Newtonian principle of gravitation.⁶⁴ Thus, if one thinks about all human relationships in terms of the processes of attraction and repulsion, Fourier’s aim to develop the notion of gravity—in the guise of “passional attraction”—into a social science becomes apparent. *What needs to be stressed is that like Mesmer, Fourier also declared the existence of an invisible medium or force that affected*

human relationships in a lawful manner. Davis clearly recognized this relationship and elevated it into a premise of a “social science.”

The significance that Davis attributed to this invisible relationship was developed in several passages that followed. After several more pages, the following statement appeared:

OUTWARD searching after truth, and inductions drawn from the appearances of things external, has been thought the only process by which man can demonstrate tangible realities. Men generally proceed in this way to become convinced of the reality of things—are satisfied only in proportion as evidence appeals to their senses[.]⁶⁵

Thus, he declared, men had devoted much energy to forming theories founded on visible facts and appearances.⁶⁶ Hitherto, he stated, “that which has been termed science has only been a mode by which the world has attempted to arrive at a correct knowledge of *external forms*, and barely to *conceive* of more *interior* qualities. Therefore, that which has been termed ‘*science*’ is neither knowledge nor understanding[.]”⁶⁷ Based on the phenomenon of mesmerism, however, he hoped that the following generation would “experience and witness phenomena relative to this science, which will be in direct contradiction to the theories received.”⁶⁸ He summarized the essence of his statements thus: “*things which are visible and external are only tangible effects and ultimates of causes invisible*” (italics mine).⁶⁹

This credo or “invisible principle,” then, was the “key” to Davis’s revelations and for him and his fellow spiritual philosophers, it had a wide variety of applications. In science, it incorporated the phenomena of gravity, magnetism, and electricity. In religion, it encompassed the idea that each individual possessed an invisible spirit that manifested itself at least temporarily in a Visible form. It can also be readily applied to the idea of spirit communication. In fact, before the first rap associated with the Fox sisters was heard in Hydesville, New York, in 1848, Davis predicted that the truth of spirit communication would make itself known “in the form of a living demonstration.”⁷⁰

The subject of communicating with departed spirits, however, did not take up much of Davis’s attention. The second and largest part of *Nature’s Divine Revelations* was devoted to looking at the source of his enunciated principle and then examining some of the results of its operations through time. Here, in good deistical fashion, he presumed the existence of a first cause, which he called by various names, including the Great Positive Mind.⁷¹ He described the laws of nature as the means by which this divine mind accomplished its designs. Manifesting “Wisdom and Goodness, Justice and Mercy, and Truth,” these designs established the existence of a most extraordinary order and harmony. Among other things, the divine mind was responsible for the wondrous evolution-

ary process that culminated in the “individualized soul” or human spirit. This knowledge of the laws of the universe and the divine essence that animated it, he declared, provided an “indestructible basis of hope and faith, and a corresponding foundation for human action.”⁷² Here then, in Davis’s declaration of an invisible or “spiritual principle”—an omnipresent, unifying force in the universe that was simultaneously scientific and religious—lay the foundation of the Philosophical Spiritualists’ faith. According to this faith, once its laws were both understood and no longer transgressed, the universe would operate as a “Great Harmonia.”⁷³ In short, it offered the prospect of a “terrestrial heaven.”

The final section of Davis’s trance dictations contained his call to action. It began with a description of American society that was anything but heavenly. Humanity, he remarked, was like a body diseased internally whose disease was invisible to the “sensuous perceptions of men.”⁷⁴ As proof of the fundamental disharmony in society, he pointed to the legal, medical, and clerical professions and how they prospered on social disunity and ignorance.⁷⁵ Echoing the labor theory of value, he described society as being divided into three distinct parts: the “poor, ignorant, enslaved, oppressed and working classes;” the “semi-wealthy, learned, enslavers, oppressors, and dictating classes;” and the “rich, intelligent, enslaving, oppressing, and idle classes.”⁷⁶ For this disorder, he blamed teachings rooted in the clerical profession. “They, with an audacity unparalleled,” he declared, “call a class of their brethren ‘sinners,’ while those under their immediate influence are esteemed as ‘*the righteous*,’ or ‘*the elect*.’ They have established two distinct classes in society, which they call ‘*good*’ and ‘*evil*.’”⁷⁷ So long as this sectarian distinction between good and evil continued, he argued, so also would war, persecution, ignorance, vice, misery, and degradation persist.⁷⁸

To remedy this situation, Davis returned to Fourier, urging that humanity become acquainted with the “law of association” in all of its operations.⁷⁹ As their essays in the *Univercoelum* make clear, the Harmonial Philosophers believed that both nature and humans were united by this invisible law and that any attempts to set themselves apart from nature or one another would end in disharmony or disorder.⁸⁰ Later Davis would describe humanity as

Being “bound together by a thousand silken cords girded around about by a magnetic belt of subtle sensibilities—which communicate an *injury* done to or by the remotest person to all other members of the living whole.”⁸¹

He regarded as “self-evident” the proposition that no one member of society could suffer from pain, destitution, punishment, exile or any conceivable affliction, without negatively affecting, to some extent, the quietude and happiness of every other individual.⁸²

For these men who believed that humans ignored the importance of invisible relationships at their peril, then, spirit communication never became that the

primary focus of their new religion. Expressed in terms of Davis's credo, the phenomena associated with departed spirits represented the "things which are visible and external." What interested them even more than these events, however, was the idea that these spirit manifestations were the "tangible effects and ultimates of causes invisible." Invisible or "spiritual" causation, they believed, held the key to the twin goals that Davis set forth: the "harmonization" or well-being of both the individual and society.⁸³ Seen in this, its most sophisticated form, Spiritualism was at its very core a reformer's religion.

Often vying with this version for the remainder of the nineteenth century, however, was the more popular understanding of Spiritualism as a religion that provided consolation through empirical proof of an afterlife. These two versions of Spiritualism were not necessarily exclusive. In the best of all possible worlds, and out of their desire to be inclusive (they had rejected the idea of an exclusive heaven), Davis and the other Philosophical Spiritualists hoped that once individuals became convinced of the veracity of spiritual phenomena, they would come to understand that such events held profound implications for making *this* world better. As these individuals would come to realize, however, any effort to organize individuals based upon the common belief in spirit communication was fraught with pitfalls. Three notable attempts at national organization led by Philosophical Spiritualists would all ultimately fail.⁸⁴

As a movement, then, Philosophical Spiritualism was always best described as a loose network of individuals. Because of the convergence between Phenomenal Spiritualism and Philosophical Spiritualism, the number of Philosophical Spiritualists will always be impossible to estimate. After the exits of both Davis and the audacious free love advocate, Victoria Woodhull, during the 1870s, the movement changed with the emergence of a new generation of freethinking spiritualist reformers who showed an interest in psychic research.⁸⁵ At least one important non-Spiritualist editor of a freethought publication would continue to acknowledge the existence of "rational" Spiritualists for the remainder of the nineteenth century.⁸⁶

The Reforms of Spiritualism

What remains to be seen is whether Philosophical Spiritualism can be paired with the reforms known to have been embraced by spiritualist reformers. General agreement exists over the list of these causes. The editor of the *Knoxville Whig*, for example, proposed to organize a "Missionary Society of the South for the Conversion of Freedom Shriekers, Spiritualists, Free-lovers, Fourierists, and Infidel Reformers of the North," while a much less bemused J. D. B. DeBow placed Spiritualists in the same camp as the Owenites, Fourierists, Agrarians [i.e., Land Reformers], and Free-lovers, i. e., or among those groups bent on "breaking down all forms of society and religion and [then] reconstructing them [.]"⁸⁷ Both of these statements emphasize the freethinking nature of Philosophical Spiritualism and its appeal to critics of industrial capitalism who both pronounced the

system sorely lacking in humane values and believed that its associated ills were problems that could and should be addressed. Moore's list adds temperance, antislavery, health reform, and women's rights.⁸⁸ Because temperance can be considered a health measure and it was not difficult to find a northern religious reformer who opposed slavery during the 1850s, I will only discuss health reform and free love/women's rights.⁸⁹ Just as Davis began and ended his career as a healer, many Spiritualists would become practitioners of alternative medicine; indeed the harmonial outlook of spiritualist reformers can perhaps best be appreciated in their rejection of regular or allopathic medicine.⁹⁰ As historian Charles E. Rosenberg has pointed out, anthropologists have long been aware of the centrality of medical theory and practice in the understanding of a particular culture's beliefs. Just as naturalists and physical scientists assumed that their research illuminated the glory of God and his handiwork, so too did most nineteenth-century American physicians believe that no conflict existed between their findings and their religious convictions. God had created the human body; any infringements upon God's laws, which entailed disobeying the laws of physiology, were punished by suffering and disease. In this manner, moral philosophy drew upon the prestige of science while orthodox physicians had the satisfaction of believing that their findings reinforced the dictates of morality.⁹¹

As freethinkers, however, Philosophical Spiritualists rejected many of the dictates of orthodox morality. In doing so, they rejected the ideas of "orthodox" medicine as well. In his series of spiritual discourses published in 1887, Thomas Gale Forster, a long-time spiritualist lecturer, spoke for many of them when he declared that ecclesiastical systems had "mystified existence" and left humanity "wretchedly deficient in the practical cultivation of a physical religion[.]" Instead, he wrote: "We must analyze [man] as a physical, an intellectual, and a spiritual being, which, we are assured, he is[.]"⁹² Giles B. Stebbins, a reformer perhaps best known for his role in the abolition movement, was making much the same point when he spoke of the need for a "religion of the body."⁹³

Davis's enunciation of a new philosophy of medicine was contained in the first volume of *The Great Harmonia*, also known as *The Physician*.⁹⁴ That he began this work with a chapter entitled "What is Man?" indicates that he fully recognized the relationship between his unorthodox views of nature and humanity and his rejection of allopathic or regular medicine. Regular—, i. e., "orthodox" physicians—tended to see nature as a malevolent force or at least as the source of problems to be cured or controlled. In his scheme of the Univercoelum, however, the laws of nature had worked together to produce humanity's immortal and individualized spirit.⁹⁵ These laws being the thoughts of the Divine Mind, it simply did not follow that humans were fallen and lamentable creatures who were inherently prone to and punished by disease. Rather wrote Davis:

"The laws of Nature conspire to one end, namely, to the establishment of perfect harmony; and there is nothing so

completely qualified to represent and enjoy that condition as the human constitution.”

Should a disease occur, Davis made a distinction between the “immediate causes and conditions of health” and its “deeper and more essential causes,” which lay in the “invisible bosom of Vitality.” Physicians and philosophers, he stated, had pursued their inquiries sufficiently far to believe that life was a “principle of vitality” associated in some way with matter. What they had not yet learned to do was identify its true nature or essence with the invisible “Spiritual Principle” that he had set forth in *Nature’s Divine Revelations*. He defined perfect health as that state in which this spark of divinity within humanity circulated throughout the human body in harmonious fashion—permeating, penetrating, and actuating its every particle. Nothing, he declared, could be “understandingly applied to cure disease” until both physicians and patients knew more about the “great spiritualizing influence which the organized mental principle exerts upon the subordinate organization [i. e., physical body].” “[S]hould anything disturb the harmonious circulation of the Spiritual Principle from the Brain through the diversified ramifications of the system, it is positively certain that discord or disease would be the inevitable consequence.” And he further claimed:

By interior perception, [i. e., his clairvoyant abilities] I discover that . . . hundreds of diseases which physicians have distinguished by as many names, are *simply but* SYMPTOMS OF ONE DISEASE; and that this ONE DISEASE is caused or created by a constitutional imbalance in the circulation of the spiritual principle.⁹⁶

In attributing so many diseases to mental causes, Davis was, of course, advocating one model of mind-body medicine. In suggesting a revised role for physicians, he argued, “they should be clergymen and clergymen should be physicians” or rather the two professions should converge. In his description of man as a “UNIT,” he wrote:

It is not true that he has a *body* to be cured of disease separate from his *mind*; nor is it true that man has a *spirit*, a *soul*, a *heart*, to be cured of sin-diseases separate from the body. . . . If clergymen suppose (and I know they most conscientiously do) that the moral and religious sentiments and qualifications of the human *soul* can be touched and unfolded into practical exercise *merely* by preaching and imparting sacred principles to it, then I am impressed to undeceive them. And if physicians believe (and I know that they profess to) that the human *body* can be cured of its endlessly modified afflictions *merely* by

administering scientific preparations of mineral and vegetable substances, then I am also impressed to undeceive them.⁹⁷

Summing up the significance of these ideas, he wrote:

The relations which subsist between mind and matter, or between the body and spirit, are exceedingly intimate, varied, and extensive; they lead the inquiring intellect into innumerable regions yet unexplored—into the richest mines of physiological, philosophical, and psychological knowledge. It is a new method of imparting medical or physiological instruction, to begin with the spirit and consider its many, and hitherto, hidden and mysterious influences upon the organism over which it so majestically presides.⁹⁸

Philosophical Spiritualists, then, judged the merits and demerits of all systems of medicine on the basis of whether they recognized an invisible “spiritual principle” inherent in humanity. This can be seen in Davis’s assessment of homeopathy, whose merits he classified under two headings: “a foundation of *spirituality*” and “a partial abandonment of all *medicine*.” Praising Samuel Hahnemann, its originator, he wrote that Hahnemann’s perceptions had been “sufficiently expanded to recognize the universal magnetic or spiritual forces by which all matter, as well as the human organization, is constantly influenced and governed.” Casting aside the “materiality and superficialness of the allopathic theory and practice,” Hahnemann had declared that it was by means of the “*spiritual* influence of the morbid agent, that our *spiritual vital power* can be diseased; and also that it is only by the *spiritual* or dynamic operation of medicine that health can be restored.” Regular physicians who had been educated from their youth to graduation from medical college in “sensuous modes of reasoning and argumentation,” Davis argued, were incapable of seeing in homeopathy anything but ridiculous propositions and incomprehensible corollaries. They were equally incapable, he added, of understanding the “magnificent disclosures” of Swedenborg in relation to the anatomy and physiology of the animal kingdom.⁹⁹

Writing about the close relationship that existed between homeopathy and Swedenborgianism in America, historian Robert C. Fuller has described homeopathy as “the clearest example of the metaphysical dimensions that mesmerism and Swedenborgianism infused into nineteenth-century healing movements.” According to Fuller, the physical manipulations and mental focusing employed by mesmerists revealed to Hahnemann how vital power could flow from a spiritual source into matter and vice versa. He, in turn, advocated mesmerism both as a means of balancing the vital power throughout the body and as a clue in understanding the lawful relationship which existed between things physical and spiritual.¹⁰⁰

Davis’s belief in the mind-body connection, along with his understanding of the invisible phenomena of mesmerism and Fourierism, also provide some of the

missing links in the well known, but still nebulous relationship between Spiritualism and free love. When first introduced to Americans, Fourier's idea of passional attraction had been limited to the formation of phalanxes. Fourier, however, had applied it to sexual relationships as well. As Stephen Pearl Andrews, the "father" of free love and Victoria Woodhull's mentor, explained:

Fourier . . . claim[ed], as his grand discovery, that Attraction which Newton discovered to be the Law and Regulator of the motions of material bodies, is equally the law and the God-intended Regulator of the whole affectional and social sphere in human affairs; in other words, that Newton's discovery was partial, while his was integral, and lays the basis of a science of Analogy between the material and spiritual world, so that reasoning may be carried on with safety from one to the other.¹⁰¹

Sympathetic to the cause of women's rights, Davis was one of the individuals who refused to draw back from this more controversial aspect of Fourier's teachings. "The universality of the principle of Attraction demonstrates the universality of the principle of Marriage," he declared. "Wherever Life is, *there* is Attraction; and wherever Attraction, *there* is Marriage."¹⁰² After the demise of the *Univercoelum*, he would become known for his lectures on matters of the heart and marital reform.¹⁰³

Viewing marriage as a consequence of and governed by the law of attraction brought the relationship between the sexes under the province of science. So, too, did Davis's understanding of mesmerism. The idea that each individual possessed or emanated a personal aura lent itself to the notion of invisible "spheres of influence." In Volume IV of *The Great Harmonia*, Davis described a "nuptial science" that would identify compatible candidates for permanent and meaningful relationships. Acknowledging his debt to the "philosophy of temperaments," most recently propounded by phrenologists, he identified six "radical individual Temperaments" that he believed were more or less present in all individuals and all races, but "*differently toned* in the opposite sex." By a careful process of self-knowledge, the relative presence of each of the six temperaments could be established and ranked. If the two central temperaments of each individual matched, he believed the couple would be compatible. To Davis, this compatibility was literally a magnetic one. Or as he explained: "The exact philosophy of this temperamental or matrimonial *unity*, between a man and woman, is simply this: when a man's two *central* temperaments meet their correspondents in the female spirit, they instantly feel attracted, and form a magnetic circle; the atoms of each interpenetrating and permeating the other, *negative clinging to positive*, and vice versa[.]"¹⁰⁴

Later, *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* would link the idea of "sexual magnetism" to Davis.¹⁰⁵ My reading of spiritualist authors has led me to conclude that

the belief in the invisible phenomena of magnetism only served to confirm what these individuals had observed or experienced in their own lives, namely the invisible, but very real, mental suffering of both women and men trapped in loveless marriages. This can be clearly seen in the following passage by Juliet Stillman Severance who, in her capacity as a physician, diagnosed many of her female patients as suffering from unhappy marriages:

In vain we treat them . . . only to be again excited by contact with the atmosphere of one who has, all unwillingly on his part, caused the diseased and prostrate condition. We strive to cleanse the system, but poisonous magnetism is being absorbed, constantly. Unhappy, wretched ones, with no hope in the[ir] present condition, and the curses and slander of the world upon them if they change; what can they do? If we see them living upon food that is not adapted to the wants of the system, we say to them you must not eat such food, it will injure you; you have no right to live contrary to the laws of nature . . . [B]ut is not one law of nature just as sacred as another; is it not just as great a wrong to injure yourselves by improper associations, as improper food? . . . I say cease to live in such relations, it is a crime and a sin against your own soul[.]¹⁰⁶

The concern of Philosophical Spiritualists for such women, however, was based on more than a sympathy with their individual and immediate suffering. Davis had promulgated the idea that the role that mesmerism played in the laws of attraction crossed generations. In Volume IV of *The Great Harmonia*, he had also linked the quality of love between a man and a woman with the health and well-being of their children.¹⁰⁷ He and many other Philosophical Spiritualists believed that particularly strong thoughts or impressions in the mind of a pregnant woman were “imprinted” onto her offspring.¹⁰⁸ This belief was not a new idea—it has an ancient pedigree¹⁰⁹—but Philosophical Spiritualists made it their own based on their belief that the invisible phenomenon of mesmerism was involved in the “invisible” transmission of both physical and mental traits to children.¹¹⁰ Understood more squarely in terms of Davis’s philosophy, this meant that the twin goals he set forth, the “harmonization” of the individual and the “harmonization” of society, were irrevocably linked. This was one of the meanings many Philosophical Spiritualists gave to his assertion “there can be no absolute isolation; no happiness or misery in the parts, which the *whole* does not realize to some extent.”¹¹¹ On the basis of such views, women’s rights was not merely an admirable cause, but a necessary one. This helps to explain why Philosophical Spiritualists—women and men alike—pursued the cause of women’s rights with such vigor.¹¹²

Davis's ideas of "sexual science," then, made it imperative that relationships between the sexes be free of coercion. Because forcing an incompatible couple to remain together spelled disastrous consequences for the couple, their offspring, and the larger society, divorce had to become an option. His advocacy of free love was largely a protest against the orthodox idea of indissoluble marriage. In his description of seven types of marriage in Volume IV of *The Great Harmonia*, Davis characterized religious marriages as unions of duty. Of these couples, he said:

"They marry without love, because they are commanded. They believe that God made male and female, only for the purpose of keeping up the species." Such individuals as well as those who remained together out of a sense of duty, he declared, were "false to God, in Nature."¹³

The advocates of free love within the spiritualist community were freethinkers who recognized the sovereignty of natural law. In so doing, they turned a blind eye to both religious and civil authorities in their power to determine matters related to the heart.

During the 1870s, these views would find a captivating and controversial advocate in the person of Victoria Woodhull, who refused to remain silent about the grim consequences associated with miserable, indissoluble marriages. The audacious manner in which she discussed such impolite topics as infidelity, marital rape, and sexual freedom for women brought her widespread notoriety and split the spiritualist community. Her supporters flatly rejected the notion that free love was a "side issue."¹⁴ In its recognition of the invisible web of causation linking the well-being of the individual to the harmony of society, and making the peace and harmony of the present generation the key to the happiness and prosperity of the next, they argued that free love was Spiritualism's quintessential cause.

With a new understanding of Spiritualism as a reform movement that attributed an important role to the mind in understanding religion and science and that stressed the importance of unseen and unappreciated relationships, it becomes easier to suggest that the movement did not so much disappear as contribute to the interest in a number of other "heterodoxies" that gained popularity during the late nineteenth century. Thus in 1901, nine years before Davis died, the most popular and longest running spiritualist journal, the *Banner of Light* asserted: "Every idea jostling about amongst the Theosophists, Christian Scientists, Mental Curists, New Thoughtists, and Spiritualists, he foreshadowed or settled long ago."¹⁵ And even now, more than a century after their heyday, the ideas of the Philosophical Spiritualists are being echoed in the blending of religion, science, and reform called the New Age movement. Always interested in the human condition, I believe many of these spiritualist reformers would have felt a keen sense of *deja vu* when looking at our present age of spiritual unrest

which finds proponents of orthodox and “New Age” religious ideas arguing over the roots of this nation’s social problems. Both sides point to a lack of spirituality, but are otherwise poles apart when it comes to diagnosing these problems. As unapologetic humanistic liberals, the Philosophical Spiritualists of the nineteenth century insisted that humans be measured, not against any preconceived theological ideas of their origins and proper behavior, but against their history, vulnerabilities and possibilities as best determined by the progress of knowledge. Refusing to draw lines between the mind and body, they also found the invisible relationship between the individual and society to be equally complex. Based on these beliefs, they sought to create a just and equitable society that was congenial to both the physical requirements of the human body and the intangible needs of the human spirit. Fundamentally, they were optimistic religious reformers who believed in the progressive nature of the universe, the potential majesty of all individuals, and the possibility of a heavenly harmony on earth.

Notes

1. R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York, 1977), 4.
2. The Philosophical Spiritualists distinguished themselves from the Phenomenal Spiritualists by referring to the latter as “spiritists.” See Moses Hull, “Spiritism and Spiritualism,” *The World’s Advance-Thought*, n.s., 5, no. 2 (1890): 35 and Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years’ Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: n.p., 1870; reprint, New Hyde Park, N.Y., 560).
3. Robert W. Delp, “The Harmonial Philosopher: Andrew Jackson Davis and the Foundation of Modern Spiritualism,” (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1965), 1-10 passim.
4. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 10, 17, 42-43.
5. *Ibid.*, 14, 62-63.
6. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at a Scientific Religion” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1973), 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 65-68.
8. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 9, 12, 25, 52-53.
9. *Ibid.*, 14, 17, 42, 72-73.
10. Here are a few works where Moore’s book is cited, but the authors continue to find the link between Spiritualism and reform ambiguous: Rodney O. Davis, “Prudence Crandall, Spiritualism, and the Populist-Era Reform in Kansas,” *Kansas History* (Winter 1980): 239-54; Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright, 1797-1870* (Chicago, 1980) 156; Elliot Shore, *Talkin Socialism: J. A. Wayland and the Role of the Press in American Radicalism, 1890-1912* (Lawrence, KS, 1988), 192, 196, 254-55; and Martin Henry Blatt, *Free Love & Anarchism: The Biography of Ezra Heywood* (Chicago, 1989), 84. I would like to acknowledge a few historians who, I believe, rightly traced the reformative impulse behind Spiritualism to Philosophical Spiritualism, but left it for others to explore this connection: Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York, 1950); Neil Burkhardt Lehman, “The Life of John Murray Spear: “Spiritualism and Reform in Antebellum American” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1973) and; Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the USA: From 1870 to the Present Day* (London, 1987).
11. R. Laurence Moore, “The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America,” *American Quarterly* 27 (May 1975): 200-21.
12. Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, 1989), 35, 185.
13. For statements distinguishing Philosophical Spiritualism from Phenomenal Spiritualism, see Juliet H. Severance, *A Lecture on the Evolution of Life in Earth and Spirit Conditions* (Milwaukee, WI: Godfrey and Crandall Printers, 1882), 10; Giles B. Stebbins, *Upward Steps of Seventy Years* (New York, 1890), 226; Warren Chase, *The Gist of Spiritualism: Viewed Scientifically, Philosophically, Religiously, Politically, and Socially* (Boston, 1865), 71; *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly* 2 August 1873; and Thomas Gale Forster, *Unanswerable Logic: A Series of Spiritual Discourses* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1887), 394-96.
14. Delp, “The Harmonial Philosopher,” 16.

15. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Magic Staff: An Autobiography of Andrew Jackson Davis* (New York, 1874), 137, 134, 168-69.
16. *Ibid.*, 201-10, 279.
17. *Ibid.*, 205.
18. Ernest J. Isaacs, "A History of American Spiritualism as a Religious and Social Movement" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1975) 34 and Delp, "The Harmonial Philosopher," 31, 38-39.
19. Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and Criticism* (London, 1902), 2:134.
20. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind* (New York, 1847), iii.
21. *Ibid.*, v-xvi.
22. Frank Podmore, *From Mesmer to Christian Science* (New York, 1963), vii, 219.
23. Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the Cure of American Souls* (Philadelphia, 1982), 1-3.
24. *Ibid.*, 13-14, Podmore, *From Mesmer to Modern Spiritualism*, 2:349-50.
25. Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, 1968), 143-45.
26. Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 10-22; Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End . . .*, 8-10; and James Wyckoff, *Franz Anton Mesmer: Between God and Devil* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1975), 111.
27. John D. Davies, *Phrenology: Fad and Science: A Nineteenth-American Crusade* (New Haven, Conn., 1955), ix, 5-9, 16, 68, 150-51.
28. George Combe, *Notes on the United States of America during a Phrenological Visit in 1838-1839-1840* (Philadelphia, 1841), 1:131, quoted in Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York, 1950), 325.
29. *Ibid.*, 325.
30. Davies, *Phrenology*, 152 and Stebbins, *Upward Steps*, 64. Pierpont, the grandfather of J. P. Morgan, authored a work entitled *Phrenology and the Scriptures* which, according to Davies, "indicated the analogies and the impossibility of contradiction between the two teachings."
31. Eliza W. Farnham, *Women and Her Era* (New York, 1864), 2:17-18; W. David Lewis, "Eliza Wood Burnhams Farnham," in *Notable American Women*, 3 vols., eds. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul Boyer (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 1:598; and Andrew Jackson Davis, *Memoranda of Persons, Places, and Events: Embracing Authentic Facts, Visions, Impressions, Discoveries, in Magnetism, Clairvoyance, Spiritualism. Also Quotations from the Opposition* (Boston, 1868), 264-65.
32. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia: Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, and Celestial Universe*, vol. 2, *The Teacher* (Boston, 1858), 130-32. Davis also wrote: "I feel moved to consider Phrenology as defective and inadequate to the wants of the individual and of universal society because in its deductions and conclusions it does not rest upon the internal elements of the soul."
33. Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 3-5.
34. Davis, *Nature's Divine Revelations*, 508, 563.
35. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia, Concerning the Seven Mental States*, vol. 3, *The Seer* (Boston, 1855), 46, 100-01, 133, 136, 156, 184-85, 211. The seven mental states that Davis mentioned were: I. The Rudimental State, II. The Psychological State, III. The Sympathetic State, IV. The Transition State, V. The Somnambule State, VI. The Clairvoyant State, and VII. The Spiritual State.
36. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Fountain of Jets of New Meaning* (Boston, 1870), 215; Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 58, 75-76; Hudson Tuttle, "Spiritualism," *New England Magazine* 6 (June-July 1887), 59; J. O. Barrett, *The Spiritual Pilgrim: A Biography of James M. Peebles* (Boston, 1871), 75; and Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 48.
37. W. H. Corning, *The Infidelity of the Times, as Connected with the Rappings and the Mesmerists, and Especially with the Writings of Andrew Jackson Davis* (Boston, 1854), 2.
38. J. R. Jacobs, "La Roy Sunderland: The Alienation of an Abolitionist," *American Studies* 6 (1972), 2-10.
39. La Roy Sunderland, *Mormonism Exposed and Rejected* (New York, 1838), 5, quoted in *Ibid.*, 10.
40. *Ibid.*, 10.
41. La Roy Sunderland, *The Trance and Correlative Phenomena* (Chicago, 1868), 10 quoted in *Ibid.*, 9.
42. *Ibid.*, 9-10 and Davies, *Phrenology*, 130. Sunderland's claim to have discovered phrenomagnetism was disputed by Joseph Rodes Buchanan, an itinerant lecturer on phrenology and its "allied sciences." Buchanan also became a Spiritualist which again confirms that a link existed between phrenology, mesmerism and Spiritualism.
43. Eliab Wilkinson Capron, *Modern Spiritualism: Its Facts and Fanaticisms, Its Consistencies and Contradictions* (Boston, 1855; reprint, New York, 1976), 204-05 and Burton Gates Brown, Jr., "Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1973), 65-68.
44. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 17.

45. *Ibid.*, 5, 15, 38; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn., 1972), 488-89 and Joseph McCabe, *Spiritualism: A Popular History from 1847* (New York, 1920), 19.

46. My continued use of the term "orthodox" will reflect the Philosophical Spiritualists' rejection of the authority of the Bible.

47. Davis, *Nature's Divine Revelations*, 5-9, 13.

48. *Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher*, 4 April 1849.

49. Sidney Warren, *American Freethought, 1860-1914* (New York, 1943), 14-20.

50. Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-50* (New York, 1943), 14-20.

51. *Ibid.*, 28-29 and *Univercoelum*, 4 April 1849.

52. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), 350-51 and John Ashworth, 'Agrarians' & 'Aristocrats': Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846 (New York, 1987), 14, 35-37, 193-203 passim

53. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989), 6-11 passim, 44, 182.

54. Post, *Popular Freethought*, 14-50 passim, 81-82 and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), 153-57, 180-82, 224.

55. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*, 356.

56. Davis, *The Magic Staff*, 24-25 and Delp, "The Harmonial Philosopher," 20. Davis described his father as a "half-weaver and half-shoemaker," a skilled artisan who was unable to earn sufficient money through the "art of weaving with a hand-loom" so that he was forced to learn another skill. As described by Bruce Laurie (see endnote 58), most of the freethinking labor radicals during this period were not neophyte factory hands or proletariats, but veteran artisans who had shaped an independent culture on the basis of handicraft production. What most of these individuals aimed for was a competency, and they appear to have been less angered by the narrowing of opportunity than by a growing inequality of conditions and the steady reduction of artisanship and the independence that came with it. In addition, Post has reported the existence of a "liberal circulating library" in Poughkeepsie in 1835.

57. Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-50* (Philadelphia, 1980), 69-70.

58. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 323-24.

59. Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, 1:170.

60. Joshua King Ingalls, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian in the Fields of Industrial and Social Reform* (New York, 1897), 3-26 passim and Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, 1991), 308.

61. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, 100-01, 282-320 passim.

62. Ingalls, *Reminiscences*, 167 and Isaacs, "A History of American Spiritualism," 34, 52, 124 and Brown, "Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century America," 68.

63. Davis, *Nature's Divine Revelations*, 10-11.

64. Charles Gide, Introduction to *Design for Utopia. Selected Writings of Charles Fourier*, trans. Julia Franklin (New York, 1971), 9, 17-19; Jonathan Beecher and Charles Bienvenu, Introduction to *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier. Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passional Attraction* (Boston, 1971), 1-2, 8, 10; Albert Brisbane, *Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and Reorganization of Industry* (Philadelphia, 1840), 245; and *Harbinger*, 8 May 1847.

65. Davis, *Nature's Divine Revelations*, 22.

66. *Ibid.*, 22.

67. *Ibid.*, 295.

68. *Ibid.*, 22.

69. *Ibid.*, 26.

70. *Ibid.*, 675.

71. *Ibid.*, 16, 43, 70, 143, 429 and Post, *Popular Freethought*, 231.

72. *Ibid.*, 104-05, 113, 116-22, 457, 676.

73. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia, Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual, and Celestial Universe*, vol. 1, *The Physician* (Boston, 1855), 42.

74. Davis, *Nature's Divine Revelations*, 733.

75. *Ibid.*, 694-722.

76. *Ibid.*, 679.

77. *Ibid.*, 716.

78. *Ibid.*, 739.

79. *Ibid.*, 739.

80. *Univercoelum*, 2 December 1848 and 17 February 1849.

81. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia, Concerning the Physiological Vices and Virtues, and The Seven Phases of Marriage*, vol. 4, *The Reformer* (Boston, 1857), 409.

82. Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia, Being a Philosophical Revelation of the Natural, Spiritual and Celestial Universe*, vol. 2, *The Teacher* (Boston, 1858), 106, 172. For an extended statement of this position see *The Great Harmonia*, vol 3, *The Seer*, 359.

83. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, *The Seer*, 398.

84. Author, "Modern Spiritualism and Reform in America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1995), 321-42, 399-441 passim, 626-39.

85. Delp, "The Harmonial Philosopher," 104. Probably the best place to start to look at the interest in Spiritualism shown by this new generation of reformers in Benjamin O. Flower's book *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements in the Last Fifty Years* (Boston, 1914). Flower, who was a Spiritualist and who aware of Davis, was the editor of the Boston-based "radical" magazine *Arena*. As the name of his publication suggests, it offered a hearing for new and controversial topics. Articles on Spiritualism can be found throughout the publication, many of them authored by the antebellum generation of Spiritualists. A leading figure in the formation of the American Psychical Society formed in 1891, Flower was interested in mesmerism, defended the right of unorthodox healers to practice medicine, and called himself "a student of psychical problems." He was also a believer in prenatal influences (see upcoming section of my essay).

86. George E. Macdonald, *Fifty Years of Freethought* (New York, 1929), 1:189, 2:311. Macdonald was the third editor of the *Truth Seeker*. Its first editor, D. M. Bennett, was a Spiritualist. Looking back at the year 1888, Macdonald noted the existence of eleven non-spiritualist liberal papers and four liberal spiritualist papers.

87. W. G. Brownlow, *Ought American Slavery to be Perpetuated: a debate between Brownlow and Prynne* (Philadelphia: 1859), 167, quoted in Clement Eaton, "The Resistance of the South to Northern Radicalism," *New England Quarterly* 8 (July 1935): 216 and James E. B. DeBow, "The Non-Slaveholders of the South, in DeBow and others, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder, The Right of Peaceful Secession, Slavery and the Bible* (Charleston, S.C., 1860), quoted in Eric L. McKittrick, *Slavery Defended: Views of the Old South* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), 173-74.

88. Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 70.

89. Moore, quite rightly I believe, uses some caution when pairing antislavery with Spiritualism. See idem, *In Search of White Crows*, 78. As freethinkers, whose sense of wrong was uncolored by a belief in a personal God, Modern Spiritualists often viewed chattel slavery through the same eyes that they viewed northern "wage slavery." Both were forms of distributive injustice that should be remedied by finding the right principles or laws upon which to reorganize society. Thus, even though Davis aligned himself with the Garrisonian abolitionists and enjoyed a personal friendship with William Lloyd Garrison, Garrison was outraged when Davis allowed Southerners to publish a defense of their "peculiar institution" in his own publication, *Herald of Progress*, with the comment that this kind of correspondence was "positive and candid." See Delp, "The Harmonial Philosopher," 147.

90. Delp, "The Harmonial Philosopher," 205; Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 542-44, and Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 149-50.

91. Charles E. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Baltimore, 1976), 10-11.

92. Thomas Gale Forster, *Unanswerable Logic*, 414, 265-66.

93. Stebbins, *Upward Steps*, 200-03.

94. This short title and another one that I will use to distinguish the five volumes of Davis's *magnum opus* did not appear in any of the books that I examined. They do, however, appear in advertisements and I have, therefore, adopted them.

95. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 1, *The Physician*, 25-26.

96. *Ibid.*, 43-44, 64, 110.

97. *Ibid.*, 223-25.

98. *Ibid.*, 71.

99. *Ibid.*, 247-48.

100. Robert C. Fuller, *Alternative Medicine and American Religious Life* (New York, 1989), 55-56.

101. Henry James, Horace Greeley, and Stephen Pearl Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce, and the Sovereignty of the Individual* and Horace Greeley and Robert Dale Owen, *Divorce* (New York, 1853 and New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1860; reprint, New York, 1972), 17; Emanie Sachs, *The Terrible Siren: Victoria Woodhull, 1838-1927* (New York, 1928), 59 and; Lois Beachy Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran for President: The Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull* (New York, 1995), 75-76. D. M. Bennett, the Spiritualist editor of the freethinking journal, the *Truth Seeker* (still extant) identified Andrews as the father of free love in idem, *The World's Sages, Thinkers, and Reformers, Being Biographical Sketches of the Leading Philosophers, Thinkers, Sceptics, Innovators, Founders of the New Schools of Thought, Eminent Scientists, etc.* (New York, 1878), 870.

102. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 4, *The Reformer*, 280.

103. Davis, *The Magic Staff*, 479-82, 491-94; *Liberator*, 3 March 1854.

104. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 4, *The Reformer*, 308-32 passim.

105. *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 27 September 1873.

106. *Ibid.*, 12 July 1873.

107. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 4, *The Reformer*, 73-76, 113-16, 122-28, 300-04.

108. For a few especially clear examples of this belief see *Ibid.*, 370-71; Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Penetralia: Being Harmonial Answers to Important Questions* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1856), 104-06; "Motherhood: Its Power Over Human Destiny," *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 12 May 1874 and; Victoria Woodhull, *Tried as by Fire; or, The True and The False, Socially* (New York: Woodhull & Claflin, 1874), 30.

109. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods*, 214.

110. The Philosophical Spiritualists' understanding of the impact of prenatal influences can be seen in the following pairings of spiritualist authors and book titles: W. M. Fernald, *A View at the Foundations; or, First Causes of Character as Operative before Birth from Hereditary and Spiritual Sources* (Boston, 1865); Georgiana Kirby *Transmission; Or, Variation of Character through the Mother* (New York, 1877); and Henry C. Wright, *Marriage and Parentage; or, The Reproductive Element in Man, as a Means to his Elevation and Happiness* (Boston, 1855), *The Unwelcome Child, or the Crime of Undesired Pregnancy* (Boston, 1858) and *The Empire of the Mother over the Character and Destiny of the Race* (Boston, 1866). See also "Propositions in Sexual Science" and "Pre-Natal Conditions" which appeared in the 3 February 1873 and 22 August 1874 issues respectively of *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*.

111. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 3, *The Seer*, 359.

112. Stebbins, *Upward Steps*, 262.

113. Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, vol. 4, *The Reformer*, 303-04.

114. *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 4 October 1871, 2 August and 29 November 1873, 6 March and 10 July 1875.

115. *Banner of Light*, 23 March 1901, quoted in Delp, "The Harmonial Philosopher," 206.