

Back From Jerusalem:

The Life and Times of
Emma Hardinge Britten,
Spiritualist Propagandist

Marc Demarest
The Emma Hardinge Britten Archive

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Intermission

The Universe As An Occult Object

Science In 1850

- The constitution of matter -- the (classical) theory of limited divisibility and bedrock atomic particles is one of two contending schools of thought; the other allows for unlimited divisibility, which leads to “unparticled matter”
- The luminiferous aether -- (fluid, gaseous or novel) undetectable medium in which light propagated
- Nature of electricity - a “subtile fluid”
- Constitution of gases
- Catastrophism
- The origin-less universe

Geology and astronomy are,
of themselves, incapable of giving us any distinct and satisfactory
account of the origin of the universe, or of its parts.

William Whewell, History of the Inductive Sciences (1858)

Newton conjectured that the density of **aether** is to that of the air as 1 to 700,000; and all physical philosophers have been wont to say that **aether** is extremely rare. Their reason was, because a dense **aether** would have resisted the planetary motion. We have already proved, that, if **aether** were repulsive, even by making it extremely rare, the planets would not be freed from sensible retardation. On the other hand, if the medium is all attractive, be it extremely rare or extremely dense, the motion of planets remains unaltered. Hence, the proper test for judging of the density of **luminiferous aether** is to be sought for, not in the motion of planets, but in the motion of **aether** itself.

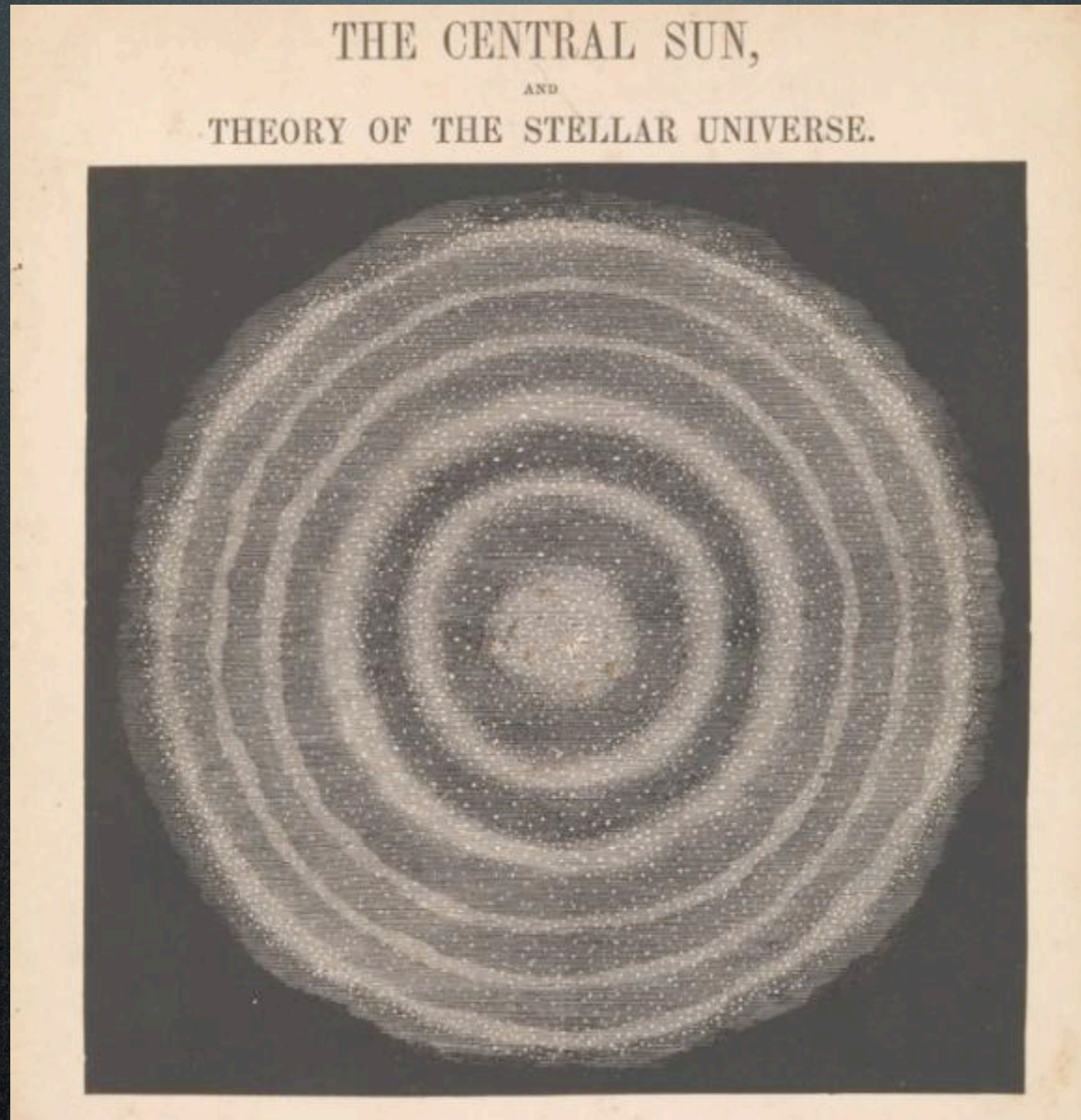
Luminiferous aether vibrates very freely through atmospheric air: let us see whether from this fact we can draw any inference about its density at the surface of the earth. Taking for granted that air is the result of a mixture, not of a combination, of oxygen and nitrogen, the number of molecules which are necessary to fill up, at sea level, the length of a single millimetre is not less, and possibly greater, than 281,740, as we shall see further on. And, since a beam of red light in going over the same length of a millimetre makes 1550 vibrations, we may conclude, that the length of

Joseph Bayma, The Elements of Molecular Mechanics, 1866

If we are to reason at all concerning the phenomena of nature, one of two conclusions must be adopted with reference to this subject; either the physical conditions whereto the existence of those plants and animals was related, changed gradually and equally in obedience to some continuous law — the forms of life being varied accordingly — or were liable to violent interruptions or revolutions, consequent upon new circumstances, or the accumulated tension of some feeble but continuous disturbing agency. Which of these views is true, will be the subject of inquiry hereafter: for the argument as to the lapse of **geological time**, it is immaterial which may be preferred; since in existing nature the rate of such physical changes, supposing them to be continual, is so small, as to have caused almost *no changes of organic life* in several thousand years; — witness the sculptured monuments of Egyptian grandeur; — and

John Phillips, A Treatise on Geology 1852

Science In 1850



Science in 1850

- Distinctions drawn between “spirituality” and “science” at war with one another in the 19th century also serve to place all combatants on one side or the other of a single bright line, which is not how history works
- The fact is: when Emma said that Spiritualism was science, she meant it
- Unparticled matter, the luminiferous aether, the “subtile fluid” of electricity, the emergence of long-scale geological and astronomical time in an origin-less universe, evolution as teleology -- Emma’s “religion” was consistent in most respects with either the majority or a minority opinion within scientific communities in 1860
- She and her compatriots would lose most of their scientific ground by 1890

301. The nature of Electricity. There are two hypotheses in regard to the nature of this powerful agent analogous to those which have been mentioned in regard to the nature of heat and light. The first regards it as an exceedingly subtile fluid, so light as not to affect the most delicate balances; moving with immense velocity, and pervading all substances. The second regards it as the result of a special modification made in the state of bodies, depending upon a peculiar vibration of the particles of matter communicated to the same ether, whose undulations produce heat and light. The latter theory is the one which is now generally received. The full discussion of all the phenomena of electricity would require a volume, and it properly forms a part of the sciences embraced in Natural Philosophy. We are concerned with it here only so far as it is connected with chemical phenomena, and as a knowledge of its fundamental facts is necessary to the full understanding of the various chemical processes which are soon to come under our notice. The subject of galvanic electricity is of more importance to the chemist than that of statical, and our attention will, therefore, be chiefly directed to it. The fundamental facts on which the whole science of statical electricity is founded may be stated in a few words.

T. R. Pynchon, *An Introduction to Chemical Physics* (1881)

The question
of the “fundamental
nature” of things is
everywhere a
derogated topic.

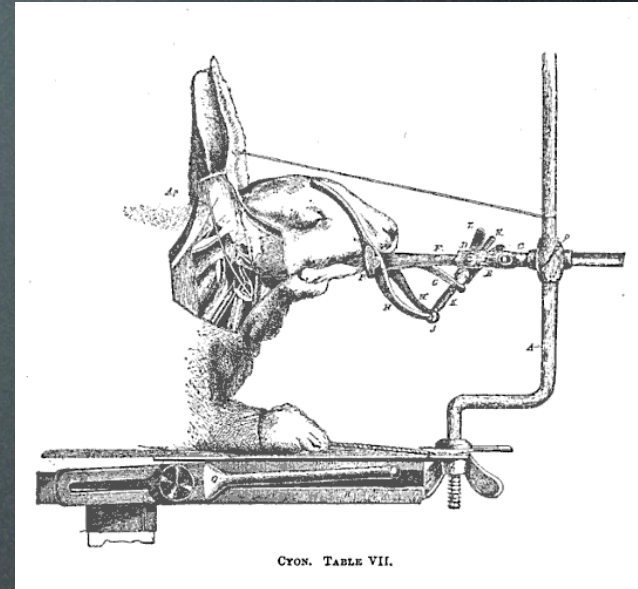
“Influence” of apparently
un-connected and
undetactable things upon
one another is
everywhere alleged.

The universe is occult.

Science in 1850

- Many of the alternative sciences practiced today were amenable or sympathetic with spiritual science, and integrated with it -- **to this day**
- Homoeopathy and naturopathy
- Vitamins, tonics, herbals --> the entirety of what we now refer to as nutritional supplements
- Complete with a conspiracy theory about medical science excluding these from the **materia medica in 1875**
- Anti-vivisection, vegetarian, and anti-vaccination movements
- Exercise and ritualized movement regimes, including yoga -- staples of early 20th century occult practices

What if animals have souls, too?



Frances Power Cobbe, *Illustrations of Vivisection* (1888)

ANTI-VACCINATION.

RECENT VACCINE DISASTERS.

To the Editor.—Sir,—Those of your readers who have been at the trouble to take note of what is recorded in the daily Press, as well as in the columns of the *MIRROR*, will have observed the frequent cases of hardship and cruelty arising out of the operation of the Vaccination Acts. About one hundred parents are now summoned every week for refusing to imperil the life and health of their children by submitting them to an operation which a St. Pancras Jury in a recent verdict on a fatal vaccination case described as “the natural constitutional irritation due to vaccination”; and over 50 of these parents, conscientious and law-abiding citizens—the salt of the earth—are subjected to judicial penalties without the chance (except in a rare case) of even explaining the grounds of their disobedience. Then there are public disturbances as at Leicester (December 14th), when two or three thousand persons assembled to offer their judgment against the seizure and sale of the goods and chattels of 10 of these sturdy medical nonconformists, 50 policemen, with numerous detectives, being found necessary to quell the riot and restore order. A few days later (December 19th) an inquest is held on a fatal case of vaccination at Sheffield, due to what the mother called “bad lymph.” The same day’s papers (*Manchester Courier* December 19th) report that the attention of Government has been called to the alleged death of a child at Blackburn, caused by the same official ordinance. The child was vaccinated at three months old, after which it refused all sustenance, and “died a mere skeleton, after four weeks’ intense suffering.” The *British Medical Journal*, two days afterwards (December 15th) records six cases of vaccinal erysipelas reported by one medical man, Dr. C. T. Vacheil, of Cardiff, all occurring within four days! These tragic events are happening all over the kingdom, and it is no exaggeration to affirm that a mere record of authenticated cases occurring within recent years would, if described, fill a considerable volume. I have personally collected over 400 of such cases, the vouchers and authorities relating to which have been carefully examined by Mr. Thomas Baker, barrister, of the Inner Temple; and the catalogue has been published by Mr. Young, at 114, Victoria Street, Westminster, under the title of “Vaccine Disaster Record.” The serious question which is filling the minds of reflecting parents with indefinable anxiety is—Where is this mischief, and misery to stop? Meet the patient, long-suffering but much injured and oppressed people be driven into exasperation and active rebellion before the Local Government Board is aroused from its criminal lethargy?—Yours faithfully,

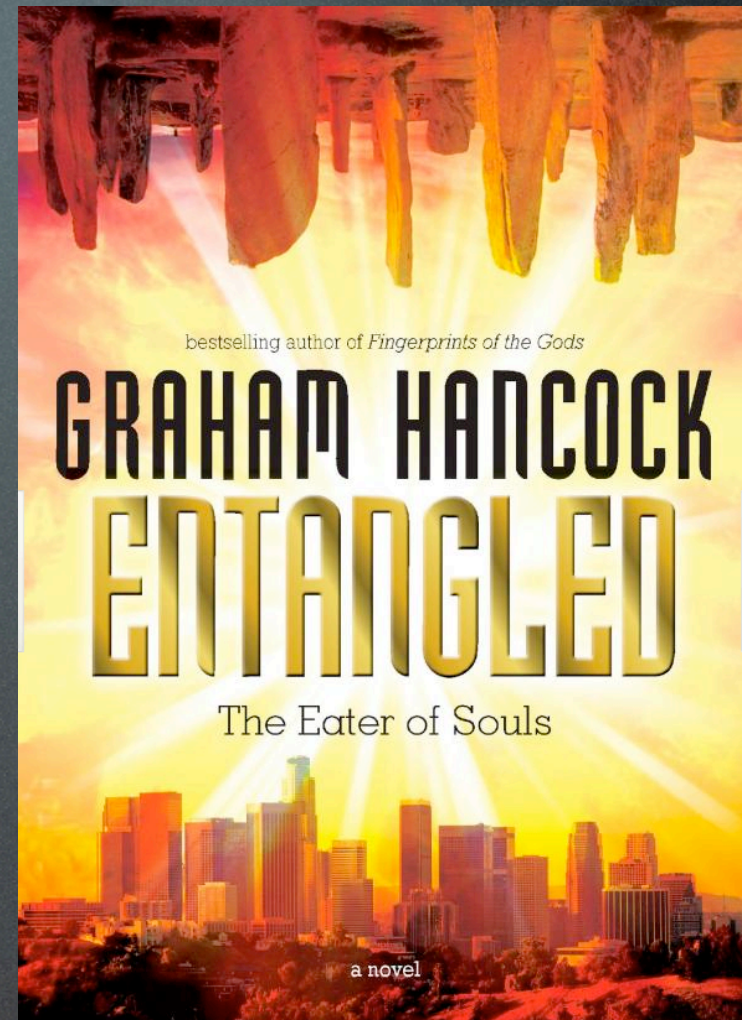
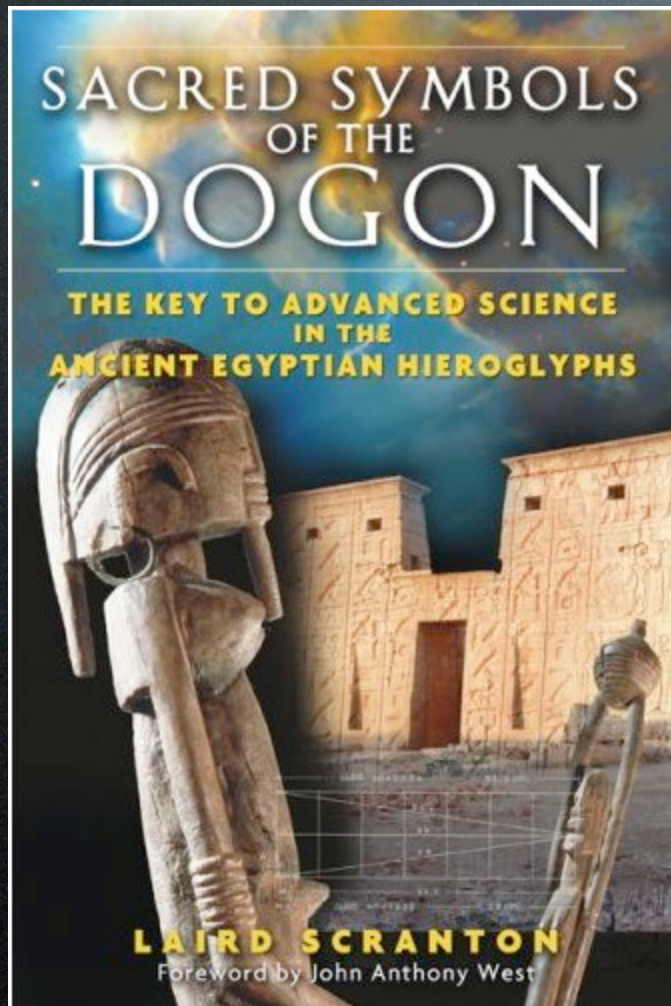
WILLIAM TEBB,
7, Albert Road, Regents Park, London, January 1st, 1884.

Letter next door to a notice of EHB’s lecture on “Occultism, Witchcraft, and Spiritualism” in *The Medium & Daybreak* for January 11, 1884

Science in 1890

- The constitution of matter -- periodic table, limited divisibility, no “unparticled matter”
- The luminiferous aether -- Michelson-Morley experiments in 1887; the death of aether, and the beginning of (modern) wave/particle duality
- The nature of electricity -- James Clerk Maxwell’s unified model of eletromagnetic energy (1864)
 - These three are, collectively, the end of mesmerism as science, but it had already been co-opted by psychology anyway
- The constitution of gases -- helium (1868), argon (1895), krypton, neon and xenon (1898)
 - krypton --> “hidden” gas
- Catastrophism -- dead as the dodo; uniformitarianism and gradualism prevail
- The origin of the universe - still proscribed, occult territory (we do not discover the universe-wide red shift until 1912)

Science & the Occult in 2010



The occult operates, at any given time, in the white spaces created by the dominant ideology.

At present, that white space includes: Egyptology, genetics, neuroscience, energy systems, quantum mechanics, subatomic physics, and string theory.