D.D. Palmer and Innate Intelligence: Development, Division and Derision
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D. D. Palmer’s concept of innate intelligence was introduced to the fledgling chiropractic profession in 1904. It has been a source of division and derision to the profession since that time because of its religious content. Innate philosophy, although unique to chiropractic, was largely a refabrication of common turn-of-the-century religious and philosophical beliefs. The origin and development of this concept is accordingly examined relative to both Palmer’s beliefs and the wider social matrix from which he drew them.

Innate intelligence has been a controversial term since the early days of chiropractic. This paper will explore the roots of this concept relying primarily on D.D. Palmer’s only comprehensive work, The Chiropractor’s Adjustor. The etymology and rationality of this term needs to be explored for several reasons. It is still in common use by many chiropractors, usually in a “we kind of know what we mean” fashion. It has been a serious source of division in the profession since shortly after the 1906 formation of National College and its rejection of this philosophy. Innate and other allied concepts have been deemed as “bordering on the irrational” by the independent evaluating committee that wrote the 1978 New Zealand Report and has been used to derogate all chiropractic principles by such groups as the American Medical Association in the 1968 Cohen Report to Congress.1

Historically, it is important to note that the concept of innate intelligence was originated and developed by D.D. Palmer although it is more often associated with his son, B.J. The name innate intelligence was selected as best expressing the superiority, individuality, and intuitive intelligence this entity supposedly possessed.2

D.D. first tentatively introduced innate intelligence to the growing profession in a 1904 article.3 During the next six years he worked on the philosophy and began to incorporate it into his chiropractic instruction. In this book he criticized the unauthorized inclusion of his 1904 article in B.J.’s 1906 book, The Science of Chiropractic. It must be noted that father and son had not worked together since their 1906 “falling out,” but B.J. apparently had kept and used D.D.’s original writings.4 In criticizing B.J.’s use of the article he said, “I did not sanction its publication.... I did not know enough... on the science, philosophy and art of Chiropractic as the subject demanded.”5

In a lengthy rewrite of that article contained in his book, D.D. felt he finally had a proper grasp of the ideas.6 However, even then the elder Palmer realized that innate’s religious and philosophical meanings were somewhat radical.7 He also found teaching the subject more difficult than anticipated.8 In fact, he spent much of his book correcting misunderstandings and misinterpretations of it.

It apparently took about ten years from germination of the idea until its culmination in his 1910 book.9 With this fully developed concept of innate wedded to his now relatively mature science of chiropractic, D.D. grandiously felt he had answered the fundamental questions of life:

What is life, disease, death and immortality? These questions have been propounded by the savants of all ages and have remained unanswered until the advent of Chiropractic. This science and life are coexistent; it now answers the first three questions and in time will lift the veil which obstructs the view of the life beyond.10

In the rest of this paper we will explore the most plausible roots of his philosophy and then try to clearly lay out its meaning, particularly as it related to the practice of chiropractic. In an attempt to explain this seemingly unorthodox philosophy, several related facts about D.D. seem to stand out. It will be shown that most of his philosophy was a restatement of varied views widely held in his time.

First, as Gielow points out in his biography of D.D., Dr. Palmer was attuned to the “philosophical school of vitalism, so attractive to the metaphysical side of the healer.”11 This belief was in sharp contrast to the more mechanistically inclined beliefs of medicine and some early chiropractors.12 D.D. voiced his beliefs succinctly when he said, “to attempt to demonstrate the vital acts of the human body by the working of machinery is futile.”13

A second fact is that like A.T. Still, the founder of osteopathy, D.D. was a “Spiritualist.”14 Palmer, a religious man, found its incomprehensible to view the inherent recuperative power of the body as nothing but “nature, instinct or intuitive force.”15 He saw behind that power a larger spiritual force that needed to be understood and explained for the benefit of the sick. Thirdly, he also

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Paper delivered at the Sixth Conference on Chiropractic History, June 7, 1986,
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tended to equate philosophy solely with theology as witnessed by the fact he called innate philosophy his "religious plank" or "theosophy" of chiropractic science. This is certainly understandable given the confusion in classical philosophy caused by science's encroachment into its realm.

A fourth point may be that D.D. saw himself somewhat as "destiny's child," as the elected bringer of a revolutionary science and philosophy:

Chiropractic came to the world as soon as it was ready to receive it. It came as an educator. The human intellect is outgrowing credulous superstition. There was a demand for this science, and a fit person who is destined to enlighten the world on that perplexing question - what is life - was prepared to present it. It did not come to antagonize other systems - they have served their time and purpose. This science is being appreciated; it is solving the problems of human life.

Therapeutic methods are absorbing the principles and movements of Chiropractic as fast as possible. The people demand that medicine and therapies shall move forward or step aside and allow this giant to pass.

Lastly, we must not forget his magnetic healing career that left an indelible mark on him concerning the nature of living tissue. D.D.'s writings on innate immediately take on a more intelligible character when all of these facts are examined.

The two most important belief systems relative to the development of innate philosophy were spiritualism and vitalism. Spiritualism had its roots in ancient Egypt and Babylonia and cuts across religious denominational lines. It was something of a phenomenon in the United States and Europe in Palmer's time and is practiced even today. Many intellectuals, medical physicians, and prominent citizens were involved in practicing and researching it. Spiritualism can be briefly described as a belief in a continued spiritual life after death, and the ability for the living to communicate with those spirits through the use of a medium or trance state. It was common in this era to believe not only in the spirits, but also in varying levels of spiritual advancement among them.

The prominent vitalistic philosopher Henri Bergson was convinced of medium Eusapia Palladino's authenticity and in 1913 became president of the well-regarded Society for Psychial Research. D.D., although equally interested in spiritualism, was skeptical of many of the so-called mediums and was not adverse to writing an article to expose them.

D.D.'s beliefs were evident when he wrote, "Through the spiritual, by communications, we may receive intelligence from other spirits in or out of bodies." Spiritualism explains D.D.'s alluding to the "next step in our existence" and his talk of the Universal Intelligence's struggle to "improve upon itself" and express itself "higher in the scale of evolution." "In time the condition of spiritual existence will be as well known and comprehended as are those of the physical world," is another obvious example of these beliefs.

As you will see, there were underlying similarities in spiritualism and vitalism, particularly the themes of evolution and the invisible spiritual essence giving life to inanimate matter. Vitalism was a strong philosophical school of thought at the turn of the century probably as much as anything in response to the strong mechanistic leanings of much of pure science. This was an age of tremendous achievement and discovery in all fields, and left many people feeling science could do anything. Many felt it was just a matter of time before scientists unraveled even the mysteries of life.

Vitalism as a counterforce to this thinking can be described as the "doctrine that life processes have a unique character radically different from purely physical-chemical phenomenon." Vitalists clearly felt the human whole was more than the sum of the parts. The following passages reflect the strong vitalistic philosophy that D.D. must have absorbed in his continuous and well-rounded self-education:

Spirit, soul, mind, and body — four different entities. The first three are imponderable; the last ponderable. The first three cannot be weighed on scales, the latter can be.

Spirit, soul and mind are distinct from matter. Spirit can exist without matter. Mind depends upon individualized spirit — innate for its existence. Soul is that which unites the immaterial spirit with the physical body.

A related aspect to this philosophy is noted in the following passages. These ideas are closely allied with Vitalists such as Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Samuel Alexander (1859-1938), but have roots back to ancient Greek philosopher Heracleitus (535-475 B.C.). The ideas themselves have been termed "emergent evolution" and deal with evolution of both organisms and of the universe in general. The one category of emergent evolution most closely allied with Palmer's concepts is called "creative advance." By this is meant, "there are small accumulative advances in the rearrangements and reorganizations of the constituents at each level, but there is also a broad, general creative direction toward an all encompassing interrelated perfect whole." Palmer continued:

Life is evolutionary in its development. The mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms are looking forward and upward, seeking a more refined and better method of expression.
Growth, unfoldment is seen everywhere. Each individualized portion of matter is but an epitome of the universe, each growing and developing toward a higher sphere of action; intelligence expressing itself thru matter. The various methods of cure are intellectual advancement toward others.30

The Universal Intelligence collectively or individualized, desires to express itself in the best manner possible. It has been struggling for countless ages to improve upon itself — to express itself intelligently and physically higher in the scale of evolution. Man’s aspirations should be to advance to a superior level to make himself better, physically, mentally and spiritually.31

D.D. also came to feel that a chiropractor’s role was more profound than just getting sick people well. He felt that it was the individual doctor’s moral duty to help the sick, to allow innate and spiritual evolution to be better served.

Knowing that our physical health and the intellectual progress of innate (the personified portion of Universal Intelligence) depend upon the proper alignment of the skeletal frame, prenatal as well as postnatal, we feel it is our right and bounden duty to replace any displaced bones, so that the physical and spiritual may enjoy health, happiness and the full fruition of earthly lives.32

Coupling spiritualism, vitalism, and personal experience, Dr. Palmer slowly formed his very intricate philosophy over the course of his lifetime.

Having explored innate’s development as a central philosophical construct we must determine the meaning D.D. gave it. To understand it, it is necessary to keep it in the proper context with other allied concepts. These definitions had to be pieced together from throughout the book because D.D. did not always give comprehensive explanations nor state them the same way twice.

Universal Intelligence:

God — the Universal Intelligence — the Life-Force of Creation.33

The universe consists of intelligence and matter.34

The spiritual is an individualized portion of Universal Intelligence — God — just as the man is a portion of the material universe.35

The following brief passages contain enough information to grasp innate’s relationship to universal intelligence and soul. The complete relationship of it to chiro-practic science will follow later in the paper.

Innate:

That which I named innate (born with) is a segment of that Intelligence which fills the universe, this universe, all wise, is metamaterialized, divided into metameres as needed by each individualized being.36

Innate is a part of the Creator. Innate spirit is a part of Universal Intelligence, individualized and personified.37

Innate has always existed.38

There is nothing radical or particularly unique to this partial definition. It follows fairly traditional Western and Christian ideas and differs only in the more unfamiliar word used. Innate and spirit are treated synonymously. On the soul, he writes:

The Soul is intelligent — life guided by intelligence. It resides thruout the body where ever life is manifested... that these two terms, life and soul are synonymous.39

It is the link which unites the immaterial with the material, the spirit with the body... The soul, the life, the bond of union.40

Without the connecting link the spiritual and physical are separate and distinct from each other.41

Palmer’s use of soul is rather unique in that he not only treats it as a separate entity, but distinguishes it from the spiritual. Traditionally, religion looks on soul and spirit as synonymous and the producers of life. He stressed, however, that although soul and life are synonymous, they are separate from innate or spirit. Why he made this distinction will be considered later when we explore his thinking on the relationship between vital energy, or vital force and innate.

The final concept that must be defined is mind. This is a crucial idea in Palmer’s philosophy. As you will note in the following passage, he saw the mind as being a dual entity derived from both the spiritual and physical part of man:

Mind is dual in its nature; it is intelligence expressed by individualized spirit.42

Innate and Educated. Innate existed before Educated. The latter is dependent upon the former for existence. Each of these entities has a mind, each has an intellect, a consciousness: each thinks, considers, understands, reasons, feels, perceives and wills. The knowledge and attributes of Innate has been acquired thru the countless ages of time; while
those of Educated is limited to this, our life
time and acquired thru the nervous system;
that of Innate is the sum total of all life
experiences.
The attributes of the Innate mind are directed
thru the sympathetic nervous system to the
upbuilding of the physical body, the sum total
of all the processes known as metabolism;
while that of Educated is directed toward our
environments.
Innate is not the mind, any more than the
body is the mind. The former is everlasting;
the latter exists during life. The mind of the
spirit is augmented by the experiences of the
physical mind.43

Other terms such as vital force and life force were
clearly used by many people, including spiritualists and
vitalists and as such are not creations of Palmer’s. He
defined vital force to mean “that principle of life which
imports energy. It is inherent in each organ of an
organism.”44 Vitalists described it as “a form of energy,
regarded as unique and distinct from others (such as
mechanical, chemical, molecular), that is manifested in
living phenomena and is the cause of life.”45

Many points make up the essence of innate intelligence
as taught by D.D. in 1910. They are arranged into
four groupings to aid comprehension (boxed with this
presentation). Each entry is principally derived from
D.D.’s article on innate or earlier references of this paper,
except where otherwise noted.46

SPIRITUAL IDENTITY
1. Innate is an individualized portion of Universal
Intelligence or God.
2. Innate philosophy takes a nondenominational
view of God.
3. It has no physical qualities only spiritual ones.
4. It is eternal.
5. It is a distinct entity from the soul.
6. It becomes bonded with a human body at
birth (with the first breath) by the soul. An
embryo or fetus is a parasite on the Mother’s
system, not having its own innate.

SPIRITUAL PURPOSES
1. It is in an evolutionary process.
2. It associates with the human body as a vehicle
for spiritual perfection.
3. It takes lessons learned on earth to the
afterlife.
4. It depends on educated or the rational mind to
absorb its earthly lessons.
5. It needs a harmonious working relationship
with the educated or rational mind to benefit
the most.

CONSCIOUS NATURE
1. It has a consciousness separate from the rational
human mind.
2. This consciousness reasons by induction and
has all the faculties of the rational mind such
as senses.
3. It is a superior consciousness to the educated
mind in every way.
4. It is capable of gaining knowledge by intuition.
5. It is the only part of human consciousness
capable of obtaining knowledge of the spiritual
realm.

PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES
1. It runs all the “vegetative” and “vital” physiologic
functions of the body.
2. It has perfect knowledge of how to run the
functions of the body, learned over the evolu­
tionary period of vertebrates.
3. It utilizes the nervous system to control the
physiologic functions of the body.
4. It generates the mental or nerve impulses
carried by the nervous system to the target
tissue, but the impulse is not innate itself.47
5. It activates the vital force in an organ by the
way of the nervous system. The “nerve vibration”
carries innate’s thoughts and commands.48
6. Innate has under its control the three forms of
vital force. They are “thot force,” “phrenism”
or mind force, and “bathism” or growth force.
These forces are “all that is necessary to
mature individual life.”49
7. Human disease is caused by a nervous interfer­
ence to innate’s normal perfect control of the
body, particularly by vertebral subluxations.

D.D. knew chiropractic could be practiced without
knowledge of his innate philosophy, but felt the doctor
should know what his profession was based upon.50

As noted earlier, D.D. felt he had solved several
critical problems about life and disease. The slow evolving
of his reasoning, especially on innate philosophy, must
have followed a particular pattern. The main religious
and vitalist aspects of his philosophy came together rather
passively over a thirty-year period. The final pieces came
after 1900, requiring an active search to complete the rest
of the philosophy.

His magnetic healing days left him with the belief
that living tissue contained a vital energy that was
corrected by his ministrations. However, he had been
continually perplexed why people living in the same
house, eating the same food did not suffer the same illness.
With the advent of his discovery of chiropractic, he saw
the connection between the nervous system and the disease
process. He still thought vital energy resided in living
tissue, but now believed it was controlled by the nervous
system.
By 1900, after a great deal of studying, he felt the only conclusion he could reach about the marvelous complexity and healing capabilities of the body was that it was guided by a supernatural intelligence. It was at this time that he said he was the first person to equate this intelligence with God. This became the basis of his innate philosophy, but was a serious scientific flaw because his conclusion far outreached the available data. His conclusion, of course, was in line with his religious and vitalistic philosophical views. In his defense, his idea preceded by over a decade the now generally accepted principle of homeostasis elucidated by physiologist Walter Cannon (1871-1945).

His next philosophical act was to create an innate spirit to individualize this “intelligence” found in all organisms. His unstated problem then became how to account for the need of an autonomic nervous system used exclusively by this innate intelligence. Obviously if this innate spirit gave the body life and resided throughout it as his conventional religious beliefs held, why would it need this nervous communication and control system? His partial answer must have been that since living tissue obviously had vital energy inherent in it, it must somehow be different from innate. Further, this tissue energy had to be considered only a potential force activated externally by magnetism or internally by nerves. With this, D.D. needed to create another entity to solve the innate, vital energy relationship.

His final philosophical creation must have been his already mentioned unique soul entity. Once D.D. equated soul only with life he “solved” his problems. This gave him the explanation for the alleged relationship of innate and vital energy. That is, innate must activate a given organ’s vital energy and receive information about its functioning via the nervous system. He felt vertebral subluxation changed the nerve’s tension altering innate’s commands. The altered command affected the inherent vital energy resulting in either too much or too little tissue function. This abnormal function caused disease.

D.D.’s plans for general acceptance of his concept of innate were to be frustrated for three reasons. First, by the time (1910) D.D. had completed his work, many chiropractors had been trained who had no or very little acquaintance with the philosophy. Many would go on to train other chiropractors and never include innate philosophy. Second, by 1906, one school (National) was formed that would come to reject the innate philosophy as taught by B.J. at Palmer College. Lastly, as D.D. saw his influence diminishing in chiropractic circles, his son B.J.’s was increasing. B.J. had begun by 1906 to emphasize innate philosophy to suit his own beliefs.

The whole concept of innate of course rests on accepting on faith the basic premises without hope of any concrete proof. From a strictly scientific viewpoint, innate must be rejected out of hand because it fails the most fundamental requirement of science, namely testability. From the standpoint of logic, the whole concept of innate depends on the logical fallacy called word magic. Giving names and definitions to unprovable spiritual entities like innate and soul cannot guarantee their existence.

Innate philosophy’s impact on the profession was far greater than it should have been, considering its scientific merit. This was not the only philosophical mistake chiropractors would make, however. Those on either side of this issue have added little in the ensuing seventy-five years that is useful or germane philosophically. If anything, things are more confused than ever with no competent spokesman for either side.

Philosophical problems have continued to lurk below the surface disguised as disagreements on scope of practice, and more essentially, over a generally accepted definition of chiropractic. These philosophical problems did in fact precede innate’s introduction in 1904 and have never been resolved to this day.

Daniel David Palmer’s achievements in accomplishing so much in founding and developing chiropractic through its first fifteen years surely overrides his philosophical failings. This is especially true in light of modern-day chiropractic’s continued philosophical shortcomings.
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Innate intelligence has been debated among chiropractors ever since it was first outlined by Daniel David Palmer. Actually, "Innate" had its roots in common late-19th century philosophical, religious and medical works (above). The chiropractic philosophy of "releasing the power within" (left) was based upon many schools which could not demonstrate tenets to the satisfaction of the scientific mainstream.