The Table-Tipping Experiments of Haakon Forwald

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In an earlier issue of *Theta* an article by Colin Brookes-Smith (1981) indicated that the study of table-tipping stopped in the early 1930s and did not start again until Batchelder's work in the 1960s. This made me realize that comparatively few people are aware of the late Haakon Forwald's table-tipping experiments, which were carried out from 1948 to 1950, there being but one brief comment about them in Louisa E. Rhine's *Mind over Matter* (1970).

Before describing his experiments, it seems in order to provide some biographical information about Forwald as well as a brief survey of his work. He was born in Norway in 1897 and grew up there, but from 1935 until his death at age 81 in 1976 he lived in Ludvika, Sweden, where he was an engineer with the General Swedish Electric Company. He held over 500 patents in various countries, primarily in the circuit breaker field. In 1950 he sent a report to the Parapsychology Laboratory, Duke University, an account of his card-guessing and table-tipping experiments. Dr. J. B. Rhine suggested to Forwald that he try to do some PK placement experiments. He did so, and thus began what is probably the longest term of research the field has known. For a period of 20 years he conducted PK placement tests in Sweden, Durham, and Pittsburgh, serving as both experimenter and subject, though sometimes observed by others. The results of his experiments are summarized and his theoretical speculations about them are presented in a Parapsychological Monograph (Forwald, 1970). Those interested in more details of his work should read the review of Forwald's monograph written by J. H. Rush (1971) and a biographical sketch which appeared in *Parapsychology Bulletin* (No. 44, February, 1958: this publication may sometimes be found bound with the *Journal of Parapsychology*).

In his monograph and in his experimental reports, which were published in the *Journal of Parapsychology*, Forwald emphasized the physical aspects of his work, but he made some important psychological observations in the monograph (Forwald, 1970) which warrant quotation in full here because of their relevance to current process-oriented research:

> In order to obtain positive results in a PK experiment, the subject must put himself in a special psychological situation, generally characterized as "willing" or "desiring." According to the author's experiences, however, results can be obtained also in other psychological situations. A person with the ability to produce strong mental images of physical events may well succeed in obtaining PK results without relying on the mental capacities *will* and *desire*. This would mean

> that the mental image is projected to the physical world outside the subject and produces there a real, meaningful effect. . . . The images must be formed in the mind in advance of the release, which must then be made immediately, when the mental picture is clear and distinct. The subject must feel confident during the time when the actual cubes are moving. He should not waver in the control of his mental picture, as this generally leads to the missing of the target. . . . The author is inclined to believe that the capacity to build up mental images is very useful in PK experimental work, as it has also proved to be in his extensive technical invention work (pp. 71–72).

When I was doing research on *to Stretch a Plank* (Robinson, 1981), I followed up on Louisa Rhine's brief mention of Forwald's table-tipping. Although by that time Forwald had retired from the General Swedish Electric Company, he was still eager to correspond about his experiments of some 18 years before. Part of his first response to my inquiry read as follows:

> The character of our experience was very much like that described by Batcheldor (1966). We had on some occasions table levitations free from the floor, and experienced also resistant forces on the table, of such a strength that we could not press the table down to the floor, or raise it from an inclined position. I learned during our sittings that I must have been the medium myself, because it happened frequently that I found myself to be in a drowsy state of mind when strong phenomena occurred.

My curiosity whetted, I wrote for more information, and Forwald kindly sent me translated extracts of his notes on 24 of these sessions. As it turned out, I used only one brief incident in my book and since the remainder of this work has never been published, it seems appropriate to fill this historical gap by putting these experiments on record.

As in most table-tipping work, complete control was impossible, which is probably why this work was not published long ago. However, Forwald expressed belief in the paranormality of events in at least one session (#24), and some of the phenomena seem difficult to explain as fraud unless Forwald himself were the perpetrator—a fact that seems unlikely for many reasons. In any event, within the context of the genre they are certainly of some historical interest, and it is in this spirit that they are reported here. What follows is partly direct quotation from Forwald's extracts, letters, and full-length notes on two sessions, and partly my integration of these several sources. In his notes Forwald gives the last names of participants, without any introduction or explanation. Elsewhere (*Parapsychology Bulletin*, 1958) his fellow-sitters have been described as engineers, so they were probably his co-workers at General Swedish Electric. Because the names provide no useful information I have abbreviated them to initials.

Starting January 7, 1948, and continuing until the end of March, 1950, the group organized by Forwald held 61 sessions. Of the 17 conducted irregularly during 1948 Forwald commented only that many different combinations of sitters were involved, and that nine of the sessions produced table-tipping phenomena of some kind. Similarly, the last 12 sittings, conducted in 1950, produced only weak results. However, during 1949 a number of apparently significant sessions were held. Continuity of sitters remained a problem, but a core of two or three managed to be present throughout most of the sessions, supplemented at times by more transient participants. I have Forwald's extract notes on 24 of the 32 sessions; 13 of these seem to have involved interesting results.

The extracts begin with the session held on February 10, 1949 (referred to here as session #1). Before the physical phenomena started Forwald himself heard "a noise, perhaps somewhat like a railway train approaching simultaneous [sic] from left and right . . . quite new to me."[1] (The phenomenon did not repeat itself for him, though one other sitter had a similar experience on two subsequent sittings, and still another sitter on a different occasion.) The sitters were around a table which will be described below as table 1, with their fingers resting lightly on top of it. Forwald and another sitter, A., had a feeling like a surge of electricity in their hands and arms. No table tipping occurred, but from another table about three feet away they heard 10 distinct raps, similar to the sound of fingernails against a hard surface.

Session #2: The same table (#1) was used on the next occasion, a week later. It was of polished birch, 19½ inches high,[2] and 12½ by 19 inches across. From the look of Forwald's carefully measured diagram, the legs were very near the edge of the table so that there was very little overhang. The table weighed just over five pounds.

Forwald wisely distinguished between movement "with contact," when fingers or hands were actually touching the table, and movement "without contact," when it did not appear that anyone was touching the table at all. During this session the movement was "with contact," the table sliding sideways over the floor, and later raising up on two legs, where it stood for about two minutes. "We all carefully attended our hands. Our fingers scarcely touched the table. A comparatively strong elastic counterforce was felt when trying to press the table down with the hands."

Session #3, the following week, produced similar occurrences, but session #4 resulted in "comparatively weak phenomena."

In session #5, on March 10, the table displayed behavior that was to repeat several times in future sessions. It tipped somewhat sideways at an angle of about 30 degrees and pressed—or perhaps banged—against A.'s knees several times in succession "with considerable force so that he felt pain." All the sitters lifted their hands to about three and a half inches from the table, which did not move. Forwald commented elsewhere that the table would usually slide down to the floor if tipped beyond 20 degrees unless held in place by a side force of about just over a pound, but in this case it remained against A.'s knees without sliding. Since Forwald was sitting directly opposite him, he (Forwald) pressed down on the uppermost side of the table. "I could press the table downward, but felt an elastic resistance. I then removed my hands from the surface, and the table again went to the knee of A. He said that the table in continuation gave several strong pressing impulses against his knee." This session is one of the two for which I have copies of Forwald's more detailed notes (from which the above is taken) rather than just the extracts. Apparently at the beginning of the session the table was standing on top of a blackboard which had been placed on the carpet. The group was anticipating getting a message from the table in this way (presumably in a similar fashion to a planchette, with letters having been written on the board). The message that was "knocked" by the table was, after some question and answer, "take away the board." The group obeyed, and the activities reported above continued with the table placed directly on the "cocoa-carpet" (probably coconut matting, not the smoothest of surfaces for a table to slide about on).

After this the group started to work with objects suspended from a helical spring. During session #6 a plate was hung from the spring and "asked" to move upwards from its resting position. No such move occurred. However, in the next session table 1 was suspended from the spring with its feet about six inches above the floor. After its resting position had been ascertained, a plumb was hung less than an inch above it. During the session the table three times rose to rather more than half an inch above its rest position for approximately 30 seconds each time. Forwald calculated that a force of about three and a half ounces, plus any force needed to counteract possible weight from the sitters' fingers, would have been needed to make this change in position.

Session #8 produced "comparatively weak phenomena," and a week later session #9 produced no results while the table was on the spring. However, when it was placed on the floor it slid over the carpet towards B., one of the regular sitters. He moved backwards away from it, but it continued to approach him. Then he changed places with the sitter opposite him, and the table reversed its direction to follow him again.

The next three sessions saw little or no table movement, but on May 12 (session #13) the table made "vivid" movements and repeated its performance of session #5, tipping sideways to press against A.'s knees and resisting attempts to press down on the raised edge with a "strong elastic counterforce."

A new table was introduced at the next session after table #1 had produced no movement when hung from the spring. Table #2 was three-legged, with a top diameter of about 19 inches and a diameter across the legs of about 12½ inches, making it perhaps somewhat less stable than table 1 both because it was three-legged and because its top was wider than its supports and so provided a greater overhang. This might have made surreptitious pressure easier. This table, too, tipped over against A.'s knees. All participants lifted their hands from the table, and then Forwald pressed down on the upper edge, but found that the table seemed to be held in place with "considerable force." Later, as all hands were held about an inch above the table, a scratching noise was heard. And the table then tipped so that one side lifted up against the hands of H., a fairly regular sitter. He, too, reported that the table pressed upwards against his hands with considerable force.

The same table was used in the next session (#15) where "vivid movements" occurred, though all were with contact. The table tipped over several times and made sudden changes of direction, performing a "veritable dance, mostly only on one leg. On one occasion we all pressed it down on the floor and held it fast with our hands. We felt it just as if it should be a living being trying to make itself free from the charge of our hands. We were not able to completely stop its movements." The following week, still using table 2, the group again observed "vivid movements." The table tipped over several times without apparent contact, and Mrs. H. reported feeling a "cold wind" against her knees.

The group met less frequently during the summer, and of the next five sessions, two attempted to produce physical phenomena but failed, and the other three involved card guessing. However, session #22, on September 29, produced more "vivid movements" from table 2, after no success with table 1 suspended from the spring. Another new table (table 3) was introduced at the next session. Similar in design to table 1, though slightly larger, it was of polished light birch, with four legs all very close to the corners, i.e., with little or no overhang, almost 15" × 29" across, 20" high, and weighing almost seven pounds. Like

table 1, there was a one inch "skirt" under the table top. As so often happens when an element of novelty is introduced to parapsychology experiments, the phenomena returned more strongly. First there were movements with contact. Then, after a period when contact was maintained but no movements occurred, raps were heard from the table surface. The table was not just new to the group, but was a new table, and the group was not able to get such noises from it by normal pressure. Encouraged, they returned to the three-legged table 2, getting both movements with contact and feeling of coldness. At one point C. held the table alone, and claimed that he felt it move under his hands. Forwald then had the same experience.

Two weeks later (session #24), Forwald had difficulty in assembling participants, and to get four (which he seems to have considered the minimum number) he had to introduce a new sitter, S. In addition, C. was not feeling well, and the weather was bad, so the mood was not one of optimism. In spite of this, quite dramatic events occurred. Table 3

> . . . soon started sliding movements over the carpet, raised on two legs and a couple of times even on one leg. Two persons simultaneous [sic] tried to press the table down to the floor, but felt a considerable counterforce. Once when the table stood on one leg in 20–30 degrees inclined position C. pressed down so that he felt pain in his hands, but did not succeed in getting the table down on the floor. I saw that he pressed so hard that his hands were trembling. I was anxious for the table, the legs being very weak. It is absolutely sure that the remaining participants could not have compensated for the force from the hands of C. This should have demanded a force in the direction of the table surface much higher than the table leg could have withstood. In fact I did not observe any deformation of the leg—it was just to my left—and light was good enough for observation . . . C. is big and strong . . . [he] said he had the impression to press against a hard spring.

Forwald makes the point that during the sessions the participants were talking and inspecting each other's hands continuously. Later they expressed the hope that the table would lift all four legs from the floor and it "seemed to strain to demonstrate such a rise. It went up on one leg and made turning movements as if to screw itself up from the floor." However, the fourth leg remained on the floor. Encouraged, the group switched to table 2, which quickly started to tip and turn, once falling to the floor. Asked to lift itself up again, it slid across the carpet until it was against a chair, and then came up to the vertical position again. However, Forwald makes the point that this was with contact, and it was possible that the group might have unconsciously made this happen by pushing the table against the chair and using it to bring pressure at an angle until the table was upright. Encouraged, they tried to get movement without contact, holding their hands about an inch above the table surface. Slight movements were observed, but the table did not tip. When contact was re-established the table raised on one leg and then "suddenly began to walk over the floor, taking steps with two legs." The group followed, with hands "in loose contact" until the table stopped in the darkest corner of the room. Here it lifted all three legs from the floor and remained with the surface more or less horizontal and the feet about six inches above the floor. It remained in this position for about two seconds before being "rapidly lowered" back to the floor, where it landed with a bump. This phenomenon was repeated twice more. After this the group asked the table for a fourth levitation but nothing happened. Then the table started to "walk" again, with all but C. in loose contact, and returned to the place in the room where it had been earlier.

Forwald comments: "It is quite natural that under such conditions a suspicion of fraud arises. C. afterwards told that his first thought was that somebody lifted the table with his foot. He therefore put his foot quite under the table as it was in the air but could not discover anything." Later they experimented to see if one person could hold the table in the air by hooking his thumbs under it, but decided that this was impossible. He adds, "We came to the conclusion that we had witnessed a genuine phenomenon . . . During the experiment I got the impression that my feet were not freely moveable. I tried to move both feet one after another to and fro in the direction of the table, but felt a resistance as if I should have to push my foot forwards in a tough liquid."

He adds that both C. and S., the new participant, were so shaken up by the experience that they were considering not taking part in any further experiments.

At about that time Forwald prepared the summary of the 24 sessions covered here to send to the late J. B. Rhine (a copy of which he so much later sent to me). I therefore have no information on the formal sessions that came later except that they were largely "weak." However, in a letter to Rhine Forwald describes another, rather dramatic, informal session that took place December 29, 1949.

With six people, all except Forwald being new to table tipping, sitting at table 2 (which always seems to have produced the most exciting phenomena) the table produced "energetic movements," and then leaned against Mr. E. under good light. The table was tipped so far that the central pillar and all three legs were visible. Then "the legs began to rise into the air (by this time, because of the angle of the table, only two

people still had their hands in contact with it). Within a few seconds their lowest point was about 20 inches over the floor so that the table was lying practically in horizontal position in the air. At the same time the surface had lifted from the knees of Mr. E. and it was rather curious to see the table hanging in the air with 4 hands in loose contact with the vertical surface, but with no further visible connection to anything else in the room." Forwald estimated that this lasted for about five seconds. He was eager to continue the session, but realized that the effect on the inexperienced sitters was so great that this would be unwise. All later told him that they had previously had negative feelings about the possibility of such events, but had now changed their attitude. In a later conversation Mr. E. told Forwald that when the table was in the air above his knees he felt air currents around his legs, and that the table seemed to be held in position by an "elastic force."

When I had read his summary and the more detailed reports on two sessions (#5 and #7), I asked Forwald some questions about the experimental conditions, to which he responded as follows:

"We who took part in the table experiments were all curious to see a genuine phenomenon. If something unusual happened we always discussed the experience afterwards, searching in the first hand for a 'natural' explanation."

To a question about the possibility that some of the movements could have been produced by the feet of one of the participants, he replied:

> It was impossible to control all feet visually the whole time. But it should also have been difficult to produce by "foot fraud" that character of movement which we sometimes experienced. The table moved on occasions as if it were held in a firm grip by some kind of guiding mechanism. Important is also that I often found myself to be in a strange state of consciousness when we had discrete table movements.

I asked whether someone pressing down on the edge of table 2 could have caused the tipping, while appearing to just have their fingers resting lightly on the surface. (As mentioned previously, the top of this table was somewhat wider than the base, and it was three-legged, both of which circumstances might have made it easier to tip than the other tables. This, combined with the fact that this table was by far the most "active," aroused my suspicions.) Forwald responded:

> Yes, it would have been possible for one person to tip over the table in the way you suggest. But such an action would not have accounted for the behavior of the table as reported in the sitting of October 29, 1949 (#24), because the table was on this occasion lifted about (two inches) from the floor with its surface maintaining its horizontal position.

After corresponding with Rhine about these effects, Forwald started on his now famous series of placement experiments with dice, and discontinued the table-tipping experiments. During a trip to the United States in 1957 he informally attempted to demonstrate table-tipping to the staff at the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University, but with little success. By the time interest in this type of work was revived in the 1960s he had retired and, as he expressed it, had "little possibility to get co-operators." He did tell me that he occasionally tried the table for "communication" and that it would still tilt out the right card from a pack of 52—but only the first card of each sitting.[3]

It does not seem possible to conduct this type of experiment with total control, and certainly Forwald's work on table-tipping must raise as many questions as it answers. However, when Forwald originally reported on his work to Rhine he seems to have been open to, and indeed eager for, further investigation which might well have included the questioning of his fellow-sitters. While some of the phenomena could perhaps be explained by trickery, some of the events described above do seem very hard to explain "normally." In addition, it is interesting that others, such as Batcheldor and Owen, who were apparently unaware of his experiments (since they were unpublished), should yet have reported such similar phenomena. As I mentioned earlier, this material is not presented as evidential, but for its historical value and as another, quite independent piece in the table-tipping puzzle, to be added to the work of those who came before him, and to that of more recent experimenters.

*I want to express my thanks to Mrs. Bergljot Johansen, the eldest daughter of Haakon Forwald, for writing on behalf of her mother, granting permission to publish the sections of Forwald's notes presented in this article.

[1]But possibly not unique; such noises at the start of paranormal experiences have been referred to by a number of writers. For example, Monroe (1971) mentions vibrations that seemed to pass over his head and added, "a great roaring surged with it" at the start of his OBEs, and Moody (1975) observes that many of his correspondents had similar experiences.

[2]Forwald's measurements were metric. I have converted them for the convenience of *Theta's* readers.

[3]Forwald's notes give very little information as to the conditions under which the table was used by the group for card-guessing experiments. Therefore, although it seemed that these few experiments produced interesting results, I have not included any discussion of them. In connection with success in guessing the first card only, it may be of relevance to point out that one of the outstanding characteristics of Forwald's placement PK work in which he served as the subject was that his best results were found consistently to be on the first trial (Forwald, 1954).

References

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refs. cont. on p. 7