

A UNIFIED THEORY FOR DOWSING

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The first question someone newly introduced to dowsing invariably asks is: "But how does it work?" For the experienced dowser, the question of theory is commonly set aside — it is manifestly a thorny problem and given that, with or without a theory, dowsing definitely works it is more interesting and fruitful to get on with learning and applying the craft than worrying about how something apparently impossible should work. Yet the lack of a theory still haunts the dowser. For some, the lack of theory is the obstacle to acceptance by the wider public and the world of science — a theory would give dowsing a much-sought respectability; for others less concerned about this the wish for a theory comes from the human need to understand how things work — if it works, there *must* be an explanation.

My interest in developing a theory stems from the latter. I am an engineer, introduced to dowsing a year ago and still learning its applications in my professional work. My primary interest is in site dowsing, for running water, buried services or pipes and anything else underground. My first impulse, like many others, has been to assume that the problem would be amenable to investigation on the basis of scientific experiments. However, the fact that whatever is happening clearly goes on in the recesses of the subconscious mind and that it is very vulnerable to mental interference from our conscious thoughts makes this problematic, to say the least. It is well known that even experienced professional dowsers have fared poorly when set tests by "scientific" investigators; it is also clear that it is difficult for a dowser to devise experiments which will put theories of how it works to the test when his/her conscious mind is well aware of what is being tried out and can interfere so readily with the subconscious mind which is carrying out the work. The laboratory environment so favoured by the professional scientist is not conducive to successful dowsing.

If the experimental approach fails, it may be more fruitful to turn to a more theoretical approach, testing postulated theories against known facts by logic rather than experiment. What can basic site dowsing achieve? It is generally accepted that (a) running water can be located, (b) other things can be located e.g. gas pipes or electricity cables, and distinguished from running water, (c) depth can be determined by the Bishop's Rule — the distance you walk away equals the depth to what has been found, (d) depth can also be found by other methods such as counting or a variant on the Bishop's Rule where each pace away equals some chosen measurement such as one foot and (e) it is possible to map dowse, carrying out the dowsing far from the actual site. I appreciate that there are many other things

which can be detected and many other types of dowsing but in the interests of simplicity the analysis will be confined to these.

The principal theories I am aware of which might explain dowsing are:

- (a) variations in electric or magnetic or other (possibly unknown) fields are set up by the running water (or whatever else is being sought) and these are detected by the dowser;
- (b) the dowser is able to "see" into the ground — in effect what is usually known as clairvoyance;
- (c) the dowser is "seeing" into the future, anticipating what will be found when the ground is excavated; or
- (d) the dowser is tapping in to some cosmic, omniscient source of knowledge.

The first of these is the favourite based on known science; the others are the basic choices open to those who look for theories from the psychic world. How well do these theories fare when asked to explain what dowsers can achieve?

The last will be discounted first. No doubt it could explain the observed facts (and many others) but in essence it is little more than a statement of religious belief. The cosmic knowledge source might be passive — a cosmic library where everything you might want to know is stored. However, if we were to believe in this, we would also have to admit that this extraordinary pool of knowledge is not only rather difficult to make use of but also that it is extremely under-used, even by top dowsers. We would also have to explain how it came to contain detailed information about what lies below the undisturbed ground. If we are to have a cosmic knowledge source, it can only really be active — a deity, rather than a library. The trouble with this explanation is that not only would it be seen as somewhat facile by most religious people ("whatever it was that happened, God did it — He can do anything!") but again there would be the problem of explaining why such a remarkable resource is so under-used and why the knowledge should be passed out to a secular body such as the dowsing fraternity, by-passing religious organisations.

Turning to the others, it must be said that on the face of it the "field detection" theory is the most plausible. Not only is it possible that water flows could cause slight disturbance to electric or magnetic fields but the human body can detect some such things and some dowsers have reputedly been able to detect very small field variations in tests. However, there are problems. The precision of the lines found is difficult to explain and how do we explain the ability to detect, say, gas mains simply by thinking about them? Can we twiddle the dial on our biological radio receiver so easily and so accurately and what is the difference in field signature between, say, a metal pipe carrying gas and one carrying water? Clearly the theory has no chance of explaining map dowsing but it also must have trouble in dealing with depth determination. Some see the Bishop's

Rule as detection of sidebands of field disturbance and imagine that these may be spaced more widely with increased depth. However, this theory is readily disproved by trying out the other methods of depth measurement previously listed. It is uncanny to try a depth determination by Bishop's Rule, paces, counting in feet and counting in metres in quick succession, with the measurement of the distance to the Bishop's Rule peg carried out last, and find close agreement amongst them all. The fact that this can be done quickly, with practice, shows that the dowsing reaction in the depth determination has no direct physical basis — it is simply being used as a way for our conscious mind to be told something our subconscious mind already knows. We cannot be reacting physically to some sideband to a field disturbance if the sideband can move itself instantly as required, depending on whether we wish to have the information presented in analogue (Bishop's Rule) or digital (paces) form and whether we want the digital reading to be in imperial or metric units. As depth determination is a basic part of most field dowser's practice, it is reasonable to expect the theory which explains dowsing to cover this aspect in a satisfactory way.

And so we are left with the two psychic theories. Of the two, clairvoyance may be thought the less implausible by many and it certainly could be used as a basis for a theory of dowsing — the dowser "sees" from the ground surface what is buried beneath and maybe this would allow its depth to be estimated too. It certainly has an attraction as an explanation for map dowsing. However, the difficulty with clairvoyance is in explaining the precision a dowser can achieve.

It is one thing to "see" running water many feet below ground but having done that how is the dowser to position his/her body directly over the right spot without the use of a psychic plumb bob?

Depth determination is even more problematic. Dowsers generally achieve quite high precision in this with relatively little practice, announcing that water will be found at a depth of (say) 15 feet. We use our other senses, such as sight, every day in our lives, gaining far more experience in their use than we ever gain in dowsing, yet how many of us could estimate a distance of 15 feet by eye with any accuracy at all? A dowser might well pronounce that not only was water to be found at a depth of 15 feet but also that it was good enough quality to drink and that a well on the spot might yield (say) 100 gallons per day. How do you "see" the quality of water? How do you "see" the yield of a well, when the well has not yet been dug? (How many of us could estimate the quality or rate of flow of a river by eye?) If dowsing tended to qualitative impressions and rough estimates of quantities, like our eyes do, clairvoyance might be a plausible theory. However, it does not seem a plausible explanation for the instant expertise contained in the dowser's findings — or his/her tendency to quote quantities with precision.

"When all the impossible explanations have been eliminated what remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." How could dowsing be based on foretelling the future, when this is something few dowsters profess to practise and probably few even believe in? The possibility that future telling might be involved occurred to me when I tried distant dowsing (successfully) to locate a tape recorder which had been left by a colleague either in the office or else at one of three sites he had visited. I had not tried this before and I found it interesting that the feel of the process and the mental state required were very close to those involved when trying to foretell the future. (I should explain that from time to time I find that I am able to correctly predict what will happen in the future; it cannot be done "to order" but I have learned to recognise the mental state and feelings which occur when it is working. I do not do it often but find that when I do it is almost always accurate. I only do it for myself, so no enquiries, please.)

The process I am familiar with for looking into the future has similarities to dowsing — either future events are imagined and physical sensations indicate whether they will be "good" or "bad" or else "will it be this?" — style questions are posed for "yes" or "no" answers. The key features are mental state (with minimum conscious interference), clear formulation of questions, or a clear picture of what is being sought, and the "yes/no" nature of the answers. Most dowsters will recognise these features as being familiar in their work.

If dowsing involves foretelling the future, what is the type of question being posed? It is not the traditional "crystal ball" variety of passive prediction — dowsing can indicate water flows under a spot even if no one subsequently actually sinks a well there. It would appear that, rather than receiving information about what is going to happen in the future, the dowser is testing out possible futures — his/her rods are answering "yes" or "no" to the question: "if I were to drill here, would I find water?", or "if I were to drill here for water, would I find it at x depth?" If depth is being determined by Bishop's Rule, as the dowser stands on the spot, focusing on the question of depth, he/she is saying to the subconscious mind "show me what depth I would find water at, if I drilled".

If this is what is really happening in dowsing, it would explain the importance, generally recognised by dowsters, of formulating the question to be answered on the object to be sought clearly in mind. It would also explain the dowser's ability to give precise information with little practice, even about unfamiliar subjects. While the reasoning has been developed on the basis of basic site dowsing findings, it clearly is also applicable to other areas of dowsing, from map dowsing to medical, lost objects, archaeological dating and others.

To answer why underground running water is the first thing someone learning to dowse tends to find — the most powerful and

basic dowsing reaction — we must delve a little deeper. In the developed world today, people take the availability of plentiful good drinking water for granted — so much so that many give no thought to where it comes from or the essential nature of the Water Authorities which provide it. Throughout most human history, this has not been so. Water supplies have been scarce, unreliable or impure, yet drinking water is the most fundamental of all requirements for life — more vital than food or anything else. Without food, humans can survive for several weeks but without water they can perish within a few days. If there is one question above all others upon which life depends, it is “where can I find water to drink?” When we bear in mind that still water may be stagnant and surface water may be polluted, is it really so surprising that unless other specific questions are posed the dowser always tends to home in on underground running water?

I would not totally rule out a role for theories such as electric or magnet field detection in some aspects of dowsing — like the conscious mind, the subconscious one is probably opportunist in operation, making use of any clues that can be picked up to help expedite the task in hand. Thus electromagnetic anomalies may well be picked up and used to home in on, say, the presence of running water. However, for the reasons set out above, I believe that such theories can only explain secondary aspects of dowsing; the basic process that we know as “dowsing” is the art of foretelling possible futures.

What does such a theory mean to practical dowsing? Well, the first thing that must be said is: “If you don’t like or believe this theory, don’t worry about it — carry on with the practical business of dowsing, which matters more than any amount of theorising.” If you do like it and find it convincing it maybe doesn’t change much, other than place some of the arguments about the merits of different pieces of apparatus firmly in perspective, focusing the attention more firmly than ever on the dowser and his/her mental state, rather than the instruments.

What is proposed here will no doubt be uncomfortable for many and it offers no assistance to those who have hoped that the development of a satisfactory theory of how dowsing works would earn it scientific respectability. It must be admitted that it is an answer which poses more problems than the question it solves — I would be the first to acknowledge that the logical difficulties posed by the notion that the future can be foretold are severe. However, if we accept that dowsing works and accept the many remarkable things it can achieve, then there must be some explanation; the one proposed here may be uncomfortable but unless there is a better one it might just be the truth. Maybe the old tag of “divining”, which modern dowsers have shunned, wasn’t so far off the mark after all.