William James

The American philosopher and psychologist William James was one of the most eminent academic figures to have been involved in psi research. He was especially interested in trance mediumship, initiating studies of the Boston medium Leonora Piper, and was supportive of attempts by Frederic Myers to frame a model of consciousness that embraced psi experiences.

Brief Biography

William James was born in 1842 in New York City, the first-born child of the marriage of Henry James and Mary Robertson Walsh, which produced three other children, including the novelist Henry James. Inherited wealth gave their father Henry leisure to pursue interests in theology and mysticism, following the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg. William studied many topics during his youth, among them painting and the sciences. In 1865, he joined naturalist Louis Agassiz in an expedition to the Amazon, during which he contracted smallpox. Soon after, in 1869, he received an MD from the Harvard School of Medicine; however, he never practiced as a physician. In 1878, he married Alice Howe Gibbens, with whom he had five children.

During the 1870s James started teaching at Harvard. The subjects he taught included courses on comparative anatomy and physiology (1872-1873), the relationship of physiology to psychology (1875-1876), physiological psychology (1876-1877), and psychology (1877-1879).[1] In 1880, he was appointed assistant professor of philosophy at Harvard and continued to teach psychology and philosophy into his later years.

James died in Chocorua, New Hampshire, in 1910.

Psychological Studies

James published many works over the course of his life. Some early articles covered Herbert Spencer's idea of the mind,[2] human beings as automata,[3] emotions,[4] mediumship,[5] and hypnosis.[6] He produced many unsigned book reviews, several on psychological topics discussed by non-American authors.[7] Titles on psychology and philosophy that he published in later years include *The Principles of Psychology; Psychology: Briefer Course; The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy; Human Immortality; Talks to Teachers on Psychology; The Varieties of Religious Experience; Pragmatism;* and *A Pluralistic Universe.*

James's fact-oriented approach to psychology was clear in his celebrated book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which a commentator remarked was not merely a review of the field, but itself 'an event in the history of psychology'.[8] The two-volume work was widely used as a textbook and has been considered influential, particularly in the United States. Among its 28 chapters are 'The Functions of the Brain,' 'The Methods and Snares of Psychology,' 'The Stream of Thought,' 'The

Consciousness of the Self,' 'Memory,' 'Sensation,' 'Imagination,' 'Reasoning,' 'Will,' and 'Hypnotism.'

At the beginning of *Principles* James writes:

> This book … assuming that thoughts and feelings exist and are vehicles of knowledge, thereupon contends that psychology, when she has ascertained the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain, can go no farther—can go no farther, that is, as a natural science. If she goes farther she becomes metaphysical.[9]

However, this fact-oriented approach was expanded later. In James's view, as he stated in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, his purpose in *Principles* was

> to simply eliminate from psychology … the whole business of ascertaining how we come to know things together or to know them at all. Such considerations, I said, should fall to metaphysics … I have become convinced since publishing that book that no conventional restrictions can keep metaphysical and so-called epistemological inquiries out of the psychology books.[10]

This does not mean that James abandoned psychology. E Taylor[11] stresses that after 1890 James did not limit himself to positivist epistemological approaches, but continued to write about psychopathology and psychical research, and about the subconscious mind in general. James, Taylor states, defined psychology as a 'person-centered' discipline that was also related to other disciplines. Metaphysics had a place in this new view of psychology. Taylor writes:

> His new position acknowledged the reality of consciousness as an ultimate plurality of states; it shed significant light on then current scientific studies of personality disintegration; it admitted the iconography of the transcendent as a crucial determinant of personality transformation; and it provided James with an analytical tool powerful enough to critique the unexamined assumptions of radical materialism in experimental science.[12]

Consciousness was a topic that James engaged in throughout his career.[13] He noticed that consciousness 'does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described'.[14] A few years later, James wrote about 'a succession of states, or waves, or fields … of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc., that constantly pass and repass, and that constitute our inner life'.[15]

Dissociation presented disruptive manifestations of the state of consciousness. James discussed dissociation in his article 'The Hidden Self',[16] published in *Scribner's Magazine*. Here much attention is given to the work Pierre Janet conducted in France with hypnotized persons, reported by Janet in his classic work *L'Automatisme Psychologique,* as well as in the work of other French researchers.[17] James's view, based on the work of the French researchers, was that

> in certain persons at least, the total possible consciousness may be split into parts which coexist, but mutually ignore each other and share the objects of knowledge between them, and—more remarkable still—are complementary. Give an object to one of the consciousnesses, and by that fact you remove it from the other or others. Barring a certain common fund of information, like the command of language, etc., what the upper self knows, the under self is ignorant of, and *vice versa*.[18]

While the French work emphasized pathology, James believed there were trances that were not necessarily pathological. He further wrote:

> It seems to me a very great step to have ascertained that the secondary self, or selves, coexist with the primary one, the trance-personalities with the normal one, during the waking state. But just what these secondary selves may be, and what are their remoter relations and conditions of existence, are questions to which the answer is anything but clear ... But there are trances which obey another type... My own impression is that the trance condition is an immensely complex and fluctuating thing, into the understanding of which we have hardly begun to penetrate, and concerning which any very sweeping generalization is sure to be premature. *A comparative study of trances and sub-conscious states* is meanwhile of the most urgent importance for the comprehension of our nature.[19]

In his writings James presented many fascinating cases of dissociation, including those of Anna Winsor[20] and Léonie Leboulanger;[21] he was also involved in the famous fugue case of Ansel Bourne.[22] His interest in dissociation was expressed in his unpublished 1896 Lowell lectures on exceptional mental states,[23] where he covered such topics as hysteria, hypnosis and possession.

Ferreri[24] has argued that James's interest in psychology showed two particular aspects. One was an interest in non-traditional topics and approaches. He also showed a multidisciplinary approach, a determination not to limit himself to knowledge gained via laboratory studies. This was clear in his interest in psychical research, which it has recently been argued was important in James's expansion of psychology by way of his radical empiricism: 'Countering classical empiricism, he advanced a set of metaphysical postulates with epistemological consequences, which place experience in its broadest sense as the cornerstone of reality. Consequently, through philosophical reasoning, he was able to encompass any kind of experience, objective or subjective, ordinary or extraordinary, as targets of scientific examinations.'[25]

Initial Steps in Psychical Research

Early in 1869, an unsigned review by James appeared in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* about *Planchette,* a book about Spiritualism.[26] He wrote:

> The present attitude of society on this whole question is as extraordinary and anomalous as it is discreditable to the pretensions of an age which prides itself on enlightenment and the diffusion of knowledge.[27]

James recognized the strongly divergent views of scientists and spiritualists, and the need of the former, when presented with descriptions of cases of psi phenomena, to be provided with copious details, notably the precautions taken to control for deception and illusion. After all, he observed:

> [A]n author writing avowedly for purposes of propagandism should have … recollected that one narrative personally vouched for and *minutely* controlled would be more apt to fix their attention than a hundred of the striking but comparatively vaguely reported second-hand descriptions which fill many of the pages of this book.28

In later years James was involved in the development of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR). We find him attending the initial meeting to form the Society, held on September 23, 1884 in Boston,29 and serving on its Council.30 Early publications also show he was working in the ASPR's committees of hypnotism31 and mediumship.32 The ASPR published a paper by James33 entitled 'The Consciousness of Lost Limbs', in which he discussed phantom-limb sensations of amputees, and papers about automatic writing34 and about a defense of the thought-transference experiments of its parent organization, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London.35

In 1885, answering a correspondent who was worried about the ASPR leaders' seeming lack of spiritualistic interests, James said he did not think this was actually the case, and expressed what he believed was the present priority:

> I take it the urgent thing … is to ascertain in a manner so thorough as to constitute evidence that will be accepted by outsiders, just what the phenomenal conditions of certain concrete phenomenal occurrences are. Not till that is done, can spiritualistic or anti-spiritualistic theories be even mooted. I'm sure that the more we can steer clear of theories at first, the better.36

That James had a strong interest in psychic phenomena is clear in a letter he wrote early in 1886 to German psychologist and philosopher Carl Stumpf, in which he mentioned psychical research and the SPR:

> I don't know what you think of such work; but I think that the present condition of opinion regarding it is scandalous, there being a mass of testimony, or apparent testimony, about such things, at which the only men capable of a critical judgment—men of scientific education—will not even look … It is a field in which the sources of deception are extremely numerous. But I believe there is no source of deception in the investigation of nature which can compare with a fixed belief that certain kinds of phenomenon are *impossible*.37

The latter critique—about the practice of some to prejudge what was possible or not—was a recurrent topic for James, and not the least of his contributions was to open people's minds to alternative possibilities.

Some of James's contact with leading SPR members involved studies. In 1889, he wrote to his wife from London saying that he 'spent a night at Myers's lodgings, and the evening with him and the Sidgwicks trying thought-transference experiments which, however, on that occasion did not succeed.'38

James reported attending séances with Boston medium Leonora E Piper, whom he encountered in 1885 (see below).39 He also took a skeptical interest in psychic healing, telling his sister in a letter in 1887:

> I have been paying ten or eleven visits to a mind-cure doctress … Mrs. Lydia E. Pinkham … I sit down beside her and presently drop asleep, whilst she disentangles the snarls out of my mind. She says she never saw a mind with so many, so agitated, so restless, etc. She said my eyes, mentally speaking, kept revolving like wheels in front of each other and in front of my face, and it was four or five sittings ere she could get them fixed. I am now, unconsciously to myself, much better than when I first went, etc … Meanwhile what boots it to be made unconsciously better, yet all the while consciously to lie awake o' nights, as I still do?40

In correspondence to his wife James mentioned some experiences he had in New York together with Richard Hodgson. One reads as follows:

> In bed at 11.30, after the most hideously inept psychical night, in Charleston, over a much-praised female medium who fraudulently played on the guitar. A plague take all white-livered, anaemic, flaccid, weak-voiced Yankee frauds!41

An early example of James's attempts to obtain a fair hearing for psychical research includes his review of *Phantasms of the Living* in the journal *Science*.42 On a similar topic, we find James involved with an American census of hallucinations, which included veridical cases.43

General Views about Psychical Research

Writing in *Scribner's Magazine*, James commented on what he referred to as the 'unclassified residuum' in human knowledge, attention to which could 'renovate' science. In his view, 'mystical' occurrences were the most neglected:

> Physiology will have nothing to do with them. Orthodox psychology turns its back upon them. Medicine sweeps them out; or, at most, when in an anecdotal vein, records a few of them as 'effects of the imagination'… No matter where you open its pages, you find things recorded under the name of divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers possessed by peculiar individuals over persons and things in their neighborhood.44

When James was elected president of the SPR he referred in his presidential address to psychic phenomena as 'fortuitous and occasional'.45 The Society had published studies of thought-transference, he said, adding:

> But their types are heterogeneous; in some cases the conditions were not faultless; in others the observations were not prolonged; and generally speaking, we must all share in a regret that the evidence, since it has reached the point it has reached, should not grow more voluminous still. For whilst it

> cannot be ignored by the candid mind, it yet, as it now stands, may fail to convince coercively the skeptic.[46]

He was more positive regarding the study of hallucinations, including veridical ones, a census of which had been published in 1894,[47] but doubted that skeptics would be convinced by it. With regard to the supernormal knowledge shown by individuals such as Piper, he wrote, 'the disbeliever will certainly rather call the subjects deceivers, and their believers dupes, than resort to the theory of chance-coincidence.'[48] James himself held a more positive attitude, one that was largely influenced by his observations with Piper, about whom he wrote:

> For me the thunderbolt has fallen, and the orthodox belief has not merely had its presumption weakened, but the truth itself of the belief is decisively overthrown.[49]

In James's view, science had failed humanity by its abandonment of the study of psychic phenomena. In this sense, he believed, the SPR had performed a humanizing function.

> We have restored continuity to history. We have shown some reasonable basis for the most superstitious aberrations of the foretime. We have bridged the chasm, healed the hideous rift that Science, taken in a certain narrow way, has shot into the human world.[50]

In this address James also commented on the work of Frederic WH Myers, a topic he returned to frequently (for instance in *Varieties of Religious Experience*.[51]) James wrote in 1901 to the English psychologist James Sully: 'I seriously believe that the general problem of the subliminal, as Myers propounds it, promises to be one of the *great* problems, possibly even the greatest problem, of psychology.'[52] There is no question that each man influenced the other. James paid tribute to Myers when he wrote to him 1891, saying 'that you, with your singular tenacity of purpose, and wide look at all the intellectual relations of the thing, may live to be the ultra-Darwin yourself.'[53] In an obituary article entitled 'Frederic Myers's Service to Psychology,' he recognized Myers's talents in combining materials from the literatures of psychical research and specific topics such as creativity, dreams, hypnotism, and secondary personalities, while at the same time acknowledging evidential weaknesses in Myers's model.[54] Writing to Swiss psychologist Théodore Flournoy in 1903, James expressed his opinion about Myers' book *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903):

> It is a hypothetical construction of genius which must be kept hanging up, as it were, for new observations to be referred to. As the years accumulate these in a more favorable or in a more unfavorable sense, it will tend to stand or to fall. I confess that reading the volumes has given me a higher opinion than ever of Myers's constructive gifts, but on the whole a lower opinion of the objective solidity of the system. So many of the facts which form its pillars are still dubious.[55]

James's main psychological and philosophical writings contain little about psychic phenomena. His *Principles* includes mentions of mediumship[56] (to be discussed below) and, more briefly, telepathy and other phenomena,[57] for instance when referring to the assumption that consciousness is confined to each person: 'As for insulation, it would be rash, in view of the phenomena of thought-transference, mesmeric influence and spirit-control, which are being alleged nowadays on better authority than ever before, to be too sure about that point either.'[58] But he did not elaborate on the subject of psychical research.

James summarized aspects of the literature of telepathy for the general public in an encyclopedia entry.[59] He faulted the mesmeric literature on the grounds that psi phenomena might be explained by cues, but considered the SPR work of more sound quality, saying: 'These experiments, taken in the aggregate, appear to make it unreasonable to doubt any longer the fact that occasionally a telepathic relation between one mind and another may exist.'[60] However, he felt that people 'will weigh the evidence differently, according to their prepossessions'.[61]

Telepathy, Apparitions and Clairvoyance

In his 1887 review, James described *Phantasms of the Living* as 'a most extraordinary book'.[62]

> Very roughly speaking, there are reported in the book about seven hundred cases of sensorial phantasms which seem vaguely or closely connected with some distant contemporaneous event. The event, in about one-half of the cases, was some one's death ... But the veridical phantasms have... many peculiarities. They are more apt to be visual than auditory. Casual hallucinations are oftener auditory. The person appearing is almost always recognized; not so in casual hallucinations. They tend to coincide with a particular form of outward event, viz., death. These and other features seem to make of them a natural group of phenomena.'[63]

In James's view, the cases presented in the study, together with their analysis and consideration of conventional explanations, placed the evidence for apparitions at a higher level than ever before. He ended his review by remarking: 'It will surprise me after this if neither "telepathy" nor "veridical hallucinations" are among the beliefs which the future tends to confirm.'[64]

In 1896, during one of his Lowell lectures, James stated that the issue of supernormal powers of cognition is 'a matter to be decided by evidence'.[65] He noted that while he was convinced of this phenomenon, he had no explanation for it.

James also published a case of clairvoyance received from Dr Harris Kennedy, a physician and his wife's cousin.[66] This involved the successful location of the corpse of a missing woman by following up certain impressions received by a woman four miles away. James carefully analysed the testimonies of people who heard the account, and concluded that conventional explanations were not plausible in this case. He wrote: 'My own view of the Titus case consequently is that it is *a decidedly solid document in favor of the admission of a supernormal faculty of seership*—whatever preciser meaning may later come to be attached to such a phrase.'[67]

In a 1909 note, James reported an attempt by an individual to artificially induce an 'apparition' of himself to a neighbor in a house nearby.68 This person concentrated on the neighbor, experiencing nothing himself; however, the neighbor (according to the informant) was visited by an apparition of him that same night. As James noted, there was no corroborating evidence in this instance.

Mental Mediumship: Leonora Piper

The most important sittings with mediums that James attended were with Leonora Piper.69 Indeed, it was his initial work with her that brought the medium to the attention of psychical researchers, who devoted decades to her study.70

The first séances took place in 1885, following visits to Piper by his mother and sister-in-law that appeared to produce veridical information. James visited with his wife, writing later:

> The names of none of us up to this meeting had been announced to Mrs. P., and Mrs. J. and I were, of course, careful to make no reference to our relatives who had preceded. The medium, however, when entranced, repeated most of the names of 'spirits' whom she had announced on the two former occasions and added others. The names came with difficulty, and were only gradually made perfect. My wife's father's name of Gibbens was announced first as Niblin, then as Giblin. A child Herman (whom we had lost the previous year) had his name spelt out as Herrin. I think that in no case were both Christian and surnames given on this visit. But the *facts predicated* of the persons named made it in many instances impossible not to recognize the particular individuals who were talked about. We took particular pains on this occasion to give the Phinuit control no help over his difficulties and to ask no leading questions. In the light of subsequent experience I believe this not to be the best policy. For it often happens, if you give this trance-personage a name or some small fact for the lack of which he is brought to a standstill, that he will then start off with a copious flow of additional talk, containing in itself an abundance of 'tests'.71

James's impression was that 'Mrs. P. was either possessed of supernormal powers, or knew the members of my wife's family by sight and had by some lucky coincidence become acquainted with such a multitude of their domestic circumstances as to produce the startling impression which she did.'72 He later stated: 'taking everything that I know of Mrs. P. into account, the result is to make me feel as absolutely certain as I am of any personal fact in the world that she knows things in her trances which she cannot possibly have heard in her waking state, and that the definitive philosophy of her trances is yet to be found.'73

For his initial report published by the ASPR, James made use of a stenographer to record the séances.74 He said he witnessed many trances and that he obtained direct testimony from twenty-five sitters, all of whom (with one exception) were presented to the medium by James.

> Of five of the sittings we have verbatim stenographic reports. Twelve of the sitters, who in most cases sat singly, got nothing from the medium but

> unknown names or trivial talk … Fifteen of the sitters were surprised at the communications they received, names and facts being mentioned at the first interview which it seemed improbable should have been known to the medium in a normal way. The probability that she possessed no clue as to the sitter's identity, was, I believe, in each and all of these fifteen cases, sufficient. But of only one of them is there a stenographic report …[75]

'What science wants,' James wrote,[76] 'is a context to make the trance-phenomena continuous with other physiological and psychological facts.' With this in mind, he hypnotized Piper as a means to explore the possibility of continuity between the mediumistic and the hypnotically-induced trance. He concluded that there did not seem to be continuity of consciousness from one state to another, but there were some physiological differences. He reported that the mediumistic trance 'is characterized by great muscular unrest, even her ears moving vigorously in a way impossible to her in her waking state. But in hypnosis her muscular relaxation and weakness are extreme.'[77] Suggestions to the spirit control that the control 'should make her recollect after the trance what she had been saying were accepted, but had no result'.[78] No evidence of thought-transference was found in the medium when tested under different conditions.

Over the years, James had many séances with Piper. For example, in one of Hodgson's reports it is recorded that several séances held between 1893 and 1895 took place at James's home in Cambridge.[79]

James repeated his conviction about the supernormal nature of Piper's readings in his SPR Presidential Address a few years later:

> If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white. My own white crow is Mrs. Piper. In the trances of this medium, I cannot resist the conviction that knowledge appears which she has never gained by the ordinary waking use of her eyes and ears and wits.[80]

James's final study of Piper[81]—the most detailed study he conducted of the medium, or of any other psychical research topic —was his report of communications purportedly coming from Richard Hodgson. James thought these contained veridical aspects, but did not accept that Hodgson was communicating, referring instead to indications of a will directing the communications.

Other Writings About Mental Mediumship and Automatisms

Writing about mediumship in the *Principles of Psychology*, James wrote:

> In 'mediumships' or 'possessions' the invasion and the passing away of the secondary state are both relatively abrupt, and the duration of the state is usually short—i.e. from a few minutes to a few hours. Whenever the secondary state is well developed no memory for aught that happened during it remains after the primary consciousness comes back. The subject during the secondary

> consciousness speaks, writes, or acts as if animated by a foreign person, and often names this foreign person and gives his history.[82]

He continued:

> The lowest phase of mediumship is automatic writing … Inspirational speaking, playing on musical instruments, etc., also belong to the relatively lower phases of possession, in which the normal self is not excluded from conscious participation in the performance, though their initiative seems to come from elsewhere. In the highest phase the trance is complete, the voice, language, and everything are changed, and there is no after-memory whatever until the next trance comes.[83]

In his paper 'Notes on Automatic Writing' James[84] discussed cases of this phenomenon. To follow up on claims of hysterical traits in automatic writers he tested for anesthesia:

> I have actually tested three automatic writers for anaesthesia. In one of them, examined between the acts of writing, no anaesthesia was observed, but the examination was superficial. In the two others, both of them men, the anaesthesia to pricking and pinching, and possibly to touch, seemed complete.[85]

A 21-year-old student who wrote with a planchette said he himself did not feel himself being pinched, but nevertheless communicated the fact of being pinched through the writing. As James observed:

> Here … we have the consciousness of a subject split into two parts, one of which expresses itself through the mouth, and the other through the hand, whilst both are in communication with the ear. The mouth-consciousness is ignorant of all that the hand suffers or does; the hand-consciousness is ignorant of pin-pricks indicted upon other parts of the body—and of what more remains to be ascertained. If we call this hand-consciousness the automatic consciousness, then we also perceive that the automatic consciousness may transfer itself from the right hand to the left, and carry its own peculiar store of memories with it.[86]

James recorded other cases of automatisms.[87] One concerned Sidney Dean, a congressman from Connecticut. In a letter to James, Dean claimed that he wrote automatically, producing hieroglyphics and what seemed like foreign languages in his normal state, but with apparently two different minds:

> The writing is in my own hand, but the dictation not of my own mind and will, but that of another, upon subjects of which I can have no knowledge and hardly a theory; and I, myself, consciously criticize the thought, fact, mode of expressing it, etc., while the hand is recording the subject-matter and even the words impressed to be written. If *I* refuse to write the sentence, or even the word, the impression instantly ceases, and my willingness must be mentally expressed before the work is resumed, and it is resumed at the point of cessation, even if it should be in the middle of a sentence. Sentences are

> commenced without knowledge of mine as to their subject or ending. In fact, I have never known in advance the subject of disquisition.[88]

Elswhere, James discussed two other cases of automatisms: 'speaking with tongues'[89] and the production of drawings.[90]

Physical Mediumship

Over the years James had many opportunities to see physical mediums. One was the materialization medium Helen Berry, whom he visited together with psychical researcher Reverend Minot J Savage. On one occasion, James wrote:

> it was granted to Mr. Savage to sit behind the cabinet, others being in front, whilst I explored it after the medium's entrance, and found no confederate concealed. A trap-door seemed out of the question. In a minute two forms emerged from the cabinet ... I visited twelve séances, and took with me, or sent, personal friends enough to have, in all, first-hand reports of thirty-five visits, embracing sixteen or seventeen séances. No spirit form came directly to any one of us, so we offer no opinion regarding the phenomena.[91]

James also went on record regarding attending materialization séances with Mrs HV Ross.[92] These séances, he thought, contained much trickery.

Soon after, in 1888, James wrote to his wife that he was going to visit, with Richard Hodgson, a physical medium he referred to as 'Madame D.'

> We found the old girl herself, a type for Alexandre Dumas, obese, wicked, jolly, intellectual, with no end of go and animal spirits, who entertained us for an hour, gave us an appointment for a sitting on Monday, and asked us to come and see Mr. B. tonight. What will come of it all I don't know. It will be baffling, I suppose, like everything else of that kind.'[93]

In another letter James said that he could not see the medium because she was too tired. It was that same year that James experienced a sitting that he later described in exasperated terms as 'hideously inept' and fraudulent.[94]

James's evaluation of the evidence for physical mediumship in his 1896 SPR presidential address was not positive.[95] Regarding the Italian medium Eusapia Palladino he thought the investigations provided encouragement, in that the researchers had followed strict methods, but also a warning about the doubtful merits of observations made in darkness (he referred with exasperation to 'phenomena of dark-sitting and rat hole type'[96]). Writing to Flournoy in 1903, he complained the topic was so baffling that he was starting to lose interest.[97]

When in 1909 and 1910 Palladino paid a visit to New York City,[98] James lamented in a letter to Flournoy that the resulting controversy and negative press comment was unfortunate for psychical research, and could discredit those involved with the study of the medium.[99] In a note published in *Cosmopolitan* during her visit, he mentioned he had not seen her himself and doubted whether anything of value could come of her visit, in the absence of ideal conditions—a reference to the haphazard way that séances had been conducted up until then. He wrote:

> Eusapia's methods are detestable, the cheating, the darkness, the holding, the calling out, her own restlessness, etc.; and nothing save the uniqueness of the phenomenon justifies one in paying it attention. As matters stand, however, it may break the bounds which science has hitherto set to nature's forces; and is worthy, after what has been observed in Europe, of any amount of labor spent in ascertaining just what the facts may be. Supposing Eusapia genuine, I have no inkling of a theory into which to fit her facts. That her phenomena probably are genuine seems to me established by Flammarion's, Morselli's, Bottazzi's, Courtier's, and the Society for Psychical Research reports. I shall be much surprised if later experts find that the whole repertory is composed of tricks.100

James101 reported on table phenomena obtained in a private circle in New England. This employed a table equipped with an alphabet on a revolving disc.

> To avoid too much pressure on the rotating disc, a ring or rail of thick brass wire has been adjusted to the corners of the table, surrounding the disc at four inches' distance, on which the wrists of those present may rest while they lay their finger tips on the disc. This ring slides with a moderate friction through four brass collars which sustain it, and which themselves are sustained by brass stems screwed to the angles of the table. The disc and the ring are thus concentric.

In a 1908 séance attended by James, messages were spelled out when the sitters had their hands on the disc.

> Suddenly, while we were sitting with our wrists on the brass ring and our fingers on the disc, which turned and spelled, *we perceived that the ring or rail itself was moving* … Someone immediately suggested that all wrists should be lifted, and then, in brilliant light, and no one's hands in anyway in contact with the rail, our fingers, however, resting on the disc, we all distinctly saw the rail or ring *slide slowly and for several inches through the collars, as if spontaneously.*'102

Later they obtained similar, but more slight, results.

> It always took the contact of our wrists to start the rail, but *its motion continued when the contact ceased*. This was not from its acquired momentum, for we ascertained that the friction of the collars which held the rail stopped instantly every motion imparted voluntarily by the hand.103

The conditions of observation, James stated, were good, and he was convinced. However, he wrote that after four days, 'my mind seems strongly inclined not to "count" the observation, as if it were too exceptional to have been probable.'104

Popularization and Defense of Psychical Research

As a prominent intellectual, James's views were considered important, and he had access to many forums where he might express them. For example his SPR presidential address, as well as being published in the Society's Proceedings appeared in the front page of the 19 June 1896 issue of *Science*.105

James's review of *Phantasms of the Living* also featured in the pages of *Science,* as did short statements defending Piper106 and telepathy.107

Other works on psychical research were published in sources accessible to the general public. Among these were 'What Psychical Research Has Accomplished,'108 in *Forum,* 'Telepathy,'109 in *Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia*, and 'The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher' '110 in *American Magazine*. In the *Forum* article, James stated, 'Were I asked to point to a scientific journal where hard-headedness and never-sleeping suspicion of sources of error might be seen in their full bloom, I think I should have to fall back on the 'Proceedings' of the 'Society for Psychical Research.' '111

Also influential—mainly among psychologists—were James's publications in the important American journal *Psychological Review*. In reply to James McKeen Cattell's criticism of his SPR presidential address,112 James described himself as one of psychical research's 'foster fathers' and stated in unequivocal terms that the field had 'many enemies, fair and foul, to elude before she gets her scientific position recognized'.113 He also observed that in the investigation of veridical apparitions and experiments on thought-transference, problems were commonly assumed to exist that had no evidence to back them up.

> The presumption has remained presumption merely, the scientist saying, 'I can't believe you're right,' whilst at the same time he has been unable to show how or where we were wrong, or even except in one or two cases to point out what the error most probably may have been...114

The objections, James insisted, were shallow, while 'the concrete evidence for most of the 'psychic' phenomena under discussion is good enough to hang a man twenty times over.'115

In the same journal James reviewed many psychical research works, providing, in an important psychological forum, a counterbalance for the usual negative attitudes of American psychologists towards psychic phenomena and their investigation. Among these were reviews of a French journal,116 and of work carried out in countries such as England,117 Italy118 and the United States.119

It may be argued that one of James's most important contributions was the popularization of psychical research. More than this, he gave respectability to the subject by associating his name with it. Murphy drew attention to 'the courage and energy with which he stressed the importance of these inquiries', and James's insistence that a full understanding of human beings required a systematic investigation of psychic phenomena.120

Theoretical Ideas

Unlike other figures in psychical research, James did not develop or defend specific theories to explain psychic phenomena. His reluctance in this regard was characterized by a reviewer of his work as 'James's speculative reticence'.121 But he favored certain concepts. With regard to the influence of suggestion on mediumistic personalities, he wrote:

> Whether all sub-conscious selves are peculiarly susceptible to a certain stratum of the *Zeitgeist*, and get their inspiration from it, I know not; but this is obviously the case with the secondary selves which become 'developed' in spiritualist circles. There the beginnings of the medium trance are indistinguishable from effects of hypnotic suggestion. The subject assumes the rôle of a medium simply because opinion expects it of him under the conditions which are present; and carries it out with a feebleness or a vivacity proportionate to his histrionic gifts.122

Although he believed in the supernormal nature of the information he obtained from Piper, he did not advance an explanation, observing merely that 'the definitive philosophy of her trances is yet to be found'.123 He later stated: 'What the source of this knowledge may be I know not, and have not the glimmer of an explanatory suggestion to make …'124

In his analysis of Piper's 'Hodgson' communications, James considered that behind them lay 'a will of some kind, be it the will of R H.'s spirit, of lower supernatural intelligences, or of Mrs. Piper's subliminal … yet the major part of it is suggestive of something quite different—as if a will were there, but a will to say something which the machinery fails to bring through.'125 He speculated that his 'will' perhaps could access

> the sitter's memories, possibly those of distant human beings, possibly some cosmic reservoir in which the memories of earth are stored, whether in the shape of 'spirits' or not. If this were the only will concerned in the performance, the phenomenon would be humbug pure and simple, and the minds tapped telepathically in it would play an entirely passive rôle—that is, the telepathic data would be fished out by the personating will, not forced upon it by desires to communicate, acting externally to itself.126

He did not think telepathy was a sufficient explanation, and speculated on the combination of a will to personate and other factors: 'The sitter, with his desire to receive, forms, so to speak, a drainage-opening or sink; the medium, with her desire to personate, yields the nearest lying material to be drained off; while the spirit desiring to communicate is shown the way by the current set up, and swells the latter by its own contributions.'127

To the end of his life, James appeared to remain unconvinced that discarnate agency could account for psychic phenomena, particularly mediumship. For example, he wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: 'Facts, I think, are yet lacking to prove 'spirit-return,' though I have the highest respect for the patient labors of Messrs. Myers, Hodgson, and Hyslop, and am somewhat impressed by their favorable conclusions.'128

There is no question that James saw great value in Myers's writings about the subliminal mind, even though he held reservations:

> In Mr. Myers's papers on these subjects we see, for the first time in the history of men's dealings with occult matters, the whole range of them brought together, illustrated copiously with unpublished contemporary data, and treated in a thoroughly scientific way. All constructions in this field must be provisional ... But, thanks to his genius, we begin to see for the first time what a vast interlocked and graded system these phenomena, from the rudest motor automatisms to the most startling sensory apparition, form. Mr. Myers's methodical treatment of them by classes and series is the first great step towards overcoming the distaste of orthodox science to look at them at all.129

While he accepted 'supernormal cognition', James could not explain it. In one of his 1896 Lowell lectures he speculated on the existence of an opening in the hypothetical barrier between the conscious and the unconscious mind related to such cognition.130

As seen in *Human Immortality,* James belonged to the long history of individuals who concluded from the fact of psychic phenomena that the mind was separate from the brain.131 He briefly referred to psychic phenomena in terms of the 'transmission' model, where the mind uses the brain to communicate, being independent of it, and the 'production' model, in which the mind, being the creation of the brain, has no independent existence. As he explained:

> A medium ... will show knowledge of his sitter's private affairs which it seems impossible he should have acquired through sight or hearing, or inference therefrom. Or you will have an apparition of someone who is now dying hundreds of miles away. On the production theory one does not see from what sensations such odd bits of knowledge are produced. On the transmission theory, they don't have to be 'produced,'—they exist ready-made in the transcendental world, and all that is needed is an abnormal lowering of the brain-threshold to let them through.'132

'The Confidences of a Psychical Researcher' was probably James's last specific discussion about psychical research in general.133 Here he was clear that he had not adopted any explanations for the phenomena he believed in, telepathy and the veridical nature of Piper's communications, and confessed he was 'theoretically no further' than he was at the beginning.134 But he added: 'It is hard to believe ... that the Creator has really put any big array of phenomena into the world merely to defy and mock our scientific tendencies; some deeper belief is that we psychical researchers have been too precipitate with our hopes, and that we must expect to mark progress not by quarter-centuries, but by half-centuries or whole centuries.'135

In this same article James argued that the causes of psychic phenomena were complex. 'The causal factors must be carefully distinguished and traced through series, from their simplest to their strongest forms, before we can begin to understand the various resultants in which they issue.'136

James came to believe in minds being interconnected, like islands or trees, referring to 'a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir ... Not only psychic research, but metaphysical philosophy, and speculative biology are led in their own ways to look with favor on some such 'panpsychic' view of the universe as this.'[137]

James and Psychical Research in Perspective

James conducted rather little research,[138] in the sense of collecting data via experiments or case studies. (In early life he told his family that he was convinced he was cut out for a 'speculative rather than an active life.'[139]) There are indications that he disliked the detailed work involved in psychical research, once referring to it as 'tedious'.[140] He wrote to Myers in 1891 that he found the reading of experiences he had not himself collected 'almost intolerable',[141] and complained to Flournoy in 1908 about the 'tiresome detail' of some SPR mediumistic records.[142]

Like other important thinkers in the human sciences, James preferred philosophical analysis, or the collation and creative ordering of published literature, essential to making sense of 'facts'. He was at his best as a creative synthesizer concerned with the big picture. In the view of Bordogna,[143] James 'reinvented the role and the function of the philosopher at the same time as he reimagined the mental, moral, and social attitudes that would befit the genuine scientific investigator, thus redefining both the practice of philosophy and that of science.'[144]

Bringing Piper into psychical research greatly influenced the development of studies of mental mediumship and the area of survival of bodily death. More generally, he was a major force in the popularization and active defense of psychical research in the United States, at a time when some psychologists were striving to banish the subject from serious consideration.

James's ambivalence regarding survival is consistent with his questioning approach to psychical research, his habit of being positive and encouraging while at the same time noticing problems, a stance that was visible in his comments about Myers.[145] Sceptical modern readers may see his efforts as a waste of time, while those firmly convinced of survival are liable to criticize his indecision, even to charge him with moral cowardice from fear of the damage a commitment might do to his professional reputation. But this would not be consistent with what we know about James, an intrepid explorer who frequently defied the establishment on a variety of topics.

While baffled by and unable to explain the phenomena, James saw them as important for humankind. It is via psychic phenomena, he concluded, 'that the greatest scientific conquests of the coming generation will be achieved'.[146] That such progress has not yet been made was foreshadowed in the same article when he said that 'we must expect to mark progress not by quarter-centuries, but by half-centuries or whole centuries.'[147]

More recently, it has been stated that: 'James's interest in psychical research went beyond mere eccentricity. In fact, it is reasonable to assert that his many years of active investigation of psychic phenomena played a significant role, not only in the furtherance of his psychological project, but also in his philosophical enterprise.

This means that in order to understand James's works in a more comprehensive manner, psychical research as an intersection of his psychology and philosophy must be considered …'[148]

Scholarship About James's Psychical Research

There is vast literature about William James. Examples include Barnard,[149] Bordogna,[150] Brown,[151] Carrette,[152] Lamberth,[153] Proudfoot,[154] and Richardson,[155] all of whom offer various interpretations while situating his ideas in wider contexts, such as philosophy and psychology.

Several of these have also considered James's interest in psychic phenomena.[156] In *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin,* Taylor argues that, for James, 'the paradigm of psychical research became an early framework for the scientific study of the relation between mind and body …'[157] Psychical research greatly influenced James, Taylor comments, particularly through the work of Myers, which was central to the development of his psychology and philosophy in the 1890s, forming the 'epistemological core of James's scientific activities in abnormal psychology and psychical research.'[158]

Other discussions can be found in Blum's *Ghost Hunters* (2006)[159] on and Knapp's dissertation,[160] also in several articles.[161] McDermott[162] sees psychical research as central for James, commenting that the field 'put to the test religious and scientific claims which were at the core of his philosophy …'[163] Psychical research, McDermott continues, illustrated James's approach, which included attention to facts, as well as 'avoidance of abstract categories, patient attention to ultimate questions, and preference for complexities over the dogmatisms of either the skeptic or the believer …'[164]

Alvarado and Krippner[165] have seen James's writings on secondary personalities, mediumship and hypnosis as an example of the influence of psychical research on the study of both the subconscious mind in general and of the process of dissociation in particular, while Sommer[166] has illustrated James's attitudes towards medium Eusapia Palladino and her opponents.

On the other hand, many writers on James continue to ignore the place of psychic phenomena in his life and work.[167] After mentioning some topics of interest to James, one author of a history of psychology had only this to say: 'He was also interested in parapsychology'.[168]

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- 108. James (1892b).
- 109. James (1895c).
- 110. James (1909a). See also James (1903b, 1904a).
- 111. James (1892b), 727.
- 112. Cattell (1896).
- 113. James (1896c), 649.
- 114. James (1896c), 650.
- 115. James (1896c), 650.
- 116. James (1894).
- 117. James (1895b).
- 118. James (1896d).
- 119. James (1898c).
- 120. Murphy (1960), 18.
- 121. McDermott (1986), xvi.
- 122. James (1890c), vol. 1, 394.
- 123. James (1890d), 659.
- 124. James (1896a), 884. See also a statement in one of his letters in 1907, H. James (1920), vol. 2, 287.
- 125. James (1909e), 116.
- 126. James (1909e), 116–17.
- 127. James (1909e), 120.
- 128. James (1902), 514.

- 129. James (1896a), 885.
- 130. Taylor (1984), 92.
- 131. James (1898a); Alvarado (2012).
- 132. Alvarado (2012), 26.
- 133. James (1909a).
- 134. James (1909a), 580.
- 135. James (1909a), 580.
- 136. James (1909a), 584.
- 137. James (1909a), 589.
- 138. E.g., James (1886b; 1909e).
- 139. H. James (1920), vol. 1, 62.
- 140. James (1909b), 585.
- 141. H. James (1920), vol. 1, 305–6.
- 142. H. James (1920), vol. 2, 311.
- 143. Bordogna (2008).
- 144. Bordogna (2008), 34.
- 145. James (1901).
- 146. James (1909a), 589.
- 147. James (1909a), 580.
- 148. Junior et al. (2013), 73.
- 149. Barnard (1997).
- 150. Bordogna (2008).
- 151. Brown (1999).
- 152. Carrette (2005).
- 153. Lamberth (1999).
- 154. Proudfoot (2004).
- 155. Richardson (2006).
- 156. E.g., Barnard (1997); Bordogna (2008); Taylor (1996).
- 157. Taylor (1996), 20
- 158. Taylor (1996), 21. See also Taves (2003); and Taylor (1984).
- 159. Blum (2006).
- 160. Knapp (2003).
- 161. E.g., Ford (1998); Gitre (2006); Hamilton (2013); Junior et al. (2013); Knapp (2001); Murphy (1960); Schmeidler (1993).
- 162. McDermott (1986).
- 163. McDermott (1986), xiv.
- 164. McDermott (1986), xiv.
- 165. Alvarado and Krippner (2010).
- 166. Sommer (2012).
- 167. E.g., Mandler (2007).
- 168. Wertheimer (2012), 116.
- 169. Burkhardt (1986).
- 170. James (1924); Murphy & Ballou (1960).