

Contemporary challenges to William James's spiritualism

by

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But when was not the science of the future stirred to its conquering activities by the little rebellious exceptions to the science of the present? Hardly, as yet, has the surface of the facts called "psychic" begun to be scratched for scientific purposes. It is through following these facts, I am persuaded, that the greatest scientific conquests of the coming generation will be achieved. Kuhn ist das Muhen, herrlich der Lohn! [Hard is the work, beautiful the reward!] (William James 1909b, 375)

William James (1842-1910), eminent professor of psychology at Harvard, made this prediction a year before he died. Yet a century of probing deeper into "psychic" facts has led nowhere. To the contrary, the greatest scientific advances have come from the hard work of mainstream science. As for psychical research, we may as well be back in 1909.

Few students of psychology realize how important a role psychical study played in James's philosophy. In the introduction to their extraordinarily thorough compilation of James's writings on psychical research, Burkhardt and Bowers (1986) commented that their book "clearly shows that psychical research represented a continuing intellectual concern throughout his [James's] career" (p. xiv). As corroboration they cited a statement in Ralph Barton Perry's "indispensable" two-volume study that "James's interest in 'psychical research' was not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical. He grew up in a circle in which heresies were

more gladly tolerated than orthodoxies" (Perry 1935, 155). Burkhardt and Bowers, as well as Perry, found this to be a favorable trait, freeing James from prejudice and making him open and often sympathetic to a wide variety of viewpoints. They apparently did not believe that a skeptical attitude would have been more fruitful. As it was, this dichotomy between skeptics and believers led to an acrimonious debate about spiritualism as a proper area of psychological study (Coon 1992).

Skepticism came not only from psychologists who remain in the psychological pantheon but also from psychologists who do not. For example, there is the opposition of James H. Leuba (1903), appointed to the Bryn Mawr College faculty in 1897 and a founder of its psychology department, who published a critique of an article by James Hyslop (1901), a professor of logic and ethics at Columbia University. Hyslop had approvingly described seventeen seances with Mrs. Leonora Piper, sparking a debate with Leuba. Although Hyslop differed from James in his approach to psychical research, he and James agreed on the importance of material gathered from sittings with Mrs. Piper, though James was more cautious than Hyslop. Both continued to actively support the American Society for Psychical Research (which in 1890 had become the American Branch of the Society for Psychical Research) after many scientists, including the eminent psychologist G. Stanley Hall, had become disillusioned when the Society strayed from its original purpose of experimentally exploring psychical research and began to actively support it (Burkhardt and Bowers 1986).

Prior to his appointment to Bryn Mawr in 1897, Leuba had spent three years as a student at Clark University, where Hall was president. Earlier, in 1887, Hyslop had earned a Ph.D. under Hall, who was then at Johns Hopkins University (Moore 1977, 158). Hall's (1891) review of James's *The Principles of Psychology* is only one of many scathing indictments of James's position. In fact Hall, assisted by psychologist Amy Tanner, took the trouble to arrange six seances with Mrs. Piper, and they drew a far different conclusion about the medium's psychic powers than did either James or Hyslop (Tanner 1910).

Leuba also squabbled with James, although their initial exchange of letters gave no hint of the disagreement to follow. In March 1901, James had written to Leuba praising him for an article on religion published in the *Monist*. James wrote again to Leuba after Leuba had published a second, related article in July 1901, and this time James was more critical (Perry 1935). But the paper that most antagonized James was Leuba's (1903-1904) "Professor William James' interpretation of religious experience," which took issue with James's approach to the psychology of religion as expressed in James's

The Varieties of Religious Experience. James expressed his feelings about Leuba's article in a letter dated August 24, 1904, to Edwin D. Starbuck, who had been a student of

James's in the mid-1890s (Starbuck 1943): "I was much disappointed in Leuba's review of my book in the *International Journal of Ethics*.... I confess that the way in which he stamps out all mysticism whatever, using the common pathological arguments, seemed to me unduly crude. I wrote him an expostulatory letter, which evidently made no impression at all, and which he possibly might send you if you had the curiosity to apply" (H. James 1920, Vol. 2, 210).

James's expostulatory letter, (1) dated April 17, 1904, begins with James "rejoicing" in the way Leuba gets to the heart of James's contentions, but then he objects to Leuba characterizing his (James's) thesis as "spirit intervention." No reader could guess, wrote James, "that the only spirit I contend for is 'God.' Unless he [the reader] knows my book he will suppose that I am a 'spiritist' out and out, which I am not. This is unfair" (Perry 1935, 348-349). James then went on to accuse Leuba of being secretive. "You hide your own religious cards," wrote James, "so that one does [not] know exactly how to reply to you" (359). You may think there is no God, he went on, "and that all these vague experiences are 'poppy-cock' and nerves" (349), or that there is a God, "but that the evidence for him (sic) must always be indirect" (349). Or perhaps Leuba believed in the possibility of a God, in which case "argument grows easier" (349). James provided that argument in the remainder of his letter.

Ten months later, in a letter to Starbuck dated February 12, 1905, James suggested that Starbuck (who, like James and Leuba, studied and wrote about the psychology of religion) "drive home ... [the point] that the anti-religious attitudes (Leuba's, Huxley's, and Clifford's), as far as there is any 'pathos' in them, obey exactly the same logic" (H. James 1920, 218).

Whatever James thought about Leuba's views it did not prevent him from sending his daughter Margaret Mary to Bryn Mawr from 1906 to 1908, at which time she left without graduating (R. H. Wozniak, personal communication, January 28, 1997; and see James's letter to her in his son Henry's collection of William James's letters, 1920).

Before leaving Leuba it should be mentioned that to account for Mrs. Piper's performance he was unwilling to rule out the possibility of telepathy--widely accepted then (and now)--combined with secondary personality, or perhaps just secondary personality alone, an alternative he thought improbable (Leuba 1903). As we know, other explanations are more plausible (Gardner 1996).

The White Crow

Any discussion of James's spiritualistic bent must begin with Mrs. Piper. James (1890) wrote that he first met her in the Autumn of 1885, and Mrs. Piper's description of how they met is particularly illuminating. "My maid of all work told a friend who was a servant in the household of Professor William James, of Harvard, that I went into 'queer sleeps,' in which I said many 'strange things.' Professor James recognized that I was what is called a psychic, and took steps to make my acquaintance" (Piper 1902, 143). If this was true there would have been an obvious conduit from the James household to Mrs. Piper, and her trance state revelations about the James family, which so impressed James, would have had a more mundane source than the spirit world. Mrs. Piper's daughter, Alta Piper, told a somewhat different story. Her grandparents had a maid whose sister worked in a Boston home frequently visited by James's mother-in-law,

Mrs. Gibbens (Alta Piper spelled it Gibbins). Hearing, through this channel, marvelous tales about Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Gibbens requested and received a sitting that so impressed her that she arranged a sitting for her daughter, James's wife, "the results of which appeared equally, if not more, surprising than her own" (A. Piper 1929, 22).

James's (1890) version of how he met Mrs. Piper generally supports her daughter's description, although he made no mention of the role played by the housekeepers. When he was told of Mrs. Piper's powers he went with his wife, "to get a direct personal impression" (652). Whatever the specific connection between the servants, "It is thus possible that Mrs. Piper's knowledge of the James family was acquired from the gossip of servants and that the whole mystery rests on the failure of the people upstairs to realize that servants [downstairs] also have ears" (Burkhardt and Bowers 1986, 397).

In his *The Principles of Psychology*--a two-volume publication that is arguably the most famous book in academic psychology--James (1890) quoted a lengthy autobiographical description of the remarkable output produced during automatic writing by a former member of Congress. The man insists that the writer was not himself, nor his unconscious, but some other intelligence using his mind. What is James's response to this? He accepts it, commenting that he himself is persuaded "by abundant acquaintance with the trances of one medium that the 'control' may be altogether different from any possible waking self of the person. In the case I have in mind, it professes to be a certain departed French doctor; and is, I am convinced, acquainted with facts about the circumstances, and the living and dead relatives and acquaintances, of numberless sitters whom the medium never met before, and of whom she has never heard the names" (Vol. 1,396).

James goes on to observe that he is giving his opinion, "unsupported by the evidence," not to persuade anyone to his viewpoint, but rather because he believes "that a serious study of these trance-phenomena is one of the greatest needs of psychology" (396). Those unfamiliar with James's adventures into mysticism could not know that the medium he refers to in his famous book is Mrs. Piper and her control is Phinuit (a spirit

intermediary for other spirits), who claimed that in his earthly existence he was a French physician, although he couldn't speak French. James rationalized this by suggesting that Phinuit was a fictitious person; that is, a real spirit who lied about the nature of his earthly identity (James 1890).

The Leuba-James debate reflected the far better known dispute on the same subject between William James and psychologists G. Stanley Hall, James McKeen Cattell, and Edward B. Titchener. Hall (in Tanner 1910) gave an insightful description of Mrs. Piper and her trance behavior. By the time he and Tanner saw her in 1909 she had for some thirteen years been a star of both the Society for Psychical Research in England and its American offshoot, which paid her a generous annual sum, in addition to fees she received from individuals (Burkhardt and Bowers 1986, 396). An important figure in these events was Richard Hodgson, who had been an active member of England's Society for Psychical Research and had arrived from Europe to set the American branch on a firm footing, serving as its salaried secretary from 1887 until his death in 1905 (Burkhardt and Bowers 1986; James 1892), after which he allegedly communicated as a spirit through Mrs. Piper. Hall and Tanner had what the spiritualists believed were lengthy communications with his spirit. In fact, at roughly the time of Hall and Tanner's seances with Mrs. Piper, James (1909a) published an extended paper on Hodgson's spiritual communication via Mrs. Piper, concluding that although there was much dross and rubbish, nevertheless supernormal knowledge was indeed exhibited.

For James, Mrs. Piper was the single exception that disproved a general rule (Moore 1977).

But it is a miserable thing for a question of truth to be confined to mere presumption and counter-presumption, with no decisive thunderbolt of fact to clear the baffling darkness.... For me the thunderbolt has fallen.... If you will let me use the language of the professional logic-shop, a universal proposition can be made untrue by a particular instance.

If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to prove that no crows are; it is enough to 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. (James 1896a, 884)

James Mckeen Cattell (1896) was not persuaded. "One white crow is enough, but its skin should be deposited in a museum" (582-583), to which James (1896b) responded, "But our reports are not of gray crows; at the very worst they are white crows without the skins brought home" (650).

Cattell (1898) would not let the metaphor rest: "The difficulty has been that proving innumerable mediums to be frauds does not disprove the possibility (though it greatly reduces the likelihood) of one medium being genuine. But here we have the 'white crow' selected by Professor James from all the piebald crows exhibited by the Society" (534).

The white crow turned up as a white blackbird during one of Hall and Tanner's sittings with Mrs. Piper. In talking with Mrs. Piper before she went into her trance state, "Dr. Hall recalled to her Dr. James's saying that she was his white crow, and [that she] had made science prostrate in the dust so far as he [James] was concerned, which evidently pleased her greatly" (Tanner 1910, 224). During the trance that followed, Hall supposedly communicated (through Mrs. Piper) with the spirit of Richard Hodgson. At one point Hall caught Hodgson's spirit in an error for having said that it had seen the spirit of Ms. Tanner's father, whereas in fact her father was still 'alive. Hodgson's spirit then replied, through Mrs. Piper's automatic writing: "I say he is living. Nothing ever dies I say. Dead, no such thing. You do not UD [understand]. Catch me and you will catch a white blackbird. Blackbird" (228).

In discussing the seances, Tanner wrote: "The most distinct case of a memory common to the two states was when Dr. Hall, before the trance,

quoted the phrase, 'a white blackbird,' to Mrs. Piper, and in the trance Hodgson used the phrase, 'catch me and you catch a white crow'" (Tanner 1919, 22-23).

But white crow or white blackbird, its skin has yet to be deposited in a museum for public viewing.

Like Hamlet, James vacillated, unable to decide how Mrs. Piper performed her feats. She was still "supernormal," he said, but not necessarily a medium for spirits of the departed. In a letter to Mr. Slattery, dated April 21, 1907, his state of mind was that "Mrs. Piper has supernormal knowledge in her trances; but whether it comes from 'tapping the minds' of living people, or from some common cosmic reservoir of memories, or from surviving 'spirits' of the departed, is a question impossible for me to answer just now to my satisfaction" (H. James 1920, 286).

The Reaction to Mrs. Piper of William James's Sister Alice

William James's invalid sister Alice was not as beguiled by Mrs. Piper as were he, his wife, his mother-in-law, and most members of the English Society for Psychological Research and its American branch. James had once asked Alice to mail a lock of her hair to Mrs. Piper for a reading, but Alice--apparently with the help of her devoted friend Katherine Peabody Loring (Burr 1934)--deceived her brother by sending instead a lock of hair from her nurse's friend, who had died four years previously. Alice later revealed the deception to William and apologized: "I hope you will forgive my frivolous treatment of so serious a science" (Strouse 1980).

If Alice truly believed the science was serious she did not herself take it seriously. In her diary entry of February 28, 1892, a week before she died, she expressed misgivings about what might take place after her death:

I do pray to Heaven that the dreadful Mrs. Piper won't be let loose upon my defenceless soul. I suppose the thing "medium" has done more to degrade spiritual conception than the grossest forms of materialism or idolatry: was there ever anything transmitted—but the pettiest, meanest, coarsest facts and details— anything rising above the squalid intestines of human affairs? —And oh, the curious spongy minds that sop it all up and lose all sense of taste and humour! (Edel 1934, 231)

After Alice died Ms. Loring edited her diary and sent printed copies to Alice's three living brothers (Edel 1934).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Prof. Robert H. Wozniak of the Bryn Mawr College psychology department for information about the presence at Bryn Mawr of William James's daughter, and for copying and sending an article I could not locate.

NOTE

(1.) According to Perry (1935), the original of James's "expostulatory letter" is missing; the version Perry published was "made up of several fragmentary versions which have been found among the James papers" (348).

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