

THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

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VOLUME XLIII JULY - 1949 Number 3

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William James and Psychical Research

GARDNER MURPHY

Everything conspired to make William James a pioneer in psychical research. One could almost see it coming a hundred years ahead. One might look first at his ancestry and early rearing; then at his more formal education; then at his career in medicine and in philosophy, and his integration of these studies with psychology; his determination to investigate the margins and edges of all that is known; and consequently his discovery, in psychical research, of a kind of inquiry that fulfilled the cravings accumulated from all these many areas of experience.

The family history usually begins with "William of Albany," his grandfather, who made a fortune and enabled his many children to start off in life with some degree of freedom from the current struggle to exist. Among his sons, Henry James, Sr., the father of William James and of Henry James the novelist, early chose for himself a life of study, contemplation, speculation. He was a "seeker," who in the nineteenth-century effort to find a new, solid ground to stand on, explored one philosophy or religious movement after another. Having suffered a series of amputations upon a leg as a child, he had been deprived to some degree of normal social intercourse, yet managed to preserve a vivid, earnest, hearty enthusiasm,

and a real gift for friendship with all sorts of fellow-seekers. His warm response to the teachings of Swedenborg—who, against the background of an amazing scientific achievement had nevertheless seen fit to identify himself with his great vision of the beyond—was characteristic of his deep sympathies, though he never joined the Swedenborgian fold. He created in the home atmosphere an exhilarating sense of the worthwhileness of pursuing problems of cosmic dimensions, of asking forever one more question as to the place of man in this world and as to the real basis for ethics and religion; everybody in the family was apparently always ready for a debate which wound up with humor and with agreement to live and let live.

William (born in 1842) and Henry (born in 1843) shared this atmosphere. As their letters show, there was a rugged intensity of fellowship despite their profound temperamental differences. The contrast appears in the fact that while Henry James had sought the meanings of life in introspection and in the subtleties of self-observation, it was William James' determination to look for answers in the new scientific world of the evolutionary period, and to attempt to support his personal faith with the knowledge and wisdom of empirical inquiry. Both were empiricists, but in a very different sense, Henry James looking for the shadings and overtones of daily experience, William trying always to accumulate more facts from every quarter.

The freedom of the family to roam about reached its richest values for William James during the journeys to England, France, Switzerland, and Germany. A special importance should perhaps be attached to a year in Geneva in which, as he entered upon adolescence, William James found his enthusiasm fired by a mixture of science and art. He loved, for example, to draw the skeletons in the Geneva museum. Soon he was thinking of becoming a painter.

Returning to the United States, he entered upon his studies at Harvard (1861). Ill health dogged him all during these years. He was obviously unfit for military service, and his chemistry professor noted the long hours in which he had to lie still and rest, being unable to stand at his table and his test tubes as most students did. His interest in science, especially biology, led ultimately into medicine. Medicine meant, however, much more for him than the continuation of scientific studies. Indeed, his one attempt to be a pure scientist, his journey with Agassiz to the Amazon to collect and barrel fishes, resulted in a tremendous breakdown and a long illness. Medicine, however, he could ultimately master, with hopes, as he said, that he could not only "support W. J., but Mrs. W. J. as well."

During these medical years, moreover, he was carrying forward the kinds of thinking which another journey to Europe had set

going within him. He had exposed himself to the physiological psychology of Helmholtz, and the other giants of the period, and wrote to his brother that he hoped that these beginnings of a new experimental science of psychology had something to offer, and he wanted to see what he could do in this area too.

After finishing medical school, and going on into further studies in physiology, he attracted the attention of President Eliot of Harvard, who asked him to teach comparative anatomy and physiology to Harvard undergraduates. This led rapidly to more and more work in experimental physiology, and later, psychology, where both subjects were carried forward by James as he rapidly rose to fame through a series of brilliant publications which began in 1876.

As a matter of fact, during these early years he had made a contract with Henry Holt for his *Principles of Psychology*, and over a twelve-year period, from 1878 to 1890, he turned out chapter after chapter of this monumental work. As he began his Harvard career, he had been married to Alice Gibbens, and a quiet and happy home life in Cambridge made possible a period of relative freedom from the strain and illness which had frequently been his lot. The question has often been debated as to what factors, other than his marriage and his steady work at Harvard, had turned the semi-invalid into such a productive and effective teacher and writer. The answer which he himself apparently emphasized most was that the restitution of his health came from the study of that branch of evolutionary philosophy represented by the French philosopher Renouvier, who taught that *spontaneity, genuine freedom*, is available to the individual who strikes out on a new path for himself, and creatively remakes his personal life, including his health as well as his intellectual and spiritual goals. Evidently James' long sufferings, his backaches, his eye-aches, his periods of semi-invalidism, his pathetic and futile journeys to the mud-baths in Bohemia, all of which left him still an invalid, were things of the past when once he realized, in the language of Renouvier, that he could spontaneously, arbitrarily recreate his own life. Though he never became really rugged, his physical and intellectual vitality were in some measure a response to this new conviction.

But this philosophy of spontaneity was an aspect of a still larger movement of thought within him. He was more and more convinced that the threadbare abstractions which characterized German idealistic philosophy and British idealistic philosophy almost to the same degree could make no real contact with the tough, vital, throbbing, everyday realities with which our immediate life is concerned. Always give us realities, give us facts, give us concreteness. In later years, for example, when asked to tell what "pragmatism" was really about,

he stressed the fact that it dealt with the practical and the concrete, and that if one must choose between the two, to be concrete was even more important than to be practical. He was moving toward "radical empiricism," the habit of thrusting oneself forward into the world of experience to make the richest possible contact with the concrete, the immediate, the real.

The extraordinary series of lectures that he gave at Edinburgh in 1901, which appeared in the volume *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is a consummation of this faith in the importance of the concrete and the personal. Religion is to be judged not in terms of the abstract representation of an invisible world, but in terms of the living fibre of its substance as we feel it moving through us; and even the mystic is to be understood in terms of the kinds of reality with which he makes contact, the "window" into an unseen world, said James, upon which one's own personal vision depends. As R. B. Perry (8) put it in his final evaluation of James, James always "knew there was more." No summary, no scheme can ever contain the creative totality of the real. Indeed, those last extraordinary ten years of his life from 1900 to 1910, in which he turned out such a series of epoch-making philosophical contributions, represent the constantly changing, many-faceted expression of his determination to make contact everywhere with the concrete and the vital. Just as he never constructed a system of psychology, so he never constructed a system of philosophy. He wrote many psychologies and many philosophies; it was evidently his wish to let posterity decide what it could use.

II

The interest in psychical research came, then, as a perfectly normal and "predictable" response to this kind of attitude toward life. In the home environment one did not laugh at the claims of Swedenborg. One studied them, played with them, tossed them about, rejected some aspects of them, took other aspects more seriously, just as one did with regard to Christian Science, or any of the other new winds of doctrine that swept through the intellectual atmosphere. Questions about telepathy or survival were just as reasonable as any other kind of question. Such questions were not to be decided *a priori*, or in deferential regard for authority, but by recourse to rigorous investigation. When, therefore, the Society for Psychical Research was founded in London in 1882 under the able leadership of scholars of the stature of Henry Sidgwick, Sir William Barrett, and Frederic Myers, he shared warmly in the whole enterprise. Shortly thereafter he played a leading part in forming an American Society for Psychical Research, which after a few years became the American Branch

of the London Society. (The present American Society for Psychical Research later replaced this American Branch.)

During these years William James was eagerly and actively concerned with the investigations by these societies into alleged hauntings, apparitions, and communications with the deceased. He himself was drawn as early as 1885 to investigate the extraordinary phenomena of Mrs. L. E. Piper, who was purported while in deep trance to give information to sitters regarding which she could have had no normal knowledge. In the first sittings which he held, sometimes in the company of his wife, highly personal material was given which he and his wife were morally certain could never have been known normally to Mrs. Piper—indeed some of which was apparently known to no living person but themselves. Other sitters had similar success. In his own words:

"To turn to the . . . case of Mrs. P. This lady can at will pass into a trance condition, in which she is 'controlled' by a power purporting to be the spirit of a French doctor, who serves as intermediary between the sitter and deceased friends. This is the ordinary type of trance-mediumship at the present day. I have myself witnessed a dozen of her trances, and have testimony at first hand from twenty-five sitters, all but one of whom were virtually introduced to Mrs. P. by myself.

"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. Four of these were members of the society, and of their sittings *verbatim* reports were taken.

"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 clew 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; so that, unfortunately for the medium, the evidence in her favor is, although more abundant, less exact in quality than some of that which will be counted against her.

"Of these fifteen sitters, five, all ladies, were blood relatives, and two (I myself being one) were men connected by marriage with the family to which they belonged. Two other connections of this family are included in the twelve who got nothing. The medium showed a most startling intimacy with this family's affairs, talking of many matters known to no one outside, and which *gossip* could not possibly have conveyed to her ears. The details would prove nothing to the reader, unless printed in

extenso, with full notes by the sitters. It reverts, after all, to personal conviction. My own conviction is not evidence, but it seems fitting to record it. I am persuaded of the medium's honesty, and of the genuineness of her trance; and although at first disposed to think that the 'hits' she made were either lucky coincidences, or the result of knowledge on her part of who the sitter was and of his or her family affairs, I now believe her to be in possession of a power as yet unexplained" (1).

This did not establish for William James, of course, any *prima-facie* case for survival as such, but it indicated, as he said over and over again (2), a "lightning stroke" of conviction that there were received by Mrs. Piper's mind many items which she had never normally acquired. He continued to have sittings through his life. He did not hesitate to go out to Concord to see the curious physical phenomena produced by Mr. Foss, in whose home the table charged about in the darkness like a wild beast, and he made it his business to keep informed regarding Mrs. Piper, through the extensive reports offered by Richard Hodgson. He was in the meantime closely following the studies of phantasms of the living and of the dead, and the whole realm of phenomena to which his friend Frederic Myers was applying the conception of the "subliminal self." In his review of Myers' posthumous treatise, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, he wrote: "Any one with a healthy sense for evidence, a sense not methodically blunted by the sectarianism of 'Science,' ought now, it seems to me, to feel that exalted sensibilities and memories, veridical phantasms, haunted houses, trances with super-normal faculty, and even experimental thought-transference, are natural kinds of phenomenon which ought, just like other natural events, to be followed up with scientific curiosity" (3).

When in 1905 Richard Hodgson suddenly died, it was James' task to edit and report upon that long series of communications purporting to come from the deceased Hodgson through the trance communications of Mrs. Piper (4). Here he poured himself into a systematic and critical task of editing and evaluation, in which both the strength and the weakness of the evidence for the surviving personality of Hodgson were carefully appraised. An example is the following incident from his report:

"The American Branch had never fully paid its expenses; and although the Secretary's salary had always been very small, Hodgson had, after the first years, been reluctant to have any part of it charged to the mother-country. The result had occasionally been pecuniary embarrassment on his part. During his last visit to England, shortly after Myers' death, this embarrassment had been extreme; but an American friend, divining

it in the nick of time, rescued him by an impulsive and wholly unexpected remittance. To this remittance he replied by a letter which contained some banter and, among other things, cited the story of a starving couple who were overheard by an atheist who was passing the house, to pray aloud to God for food. The atheist climbed the roof and dropped some bread down the chimney, and heard them thank God for the miracle. He then went to the door and revealed himself as its author. The old woman replied to him: 'Well, the Lord sent it, even if the devil brought it.'

"At this friend's sitting of Jan. 30th, R. H. suddenly says: 'Do you remember a story I told you and how you laughed, about the man and woman praying.'

Sitter: "Oh, and the devil was in it. Of course I do." "Yes, the devil, they told him it was the Lord who sent it if the devil brought it. . . . About the food that was given to them. . . . I want you to know who is speaking."

"The sitter feels quite certain that no one but himself knew of the correspondence, and regards the incident as a good test of R. H.'s continued presence. Others will either favor this interpretation of it, or explain it by reading of the sitter's mind, or treat it as a chance coincidence, according to their several prepossessions. I myself feel morally certain that the waking Mrs. Piper was ignorant of the incident and of the correspondence. Hodgson was as likely to have informed me, as any one, of the affair. He had given me at the time a vivid account of the trouble he had been in, but no hint of the quarter from which relief had come" (5).

The final verdict was that the representation of his deceased friend, and the evidence given of his personal identity, was of such a sort as to suggest that Richard Hodgson himself, or a "spirit counterfeit" of him was there. But James' whole concluding statement should be noted; it reads as follows:

"Fechner in his *Zend-Avesta* and elsewhere assumes that mental and physical life run parallel, all memory-processes being, according to him, co-ordinated with material processes. If an act of yours is to be consciously remembered hereafter, it must leave traces on the material universe such that when the *traced parts of the said universe systematically enter into activity together* the act is consciously recalled. During your life the traces are mainly in your brain; but after your death, since your brain is gone, they exist in the shape of all the records of your actions which the outer world stores up as the effects, immediate or remote, thereof, the cosmos being in some degree, however slight, made structurally different by every act of ours that takes place in it. Now, just as the air of the same room can be simultaneously used by many different voices for communicat-

ing with different pairs of ears, or as the ether of space can carry many simultaneous messages to and from mutually attuned Marconi-stations, so the great continuum of material nature can have certain tracts within it thrown into emphasized activity whenever activity begins in any part or parts of a tract in which the potentiality of such systematic activity inheres. The bodies (including of course the brains) of Hodgson's friends who come as sitters, are naturally parts of the material universe which carry some of the traces of his ancient acts. They function as receiving stations, and Hodgson (at one time of his life at any rate) was inclined to suspect that the sitter himself acts 'psychometrically,' or by his body being what, in the trance-jargon, is called an 'influence,' in attracting the right spirits and eliciting the right communications from the other side. If, now, the rest of the system of physical traces left behind by Hodgson's acts were by some sort of mutual induction throughout its extent, thrown into gear and made to vibrate all at once, by the presence of such human bodies to the medium, we should have a Hodgson-system active in the cosmos again, and the 'conscious aspect' of this vibrating system might be Hodgson's spirit redivivus, and recollecting and willing in a certain momentary way. There seems fair evidence of the reality of psychometry; so that this scheme covers the main phenomena in a vague general way. In particular, it would account for the 'confusion' and 'weakness' that are such prevalent features: the system of physical traces corresponding to the given spirit would then be only imperfectly aroused. It tallies vaguely with the analogy of energy finding its way from higher to lower levels. 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.

"It is enough to indicate these various possibilities, which a serious student of this part of nature has to weigh together, and between which his decision must fall. His vote will always be cast (if ever it be cast) by the sense of the dramatic probabilities of nature which the sum total of his experience has begotten in him. *I myself feel as if an external will to communicate were probably there, that is, I find myself doubting, in consequence of my whole acquaintance with that sphere of phenomena, that Mrs. Piper's dream-life, even equipped with telepathic powers, accounts for all the results found. But if asked whether the will to communicate be Hodgson's, or be some mere spirit-counterfeit of Hodgson, I remain uncertain and await more facts, facts which may not point clearly to a conclusion for fifty or a hundred years*" (6).

Thus, while he had early and repeatedly expressed his conviction

regarding the reality of telepathy, he apparently never reached conviction on the question of the evidence for survival. One finds, nevertheless, a constant insistence on the legitimacy and importance of the inquiry. Indeed, he had published a little book on *Human Immortality* in 1898 (7) in which he had suggested that perhaps the brain acts as a transmitter rather than an originator of mental processes, so that the deceased may perfectly well be able to carry on a trans-physical existence. He believed, however, that Frederic Myers' studies of the "subliminal consciousness" showed such a vast array of paranormal powers possessed by the deeper strata of the living personality that it is difficult to tell which, if any, phenomena of trance mediumship, or of psychical research in general, may require an interpretation transcending the action of these deeper subliminal powers.

But it was not simply the research that James carried on, nor the views he expressed, which gave him the permanent place which he holds in psychical research. It was in large measure the courage and energy with which he stressed the importance of these inquiries; his eager insistence upon the definitive nature of the evidence that at least telepathy exists; his demand that the instruments of such research, such as spiritualist mediums, be respected, honored, and studied with an open mind; his emphatic recognition and insistence that an organized type of research enterprise must be set up, with continuity over the years; his deep conviction that a long-range empirical investigation, rather than anybody's religious or philosophical opinion, was the only guide which a thoughtful and literate public could accept. He believed that regardless of the question whether the demonstration of continued existence beyond death is ever possible, psychical research has epoch-making implications for the extension of our understanding about the deeper levels of personality, and of the relation of personality to the universe in which it is placed.

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