

ESSAY REVIEW

Evading the Challenge of Psychical Research

William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity
by Krister Dylan Knapp. Chapel, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 400 pp. \$32.26 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1469631240.

This book is about William James and psychical research. The author effectively makes two major points. James's interest in psychical research was lifelong and profound. Right through the last years of his life as he was writing his great philosophical works, he kept on heroically with psychical research. Knapp points out that even after all his co-explorers in England (Frederic Myers, Henry Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, Richard Hodgson) passed away, James doubled-down rather than lost interest, wearing himself weary from hours of working with mediums, often with meager results.

After a lengthy Introduction on the main idea of the book, which is Knapp's methodology, it begins with a nicely textured narrative of James's early life and influences: the combative relationship with his father, life in a carnivalesque New York City, encounters with the redoubtable Sidgwicks and the more emotionally alive Myers and his wife, all very interesting and informative—the contextual grounding of James's evolution as a thinker.

James was a serious, indeed impassioned, lifelong psychical researcher, an important fact about one of America's greatest philosophers and psychologists. This leads to the second point that Knapp takes great pains to discuss: James's method of approach to psychical research. According to Knapp, he was not only passionate and persistent about exploring psychical research but did so in a manner that Knapp calls a *tertium quid*, or third way.

The third way mediates between fanatical overbelief and fanatical disbelief. The third way cleaves to the value of fact and is guided by a relentless quest for the truth wherever it leads. A true picture of James. Knapp tries to put the new quest called psychical research in the historical context of 19th-century Europe, a unique period of cultural ferment and technological transition. Darwinism and mechanistic science and technology had triumphantly arrived on the scene. A new awareness of mortal wounds to Biblical cosmology began to dawn, and people of the West found themselves looking for new ways to reconfigure their shattered worldviews.

With biting concern by many, there were issues about basic human identity. To get simple about it: Am I an immortal soul or a swirl of atoms in the void? The new philosophy sent shivers of angst through the more conscious and reactive part of the populace; and people began to respond in curious ways to their traditional beliefs being undermined by science.

One response was a new movement called Spiritualism, started by the Fox sisters in 1848 in upstate New York. In other places, revolutions were afoot, and empires threw out their tentacles and cannon fodder as the scientific age began to feel its oats.

James, thanks to his capacious sensibility, was attuned to all the tensions, hopes, and uncertainties arising from this vast, unfolding, psychic dislocation. He engaged and had to face spiritualists who had strange experiences causing them sometimes to over-believe and over-emote—not of course the cool way of the philosopher or the scientist. But James also had to deal with professional colleagues, know-it-all, hard-headed materialists.

James avoided the excesses of both sides of the quarrel. This is Knapp's *tertium quid*. The author throughout the book comes back to his thesis, and James becomes the posterboy of the third way as Knapp elaborates on it in great detail. Knapp continually likes to show how James enthusiastically began on a topic related to psychical research and always had second thoughts but never gave up trying to capture the elusive truth. The persistent effect as the pages turn is to suggest that James was always doubting and qualifying his views on the subject at hand, especially regarding any serious claims about supernormality.

But James did come to definite conclusions; early on, for example, his "white crow," Mrs. Piper, convinced him of the reality of telepathy—a fact whose importance Knapp seems to minimize—after all, here is a challenge to "modernity," that is, to the rise of scientific materialism. James comes out decisively on the side of soul and despises the facile reductionism that would reduce St. Teresa to some idiosyncrasy of her brain, a point he makes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

In "The Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher," he refers to the phenomena called "psychic" as "phenomena of which the supply seems inexhaustible but which scientifically trained minds mostly refuse to look at" (Murphy & Ballou 1960:309). This is an important and distressing finding. The phenomena, he discovers, are abundant, but most scientists refuse to look at the evidence. And the really depressing fact is: It hasn't changed. It's the same scene today. Phenomena still abound, and we still have a minority of serious students of the subject and a majority of ill-informed people who reject it out of hand. This is definitely *not* what Knapp calls our attention to.

On page 2 of the book, we find an explanation of the author's reluctance to appear sympathetic to psychical research. Considering James's interest in "exceptional mental states," Knapp suddenly announces:

An organized pseudoscientific movement known as 'psychical research' organically emerged in the Western world, reaching its apogee in fin de siècle England, France, Germany, Italy and the United States. . . .

If you believe that psychical research is a pseudoscientific practice, you will tend to ignore or downplay evidence clashing with your belief. This explains why the author constructs his narrative around James toward negative conclusions on the reality of survival and of the paranormal.

The author is intent on proving his peculiarly conceived thesis, but seems less curious about psychical research, and is even less fair to the other founders of psychical research. Myers, whom he castigates for "gushing" and "gullibility" several times, is too "theologically" oriented to qualify as being objective enough to rank as a practitioner of the third way. (There are, however, moments when Myers is treated fairly but grudgingly.) Knapp, in fact, declares that none of the founders of psychical research such as Sidgwick, Gurney, and Hodgson qualify as tertium quid devotees because they all came out of a religious, "theological" tradition. To say this about Henry Sidgwick, who was famous for his critical intellect, is particularly incredible. What is credible is that the author has committed the fallacy of arguing ad hominem.

Despite noting the author's useful and interesting background historical discussions, the reader is not getting an accurate account of psychical research. The third way is to be relentless about facts, but I don't see that scrupulous attention to facts here, and if anything William James is used in this book as a foil to diminish psychical research.

Take the treatment of one of the most famous physical mediums, Eusapia Palladino. The author cherry-picks what is needed to dismiss Palladino as "a cheater." Period. Without acknowledging that most researchers knew all about her often clumsy efforts at deception, and knew how to control for them. In part, this "know-how" consisted of treating her like a human being, and recognizing that her rare talents were not unlike the rare talents of any performing artist. I find no reference here to Eric Dingwall (a practitioner of the "third way") on Palladino. The essay he wrote on her is indispensable, a detailed analysis of the extraordinary phenomena of this physical medium, the variety of investigators including Henri Bergson and Madam Curie, and examines *in detail* the issue of fraud, showing that it cannot be used to explain away the mass of her positive phenomena (Dingwall 1962).

Dr. Joseph Maxwell argues that the Sidgwick group virtually encouraged her trickery by their insensitive treatment of the medium (see *Metapsychical Phenomena* (1905), Appendix A). With the exception of Myers and his wife, the English researchers showed no interest in the subtle psychology of mediumship. Apparently, Eusapia was not invited to join the Sidgwicks at the dinner table; this would not have put her at ease nor been conducive to the expression of her powers. Among the many controlled studies of Palladino demonstrating her physical phenomena that Knapp doesn't mention is perhaps the most compelling, conducted by Feilding, Baggally, and Carrington, seasoned researchers and knowledgeable in matters of legerdemain. All three concluded without even minimal hedging on the reality of her phenomena (Feilding 1963). It cannot be part of the vaunted third way to blithely omit the most powerful evidence in favor of an empirical claim. Eusapia Palladino was a major part of psychical research, and among the most studied by multiple investigators. Any historical treatment of the period needs to get her story straight.

Knapp quotes James, "once a cheat, always a cheat," which was the working principle of the English Society for Psychical Research. James at first thought this a good idea, a way to expedite research. But Knapp uses the maxim to dismiss without discussion the mediumship of Eusapia Palladino. James immediately goes on to say that the maxim is "irrelevant" because simplistic, and launches into the psychological subtleties of lying and cheating. He notes that scientific men sometimes cheat, especially in public lectures, and then gives an example of himself once having cheated in the course of a public lecture, introducing a fiction to support a point he was trying to make. The issue here is that Knapp leaves all this out of his discussion, abridging James as a thinker in order to carry out his predilection for diminishing psychical research.

Knapp uses his thesis of *tertium quid* as an excuse never to make it seem that he is guilty of holding any positive conclusions about the findings of psychical research. The *tertium quid* idea is used to distance himself from all the challenging aspects of the material at hand. I understand it might seem dangerous for a serious scholar to appear sympathetic to the controversial material of psychical research. But James did not invest himself so powerfully in psychical research as an exercise in avoiding the extremes of rigid disbelief and blind credulity. He was himself a passionate extremist in the study of psychical research and made positive claims that were totally at odds with the authoritative disbelievers around him whom he didn't hesitate to oppose. James had the kind of courage that the majority of middling scholars then as today tend for pragmatic reasons to lack.

Knapp suggests that James was free from religious need or interest

in survival and was therefore the more honest and reliable investigator. I question this view and think all scientific inquiry of any worth is bound to be driven by all sorts of passion, pre-conception, and intense bias—all with varying degrees of self-awareness. Creative science is a much messier affair than we might suppose, a theme discussed to great effect in the books of Paul Feyerabend.

Myers was romantically passionate about survival, but that didn't prevent him from being an extraordinary researcher, psychologist, and critical thinker. The passion may have skewed some of his judgments, but it may have also helped him to see things that more cold-blooded types fail to see. James's passion to explore psychical research was as strong as Myers', evinced by his work and writings, but it was tempered and more discreet.

On page 259, Knapp remarks that James, "baffled" by the alleged evidence of Hodgson's spirit return, lists "telepathy" as one of the possible counterexplanations. It is of course true that telepathy from the living may be invoked to explain some piece of apparent survival evidence. For that to work you have to accept that telepathy is real. Explaining apparent survival evidence by the psychic ability of living agents is still used to argue against survival. In many striking cases suggestive of survival, the alternative is to assume that some mediums have near-godlike powers that create the illusion of a communicating spirit.

Either way we go here—toward survival or living-agent potentials—things are at odds with the mainstream picture. This is a dilemma for reductionistic "modernity" and deserves to be noted in a book about James and psychical research. The only way out of this dilemma is to deny there are any facts to begin with.

James resisted the encroaching materialism that was beginning to dominate the academy as he resisted the encroaching imperialism that was beginning to overtake the United States.

At about the time he was writing the Ingersoll Lecture on "Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine," he was publishing letters and pamphlets lamenting the annexation of The Philippines. This is how James saw this fatal turn toward American empire-building: "We are cold-bloodedly, wantonly and abominably destroying the soul of a people who never did us an atom of harm in their lives" (Kinzer 2017).

The "soul" is not only the psyche of psychical research but an element in the dangerous games of world politics. The annexation was about America's "commercial supremacy," the brutal acting out of the country's deep propensity toward amassing material wealth and power. Annexing The Philippines was about economic expansion at the expense of the soul life of a culture. James saw the connection between intellectual imperialism and

economic imperialism. As the American empire grew to its present status, the words quoted above continue to apply.

I think it a mistake to downplay the challenge of psychical research. For example, Knapp focuses with great energy on James's skeptical (in the classic sense) treatment of the Hodgson-persona survival case. But he is silent about another Hodgson case, this time one that Hodgson worked on when he was alive. This case involved Mrs. Piper and the *soi disant* excarate George Pellew. This is a particularly challenging case to afterlife dismissers.

In the words of Hodgson:

I may say generally that out of a large number of sitters who went as strangers to Mrs. Piper, the communicating G. P. has picked out the friends of G. P. living precisely as the G. P. living might have been expected to do. Thirty cases of recognition out of at least 150 who had sittings with Mrs. Piper . . . and no case of false recognition. (Hodgson 1897–1898)

The George Pellew persona recognized and interacted with all thirty people that the living GP knew, leaving them convinced they were interacting with a deceased man they knew in life. This is a very difficult case to explain away. So it is not surprising that Knapp does not confront the challenge.

Strangely, the author has written a book about psychical research but shows limited interest in the subject, except as a way to discuss his version of an abstraction about evenhandedness that dominates his narrative. Meanwhile we get a skewed picture of James, forever dawdling indecisively on the edge of conviction. What I see is the nimble and multifaceted way that James thought, maintaining a truly skeptical suspense, neither in the end dismissing nor fully accepting Hodgson's survival. This position starkly differs from uninformed dismissal, the standpoint of the "educated" classes today.

In addition to the trance personality producing what seems like evidence for survival, it may also have other functions no less significant such as wisdom and therapeutic talent. "Rector," one of Mrs. Piper's controls, seems in wisdom and gravitas to surpass the normal Mrs. Piper. James wrote of Rector as the

extraordinarily impressive personality which he unquestionably is. He has marvelous discernment of the inner states of the sitters whom he addresses, and speaks straight to their troubles as if he knew them all in advance. (Murphy & Ballou 1960:114)

Where did this high order performance originate? Was it a discarnate

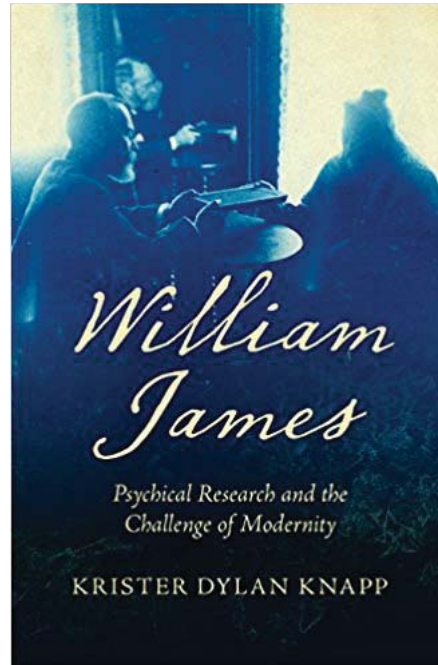
agent or Mrs. Piper’s subliminal genius-playwright? This forces a choice between two alternatives, neither of which is palatable to reductionist tastes. Either her performance provides evidence for survival or evidence for latent mental capacities that transcends anything hinted at by physicalist views of human personality. This is a point about James and psychical research that deserves to be underscored; it represents a huge challenge to a metaphysically reductive modernity.

Knapp touches on an important theoretical point, James’s transmission theory of mind (also referred to as the “filter theory”). He recounts the modern history of this conception,

citing F. S. Schiller and Kant as predecessors. However, after summarizing the idea used in James’s lecture on immortality, Knapp states that it is “atrociously bad” and does away with it in a few sentences (p. 274). He has two objections. The argument “is circular because it assumes a non-corporeal mind exists.” This completely misunderstands James’s point. He was not trying to prove that a “non-corporeal mind exists.” It was about the possible types of relationship between mind and brain, and assumes only that we have minds and brains.

There are two ways to explain the mind–brain connection. In one, we suppose the mind is somehow a physical byproduct of the brain; in the other, we suppose that the brain transmits, detects, or filters—but does not create—our mental experience. James suggests that the brain is an organ of transmission, not of production; this allows for, but does not prove, survival of individual consciousness. It is also consistent with paranormal, ecstatic, and mystical data, according to James. It saves the phenomena. If we embrace the “production” model, however, whole dimensions of human experience are logically invalidated, and ought not to exist. James’s theory was both radically empirical in spirit and radically democratic in its openness to diversity.

As for the second point, according to Knapp, the transmission theory is



“essentialist because it assumes that noncorporeal mind enjoys a superior ontological status to that of the material brain”(p. 274). “Essentialist”—I have no idea what it means in this context. “Noncorporeal mind”? Is there such a thing as *corporeal* mind? “Enjoys superior ontological status?” Has causal powers? Knapp seems to object to the idea that minds actually make things happen. But we all know they do. For example, Knapp used his mind to formulate his critique of James’s model and then write about it. How can we do philosophy (or history), without using and presupposing the existence of our minds?

James’s transmission model of mind and brain has the virtue of being as logically plausible as the idea that matter can produce mind from utterly unmindlike physical stuff. James’s purpose is modest but essential; it is meant to show how survival of consciousness may be possible. The “production” model pretty much makes it impossible.

Knapp is helpful in expounding some of James’s contributions to the modern discovery and theorization of the marginal, extended, multiple, unconscious, subconscious, and subliminal mind. He is particularly good at unearthing the inchoate proliferation of terms and phrasings for the new ideas that James was struggling to articulate. However, regarding the transmission model, which begins to make sense of higher forms of consciousness, the paranormal, mystical, and ecstatic, so central to William James’s deepest interests, Knapp’s “critique” completely misses the mark. As to psychical research, the treatment is not just spotty and incomplete, it distorts by *focusing exclusively* on the winding dialectic of James’s hesitations and demands for more evidence, and by actively excluding any discussion of the strongest evidence.

I was uneasy with Knapp inserting talk of *fideism* into his description of James’s epistemic stand. Fideism is in the main a religious doctrine claiming that something called “faith” is needed to apprehend transcendent truths, *not* science, fact, or experimentation. James was a pragmatist and a voluntarist, and interested in all sorts of transcendence; but he was adamant about the need for facts; and as a radical empiricist, the whole range of human experience was for him fair game. James was a pioneer in the phenomenology of religious experience and was interested in the psychology of belief, but he never relied on faith to draw conclusions. Fideism is the wrong term here, with its implied unscientific religiosity.

On the afterlife question, my picture of James’s views does not coincide with the author’s. In his last report, James runs through various subtle but opposing arguments about survival, and then says that the point of his exercise was

... simply to show what complicated hypotheses one is inevitably led to consider, the moment one looks at the facts in their complexity and turns one's back on the naïve alternative of 'revelation or imposture,' which is as far as either spiritist thought or ordinary scientist thought goes. (Murphy & Ballou 1960:317)

This is an extraordinary and challenging statement. It brings us back to the unwillingness to properly confront the evidence and to examine it with an open mind. Well over a hundred years and the same incuriosity over these humanly momentous questions remains intact.

Finally, a comment on the author's intriguing subtitle: *Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity*. Modernity and its mania for materialism undoubtedly challenge traditional mythologies of transcendence. But psychical research has responded to that challenge and produced its own data that challenge the reductive assumptions of modernity. Knapp's subtitle could be remedied by changing one word: *Psychical Research and the Challenge TO Modernity*. But that would be the title for a different book.

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