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BOOK REVIEW

***William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity*, by Krister Dylan Knapp, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2017, 392 pp, ISBN-10: 1469631245 / ISBN-13: 978-1469631240, price (hardback) $39.95 (e-book, $29.99)**

Reviewed by Jay Beichman

This book takes a detailed look at William James' (1842–1910) psychical research and how central it was to his life and work. Psychical research, in James's time, was mostly concerned with non-ordinary states of consciousness, which he described as 'exceptional mental states' and 'consciousness beyond the margin'. Automatic writing, ectoplasm (a supernatural viscous substance) and spirit-manifestation – all associated with Spiritualist mediums – as well as telepathy, which was associated with clairvoyance, telekinesis (the ability to move objects at a distance by non-physical means), second sight and dream prediction – all were typical subjects of interest. Krister Dylan Knapp states that '[s]piritualism and telepathy were related because it seemed telepathy might explain the "spirit" communication between the "other world" and this one'.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) 'Becoming a Psychical Researcher', which explores how James became interested in psychical research; (2) 'Practicing Psychical Research', which explores the huge amounts of research he either led or supported from the 1880s until his death; and (3) 'Theorizing Psychical Research', which explores his ideas inspired by psychical research, including ideas about a 'subliminal self', immortality and 'the sublime cosmic reservoir theory… – the view that upon bodily death, consciousness melds organically with all previous consciousness and is stored over time in the cosmos'.

The Spiritualism movement was very popular in both Europe and the United States, and James would have been familiar with it from his childhood onwards. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, as a student and a lecturer, James wrote book reviews about 'mental pathology and Spiritualism'. However, it only became a major strand of his research life when he visited England in 1882 and met members of the newly formed Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Just two years later he set up the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) in Boston, which remained extant up to 1906. The American Psychological Association was itself not founded until 1892, which demonstrates the relatively early interest in psychical research as an important area.

James was not himself a Spiritualist, but he was open to the idea that researching psychical phenomena might be a useful form of scientific inquiry. As Knapp puts it, he 'was neither a skeptic nor a debunker'. Knapp proposes this

'method of inquiry' be characterised and perceived as a 'tertium quid', a third way, in which science does not get overly haughty in its claims of knowing the 'truth', yet simultaneously is strict in its demands for empirically derived evidence. James perceived the study of psychic phenomena as a research area that would ultimately find 'facts', and that once those facts were obtained then – and only then – might claims be asserted or denied.

If the reader is interested in James or psychic phenomena this book has a lot to offer; and if the reader is interested in both, it is an essential guide to the profound relationship between James and psychical research. Knapp describes it as the 'first analytical and contextualized history of James's psychical research', which is a fair self-assessment.

From a sociohistorical perspective, Knapp locates the development of James's tertium quid approach as responding to four major developments in the nineteenth-century: '[1] the Victorian crisis of religious faith…; [2] the rise of Darwinism and scientific naturalism…; [3] scientific modernism… and the mathematization of all phenomena; and [4] the professionalization of the social sciences… especially in American experimental psychology'. James was broadly in line with other researchers who valued systematic enquiry about subjective and uncertain phenomena and who valued these enquiries as valid scientific projects. Knapp argues that James's tertium quid methodology, drawing on both objective and subjective data, reflected a way of 'navigat[ing] the epistemological uncertainty of the modern age'.

Knapp, in relating James' childhood and adolescence, points to the importance of various contemporary figures who would have influenced James to become interested in psychical phenomena. The Fox sisters, who toured the USA demonstrating apparent communication with a dead man, would have been the subject of people's conversations, including those of his father, Henry James, and his father's friends. The latter group was open to various ideas, including 'communism, homeopathy, women's rights, abolition, and spiritism'. Henry was himself a Swedenborgian, a left-field version of Christianity, also subscribed to for a short time by William Blake. In other words, William grew up in an atmosphere that would have encouraged interest in psychical phenomena, even though Henry actually disapproved of Spiritualism itself.

Knapp also provides a thorough history of the figures involved in the foundation of the SPR, such as Henry Sidgwick, its first president. The relationships James formed with these (mostly) men provided a solid, strong and loving social network in which intense friendships were formed around the common purpose of pursuing psychical research. Many of these figures also belonged to what has been characterised as a British 'intellectual aristocracy'. Through his commitment to the SPR and an 'informal dinner club called the "Scratch Eight"', James became part of this aristocracy.

The SPR achieved many things, including the exposure of fraudulence within the field. For instance, Richard Hodgson was central in exposing the fraudulence of Madame Blavatsky, Eusapia Palladino and other mediums. Conversely, whilst he was initially sceptical of James' favourite medium Mrs Piper – James's so-called 'white crow' – ultimately he believed that only 'survival of the soul' could explain her abilities.

The SPR was modelled on the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) – itself only founded in 1831 – and was entirely serious in its mission as 'scientific'. Arthur J. Balfour, who would become the UK's Prime Minister from 1902–5, was one of the SPR's first vice presidents, which gives some indication of how its purpose and subject matter were considered – at least, initially – appropriate and uncontroversial. William Gladstone, Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, Pierre Janet and G. Stanley Hall are some of the more famous names amongst early SPR members, and Gladstone himself wrote that psychical research was 'the most important work which is being done in the world'.

From his research, James theorised that there were 'secondary… selves [which] coexist with the primary one'. Psychical research in that era was crucial in the investigation of what might be generally termed the 'unconscious' and, Knapp argues, in the development of James' own 'theory

of the unconscious'. Within the unconscious, the idea that we might have multiple 'selves' has also been a long-lasting concept from Jung through to Voice Dialogue, and more latterly in dialogical self theory and traumatology. Such ideas were first mooted in that era of psychical research, especially James' studies of trance states in mediums in which it seemed as if consciousness could 'split'. Similarly, James' notion of a 'cosmic reservoir' or 'Mother Sea of consciousness' pre-dates Jung's 'collective unconscious'.

In terms of estimating the importance of James' psychical research to his more mainstream psychological ideas, it must be borne in mind that he wrote *The Principles of Psychology* throughout his association with it, even though it slowed down his progress on his more 'mainstream' work. And he never discounted the possibility of a rationale being developed to explain psychical phenomena.

James' involvement with psychical research was seen by some as damaging to the field of psychology, and it is not talked about much now. Knapp's fascinating book makes a good case for it being seen as central to James' philosophical and psychological thinking, and therefore an important strand in the history of psychology which, up until this publication, has been unfairly overlooked.

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