

C. J. Ducasse (1881-1969)

Curt John (“C. J.”) Ducasse, (July 7, 1881 to September 3, 1969) was a philosophy professor at Brown University in Rhode Island for 32 years. A long-time member of the American Society for Psychological Research, serving on the Society’s Board of Trustees and as chairman of its publication committee, Ducasse had a lifelong interest in psychical research. His 1961 book, *A Critical Examination Of The Belief In A Life After Death*, was his major contribution to the field. In the book, he closely examines the arguments for and against survival.



Born in France, Ducasse attended schools in France and England in preparation for a career in civil engineering. However, illness forced him to give up his engineering studies and he emigrated to Mexico in 1900, at age 19. He worked there as a laborer for a year or two before moving to the United States. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Washington, received his M.A. from the same institution, and then his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1912. He taught at the University of Washington from 1912 until 1926, when he moved to Brown University. He delivered the first John William Graham Lecture on Psychic Science at Swarthmore College in

Pennsylvania on April 29, 1951. Titled *Paranormal Phenomena, Nature and Man*, the lecture was published and received wide circulation.

“And lastly, some of the facts we have considered suggest that the belief in a life after death, which so many persons have found no particular difficulty in accepting as an article of religious faith, may well be capable of empirical proof,” he concluded that lecture, ending with the comment that “the truly scientific attitude is neither the will to believe nor the will to disbelieve, but the will to investigate.”¹

Although Ducasse was not a researcher, as such, he did have some first-hand experiences, one involving physical mediumship. “The *prima facie* most impressive evidence there could be of the survival of a deceased friend or relative would be to see and touch his materialized, recognizable bodily form, which then speaks in his or her characteristic manner,” he wrote. “This is what appeared to occur in my presence on an occasion three or four years ago, when during some two hours and in very good red light throughout, some eighteen fully material forms - some male, some female, some tall, some short, and sometimes two together - came out of and returned to the curtained cabinet I had inspected beforehand, in which a medium sat, and to which I had found no avenue of surreptitious access”²

Ducasse went on to explain that the material forms were recognized by other sitters and in some cases the deceased spoke and caressed the living. One of the forms called his name and Ducasse went up to her and asked who she was. “Mother,” she replied. “She did not, however, speak, act, or in the least resemble my mother,” Ducasse continued the story. “This was not a dis-

appointment to me since I had gone there for purposes not of consolation but of observation.”³ The friend who had taken Ducasse to the circle informed him that his mother had materialized on a number of occasions and that the form sometimes looked like her and sometimes it did not.⁴

Whether it was his mother or not, Ducasse was fairly certain it was a materialized spirit. “I can say only that if the form I saw which said it was my mother and which patted me on the head, was a hallucination – a hallucination ‘complete’ in the sense just stated – then no difference remains between a complete hallucination on the one hand and, on the other, ordinary veridical perception of a physical object; for every further test of the physicality of the form seen and touched could then be alleged to itself hallucinatory and the allegation of complete hallucination then automatically becomes completely vacuous.”⁵

Ducasse also had an opportunity to see the ectoplasm in good red light, to touch it, and take ten flash photos of the substance as it emanated from the mouth of the medium. “Whether or not it was ‘ectoplasm,’ [it] did not behave, feel, or look like any other substance known to me could, I think, under the conditions that existed. It was coldish, about like steel. This made it seem moist, but it was dry and slightly rough like dough the surface of which had dried. Its consistency and weight were also dough-like. It was a string, of about pencil thickness, varying in length from six to twelve feet. On other photographs, not taken by me, of the same medium, it has veil-like and rope-like forms.”⁶

Considering all of the mediumistic phenomena, Ducasse saw only two hypotheses that were capable of accounting for the *prima facie* evidences for the survival of consciousness – one the spirit hypothesis and the other what is now referred to as the Super ESP hypothesis in which the medium obtains various facts telepathically

from living persons who have known them, or by retrocognitive clairvoyant observation of the past facts themselves, or by clairvoyant observation of existing records, or of existing circumstantial evidence, of the past facts. While recognizing that fraud exists, he believed that it was wholly untenable in at least some of the cases, referring to Leonora Piper and the other automatists involved in the cross-correspondences, unless, of course, the objector wanted to, as a last resort, accuse the investigator of lying, cheating, blindness, or forgetfulness.

“The essence of these more stubborn objections is the *virtually unlimited range* of the telepathy with which the automatist’s or medium’s subconscious mind has to be gifted,” Ducasse wrote of the second hypothesis, pointing out that the medium or her subconscious must be capable of instantly *selecting* specific bits of information from various minds anywhere in the world and then must “*instantly* again, be put into the form of a dramatic, highly verisimilar impersonation of the deceased purported communicator as he would have acted in animated conversational give-and-take.”⁷

After dissecting and discerning all of the arguments for each of the two hypotheses, Ducasse agreed with the pioneers of psychical research, naming Eleanor Sidgwick, Lord Balfour, Sir Oliver Lodge, Professor James Hyslop, Dr. Richard Hodgson, and others. “Their conclusion was essentially that the balance of the evidence so far obtained is on the side of the reality of survival and, in the best cases, of survival not merely of memories of the life on earth, but of survival also of the most significant capacities of the human mind, and of continuing exercise of these.”⁸

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¹ Ducasse, C. J., *Paranormal Phenomena, Nature, and Man*, reprinted from the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, Vol. XLV. No. 4, October 1951

² Ducasse, C. J., *A Critical Examination of The Belief in a Life After Death*, Charles C. Thomas Publishers, 1961, p. 167

³ _____, p. 167

⁴ The most likely explanation for this is that his mother failed in her effort project her image into the ectoplasm.

Other researchers have pointed out that the success of materialization is dependent on the ability of the spirit to project an image of herself. A spirit once told Dr. Charles Richet that he could not materialize because he could not remember what he looked like when alive.

⁵ Ducasse, *Critical*, p. 168

⁶ _____, p. 166

⁷ _____, p. 196

⁸ _____, p. 203