

William James (1842-1910)

Harvard professor William James (January 11, 1842 to August 26, 1910) was clearly one of the key figures in the early years of psychical research. His interest in the field, especially mediumship, was prompted by a dozen sittings he had during 1885 with trance medium Leonora Piper after his mother-in-law informed him of a very evidential sitting she had had with Mrs. Piper. James came to refer to Piper as his “white crow,” the one that upset the law that all crows are black. “I am persuaded by the medium’s honesty, and of the genuineness of her trance; and ... I now believe her to be in possession of a power as yet unexplained,” James wrote in 1886.¹

Persuaded by Professor William Barrett, a British physicist who was a cofounder of the Society for Psychical Research in London (SPR) in 1882, James was instrumental in forming the American branch of the SPR (ASPR) in 1885. However, because of his academic duties and other interests, he was unable to devote much time to investigating Mrs. Piper and other mediums. Thus, Dr. Richard Hodgson, a hard-core skeptic, was imported from the SPR in England during 1887 to serve as executive secretary of the ASPR.

Initially, both Hodgson and James rejected the spirit hypothesis. They reasoned that Dr. Phinuit, Piper’s spirit control, was a secondary personality buried in her subconscious and that this secondary personality somehow had the ability to read minds. “The most remarkable thing about the Phinuit personality seems to me the extraordinary tenacity and minuteness of his memory,” James offered. “The medium has been visited by many hundreds of sitters, half of them, perhaps,

being strangers who have come but once. To each Phinuit gives an hour full of disconnected fragments of talk about persons living, dead, or imaginary, and events past, future, or unreal. What normal waking memory could keep this chaotic mass of stuff together? Yet Phinuit does so...So far as I can discover, Mrs. Piper’s waking memory is not remarkable, and the whole constitution of her trance-memory is something which I am at a loss to understand.”²



When information came through that was unknown to the sitter, James expanded the theory from telepathy to teloteropathy. This theory held that it is possible to pick up thoughts from a person anywhere in the world. He later speculated that there is some kind of cosmic reservoir where every thought or utterance ever made is recorded and that the medium had the ability to draw information from that reservoir.

James admitted that he was willfully taking the point of view of the so-called ‘rigorously

scientific' disbeliever, and making an *ad hominem* plea, stating that tactically, it is better to believe too little than too much.

Born in New York City, James, the son of prosperous parents and ancestors, was educated by tutors and at private schools in New York, Geneva, Paris, and Boulogne-sur-Mur. In 1861, he entered Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard and three years later entered the Harvard School of Medicine. However, he took time out from medical school to travel with a zoological expedition in the Amazon and to study physiology and philosophy at Berlin University. He received his M.D. degree in 1869, but never practiced medicine.

During his final years at Harvard and immediately thereafter, James is said to have suffered from fits of depression, what he called "soul sickness," and even considered suicide. Apparently, the "death of God" and the increasingly materialistic world view of the times brought on by the Ages of Reason and Enlightenment and then Darwinism, seriously impacted him. However, he overcame his depression to some extent in 1872 when he accepted a position to teach physiology and anatomy at Harvard.

Soon thereafter, James integrated his physiology course with psychology and in 1876 founded the first laboratory for experimental psychology in the United States. Along with Wilhelm Wundt, John Dewey, and Sigmund Freud, James is considered one of the pioneers of modern psychology. He gradually moved from psychology to philosophy as he felt that psychology was too limited.

On March 6, 1889, Alice James, William's wife, and Robertson James, William's brother, sat with Mrs. Piper and were informed by Phinuit that "Aunt Kate" (Kate Walsh) had died early that morning and that a letter or telegram saying she was gone would be received later that day. It was known to the two sitters that Aunt Kate had been seriously ill, but neither was aware that she had died. After leaving Mrs. Piper's home, Robertson

James stopped by the ASPR office to report the sitting to Hodgson and Professor James. "On reaching home an hour later I found a telegram as follows," William James recorded: – 'Aunt Kate passed away a few minutes after midnight. – E. R. Walsh.'"³

Alice James recorded her version: "It may be worth while to add that early at this sitting I inquired, 'How is Aunt Kate?' The reply was, 'She is poorly.' This reply disappointed me, from its baldness. Nothing more was said about Aunt Kate till towards the close of the sitting, when I again said, 'Can you tell me nothing more about Aunt Kate?' The medium suddenly threw back her head and said in a startled way, 'Why Aunt Kate's here. All around me I hear voices saying, "Aunt Kate has come.'" Then followed the announcement that she had died very early that morning, and on being pressed to give the time, shortly after two was named."⁴

Six months later, Aunt Kate communicated from the other side. James wrote: "The 'Kate Walsh' freak is very interesting...In September, sitting with me and my wife, Mrs. Piper was suddenly 'controlled' by her spirit, who spoke directly (i.e., without the assistance of Phinuit) with much impressiveness of manner, and great similarity of temperament to herself. Platitudes. She said Henry Wyckoff had experienced a change and that Albert was coming over soon; nothing definite about either. Queer business!"⁵ In a later report James wrote that he knew nothing of the health conditions of Henry and Albert at the time of the sitting, but that he later found the comments to be factual.

In another sitting, James was told by Mrs. Piper [or by Phinuit] that the spirit of a boy named Robert F. was the companion of his deceased child, Hermann, who had died as an infant in 1885. The F.'s were cousins of his wife and were living in a distant city. On his return home, James told his wife of the reading and asked for particulars on the baby lost by her cousin, as he did not recall the name, sex, and age of the child

being as reported by Phinuit. However, his wife corrected him and confirmed Phinuit's version.

Perhaps out of concern for his reputation in the scientific community, James continued to struggle, at least outwardly, in accepting the spirit hypothesis. However, in the end, he appeared to see it as more probable than other explanations, such as telepathy of a limited or more cosmic scope. "One who takes part in a good sitting has usually a far livelier sense, both of the reality and of the importance of the communication, than one who merely reads the records," he wrote. "I am able, while still holding to all the lower principles of interpretation, to imagine the process as more complex, and to share the feelings with which Hodgson came at last to regard it after his many years of familiarity, the feeling which Professor Hyslop shares, and which most of those who have good sittings are promptly inspired with [i.e., the spirit hypothesis]."⁶

And while he remained perched on the fence relative to the spiritistic hypothesis, James had no difficulty professing his faith. He concluded *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by stating: "I can, of course, put myself into the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor of which W. K. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word 'bosh!' Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow 'scientific' bounds."⁷

In 1909, the year before his death, James wrote: "I am baffled, as to spirit return, and as to many other special problems. I am also baffled as to what to think of this or that particular story, for the sources of error in any one observation are seldom fully knowable. But weak sticks make strong faggots; and when the stories fall into consistent sorts that point each in a definite direction, one gets a sense of being in a presence of genuinely natural type of phenomena. As to there being

such real natural types of phenomena ignored by orthodox science, I am not baffled at all, for I am fully convinced of it...I personally am as yet neither a convinced believer in parasitic demons, nor a spiritist, nor a scientist, but still remain a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding."⁸

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¹Holt, Henry, *On the Cosmic Relations*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914, p. 400.

² _____, p. 456.

³ _____, p. 411.

⁴ _____, p. 412.

⁵ _____, p. 413.

⁶ _____, p. 708.

⁷ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Collier Books, 1961, p. 401.

⁸ Murphy, Gardner and Robert O. Ballou, *William James on Psychical Research*, The Viking Press, 1960, pp.322-323.