

## The Psychology of Parapsychology

Once upon a time, there was a man named William James, a brilliant fellow who was known worldwide for his mastery of philosophy. He was a medical doctor and the “Father” of what we now call modern psychology, by definition:

**psy·chol·o·gy** (s# kolÆÅ j"), *n., pl. -gies.*

1. the science of the mind or of mental states and processes.
2. the science of human and animal behavior.
3. the sum or characteristics of the mental states and processes of a person or class of persons, or of the mental states and processes involved in a field of activity: *the psychology of a soldier; the psychology of politics.*

James had another great obsession; he was fascinated by the concept of an afterlife. As such he was a leader of the American Society of Psychical Research, his pragmatic approach ushering in the study of the paranormal from a viewpoint based on the study of the phenomenon based on that which led to its occurrence. This is still the aim of many science grounded research organizations a hundred years later, including the ASUP.

By common definition, a medical doctor who is also a psychologist is today called a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, concepts that James initiated before this terminology existed. As noted, he was a major proponent of pragmatic philosophy as well and understood that the study of the history of any effect is most probably the key to understanding the outcome. Thus the obvious question; can the study of the history of the paranormal lead eventually to its understanding?

All of these matters are, in a word “heady” concepts, especially when we are studying something that has been passed over by mainstream science for all these years; but it is reasonable to argue that if William James found value in such research as a leader in the philosophical movement, given his background as a physician and leadership in the then new field of psychology and psychiatry, this study demands further consideration.

For the purposes of this argument, we will adhere to James’ own pragmatic approach to the topic; therefore we will only discuss it from the practical points, treating historical phenomena with special reference to their causes, antecedent conditions, and results.

Let’s look at a fictitious ghostly apparition as an example, for the purposes here we will dissect the ghost referred to in the Harry Potter books, the friendly spirit, Sir Nicholas that floats among the students, his head neatly tucked under his right arm. The author has created an elaborate fiction around this character, his life, untimely death and his reasons for haunting the academy. In theory, given the lengths that have been gone to in his creation and the number of readers who know of him, psychologists might think we would materialize somewhere in the western world.

Sounds far-fetched? Not really. The greatest skeptics often malign the work of serious researchers in the paranormal, suggesting that what we study does not exist, therefore is worthless. If in fact even one of our cases are fictitious, then it would be reasonable to suggest that the ghost from Harry Potter is as likely to manifest as our own, and would garner a good deal of publicity. Obviously, that has not come to pass, thus something much more interesting is happening, no matter how the skeptics might scoff. In fact, I might suggest that the limits of such skepticism have been diminished greatly due in part to this one factor. To paraphrase Headless Nick, “Not everyone can come back as a ghost. Wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod, but few Wizards

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choose that path,” *Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington*.

Returning to the definition of psychology for a moment, the psychology of the believers in the paranormal is the sum or characteristics of the mental states and processes of a person or class of persons, or of the mental states and processes involved in a field of their activity. I respectfully submit that such a sum total interested in the paranormal encapsulates a cross section of all classes, educational backgrounds and religious beliefs, thus a good sample of the “norm.” Therefore, the findings of those individuals should be classified as within the practical range of human experience and have a value for study.

Not to beat a dead horse, but the situation that existed a few short years ago has greatly enhanced the probability of reality in our course of study. The evolution of string theory, multiple universes and space/time hypothesis all open doors to what was merely science fiction a generation ago, yet the naysayers continue to rule that parapsychology has no standing in science. If it doesn't, one might ask, what does? It certainly has been the subject of debate and conjecture longer than any other field of study; what does it take to “make the cut?” That was the question, much more eloquently put by James a hundred years ago to his counterparts. Here was the father of modern psychology, a physician and philosopher beyond the reach of any of his peers, asking the obvious question that persists to this day. Even he could not get a reasonable hearing.

Obviously, there is a modern missing link that was not available to James. The question is whether we have anyone in our corner willing and able to challenge the mainstream using the latest data to support our arguments. Or perhaps, it is better left unasked?

A hundred years ago, William James and his colleagues were on the verge of proving the survival of human consciousness after death; in fact, many would argue that their notes and texts fulfill that objective definitively. This however was not enough from James. The ability to communicate with a recently departed colleague through a trance-medium was proof enough that the recently departed had “arrived,” but the more nagging question still remained, “For how long and to where?” When Leonora Piper contacted the deceased, the spirit was able to recall technical data, philosophical discussions and the like, but those contacts began to fade with time, eventually ending completely, thus we know he “made it” but little else.

A good deal of what we have done more recently delves into the questions of “how long” and “where” not to mention the sheer mechanism required and how that might impact of world religion. We can say with some certainty that the departed spirit sometimes will return, if it left at all, to communicate with the living under certain circumstances. We have a much more clear idea of the mechanism of those communications, including the ability of a simple electronic device to replace the human sensitive in some cases. We have asked countless times if the subject is “in heaven” and many have said yes, but there has been little clear information about the nature of that place beyond, “beautiful.” There have also been negative reports from the other side as well, but what and where that “other side” exists is still in question.

Taking some of the most recent scientific theories in hand, some of us have made the quantum leap that “heaven” exists in one of the parallel universes now predicted by theoretical physics. Time is acknowledged by the majority to be a fourth dimension, maybe it is there? The fact is that we are dealing with theory while our mandate is to prove the hypotheses. String theory, multiple universes, et al are no more proven than the belief systems of world religions. Some, all or none of which have been found to be positively proven. Today, an agnostic is as much a questioning mind of religion as it might be of science. No one is wrong, no one is right, it is all to be made clear sometime in the future.

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In the time of William James, some of the proponents of natural science predicted that by now we would be paying homage to science, just as we do to religion. Later, some announced that god was dead! But if you have any real understanding of philosophy, you would realize that such absolutes are never universal and in science, before you can deem something extinct, you must first prove categorically that it existed in the first place. The linchpin to such a discussion ends up squarely at the feet of the paranormalist, that pragmatic group who look to the past to proceed in their study of the present and by definition, the future. We look at the past and present, attempting to study that which pure science has discarded out of hand; things that always existed and continue to exist but ignored by those who claim to know better.

In many ways science is the same as religion. Science demands that to be real, one must be able to reproduce an experiment on demand, within parameters they themselves set. This is called the Empiric test. Now, much of the foundations of religion lack the ability to meet this criteria, but science, except for those few years in James' day, would dare to challenge them. Of course, today the very theories we have been talking about here, string theory, alternative universes, etc. can't meet the Empiric test either, yet our chosen field is still taunted by the same old nay sayers whose twisted fingers still wag over our inability to empirically prove that which by its nature does not lend itself to such.

The psychology of parapsychology is twisted by these faux laws and many of us are contorted in an attempt to meet these expectations. Indeed, we find ourselves constantly looking over our shoulders, while we now follow a dual path, one to continue the study of the paranormal, a second to meet the demands of pure science to prove the existence of our subject. The later attempt leads many down a path that can only disillusion the research who is now wasting his or her time in an effort to prove that which can't be proven with the methodology currently offered by our antagonists.

To say this leads to professional paranoia is an understatement!

The best historical notes in our field of study were made by those who simply did not give a fig about what science or religion had to say about their work. It is not that we wish to antagonize either but rather, that neither has any place judging what we do. We don't question science's beliefs or those of organized religion; we as a group practice a wide variety of religions and embrace science in general, but we chose to study a path ultimately rejected by the others. This pragmatic approach to our research will lead to better mental health of the individual researcher, as well as the whole and to quote one of the greatest religious leaders, "Gives unto Caesar, that which is Caesar's..." We do not exist to undertake the dismantling of religion or of science, but believe we have something that could eventually add to and enhance both.

So, this leads to the obvious question, how to prove our point? The answer is found in our technology. In the past the argument centered in theory, today it could evolve into debate based on nuts and bolts reality. Assuming for a moment that we will soon be able to categorically explain the meaning of high EMF, the images taken within full spectrum photography or the mechanism of a cold spot, to name a few, we could then present our case within a forum that everyone would consider and understand. Given our findings today, one might realistically predict that this exchange of new ideas can't be all that far away, but there is a good deal of work to be accomplished first. Finding the cold spot, the EMF spike or taking that image is a great first step, but being able to intertwine those bits of technological evidence is still a long walk to proving our point after all the negative commentary from the past.

Yes, we have a lot of work to do, but the psychology of the paranormal is evolving and that which was discarded out of hand is now, carefully, beginning to gain the attention of past

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detractors. To paraphrase the good Dr. King, “I have been to the mountaintop and seen the promised land;” I may not arrive there with you, but I know that it is within reach, so let’s pull together to make the dream of proof of the survival of the human consciousness after death, a reality for all.