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Mrs. Piper Revisited[1]

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the pioneers of psychical research, with special reference to Leonora Piper of Boston, who seems undeniably to have had some sort of paranormal faculty. The author believes that the failure of her phenomena to arouse the interest of the broader academic community is a mystery in itself, and one well worth investigating.

INTRODUCTION

For some twenty years, from the Victorian period up to the First World War, the purported mediumistic gifts of Leonora Piper of Boston were examined by some of the most astute investigators in the English-speaking world. Mrs. Piper seems, apart from her ostensible ability to communicate with the dead, a most unlikely subject of investigation for a Victorian intellectual elite. Married to a fairly well-off store keeper, she was by general consent regarded as an ordinary middle class Victorian housewife. William James, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, described her as a "simple, genuine, unassuming Yankee girl" (William James, cited in A. L. Piper, 1929, p. 50), whilst another, less generous, academic described her as being dull and of moderate but narrow intelligence, whose interests were limited to her children, and to clothes, particularly hats (Myers, 1903, pp. 237-256 and pp. 599-617). Born in 1859, Mrs. Piper was as a teenager the victim of a "coasting" accident. Subsequently she suffered from prolonged periods of ill health, and at the age of 23, shortly after giving birth to her daughter and biographer, Alta Piper, she was, rather against her better judgment, persuaded to consult a "healing" medium. Almost instantly, she discovered that she had the ostensible ability to channel spirits herself. The apparent authenticity of this phenomenon soon attracted the interest of the academic community (James, 1890).

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1 Subtitled: How Victorian psychical research came up with some pretty impressive evidence for life after death and nobody took any notice.

At various times, she was intensively studied by William James himself, Sir Oliver Lodge, who was professor of physics at Liverpool University and President of the Royal Society; Henry Sidgwick, professor of philosophy at Trinity College Cambridge and president of the Society for Psychical Research; Dr. Richard Hodgson, a Melburnian with a Ph.D. in law and a celebrated reputation as a fearless exposer of imposters and con-artists; and Frederic Myers, a psychologist who was generally regarded, among other things, as the world's leading non-religious authority on the problem of life after death. The only thing that these gentlemen had in common, apart from an interest in things metaphysical, was that they all began their investigations with the conviction that Mrs. Piper was a fraud, and they all ended believing, to quote Myers in a letter to Lord Acton, "[these phenomena] indicate that each of us is a soul within a world of souls…amid whom he [sic] continues to live & love after bodily death, and, I trust for ever" (Gauld, 1968, p. 367). Despite their standing in academic circles, and despite the fact that some of these researchers retain to this day reputations as important intellectual figures, this aspect of their work, if mentioned at all, is mentioned only in those otherwise amusing dictionaries of fallacies that seem to crop up every few years.

BACKGROUND

So, why were so many eminent scholars interested in what was seen by most of the scientific community as the party pieces of a Bostonian hausfrau? These scholars represented a specific section of the intellectual elite that felt that neither traditional religion, nor the new philosophy of science, could adequately address their deepest concerns (Turner, 1974). To put them in their social and psychological context, we can remind ourselves that they lived during a period of widespread intellectual reorientation. During this time empirical science challenged religion as not only the most prestigious institution in the world, but as the basic arbiter of truth and understanding. But empirical science had not proved to be a universal problem-solver. Largely ignoring philosophical problems, it had begun by saying "there are certain types of question that science can answer" and, having gained intellectual hegemony, had ended by saying "these are the only sorts of question that can be asked" (Appleyard, 1992, p. 249). As such, science ruled out of court the investigation of a number of largely metaphysical questions that religion had at least attempted to address, and which remained, and indeed remain, issues of great importance to most people.

In early modern Europe the study of the natural world was known by the collective title of *Natural Philosophy*. As knowledge of the natural world increased in depth, diversity and sophistication, academics became more professionalised and more concerned to promote their own particular field of expertise. Natural Philosophy was sub-divided into more manageable components and a number of more specialized

scientific disciplines began to emerge: biology, physiology, chemistry, paleontology, and so on. The philosophy that lent credibility to these sciences' new stature was Scientific Naturalism.

Positivism: a philosophical system…concerned with positive facts and phenomena, and excluding speculation upon ultimate causes or origins.
Metaphysics: that branch of philosophy which treats of first principles, including the sciences of being *(ontology)* and of the origin and structure of the universe *(cosmology).* It is always intimately connected with a theory of knowledge *(epistemology).* (Encyclopedic World Dictionary)

Scientific naturalism and positivism, which was its most extreme manifestation, maintained that the only things that really counted were those things that were actually manifested in experience, that is, things that could literally be touched, smelled, heard or seen. Questions that went outside this domain of experience had, by definition, to remain hypothetical. Victorian scientists did not, of course, deny the presence of hidden causes, but would not pay any attention to them unless they were knowable. This begs the question of how they were to know whether something was knowable or not.

Positivists in particular believed that scientific generalisations could not refer to anything other than individual, concrete objects, and that legitimate scientists had no right to acknowledge the existence of any phenomenon unless experience obliged them to do so (Wright, 1990). This put them in opposition to religious and metaphysical thinkers, who by definition made statements about the unknowable—that is, about "realities" that could not be investigated by means of scientific experiments. This, of course, begged the question of what is and is not experimentally verifiable, and whether a scientist was justified in ignoring a problem simply because on the face of things it appeared metaphysical. How do we know that a thing is unknowable, asked critics, until we have tried *every possible* way of knowing it? To the positivists and the scientific naturalists, the world we know consisted of the sum total of observable facts. But some facts go on existing, as it were, behind our backs. A tree in the forest still exists even if no human being is aware of its existence. Hidden worlds and dimensions do not cease to exist simply because the current level of technology means that they can only be sensed metaphysically, through rational or intuitive means. It could be argued that these philosophies of science are very anthropocentric—that is, human-centered, subjective—and, consequently, unscientific. In hindsight, we can argue that that this philosophy of science was self-limiting and fundamentally unscientific. Furthermore, it was found to be unable to supply answers to the deep questions that it had to address if it was to satisfy those Victorians who had a profound need to perceive some sort of meaning to life.

That scientific naturalism should have arisen when it did was easy for Victorian intellectuals to explain. Two notions, most forcefully stated by Francis

Bacon in the 17th century, had become increasingly important epistemological and social factors:

(1) As a result of acquiring genuine knowledge of nature we can enormously enhance our power to transform the human condition for the better;

(2) This is to be achieved by ignoring the opinions and speculations of philosophers and divines, and instead is to be arrived at by observation and experiment.

Many of the characteristics of Victorian intellectual life helped to snowball the influence of these suppositions: religious angst, philosophical skepticism, a new form of Biblical criticism that insisted on treating the Bible as just another book, comparative historical method, and belief in progress and in rationalism. By the 19th century, a vision of a science that would improve the lot of the average individual had become central to theories of knowledge in the English-speaking world. It had been made convincing by, for instance, the better food, better homes, and increased life expectancy that were the tangible results of applied science. Victorians such as Huxley believed that the quality of life had been so transformed that a total re-orientation of human thought and expectation was necessary. Scientific rationalism, rather than God or human nature, was to be the chief agent of this re-orientation. However, the body of scientific knowledge continued to expand at such a rate that no individual could keep pace with innovation. It had, by the middle of the 19th century, become so extensive that even the "experts" had to take on faith the vast amount of "scientific knowledge" that they had neither the time nor ability to assimilate. Science had become the new religion (Turner, 1974).

The intellectual activities of the psychical investigators grew largely out of a dissatisfaction with this ultra-materialistic and self-limiting scientific philosophy. For example, William James, the founder of the American Society for Psychical Research, believed in "radical empiricism". He maintained that the hard and fast rules of science actually inhibited true positivist thought. James' view was that the personal, subjective and romantic view of life itself grew out of our empirical contact with the real world, for the real world was "capricious, discontinuous and not easily controlled" (James, 1896, p. 9). Consequently, faith, intuition, and the exploration of the metaphysical were valid intellectual activities.

William James' friend and chief collaborator was an Englishman, Henry Sidgwick. Sidgwick was born in Yorkshire in 1838 and later became a utilitarian philosopher of some distinction, as well as professor of ethics at Trinity College Cambridge (E. M. Sidgwick & A. Sidgwick, 1902). His reasons for being interested in psychical research probably represent a rather sophisticated illustration of a rationale that remained subconscious for most of his less philosophical colleagues.

Sidgwick, who had the beard and temperament of one of the better-natured Old Testament prophets, found that the investigation of psychic phenomena was a pressing professional concern. How, he asked himself, could the teaching of ethics be itself morally justifiable when neither religion nor science could logically or adequately deal with the most basic moral question: "What ought I to do?" He could not agree with Herbert Spencer's rather Darwinian notion that the goal of evolution was synonymous with the goal of ethics (Spencer had maintained that ethics was a product of evolution—natural selection favoured those species which learnt to behave themselves and get along with each other). Evolution was about life, argued Sidgwick, whilst ethics was about happiness—a rather more subjective and abstract concept. Consequently, Sidgwick eventually concluded that it might be impossible to use scientific premises, as they stood, to create a system of ethics that provided for rational decisions.

Henry Sidgwick inclined towards hedonism: he believed that that which was good could be defined as those actions that increased happiness and reduced unhappiness. The problem was that Sidgwick was the product of an age where the rights of the individual were given much higher priority relative to the rights of society than today. Whose happiness—each individual's, or society's as a whole—was to take priority? An egotistical hedonist would argue that each individual ought to aim at the maximum degree of happiness for her- or himself. A utilitarian hedonist, on the other hand, would argue that morality demanded that an individual should make his or her priority the happiness of all sentient and future beings, and if this priority should involve the reduction of one's own individual happiness, then this was a sacrifice that a moral individual should be prepared to make. Human nature being what it was, Sidgwick saw that most people would naturally take the first option. He saw one potential solution: the promise of an afterlife would reconcile egotistical and utilitarian hedonism. If individuals believed that by acting in a way that increased society's happiness they would also be guaranteeing their reward in an afterlife, they would do so out of logical, enlightened self-interest.

Sidgwick's personal life, of course, affected the way in which he sought his solution. He spent his life struggling, with little success, to accept Christianity's arguments for an afterlife, and furthermore he could place little faith in the idea that orthodox science was ever likely to find any *empirical* evidence for life after death. Let alone could one hope to find, through conventional means, any evidence that the afterlife was governed by wisdom and justice. Therefore he had to fall back on non-empirical methods of inquiry.

To sum up, Sidgwick's ethical theory required a spiritual dimension, for without some belief in the possibility of a perfect moral order defined by a God or by a supreme principle of wisdom, there was no reason for anyone to behave morally, and subsequently there could be no basis for any system of ethics. But how, he asked himself, was he to find evidence of this afterlife, where religion could not supply the answers, and science would not ask the questions.

One other key member of this circle must be mentioned: Frederic Myers, who was born in the Lake district of England in 1843 (Myers, 1961). Myers' personal life demonstrates Victorian religious angst in its most undiluted and melodramatic form. He was a distinguished classical scholar, a Byronesque ladies' man, a pretty good poet in the Tennyson mode. Following a brief relationship with the religious social reformer Josephine Butler, he became an intensely devoted Christian, only to lose this faith, like so many Victorians, when he absorbed the scientific mood of his time. His pre-existing interest in all things spiritual was revived, and eventually took over his life following a tragic love affair with his married cousin. This cousin, Annie Campbell, had planned to leave her husband for Myers, but had changed her mind after her husband, on learning of her planned infidelity, had undergone a mental breakdown and had been committed to an asylum. Torn between love and duty, she failed to keep a planned rendezvous with Myers, and instead cut her throat and threw herself into Lake Windermere. This passionate but non-sexual relationship convinced Myers that humans had a spiritual dimension to their nature. He spent the remaining 30 years of his life trying to verify the survival of human consciousness after bodily death—particularly Annie's, one suspects.

Death, of course, was a far more central and immediate concept in Victorian times than it is today (Wheeler, 1986). Today, death is a taboo subject, rarely spoken about, and rarely seen. Most people now die in hospital, their relatives unaware of their passing until a phone call in the middle of the night. In Victorian times, death, and the impulse to dwell upon its metaphysical implications, was as much a part of the everyday scene as horse droppings in the high street. People died at home surrounded by members of their family. Etiquette laid down strict rules for mourning, codes that conspired with the high mortality rates to keep people dressed in black and moderating their behaviour for much of their lives. These higher mortality rates ensured that death, and the consequent very public rituals associated with them, were a central part of the Victorian consciousness. Yet familiarity did not breed indifference. There is little evidence to suggest that the loss of a loved one was easier to bear in Victorian times than it is today. Consequently, for those Victorians who could not accept the teachings of either science or religion, the search for alternative proof of the survival of human consciousness after physical death took on great significance. Myers was fascinated by death to a point which might today be thought pathological, and quite early in life he decided to make the investigation of death and its consequences his life's work. Like Sidgwick, he found it difficult to decide upon the best method of enquiry, and despite his romantic persona, eventually succumbed to the empirical spirit of the age. He recounts this turning point, in his usual freaked-out prose, in his unpublished memoirs:

> In a star-light walk which I shall never forget…I asked [Sidgwick], almost with trembling, whether he thought that when Tradition, Intuition, Metaphysic, had failed to solve the riddle of the Universe, there was still a

> chance that from any actual observable phenomena,—ghosts, spirits, whatsoever there might be,—some valid knowledge might be drawn as to a World Unseen. Already, it seemed, he had thought that this was possible; steadily, though in no sanguine fashion, he indicated some last grounds of hope; and from that night onwards I resolved to pursue this quest, if it might be, by his side. (Myers, 1901, p. 454)

Spiritualism and the seance business had been introduced into England from America in the 1850s, and went through a prolonged boom that no amount of fraud-exposure, state or ecclesiastical opposition or draconian application of the lunacy laws could temper (see Owen, 1989, for the abuse of the lunacy laws). In 1882, Sidgwick, who had personally found the entire spiritualist scene extremely distasteful, complained that it was shameful, in an age which prided itself on its intellectual curiosity, that phenomena believed in by so many, and for which so much prima facie evidence had been amassed, had not been the subject of serious academic investigation (Sidgwick, 1882). Psychical research needed to be put on a more formal footing, and in January of that year Sidgwick agreed to become the founding president of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), a coalition of the Sidgwick-Myers group, like-minded intellectuals, and various Spiritualist organisations which considered the phenomena a proven fact. Soon after, the Prime Minister, William Gladstone went on record as saying in 1898 that the work of the SPR represented by far the most scientific work being done in that day.

Methodology of the Society for Psychical Research

Once operational, the SPR set about their task like dedicated positivists—they seemed compelled to legitimise their activities by adopting a rigorously scientific approach—that is, to investigate the non-empirical by empirical means. Sidgwick's wife, Eleanor, who was known professionally as Mrs. Henry Sidgwick, was very influential in this respect (E. Sidgwick, 1938). Mrs. Sidgwick was a gifted mathematician, and had been one of the founders of Cambridge's first women's college. Having emerged from Cambridge with a considerable amount of teaching, administrative and research experience, she introduced as severely a rational methodology as was possible to the investigation of haunted houses and seances. A woman of impressive energy, Mrs. Sidgwick soon assumed much of the responsibility of the day-to-day coordination of the Society's affairs. Her general feeling was that they should pile up as much prima facie evidence as possible, without, in the first instance, having *too much* regard for the truth or falsity of any particular example. Later, any case that was the slightest bit dubious was thrown out. Arthur Conan Doyle, a Spiritualist who had enthusiastically joined the SPR, left muttering about her "impossible attitude", whilst as scientific a person as Alfred Wallace, the co-formulator of the theory of evolution, believed that the SPR were far too skeptical. He

described it as "an organisation dedicated to the suppression of truth". The Sidgwicks and their colleagues hoped, however, that after this weeding out process there would yet remain a substantial body of authentic data which could then be scientifically and statistically evaluated. Then not only could psychical research take its legitimate place as a social and/or scientific discipline, but the objective reality and nature of the phenomena it studied could be generally acknowledged.

The Society's biggest project may serve as an example. It involved the investigation of 2,272 reports of apparitions and bore the rather sceptical title of "the Census of Hallucinations". They excluded from consideration all reported cases submitted:

1. second hand
2. by uneducated persons
3. by those who had strong beliefs in the supernatural
4. by Asiatics
5. by the lower races
6. by children
7. by anyone seeking financial gain, fame or reverence
8. all incidents in which there was a substantial delay in the documentation of the event
9. all uncorroborated evidence by informants of whom the SPR knew nothing.
10. all cases in which the observer was not completely awake.

(Myers in a letter to Lord Acton)

About a third of the cases that remained were dismissed as dreams or hallucinations. Of those that survived this cull, the fact that most impressed the SPR was that in 32 cases, the visualisation occurred within 12 hours of the death of the individual that the "ghost" resembled, wherein in each case the ghost spotter was unaware of this death. This led to the rather conservative hypothesis that there was a link between apparitions of people in crisis situations and the death of that person. Similar censuses in the United States, France and Brazil, although smaller, came up with similar findings.

Perhaps unreasonably, this methodology earned the Society a reputation for cynicism, which, while doing little to appease the broader scientific community, succeeded in alienating the Spiritualists. There is a paradox here: materialistic science had made the impossible seem possible; after all, why should life after death be less possible or scientifically explicable than electricity or international telephone links? But mainstream science declined to acknowledge that the SPR were engaged in a serious scientific investigation. The Royal Society refused point blank to allow Sir William Crooks, Professor of Physics at Dublin University, to present the evidence he had produced claiming to verify the existence of telepathy (Oppenheim, 1986, p. 356). The SPR tried to liberate itself from mainstream science, while at the same time giving the impression that it needed the scientific method, and the approval of the

orthodox scientific community, in order to obtain a degree of credibility. Both investigators and their audiences found it very difficult to free themselves of "self-evident cultural presuppositions"—such as the semi-subconscious acknowledgement that the scientific method is the only legitimate one (Shappin & Shaffer, 1989).

THE ADVENT OF MRS. PIPER

The SPR began its activities in 1882. An enormous amount of work was accomplished in the early years, much of which was of minimal value. It took a great deal of trial and error before investigators could easily root out imposters and build up reliable research methods. They proved to their satisfaction the probability of telepathy (a word coined by Myers), and confirmed the reality of hypnosis. They learnt to distinguish between *physical mediums*, who produced physical phenomena such as table-moving, rappings, and ghostly hands and arms, and *mental mediums*, who did none of these things, yet who seemed to be able to "channel" the thoughts of deceased individuals, either verbally or through "automatic writing" (see Gauld, 1968; Haynes, 1982).

Physical mediums were invariably unreliable. The darkness of the seance room left too much scope for sleight of hand, and a number of investigators were severely embarassed by over-committing themselves to the evidence of "mediums" who turned out to have no more supernatural power than the average music-hall magician (see Hall, 1964). The mental mediums seemed to offer more scope for serious research, although, of course, what they had to offer was rather more complex and harder to disprove. It was very difficult, for example, to demonstrate that mental mediums had not come across the information they imparted by natural means, even if this rationalisation did rely on the assumption of an unnaturally developed memory, or even the medium's ability to read, telepathically, the sitter's mind. What was required was a medium who could produce veridical communications to order from ostensibly deceased persons to relatives brought without notice, and preferably incognito. If a medium produced verifiable information with sufficient detail and regularity, then even a single genuine instance would, it seemed, be sufficient to prove empirically, regardless of all other frauds, the reality of the phenomenon.

Little is known about Leonora Piper's early life. Alan Gauld (1968, p. 251) records that she possessed considerable good looks, and, in sharp contrast to the vulgar physical mediums, was undoubtably a lady, while Mrs. Henry Sidgwick helpfully points out that she was "reassuringly stout and matronly" (Haynes, 1982, p. 79). Her range of interests and conversation was, however, described as being "decidedly limited". Myers for one makes no secret of the fact that he thought her dull, and Richard Hodgson, who was later to make a full-time occupation out of Mrs. Piper, seemed to take no more interest in her, as a human being, than he would an inanimate laboratory sample. He scarcely used to pause to say good morning before putting her into the hypnotic trance required to begin the seance. This "lack of

imagination" was considered to be in her favour in so much as it moderated fears that she was a super-sophisticated fraud (Hodgson, 1898). The frontispiece of Alta Piper's biography depicts an erect, clear-eyed, confident-looking and elegantly dressed woman of late middle age, matronly in an authoritative sense, but neither as stout or as homely as Mrs. Sidgwick suggests. Her career began accidentally. Concerned about her health, she visited a healing medium named J. R. Cocke. She lost consciousness for a few minutes, and on a subsequent visit she passed into a trance. Whilst in this state she wrote a message to another sitter, an eminent judge and a Spiritualist of some 30 years standing, who said it was the most remarkable he had ever received (Gauld, 1968, p. 252).

Mrs. Piper then began to hold seances at home for her family and friends. In a not too encouraging beginning she spoke in the "voices" of, among others, Bach, Longfellow, Julius Caesar, George Eliot, and a Red Indian girl who improbably called herself Chlorine (Gauld, 1968, p. 252). These "personalities" were gradually replaced by an entity who called himself Dr. Phinuit. Phinuit claimed to be a French physician. He spoke in a gruff negro patois with a great deal of slang and vulgarity. His diagnoses were often correct; he informed one unfortunate sitter that his brother was dying of kidney disease, a diagnosis that was confirmed after a careful examination a week later. Phinuit would give sitters an account of the doings of living relatives, and transmit messages from dead ones, with appropriate gestures, who he would claim were sitting next to him. Occasionally, a relative would speak personally.

In autumn 1885, Leonora Piper was visited by Mrs. Gibbens, the mother-in-law of William James. Mrs. Gibbens reported to him how Mrs. Piper had given her a long string of family names, mainly Christian names, together with facts about the persons mentioned that seemed incomprehensible without reference to supernormal powers. Mrs. Gibbens returned the next day with one of her daughters. This time Phinuit correctly provided details about the writer of a letter that Miss Gibbens held to her forehead. The letter was written in Italian, and the writer was known to only two people in America.

Intrigued by his mother-in-law's reports, William James visited Mrs. Piper 12 times that winter. Five years later he wrote:

> My impression after this first visit was, that Mrs. P. was either possessed of supernormal powers, or knew the members of my wife's family by sight and had by some lucky coincidence become acquainted with such a multitude of their domestic circumstances as to produce the startling impression which she did. My later knowledge of her sittings and personal acquaintance with her has led me absolutely to reject the latter explanation and to believe that she has supernormal powers…. My conviction is not evidence, but it seems fitting to record it. I am persuaded of the medium's honesty, and of the genuineness of her trance. (James, 1890, pp. 652-653).

It must be pointed out that as the Harvard Professor of Psychiatry, the brother of the novelist Henry James, and as a philosopher of international standing, William James probably did not have the least known private life in Boston. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that Mrs. Piper may have accumulated a wealth of trivial information about his relations in the way in which some people today do about the royal family. Worryingly for her supporters, Mrs. Piper had a maid, "Mary", whose sister "Bridgit" was in service at a house where the Gibbens were frequent visitors. But James was right to trust the genuineness of her trances. They had been tested, among other ways, by pricking, burning, cutting, and the holding of ammonia under her nose![1] In his annual presidential address to the Society for Psychical Research in 1896, he stated:

> …I have been wilfully taking the point of view of the so called "rigorously scientific" disbeliever, [but]…For me the thunderbolt *has* fallen, and the orthodox belief has not merely had its presumption weakened, but the truth itself of the belief is decisively overthrown…. If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you mustn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough to prove one single crow to be white. My own white crow is Mrs. Piper. (James, 1896, p. 5)

Having convinced himself of the authenticity of the phenomena, James was confronted with the problem of what to do with it. The late Victorian age was not one which respected knowledge for its own sake—knowledge was valued by its utility, and Mrs. Piper's—Phinuit's—revelations had not evinced much of that. No clear description of the afterworld had been forthcoming. The supernatural agency that Sidgwick felt would give meaning to ethics, and through ethics to life itself, had not been hinted at. Almost all the messages received through Mrs. Piper were infuriatingly vague and imprecise; most of the seance transcripts look more like semi-coherent ramblings than anything else (James, 1909)—messages reliant to a worrying extent on interpretation, and investigators began to wonder whether this was one area of knowledge that was to be deliberately placed "off limits" to mortals (James, 1890). Myers suggested that the messages transmitted by spirits on the other side were perhaps limited to trivia because of unforeseen practical difficulties in communicating mental ideas through another physical being. He used as a rather unfortunate example the problems Professor Sidgwick might encounter if he had to teach his students philosophy using the brain and voice of Mrs. Piper (Gauld, 1968). Hodgson wondered

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1 See Piper (1929, pp. 171-175) for later, horrific experiments wherein the entranced Mrs. Piper appears to have been subjected to having acid tipped down her throat and her arm mutilated. Not surprisingly, her ghostly controls saw fit to suspend communications for some time afterwards.

whether communicating spirits were themselves not fully conscious of what they were doing, and whether spirits sent their messages whilst in some hypnotic or dream-like state. Investigators were reluctant to embrace the idea of full possession; the nearest they would go was to toy with the idea of telepathy from the dead—an idea towards which Piper herself inclined (Piper, 1929). An article written in 1890 showed that William James still had doubts:

> The prima facie theory, which is that of spirit control, is hard to reconcile with the extreme triviality of most of the communications. What real spirit, at last able to revisit his wife on earth, but would find something better to say than that she had changed the place of his photograph…To each Phinuit gives an hourful of disconnected fragments of talk about persons living, dead or imaginary. What normal memory could keep this chaotic mass of stuff together?

Early in 1887, pressure of work meant that William James had had to delegate the full-time task of investigating Mrs. Piper. Persall Smith, a prominent sceptic, successfully lobbied for the appointment of Richard Hodgson, perhaps hoping that Hodgson's skill in detecting fraud would demolish the reputations of both Piper and James. Hodgson was a rough and ready Australian who none the less had lectured at Cambridge before becoming a full-time member of the SPR. In this office he had exposed Eglinton and Palladino, two of the most impressive physical mediums, and had shown the Theosophists' headquarters in India to be a den of secret wires and hidden doors. During their first session, Phinuit accurately described Hodgson's family, and the unusual death (in a gymnastics accident) of a cousin named Fred. A reminiscence by James is a classic illustration of Hodgson's working methods.

> The work was time-consuming and [Hodgson] found it excessively fatiguing. He had economized energy upon it by adopting…a purely business tone with the medium, entering, starting the trance, and leaving when it was over with as few words as possible. Great *brusquerie* was among the excellent R. H. potentialities, and for a while the amount of it shown to Mrs. P. led to a state of feeling on her part of which a *New York Herald* reporter once took advantage of to exploit publicly. R. H. was remonstrated with, and was more considerate afterwards. (James, 1909, p. 6)

A striking facet of the Society's investigation of Mrs. Piper was her almost total objectification. The SPR seemed to disregard social or personal factors: they recorded virtually no information about her private life or background; the Society's own official histories record neither the date of her birth or her death. Her social circumstances, religious beliefs, her personality, her economic circumstances and her mental disposition are barely considered. Her lady-like demeanour was enough to

"prove" to the SPR that she had no ulterior motive in perpetrating a fraud. No photograph from this period seems to exist, and the only physical description of her was one furnished much later by Conan Doyle in his anti-SPR *History of spiritualism* (Doyle, 1975, p. 84). One can argue that these factors should have merited some consideration—or at least a mention—in what was supposed to be an objective scientific study, this at a time when the principles of sociology and psychiatry were already fairly well established.

Because of the ever-present worry of deception, no totally satisfying evidence of the survival of human consciousness was established during this period. James and Hodgson hit on the idea of sending Mrs. Piper to England, where she could be tested by people who were strangers to her, in an environment where there was a guarantee that she could have neither talkative friends nor established agents. Consequently, Mrs. Piper, whose patience seems to have been as extraordinary as her other gifts, set sail for England in November 1889 (Gauld, 1968, pp. 255-258; Piper, 1929, pp. 45-63).

During a three month visit, Mrs. Piper stayed in Liverpool with Sir Oliver Lodge, in Cambridge with the Sidgwicks and with Myers, and in London in lodgings chosen by the SPR. Careful precautions were taken. In order to verify that she was not receiving information from confederates, Mrs. Piper was met off the boat at the Liverpool landing stage and carefully escorted throughout the length of her stay in England. She was shadowed day and night by private detectives, although the modest retainer supplied by the SPR seems scarcely sufficient to pay for the network of spies that such an explanation would have required (Gauld, 1968). She was furthermore required to allow the SPR to read all her incoming mail and to have free access to her belongings. Her hosts were careful to lock away family albums and Bibles. Myers provided Mrs. Piper and her teenaged daughters, whom she had refused to leave behind, a servant who knew nothing about the SPR or its members. Lodge, in whose house the most remarkable displays occurred, had, by chance recently changed his entire household staff. He spoke for all of the investigators when he insisted: "I took every precaution I could possibly think of". During Mrs. Piper's stay in England, Myers received from her a message purportedly from the late Edmund Gurney, a researcher with the SPR who had died in mysterious circumstances two years previously. The message contained "extremely private communications", and Myers immediately wrote to William James explaining that the principal secret revealed by the Gurney communication was about a "matter which could not be guessed at". Myers seems only to have shown this message to Hodgson before, in a deplorable exhibition of disregard for the importance of primary source materials, he destroyed the relevant record. Its contents were and remain a mystery, but both Myers and Hodgson were convinced spiritualists from that day to the ends of their lives (Gauld, 1968).

The conclusions of the British investigators were:

(1) Mrs. Piper's behaviour never gave the least grounds for suspicion.

(2) "Dr. Phinuit" never gave any clear indication that he was anything but a secondary personality of Mrs. Piper, and the enquiries of the French SPR failed to confirm that such a doctor had ever been registered with the medical authorities. It must be remembered that several of Mrs. Piper's investigators were qualified psychiatrists, and "split personalities" were rather in vogue at the time—*Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was a current best seller.

(3) On a good day, Phinuit gave copious and largely correct "communications" from the deceased friends and relatives of sitters. The general consensus of these sitters was that it was inconceivable that Mrs. Piper could have come across this information by natural means. As a control, the SPR had asked one of their private detectives, "the very able" G. A. Smith, to see if he could learn by means of research and detective skill as much about Lodge's uncle, dead some twenty years (see below), as Phinuit seemed to have had. After three days of looking up old records, quizzing elderly residents of the uncle's village, and general snooping about, Smith conceded to Phinuit's superior knowledge (Gauld, 1968, pp. 256-258).

The compelling aspect of the Mrs. Piper phenomena is quantitative rather than qualitative. No single message seemed to be totally beyond criticism—indeed it is difficult to think of any message that could rule out the *possibility* of a natural explanation. But in what turned out to be a 20 year career as a medium, Mrs. Piper produced literally thousands of instances, the cumulative effect of which is to underline the fact that by any objective criterion, she had some sort of paranormal ability. A few more brief examples may be in order, although it must be emphasised that constraints of space will only allow for a few random selections out of a vast body of deeply suggestive material.

After Mrs. Piper returned to America, Phinuit was gradually replaced by a control known only by the pseudonym of George Pelham. Unlike Phinuit, the mortal Pelham was easy to trace: only recently deceased, he had been an outstanding philosophy student, and came from a well-known Washington family. According to Hodgson, Pelham was interested in psychical research and had in fact had a single anonymous sitting with Mrs. Piper in 1888. He had subsequently been killed, aged 32, in a riding accident, and the Society found no reason to doubt that Mrs. Piper knew nothing about him. The Pelham control was rather more convincing than Phinuit; he recognized and commented upon objects owned by him in real life; he correctly located a lost strong box hidden by Pelham, who had died without telling anyone where he had put it; and out of 150 sitters introduced to him, he recognized by name the 30—and only the 30—that had been known to the living Pelham.[2]

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2 G.P. is alternately styled George Pelham or Pellew. It is unclear to me, although not presumably to his friends, which is the rather transparent pseudonym.

Frederic Myers died in 1901 and almost immediately appeared to begin communicating messages through a number of mediums, including Mrs. Piper. Myers had been a prize-winning poet and classics scholar, specialising in Ovid, and investigators hit on the idea of quizzing Mrs. Piper's "Myers control" on the most obscure Ovidian poems they could find. Mrs. Piper was herself, as far as anyone could tell, quite ignorant of classical literature. Reviewing her cryptic but plausible replies, the statistically minded Sir Cyril Burt, calculated that the probability of these answers being lucky guesses were "at the very least well over 300,000 to 1, and probably between that figure and something over 100 million to 1" (Burt, 1975, pp. 133-138). One sitter, the classics scholar Margaret Verrall, was so impressed by the Myers control's dissertation on the Neo-Platonic influences in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, that she used "Myers'" ideas to indulge in a little post-mortem plagiarism that subsequently appeared in the July 1907 edition of *Modern language review.*

DISCUSSION

(1) What happened to psychical research?

At the turn of the century, it seemed reasonable to suppose that the SPR would in the foreseeable future come up with important and concrete conclusions, and that psychical research would establish itself as a legitimate branch of the human sciences. It was not to be. By 1910, Sidgwick, Myers, James and Hodgson were all dead, William James being by far the longest lived at 68. The SPR carried on, but came to be increasingly dominated by the small clique that gathered around the increasingly guru-like figure of Mrs. Sidgwick (Appleyard, 1992, p. 249). For all her abilities, it could hardly have been beneficial for psychical research to have as its most prominent investigator an elderly woman whose primary motivation was to reestablish communications with those she had loved in life. Many potential investigators were put off by the fact that so much hard labour had resulted in so little hard knowledge, whilst the waning of the extreme religious angst that had been so characteristic of the Victorian Age took much of the social and intellectual urgency out of the psychical researchers' agenda. In post-Victorian Britain one was free to accept or reject faith on its own as being an adequate justification for religious belief. People who remained Christians did so for traditional reasons, rather than any of the reasons suggested by psychical research or Spiritualism, while atheists were largely content to justify their disbelief with reference to the newer traditions of Enlightenment science and philosophy.

At his death, Myers had been developing a complex psychological theory that was intended to explain not only the phenomena of possession but which would untangle the interrelationships between consciousness, unconsciousness, mind, soul, spirit, personality and psychical activity. Soon after, Sigmund Freud, a pronounced admirer of Myers, formulated similar theories that, while accounting for almost as

much, were able to dispense with the supernatural element, and to express themselves in a way more amenable to the dominant scientific discourse of the day. Orthodox psychology became more experimental and biological. After the First World War, J. B. Watson, the founder of Behaviorism, began to persuade many people that introspection and the study of mental states was unscientific, and those interested in the operations of the human mind should confine themselves to empirically observed behaviour. The dualist notion that the mind or soul was something essentially separate from the body was primarily a religious or metaphysical concept, and was almost totally dismissed by scientists who distrusted ideas associated with religion or metaphysics. The human body came to be regarded as a machine, its brain as some sort of sophisticated calculating device. Thinking and perception were seen as physical acts. Disembodied entities were *ipso facto* incapable of such acts. Self-consciousness was defined simply as the by-product of a calculating device that had reached a certain level of complexity. Having a mind was dependent on having a brain. There was no room for the soul.

(2) A note on whether there is a rôle for metaphysics in modern epistemology

As we have seen, science begins by telling you what questions it can answer, and ends by telling you what questions you are allowed to ask (Gauld, 1968, pp. 340-345). But contemporary theoretical science might be suggesting that there is a place for metaphysical speculation. For example, the Mind has been defined as self-consciousness. But if, as materialists insisted, this self-consciousness were simply the by-product of a thinking device that had reached a certain level of complexity, then we could expect that computers, some of which are beginning to exceed the complexity of the organic brain, to start to show evidence of self-consciousness themselves. But despite what computer scientists might say, genuine artificial intelligence seems to be a myth. For example, the English mathematician Alan Turing has shown that a whole group of problems are intrinsically unsolvable unless a computer operator intuitively grasps the correct method of solving the problem without any formal evidence—a thing that a computer, wholly dependent on mathematical logic, cannot do. Likewise, Gödel's incompleteness theorem, which was formulated to explain a number of embarassing logical paradoxes in higher mathematics, says that "all mathematical systems contain statements that we know to be true but cannot prove to be true". This would seem to have important implications for investigators who have to resort to philosophy. Perhaps knowledge is different to, and more than, logical truth. Perhaps the human mind has a way of seeing into nature that will always be denied to machines and to formal systems of logical analysis. Calling this faculty "luck", "intuition", "mysticism", or "metaphysics" is merely naming it, without telling us what it is.

(3) What sense can we make of phenomena such as Mrs. Piper's?

So where does that leave Mrs. Piper? It is not sufficient for scientists to deny her phenomena on the grounds that they conflict with established scientific laws—scientific laws are formulated on the basis of observed conditions, and, as such, scientific laws are obliged to conform with Mrs. Piper's phenomena, not vice versa. Good evidence does not become bad just because it seems improbable. So how can we interpret the evidence? It seems reasonable to review briefly some of the conclusions arrived at by the few 20th century academics that have made a serious study of this field. Alan Gauld, a historian and psychologist interested in psychical research suggested that to explain Mrs. Piper's phenomena we had only to assume three things:

1) That she possessed remarkable powers of telepathy and probably of clairvoyance;
2) That when in a certain curious mental state she had a pronounced tendency to exhibit secondary personality patterns; and
3) That some of these secondary personality-patterns developed into enduring entities whilst others remained more plastic and could take on the semblance of people with whom casual sitters wished to communicate. (Gauld, 1968)

C. B. Broad, the Cambridge philosopher, had other thoughts. In his essay *Human personality and survival* he defended dualism, reasoning that humans were psycho-physical entities, consisting of two mutually irreducible but intimately related aspects: the physical and the psychical (Broad, 1962). Broad identified the psyche with personality, defining it as the sum total of an individual's stream of experience. Whilst one's physical and psychical facets normally go together, there are documented instances in which physical identity is accompanied by psychical diversity—in the case of multiple personality or out-of-body experiences, and circumstances in which physical identity is accompanied by psychical absence—as in the case of a person in a vegetative condition. If psychical activity could be demonstrated as being not completely the by-product of the brain's biological activity, then it would be theoretically possible for the mind and matter components of a human being to disassociate. Psychic identity could be accompanied by physical diversity, or indeed, physical death. Theoretically, physical death need not mean the death of its related stream of experience.

It is probably impossible for the evidence provided by mediums to produce conclusive evidence for the survival of human consciousness after death. Even when a medium provides information that she or he could not have known by ordinary means, it seems hard to rule out the possibility of clairvoyance, or telepathy from the mind of some living person who knew the facts in question. Likewise, the evidence suggested by the exactitude of mannerisms and attitudes displayed by controls known to the sitters can be explained in the same way. Celia Green suggests that

disembodied strands of memory might exist in a state of unimaginable sentience, strands that certain sensitive people are able to receive in the way in which a receiver picks up radio signals (Green, 1976). Gauld similarly proposes that the SPR found no proof that the universe was a happy and meaningful place, but that they stumbled across a great deal of evidence to indicate the survival of truncated, fragmentary personalities. The evidence can be reconciled, says Gauld (1968, pp. 340-355), with the view that not all personalities survive, and those that do survive do so in a greatly diminished manner—hardly a view to encourage either optimism or further research.

Mrs. Piper virtually disappears from history after the First World War. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle met her in New York in 1922, by which time, he says, she had lost all her gifts (Doyle, 1975, p. 84). She is last glimpsed in 1924, having attracted the attention of Gardner Murphy, although she seems still to have been practising when Alta Piper published her biography in 1929. The two references to her death that I have been able to find conflict by 30 years, but her death certificate testifies that she died in Brookline, Mass. in 1951, at the enviable age of 91. Yet one final example, trivial in itself, may perhaps serve to demonstrate that the phenomena associated with her are difficult to explain in any "natural" way. It is taken from the diary of Sir Oliver Lodge, and was later reprinted in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (Lodge, 1890).

> It happened that [my uncle Robert]…now quite an old man, and one of a surviving three of a large family, had a twin brother who had died some twenty or more years ago. I interested him generally in the subject, and wrote to ask him if he could lend me some relic of this brother. By morning post on a certain day I received a curious old gold watch, which this brother had worn and been fond of; and that same morning, no one in the house having seen it or knowing anything about it, I handed it to Mrs. Piper when in a state of trance.
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> I was told almost immediately that it had belonged to one of my uncles—one that had been mentioned before as having died from the effects of a fall—one that had been very fond of Uncle Robert, the name of the survivor—that the watch was now in the possession of the same Uncle Robert, with whom he was now anxious to communicate. After some difficulty and many wrong attempts Dr. Phinuit caught the name. Jerry, short for Jeremiah, and said emphatically, as if a third person was speaking, "This is my watch, and Robert is my brother, and I am here. Uncle Jerry, my watch." All this at the first sitting on the very morning the watch had arrived by post, no one but myself and the shorthand clerk, who happened to be introduced for the first time at this sitting by me, and whose antecedents are well known to me, being present.
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> Having thus ostensibly got into communication through some means or other with what purported to be a deceased relative, whom I had indeed known

slightly in his later years of blindness, but of whose early life I knew nothing, I pointed out to him that to make Uncle Robert aware of his presence it would be well to recall trivial details of their boyhood, all of which I would faithfully report…References to his blindness, illness and main facts of his life were comparatively useless from my point of view; but these details of boyhood, two-thirds of a century ago, were utterly and entirely out of my ken. My Father was one of the younger members of the family, and only knew these brothers as men.

"Uncle Jerry" recalled episodes such as swimming the creek when they were boys together, and running some risk of getting drowned; killing a cat in Smith's field; the possession of a small rifle, and of a long peculiar skin, like a snake-skin, which he thought was now in the possession of Uncle Robert.

All these facts have been more or less completely verified. But the interesting thing is that his twin brother, from whom I got the watch, and with whom I was in communication, could not remember them all. He recollected something about swimming the creek, though he himself only looked on. He had a distinct recollection of having had the snake-skin, and of the box in which it was kept… But he altogether denied killing the cat, and could not recall Smith's field.

His memory, however, is decidedly failing him, and he was good enough to write to another brother, Frank, living in Cornwall, an old sea captain, and ask him if he had any better remembrance of certain facts—of course, not giving any explicable reasons for asking. The result of this inquiry was to triumphantly vindicate the existence of Smith's field as a place near their home, where they used to play in Barking, Essex; and the killing of the cat by another brother was also recollected; while of the swimming in the creek, near a mill-race, full details were given, Frank and Jerry being the heroes of that foolhardy episode.

[The medium] told me to take the watch out of its case…and examine it in a good light…and I should see some nicks near the handle which Jerry said he had cut into with his knife.

Some faint knicks are there. I had never had the watch out of its case before; being indeed careful neither to finger it myself nor to let anyone else finger it.

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