

MARGINS
OF
REALITY

*The Role of Consciousness
in the Physical World*

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PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The first substantial attempt to institutionalize the scientific study of anomalous consciousness phenomena, *per se*, dates to the establishment in London in 1882 of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The widespread popularity of spiritualism, with its attendant séances and "table-tippings," prompted a number of notable scholars from widely disparate disciplines, led by the physicist William F. Barrett, the philosopher Henry Sidgwick, the essayist Frederick W. H. Myers, and the psychologist Edmund Gurney, to attempt to address these issues with the same scientific rigor that characterized other current intellectual pursuits. A few years later, a counterpart organization, the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), was founded in Boston by several equally distinguished scientists and philosophers, under the leadership of Simon Newcomb and William James. The explicit and implicit charters of these two organizations were nicely summarized by James's proposition:

Any one with a healthy sense for evidence, a sense not methodically blunted by the sectarianism of "Science," ought now, it seems to me, to feel that exalted sensibilities and memories, veridical phantasms, haunted houses, trances with supernormal faculty, and even experimental thought-transference, are natural kinds of phenomena which ought, just like other natural events, to be followed up with scientific curiosity.²³



Victorian Table-Tipping

Although these societies attracted a barrage of criticism from the established scientific and intellectual communities, they also attracted the interest and participation of many eminent scholars of the day. Numbered among their presidents were three Nobel laureates, nine Fellows of the Royal Society, one prime minister, an archbishop of Canterbury, and a substantial list of prominent academics including, in addition to the founders, Arthur, Earl of Balfour; Henri Bergson; Sir William Crookes; Sir Oliver Lodge; William McDougall; Gardner Murphy; Gilbert Murray; John Lord Rayleigh; Charles Richet; Eleanor Balfour Sidgwick; Sir J. J. Thomson (vice president); and G. N. M. Tyrell. Beyond this distinguished roster of officers, such notables as Marie and Pierre Curie; Sigmund Freud; Carl Jung; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; Mark Twain; Alfred Russel Wallace; and William Butler Yeats were drawn into the societies' activities.

Early in this formative period, Myers compiled his many years of personal study in a classic two-volume work entitled *Human Personality and the Survival of Bodily Death*, which he himself described as

an exposition rather than a proof [of] the thesis that a communication can take place from mind to mind without the agency of the recognised organs of sense. We found that this agency, discernible even on trivial occasions by suitable experiment, seemed