

EDITORIAL

This issue of the Journal is devoted to a single multifaceted topic: mediumship, and mental mediumship in particular. As many readers will know, mental mediumship is usually contrasted with physical mediumship, and the distinction—roughly—is this. In the former, the medium channels communications from other, presumably nonphysical, entities, whereas in the latter the medium channels phenomena that some would classify as ostensibly psychokinetic (e.g., object movements and levitations, or materializations). In both cases, however, the received view among practitioners and other believers is that the medium is an intermediary between our familiar physical world and entities occupying a different order of reality. In the former case, mediums purport to facilitate spirit *communication*, and in the latter case, spirit *agency*.

Like many topics usually classified as parapsychological, mediumship can bring out the best and the worst in scientists and other scholars. Some reflexively and uncritically dismiss a belief in mediumship (or even mere openness to belief) as deplorably atavistic, embracing or entertaining a crude and primitive superstition clearly unworthy of serious attention. In fact, some would quickly denounce as intellectually defective anyone taking a serious scholarly interest in the subject. Now of course it's true that people have held mediumistic beliefs for millennia and in quite different cultural contexts, many of them widely considered to be primitive or unsophisticated. Nevertheless (and equally clearly), we're not entitled to reject those beliefs simply in virtue of their longevity and pervasiveness. Moreover, the same critics who scoff instinctively at mediumship often fail to recognize that their aversion to the topic may be equally reflexive and uncritical. In fact, it may betray its own suspicious and venerable lineage, which F. C. S. Schiller once described as "the instinctive dislike which everywhere has led to the prohibition of 'sorcery', to the burning of 'witches', and to the ascription of the phenomena generally to the agency of the devil" (Schiller, 1899:105).

By contrast, other writers see mediumistic phenomena as a potential source of insights, not into other realms, but into many aspects of antemortem human nature. Of course (as I noted), mediumship superficially presents itself as a form of interaction between our familiar physical world and another world of spirits, invisible to all but a privileged (or afflicted) few. That's certainly the prevailing view among practitioners and their followers, and it's also the view that parapsychologists have scrutinized painstakingly ever since the founding of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882. Indeed, to this day a major preoccupation of the SPR is to document mediumistic claims carefully and

critically, determine whether (or to what extent) those claims are veridical, and then consider whether the veridical claims deserve to be taken as evidence for postmortem survival.

But it's not only spiritists, spiritualists, or psychical researchers who take mediumship seriously. It's also a rich field of research to intrepid (or professionally secure) anthropologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, historians, physiologists, and even the occasional philosopher (I was going to say "odd philosopher," but I realize that many would regard that expression as redundant). Consider this. Some researchers contend that mental mediumship looks very much like a culturally variable expression of the same underlying and unusual human capacities studied in many other contexts, both pathological and nonpathological. For example, they're quick to note similarities between mediumship and forms of nonpathological dissociation or hypnosis, and (even more dramatically) ostensible demonic possession, dissociative identity (or multiple personality) disorder, and psychogenic fugue, which likewise assume appropriately different forms in different epochs and cultures. If these researchers are right, the forms of mental mediumship might plausibly be viewed as symptom-languages or idioms of distress, but nevertheless as ways of unleashing or accessing otherwise latent and perhaps exceptional human capacities. And if that's right, mediumship might have much to teach us about the nature, variety, and limits of human abilities generally. And that's just one nonparapsychological way to approach the topic.

The papers in this issue of the *JSE* examine mental mediumship from several angles. Maraldi et al. describe several varieties of mediumship, and propose that the psychosocial and cultural aspects of mediumship are as important as its psychophysiological features. They consider the differences between spiritism and spiritualism, the relevance of the trance state to mediumship, and the extent to which processes properly considered mediumistic infiltrate many everyday human activities. By drawing in particular on some recent case studies, the authors focus on the spiritistic views of Allan Kardec, according to which mediumship is a pervasive and fundamental feature of human nature and whose study is therefore essential to the behavioral sciences.

Carlos Alvarado helpfully surveys some of the major nonparapsychological issues that have fascinated researchers in mediumship. These include the nature and prevalence of the mediumistic trance, the varieties of mediumistic mentation, the evolution of mediumship over time, the dramatic capabilities of the subconscious, and the relationship between mediumship and psychopathology.

Michael Grosso focuses on positive aspects of mediumship, and in particular its connection with various forms of artistic and practical creativity. For example, he describes some dramatic cases of mediumistic writing and painting, and with reference to F. W. H. Myers's theory of genius he considers

mediumship's potential for personal development or transformation.

Emily Kelly's paper considers the issue that motivated the pioneers of the SPR: whether mediumship ever indicates that human personality survives bodily death. She recognizes that the debate over that key issue hangs on whether the best cases should be interpreted not as evidence for postmortem survival but as evidence for psychic functioning among the living. (For some recent discussion in this *Journal* on that subject, see Sudduth, 2009, and Braude, 2009.) Kelly surveys types of mediumship that have been especially relevant to that debate, and advocates the revival of so-called proxy sittings with mediums. In this type of experiment, the person sitting with the medium is a proxy or stand-in for the person actually desiring information from the medium. And in the best of those cases, the proxy is not personally acquainted with the distant "sitter."

Finally, Renaud Evrard's paper doesn't discuss mediumship directly. Rather, it recounts a period in France's recent history during which a group of researchers rejected the laboratory-based experimental approach advocated by Rhine and others, lobbying instead to have parapsychology broadened into a multidisciplinary field that embraces (in addition to strictly experimental and proof-oriented investigations) wide-ranging enquiries that could be applied to mediumship and other apparent instances of psi-in-life.

These papers by no means exhaust the fascinating and important topics connected with the study of mediumship, although they comfortably fill this issue of the *JSE*. Since we have other excellent papers on mediumship currently in our editorial pipeline, I look forward to publishing another special issue on mediumship in the near future.

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References

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