

Beyond Boundaries 2011

Transition!

20th – 21st January

Bangor University

The scientific approach of F.W.H. Myers to the study of mystical experiences, and its value to psychology

Terence J. Palmer

School of Theology and Religious Studies, Bangor University

Abstract

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a flurry of activity in the scientific exploration of a wide variety of anomalous experiences including mesmerism, spiritualism, dissociation, spirit appearances and related unexplained phenomena. Leading lights in scientific investigations into these areas included such names as William James of Harvard University in the United States, Pierre Janet of the Salpêtrière mental hospital in Paris and Edmund Gurney, Frank Podmore and Frederic Myers of the Society for Psychical Research in London. Frederic Myers maintained that the emerging science of psychology in the late nineteenth century had lost its way by abandoning its most fundamental question – what is the nature of mind? Myers, in his determination to use robust scientific method was careful to avoid philosophical argument or religious belief systems. Myers' scientific method also aimed to bypass the influences of expectation, suggestion, preconceived assumptions and socio-cultural belief systems in order to arrive at an objective understanding of all subjective experience. This paper summarises Myers' use of trance as his scientific method and is a reminder to both experimental and clinical psychologists of the value of using this method in their work.

F.W.H. Myers' Scientific Method – The Trance

In his classic work, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James writes:

I cannot but think that the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science is the discovery, first made in 1886¹, that, in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but in addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs. I call this the most important step forward because, unlike the other advances which psychology has made, this discovery has revealed to us an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature. No other step forward which psychology has made can proffer any such claim as this. In particular, this discovery of a consciousness existing beyond the field, or subliminally as Mr. Myers terms it, casts light on many phenomena of religious biography (James, 1902, p. 233).

Frederic Meyers used the term '*automatisms*' to provide the link between automatic writing and hysteria, and argued that automatic writing is just one facet among many others including hallucination, hypnosis, double personality, and mediumship that are all connected facets of one subject. William James referred to this collectivisation of similar facets as a '*great simplification*' that places hallucination and impulses under the common theme of '*sensory and motor automatisms*'. (Ibid). *Automatisms* gave these phenomena a unifying conceptual term. Subjectively they came into consciousness through visualisation, an automatic motor impulse, or other impression as though from a source other than the subject, and become manifest automatically from beyond the conscious will. Meyers suggested that some form of intelligence, whether from within the unconscious or from an external source is finding a way to impress upon the conscious self (Myers, 1903b).

Myers principle task of scientific exploration into these phenomena was to determine whether the vision, message or automatic act is a creation of the imagination of the subject or has a source that

¹ Crabtree (2009, p. 301) has little doubt that James is referring to the work of Myers in 1886, although it is not clear which work of many published by Myers in that year. The only academic who challenges this is Ann Taves (2004), who suggests that it may have been the work of Pierre Janet who, she also suggests was the original discoverer of the unconscious and the first to use the term 'dissociation' to describe fragmented personality.

is external to the subject. The guiding light that showed Myers and his colleagues the way forward was the observation that subjects who experienced these phenomena had a tendency to enter into an altered state of consciousness, and it was therefore their intention to use the altered state as their experimental method. So what is an altered state of consciousness (ASC)?

According to Moseby's medical dictionary, an altered state of consciousness (ASC) is:

... any state of awareness that differs from the normal awareness of a conscious person. Altered states of consciousness have been achieved, especially in Eastern cultures, by many individuals using various techniques, such as long fasting, deep breathing, whirling, and chanting. Researchers now recognise that such practises can affect the chemistry of the body and help induce the desired state. Experiments suggest that telepathy, mystical experiences, clairvoyance, and other altered states of consciousness may be subconscious capabilities in most individuals and can be used to improve health and fight disease (Moseby & Co, 1990, p.47).

It is important to note that Moseby's definition is medical, and as such includes a non-specific reference to experiments that suggest that mystical experiences and clairvoyance may be subconscious capabilities. This is precisely the hypothesis that James, Meyers and Janet tested during their experiments one hundred years ago by using and observing subjects who experienced altered states. It is unfortunate that the momentum of these experiments was not maintained into the 20th century. Instead the fashions of mainstream science favoured the theories of behaviourism and Freudian psychoanalysis, and research into telepathy, ESP, precognition and psychokinesis came under the new concept of '*psi*', a term introduced by Thouless and Wiesner (1947) for all types of paranormal phenomena. Right up to the present day, I would propose that no one in any of the currently disconnected fields of psychological research is using the conceptual framework and scientific methods that Myers and his colleagues found so fruitful and productive. In keeping with Myers' assertion that the term automatisms connects several related concepts into one conceptual framework, the terms altered-state, trance and hypnosis can all be included into the same framework for experimental purposes. Modern researchers into the phenomena of hypnosis have tried to arrive at a theory to explain it, but have only succeeded in describing specific hypnotic phenomena (Kroger, 1977). In their intention to find evidence to support their own specific hypotheses these modern researchers are missing the point altogether with regard to the nature of consciousness as was discovered by Myers.

For example, Michael Heap and colleagues provide an excellent example of finely tuned scientific application to hypnosis research with no regard for the spiritual nature of what it is they are investigating. The index to their work includes just one reference to the word '*religious*' and none at all for '*spiritual*' or for '*mystical*.' The one reference reads as follows:

The idea of a trance state that endows the subject with unusual characteristics and abilities has a long history outside of hypnosis and is common to many religious and quasi-religious practises (Heap, Brown & Oakley, 2004, p. 10).

The above quotation makes a clear and unambiguous differentiation between religious trance states and hypnosis by the use of the words 'outside of'. This is not a criticism of Heap's excellent work, but a mere observation that what they are investigating is, they believe, outside the spiritual realm.

Of all the other methods he used, Hypnosis is the method chosen by Myers to be the one that produced the most significant results, and the one that he recommended *all* psychologists use in their investigations into the nature of mind, consciousness and personality, and yet, it is still the most unused, misunderstood and misrepresented concept by mainstream psychology to this day.

Myers writes:

First among our experimental methods I must speak of hypnotism. We see here the influence exercised by suggestion and self-suggestion on higher types of faculty, supernormal as well as normal, on character, on personality. It is on this side, indeed that the outlook is the most deeply interesting. Man is in course of evolution; and the most pregnant hint which these nascent experiments have yet given him is that it may be in his power to hasten his own evolution in ways previously unknown (Myers, 1903a, p. 29).

Myers was not content to explain hypnosis merely as the power of suggestion, and wanted to gather evidence that suggestion was not an adequate enough explanation for all hypnotic phenomena:

The evidence for telepathy – for psychical influence from a distance – has grown to goodly proportions, for a new form of experiment has been found possible from which the influence of suggestion can be entirely excluded. It has now, as I shall presently try to show, been actually proved that the hypnotic trance can be induced from a distance so great, and with precautions so complete, that telepathy or some similar supernormal influence is the only efficient cause which can be conceived (Myers, 1903a, p. 140).

Myers cites several examples of telepathic hypnosis in his many contributions to the journals of the Society for Psychical Research which he encapsulates in his classic work *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (Myers, 1903b). Modern theories of hypnosis, being predominantly based on the power of suggestion, cannot explain the hypnotic power of silent hand passes (mesmeric technique), neither can they explain hypnosis at a distance, whereas telepathy, although not a complete explanation, does open an alternative avenue of enquiry. To ignore the importance of telepathic hypnosis is misleading to the student of hypnotic phenomena as Myers' experiments will testify, and it is equally important that the evidence for hypnosis at a distance is presented in order to support the argument that hypnosis is a gateway to a vast array of psychological and spiritual domains.

The scientific evidence to support the hypothesis that the conscious intention of one person can influence the thoughts, feelings and actions of another without their conscious knowledge has enormous and far-reaching implications that are far too complex to expound upon at this juncture. However, what I hope to achieve is to re-open a line of enquiry that Myers identified one hundred years ago when he wrote:

Now it is that we feel the difficulty of being definite without being trivial; how little of earthly memory persists; how little of heavenly experience can be expressed in terms of earth; how long and arduous must be the way, how many must be the experiments, and how many the failures before any systemised body of new truth can be established. But a sound beginning has been made, and whatever may be possible hereafter need not be wasted on a fresh start (Myers, 1903a, p. 406).

Despite its importance in the scientific study of the mind, none of the contemporary researchers into hypnotic phenomena that I have spoken to, including Professor Graham Wagstaff of Sir John Moore's University and Dr. Michael Heap, of the Department of Psychology at Wathwood Hospital Medium Secure Unit in Rotherham have any knowledge of telepathic hypnosis. Where Myers identified hypnosis as an experimental method that opens a doorway to a multitude of mysteries, in contrast modern researchers are attempting to understand the nature of the doorway itself instead of venturing through it.

The modern philosopher of science Erwin Laszlo, on the subject of scientific specialisation writes:

The unfortunate consequence of such speciality barriers is that knowledge, instead of being pursued in depth and integrated in breadth, is pursued in depth in isolation. Rather than getting a continuous and coherent picture, we are getting fragments – remarkably detailed but isolated patterns. We are drilling holes in the wall of mystery that we call nature and reality on many locations, and we carry out delicate analyses on each of the sites. But it is only now that we are beginning to realise the need for connecting the probes with one another and gaining some coherent insight into what is there (Laszlo, 1996, p. 2).

Connecting the probes, as Laszlo puts it, is precisely what Frederic Myers did when he included clairvoyance and all related phenomena within a single conceptual framework that could be explored with hypnosis. He advocated that all of human mental experience should be seen on a continuum and that nothing ought to be regarded as supernatural or paranormal. Myers repeatedly emphasised that such unseen environments must somehow be fundamentally continuous and interrelated with the one we know through our sensory perception. 'If an unseen world exists we must in some sense be in it' (Myers, 1891, p. 634).

The neglect by modern psychology researchers into the spiritual nature of consciousness can only maintain the gulf between mainstream scientific enquiry and religious, mystical and spiritual

experience. It is time that this gap was closed with the tools that we already have at our disposal. All we have to do is to use them.

© 2011 Terence J. Palmer

School of Theology and Religious Studies

rsp823@bangor.ac.uk

tjpalmer101@btopenworld.com

<http://www.transpersonalpsychologist.net/Research.html>

References

- Crabtree, A. (2009). Automatism and Secondary Centres of Consciousness. In Kelly et al (Ed.), *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (pp. 301-363). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Heap, M., Brown, R., & Oakley, D. (2004). *The Highly Hypnotizable Person*. Hove: Brunner / Routledge.
- James, W. (1902). *Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Kroger, W. (1977). *Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis 2nd Ed.*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.
- Laszlo, E. (1996). *A Systems View of the World*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Moseby & Co. (1990). *Moseby's Medical, Nursing and Allied Health Dictionary. 3rd ed.*. Toronto: The Moseby Company.
- Myers, F. (1891). Science and a Future Life. *Nineteenth Century*, 29, 628-647.
- Myers, F. (1903a). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Myers, F. (1903b). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death (2 vols)*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.
- Taves, A. (2004). The Fragmentation of Consciousness. In W. Proudfoot (Ed.), *William James and the Science of Religions*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Thouless, R., & Wiesner, B. (1947). The Psi-Process in Normal and 'Paranormal' psychology. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 48, 177-196.