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

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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 Frederick Myers of the Society for Psychical Research in London. Frederick 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 across all of the discrete disciplines that psychology has fragmented itself into.
F.W.H. Myers’ Scientific Method – The Trance

This is our research question: Are there gifts of prophesy and divination?

The two explanations that are offered by the mechanistic scientific paradigm are that they are the effects of a creative or delusional imagination or fraud. However, if we are to be able to accommodate a wide variety of known phenomena that are experienced by people every day in all cultures and throughout history it is implicit that the hard sciences of the physical universe are inadequate in their epistemologies and conceptual frameworks. The fact that people experience communication with an unseen world that is essentially non-material strongly suggests that the laws of the universe, as we currently understand them are incomplete. The essential question is one of ontology; that is – do the origins of information, sense impressions and unexplained psychical and physical phenomena have an ontological reality in a dimension that is integrated in some way with our known physical universe? In order to approach this question scientifically it follows that three hypotheses ought to be tested within an expanded conceptual framework with a broader empirical base and epistemology. These three hypotheses are: is there such a thing as psychic ability? Are there discarnate spirits that we are able to communicate with? Is there a non-material realm where universal information is stored and accessible? In other words; in acts of divination, prophesy, spirit communication and possession, in precognition and psychokinesis ‘is the receiver or percipient communicating telepathically with other humans, with non-corporeal spirit entities or accessing a field of information that is beyond our normal conscious perception?’ These are the three essential hypotheses, and they can be explored in far greater detail and complexity than they initially imply.

According to Geoffrey Cornelius in his introduction to The Imaginal Cosmos (2007), there are four main themes that are fundamental for any comprehensive analysis of divination, and he poses the question, ‘what mode of knowing constitutes divination?’ (ibid, p.ix). Cornelius suggests that this question (of an epistemological nature) may be approached through four main avenues; that of art and nature; through the conflict between reality and imagination; through a model of the cosmos and a world-order; and through an understanding of the sacred. Cornelius’ categorisation of these epistemological themes is a topic of academic debate and it is useful for placing the work of F.W.H. Myers, into a contextual framework. Myers was not concerned with metaphysics, philosophic debate or religious belief systems in his research methodology. He regarded his approach as purely scientific, using rigorous scientific method without any consideration for belief systems, preconceived ideas or assumptions about the nature of man’s consciousness or the universe he

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1 A collection of papers presented at the Imaginal Cosmos Conference held at the University of Kent in 2004.
inhabits. He attempted to approach his work from a position of what Geoffrey Cornelius described as ‘second naivety’ in his keynote address to this current conference, a term which means that although we cannot eradicate what we have come to learn, we can approach new material with an attitude of ‘not knowing’.

This is precisely what Myers did when he adopted an approach to his research that was essentially a form of methodological agnosticism, whereas the approach of mainstream science is methodological atheism. Thus Myers’ method, according to Cornelius’ categorisation falls within the theme of reality and imagination.

F.W.H. Myers (1843-1901)

Frederick Myers was one of the founding fathers of the society for Psychical Research in 1882, and his research was primarily concerned with testing the hypothesis that consciousness survives bodily death and that man has a soul:

The question for man most momentous of all is whether or no he has an immortal soul; or—to avoid the word immortal, which belongs to the realm of infinities—whether or no his
personality involves any element which can survive bodily death. In this direction have always lain the gravest fears, the farthest-reaching hopes, which could either oppress or stimulate mortal minds (Myers, 1903b, p. 75).

Initially driven by observations of spontaneous somnambulism and the appearance of apparitions of living persons (Gurney, Myers & Podmore, 1886) and the dead and dying (Myers, 1890), Myers went on to investigate the phenomenology of the communications of spiritualist mediums. His research methods were commensurate with the phenomena he studied, for example; observation, external validation of veridical apparitions, and the accuracy and validity of information conveyed through spiritualist mediums. He went on to use another method - that of experimental hypnotism, which became the central pillar of his methodology and is the subject of this paper.

Myers’ methods collectively, and in particular with the development of his experimental hypnosis, led him to postulate a model of consciousness that extends far beyond what we call normal conscious awareness. His model of mind became a significant influence on the development of the ideas and models of many other theorists including William James, Pierre Janet and Carl Jung, and he is now being recognised as the first to effectively describe the psychological unconscious (Crabtree, 1993; 2009, p. 302).

On Myers’ contribution to psychology, in his classic text, The Varieties of Religious Experience, James wrote:

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 1886, 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).

Myers named his model to explain the hidden dimensions of consciousness The Subliminal Self (Myers, 1903a, p. 30). Unfortunately Myers’ model of mind that acknowledges the possibility of a spiritual dimension, has been forgotten or neglected in the wake of the more popular atheistic concept of the unconscious proposed by Freud (Breuer & Freud, 1895) and the behaviourist school of Watson (1913).
Frederick Meyers used the term ‘automatisms’ to provide the link between a range of psychic phenomena, and argued that automatic writing is just one phenomenon among many others including hallucinations, flashes of inspiration, creative genius, obsessions and compulsive behaviour, pathological dissociation (hysteria) and double personality 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’ (James, 1889, p. 234).

Subjectively, automatisms emerge into consciousness through visualisation, an automatic motor impulse, or other sense impression as though from a source other than the subject, and become manifest from beyond the conscious will. This hypothesis of Myers’ openly challenged the scientific consensus that automatisms are the automatic reactions of a stimulated nervous system and that all human thought, feelings and behaviour are dependent on and originate in the brain. Carpenter, for example, identified this process as ‘unconscious cerebration’ (Carpenter, 1855, p. 607). Meyers did not dismiss the theory altogether, but argued that it was incomplete insofar as it was not able to explain a wide variety of human experiences such as automatic writing, animal magnetism and information received through clairvoyance. He suggested that in addition to the accepted view that the nervous system does respond to stimuli in an automatic fashion, that there is also some form of intelligence, whether from within the unconscious or from an external source that is finding a way to impress upon the conscious self (Myers, 1903a).

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 or volition of the subject or whether it has a source that 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, the most noticeable being what Myers called the ‘sleep-waking’ state (Myers, 1903b, p. 115), or what we would now call sleep-walking. Altered states are also associated with mystical and religious experiences (Kroger, 1977), pathological dissociation (Janet, 1976), day-dreaming and absorption (Heap, Brown & Oakley, 2004), positive and negative spirit possession (Crabtree, 1985), shamanic journeying and soul loss (Villoldo, 2005), remote viewing (Targ, 2004) and clairvoyance (Myers, 1903a). The altered state hypothesis was what determined Myers and his colleagues’ intention to use it as their experimental method.

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 William James, Frederick Meyers and Pierre 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 modern research into telepathy, ESP, precognition and psychokinesis came under the new concept of ‘psi’, a term introduced by Thouless and Wiesner (1947) for all the above types of paranormal phenomena, and any effect that science is unable to explain in the relationships in these phenomena has become known as the psi effect (Radin, 1997).

Right up to the present day, very few researchers in the currently disconnected fields of psychological research are using the conceptual framework and scientific methods that Myers and his colleagues found so fruitful and productive. One notable exception is Gary Schwartz who conducted experiments with mediums in afterlife experiments for three years (2001; 2002). Schwartz’ experiments supported the hypothesis that mediums can communicate with discarnate entities, and that this experiment can be replicated using rigorous scientific methods.

Myers proposed that all psychical phenomena are connected on a continuum, that there is no such thing as supernatural and that all is natural, there is no such thing as paranormal and that all is normal:

If nature is to be intelligible to our minds she must be continuous; her action must be uniformitarian and not catastrophic (Myers, 1895, p. 22).

He therefore advocated a new expanded naturalism that could accommodate such phenomena:

The only line of demarcation that science can draw is between things which can, or which cannot, be cognised by our existing faculties, a line that is by no means permanent and immovable. On the contrary, it is the continual work of science to render that which is incognisable cognisable, that which is imperceptible perceptible (Myers, 1881, p. 103).
Modern science still needs to expand its conceptualisations in order to accommodate what may be termed anomalous experiences into a unified frame of reference. In keeping with Myers’ assertion that the term automatisms connects several related concepts into one conceptual framework, the terms altered-state, trance, dissociation and hypnosis can all be included into the same framework for experimental purposes. In other words altered-state, dissociation, trance and hypnosis are all essentially the same thing. What is different about them are the methods and techniques of induction, i.e. deliberate or spontaneous, disciplined or undisciplined, trauma related, etc. Modern researchers into the phenomenology of hypnosis have tried to arrive at a theory to explain it as a unique psychological phenomenon, but have only succeeded in describing a very wide range of 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 fundamental nature of consciousness as was postulated 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’. Their conceptual framework is built on the foundation of epiphenomenalism, which states that consciousness is produced by and is dependent on the physical brain. However, recent research by Ericksonian hypnotist Ernst Rossi (1986) and cellular biologist Bruce Lipton (2010) has uncovered new insights into the relationship between mind and body that challenge this assumption, which, in turn is supported by quantum theory from a variety of theorists (Targ, 2004; Pfeiffer, Mack & et al, 2007; McTaggart, 2008; Schwartz, 2002; Samanta-Laughton, 2006; Rosenblum & Kuttner, 2007). Thus it is becoming apparent that scientific enquiry is slowly becoming engaged in a paradigm shift in learning how to explore the fundamental nature of consciousness. The interesting thing about this paradigm shift is that it seems to be driven by the psychical sciences of biology and quantum theory rather than by psychology.

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, 1903b, 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. His initial quest for answers was to investigate the concept of a community of sensation which was prompted by Mesmer’s theory of animal magnetism (Mesmer, 1766). Myers postulated that Mesmer’s theory of the magnetic force that was responsible for the unseen interaction between magnetiser and magnetised (hypnotist and subject) was incorrect and that the connection was psychological rather than physical.

This series of experiments conducted with Edmund gurney (Gurney, 1883) demonstrated that a hypnotised subject experienced taste and touch sensations that were transmitted from a third party – the agent. In these experiments the agent was given a strong tasting substance to taste and the hypnotised subject reported the taste sensation he received. Similar experiments were conducted with the transmission of physical sensations such as pinching a part of the body. These experiments demonstrated clearly that there was something invisible and intangible between the hypnotist and the hypnotised, but it remained unclear as to the nature of the connection\(^2\). In modern hypnosis research and clinical practice this connection is considered to be a ‘psychological rapport’ (Heap et al., 2004), although it remains within the theoretical domain of expectation and suggestion despite Myers’ findings. Myers was not totally satisfied with the outcome of his experiments and continued to look for methods that would bypass any influence of expectation or the power of suggestion that was beyond dispute. His solution lay in the concept of hypnosis at a distance:

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

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\(^2\) In my own thesis on A Revised Epistemology for Spirit Release Therapy According to the Conceptual Framework of F.W.H. Myers (in preparation) I posit an argument that Mesmer was right to a certain extent in his theory of a physical influence between magnetiser and magnetised, and that this theory can be applied to such spiritual healing practises as Reiki and related healing techniques.
with precautions so complete, that telepathy or some similar supernormal influence is the only efficient cause which can be conceived (Myers, 1903b, 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, 1903a). Psychology historian Adam Crabtree cites several examples of telepathic hypnosis from his research into the history of hypnosis *From Mesmer to Freud* (Crabtree, 1993) that go back to Mesmer’s disciple the Marquis de Puységur. The phenomenon has also been reported by surgeons John Elliotson in London (1843) and James Esdaile in India (1846).

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.

However, mainstream psychology and parapsychology seem to limit their exploration boundaries by using those scientific methods that they feel most comfortable with, namely; direct observation, instrumentation and psychometric testing for quantitative research methodologies, and interviewing for the qualitative. None of these methods can possibly explore those hidden dimensions of human experience that are so compelling in their invitation for us to discover their mysteries than the altered state of consciousness – the trance.

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, it is my contention that this one concept is the key to explain the varied phenomena associated with uninvited spirit possession by earthbound souls of the deceased and non-human discarnates. What is needed 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, 1903b, 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 are even aware of the concept 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 Frederick 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 fundamental 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 by collaboration between disciplines and with the tools that we already have at our disposal. All we have to do is to use them.

David Luke’s paper on the effects of the hallucinogenic molecule dimethyltryptamine (DMT) on the perception of discarnate entities by participants (Luke, 2011) reports that there are three hypotheses to explain the phenomena; hallucination, the transpersonal and the other-world hypothesis (ibid, p.36). He makes the observation that without a scientific approach the debate concerning the ontological status of perceived entities remains wide open. This offers an excellent opportunity for collaboration using Myers’ scientific method.

It has long been established that there is a direct correlation between emotional and visual sensory perception and brain chemistry (Gauld, 2007, p. 262), and Myers argued that correlation does not

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3 David Luke’s paper was also presented at the same conference Diamonic Imagination 2011 as this paper.
imply causation (Myers, 1891, p. 635). It is my own contention that DMT will be detected in the brains of persons visualising discarnate entities who have not been administered with it, due to the fact the DMT is a substance that is manufactured in the human brain (Luke, 2011, p. 26). An explanation for similarities in the nature of perceived entities between those given DMT and those who have not could be provided by the model of consciousness suggested by Myers. By applying Myers’ model it may be hypothesised that the mind operates at an energetic frequency that corresponds with the electro-magnetic frequency of the brain. When a person enters into an altered state of consciousness then the electro-magnetic frequency of the brain will alter accordingly. When the mind reaches a frequency that enables it to connect with those energetic frequencies that exist beyond our normal waking consciousness then it triggers a corresponding change in frequency in the brain that provides the senses with a visual representation of whatever it is that the mind has encountered. An experimental design to test this hypothesis would mean taking two groups of participants, one who have been administered with DMT and the other who have not. Those who have not been administered with the DMT would need to be either natural somnambulists or those who are adept at entering altered states. It would be an essential prerequisite that both groups are naive in both their previous experiences of entity encounters and of the objective of the experiment in order to avoid possible contamination from expectation or implied suggestion. Accurate descriptions of the visualisation of the entities encountered by both groups would then be compared for differences and similarities. A positive correlation in descriptions between the two groups would imply two possibilities. Firstly that consciousness can enter into a realm that is in parallel with our own at a different energy frequency, and secondly it could support the ontological status of such entities that exist there.

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