

# Is Anybody There?

## 1. Introduction

I was recently reading a book about contemporary spiritualism in Norway (as one does!) which proved remarkably interesting.<sup>1</sup> The author, Anne Kalvig, said something about the history of what turn out to be the various spiritualist movements there. And she ended up by posing some questions about the movement. Her work led me into further reading on the topic – and, thence, to these reflections.

Spiritualism, in the sense of ‘talking to the dead’, typically by way of a medium, and related phenomena of the ‘spirit possession’ of mediums, has a long if discontinuous history. The immediate background to modern US and European spiritualism seems to have been the hearing of ‘rapping’ noises in a farm in up-state New York in the 1840s. The family living there had the idea of asking whatever was responsible to answer questions. These were answered (by tapping noises) and, building on the fame to which this led, there developed a spiritualist movement. Both men and women acquired reputations – from the local to the national and international – as mediums.

An intellectual setting was provided for some of this activity by the works of the Swedish writer Immanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who had written at some length about his mystical experiences. While during the early part of the Nineteenth century, Mesmerism – a form of treatment based on what turned out in part to be a form of hypnosis – received support even from the hard-headed Harriet Martineau. She was well-known as a polymath, who had established her reputation with popular works on political economy. But in 1844 she underwent treatment by Mesmerism, and wrote **Letters on Mesmerism**, recounting her experiences.<sup>2</sup> What is strange about Mesmerism, is that there were cures, but there was also the manifestation of various paranormal phenomena. But all this, after a brief flowering, seems to have tailed off – although a tradition of healing practises continued.

Spiritualism itself seems to have taken off, quickly, in a variety of forms, from a range of practises in households, to celebrity mediums who travelled internationally and put on performances for the rich and

famous. There was interest in spiritualism on the part of some politically radical working-class groups. A significant role seems to have been played by the fact that religious orthodoxy was in decline during the Nineteenth Century. Spiritualism spoke to the concerns of those who, nonetheless, were passionately concerned about human survival after death. In addition, spiritualism gave women opportunities to play an active role of a kind from which they were still excluded in many areas of life.

The phenomena of spiritualism seem to have been attractive in part because of their novelty value; in part because many people seem to have had experience of related phenomena of which, otherwise, it was difficult to make much sense. Spirits speaking through mediums seemed also to offer the prospect of contact with, and messages from, family members and others who were recently dead. There was also the promise of the more exotic: of mediums claiming to be in touch with spirit guides from the remote past or from other cultures. Into all of this were also sometimes thrown ideas about reincarnation, and there were links – e.g. by way of Theosophy – with movements which offered Westernized accounts of Buddhist and Hindu themes.

Sometimes, there were odd – if seldom very stable – forms of physical materialization of spirits, notably through the agency of some young female mediums.<sup>3</sup> There was both enthusiasm for, and suspicion about, what was taking place – not least because in some cases payment was made to mediums. (Some celebrity mediums were paid directly; some of the young female mediums in the late Nineteenth Century were supported by benefactors. But many middle-class mediums simply practised at home, without payment.) The suspicion related, in part, concerning the degree to which mediums were fed information by other people, or were able to discern from people's demeanour – or by their reaction to whatever limited information was initially provided – what they wanted to hear, which was then fed back to them by the medium. Often, if there was a 'message', it was initially conveyed in very vague terms as to who might be sending it, and to whom, with what was said being firmed up only if there was a response, and in the light of information being furnished by individual members of the audience who responded to what was said. In some cases, mediums were detected in outright fraud. However, there was a sufficient quantity of responses,

and demand for the services of mediums, to sustain a long-term interest in spiritualism.

One striking phenomenon, was that the performance of mediums – and later of other people who were impressive as subjects for psychical research (which brought an empirical and self-consciously 'scientific' approach to paranormal phenomena) – seemed, typically, to tail off over time.<sup>4</sup> What mediums were able to produce when they were young, they often could not accomplish later. And in a number of cases, they seemed to suffer a kind of degeneration in their personalities, for example, ending up with alcohol problems. In addition, while in the early days of spiritualism, striking physical phenomena were reported as having been produced, later there was nothing produced to match this.

As I have mentioned, there also developed an interest in the scientific investigation of spiritualism – and of 'psychic phenomena' generally. In Britain, the Society for Psychical Research was set up in 1882, and had among its leading figures some distinguished philosophers and scientists. Experimentation in various forms was undertaken, although it was difficult to do this with regard to the activities of spiritualist mediums. (It was argued by spiritualists that such a matter-of-fact approach undermined the production of 'spiritual' phenomena.) Work, however, was done on such matters as extra-sensory perception and 'parapsychology'. The work of J. B. Rhine (1895-1980) at Duke University became particularly well-known, but it has been argued that others found his results difficult to replicate.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the best-known people more recently associated with the discussion of the significance of all this, have been the philosopher C. D. Broad, the psychologist John Beloff,<sup>6</sup> and also the well-known writer Arthur Koestler, who funded a centre for the study of psychical research at the University of Edinburgh, which continues to this day.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Broad commented, at the end of a paper on 'The Relevance of Psychical Research to Philosophy',<sup>8</sup> that psychic research on issues not connected with spiritualism may provide:

the basis for a more or less plausible explanation, in terms of established facts about the cognitive powers of embodied human minds, of phenomena which might otherwise seem to require the hypothesis of survival [after death]

This was also the view of J. B. Rhine.

During the Nineteenth Century, and in the early years of the Twentieth Century, spiritualism often took place by way of group seances in darkened rooms. More recently, communication with spirits is more typically claimed to take place in public performances, at Spiritualist Churches, or by way of sittings between an individual and a medium.<sup>9</sup> In addition, spiritualism is showing signs of losing its distinctive identity, because of the development of various forms of 'New Age' spirituality, which draw – in an eclectic manner – from many different traditions, in a manner has been referred to as a 'buffet' basis.<sup>10</sup> In addition, links have sometimes been developed between the tradition of spiritualism stemming from mid Nineteenth Century America, and shamanism as found, for example, among the Saami people in Northern Scandinavia.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Spiritualism Organized?**

There have been different attempts to organise spiritualism, in different countries. These have taken different forms, but it has proved difficult to get spiritualists to form a single organization. This is, in part, because there have been differences between the views of different spiritualists. Some of them have wished to integrate spiritualism with one or another form of (extremely liberal) Christianity, and in some cases, to conduct their meetings after the model of a Protestant church, with hymns. Others have favoured ideas about reincarnation, or in some cases have made common cause with Theosophy and with others who are interested in Eastern religions. There have also been complications, relating to the inter-relationship between spiritualism, as such, and those whose main interest was in more empirical 'psychic research'.

A key problem, in terms of organization, is that there has been a strong attachment to the local, and to the gifts and teachings of particular spiritualist mediums. This has provided a barrier to the persistence of any form of top-down organization, or to attempts to impose the acceptance of doctrines from the top of an organization. In addition, there have, from time to time, been mediums who – typically relaying information from their 'spirit guides' – have offered systematic teachings which have attracted some people, while repelling others.

More generally, there seems to have been an attachment to particular mediums, and to what was involved in participating in meetings with

them, and to messages that were received from family members or friends who were dead. There seems to have been little interest in large-scale organization, or in trying to work out a coherent story across what was said by different mediums, in different locations and times.

### **3. What is going on?**

Spiritualism has in some ways a strange position, just on the grounds that – as distinct from more traditional religions – it is concerned with what can be experienced, rather than with faith in divine beings, or in the truth of a non-empirical creed. However, the intensely personal character of what is experienced, the fact that those engaged in spiritualism seem to be interested in reassurance rather than inter-personal assessment of what they are claiming, and the non-credal and in many ways unorganized character of the movement, have meant that its claims are difficult to assess. Further, it is typically argued that psychic phenomena are affected by the attitudes of those in the vicinity, and that one is not dealing with the kind of thing which can be made the topic of scientific investigation.

When I worked as Karl Popper's assistant, I recall his having mentioned to me that, on one occasion, C. D. Broad had given a talk to philosophers about psychic research. Popper told me that he had been in the audience, and that he had made a comment in the discussion period along the lines of: 'The problem about ghosts, is that they never say anything interesting'. Given what I have said about Broad's views, this is a bit unfair as a criticism of him, because his concern was with empirical psychic research not with ghosts or mediums. But as a comment about any form of spiritualism, it seems to me just about right.

The problem is that not only is what is reported on from spirits makes no coherent sense, but there seems to be a lack of interest, on the part of spiritualists, on making sense of what is going on, and in considering whether or not it is true. One important issue that Kalvig mentioned, is a disagreement as to whether what is said by spirits can be trusted. Some spiritualists take the view that the spirit realm is simply one of sweetness and light, and that spirits tell the truth. Others think that there are some spirits which are problematic, which may make a nuisance of themselves, and which may not tell the truth. One might think that to sort out who is right about this would be a matter of some

urgency, if spiritualism is characterized by taking seriously 'messages' from such spirits. In addition, it is also worth noting that there is the view – to be found among conservative evangelical Christians – that the entire phenomenon, while 'spiritual', is demonic, or the condemnation of the dangers of spiritualism by the Catholic church.<sup>12</sup> If either of these traditions are right, it puts a very different complexion upon what is going on.

A second issue, relates to the question of whether or not there is re-incarnation (to which some testify, others deny), and, more generally, what the structure of the spirit world is like, and how it is organised (and by whom or what). One might also ask what spirits are supposed to be doing when they are not (typically, somewhat ineffectually) relaying usually uninteresting pieces of information to people who are still living. There are, it is true, accounts by mediums of spirits living in a 'Summerland', accounts of which read a bit like life in a craft community set up by wealthy middle-class people when they retire. In some cases 'spirits' have produced what – when they are given to the living by mediums – seem like pastiches of works of classical composers, or of early Twentieth Century authors.<sup>13</sup> The picture that seems sometimes to be conveyed of life among the more artistically inclined, is somewhat reminiscent of a cross between the early Marx's visions of the life of unalienated man and the 'arts and crafts' movement.

We are also told that animals with which humans have bonded, will also be there.<sup>14</sup> But there is a problem with this. I would be very happy to see the various cats again that I have looked after at different times in my life. But would they be happy to meet one another, as they tended not to like other cats? And what about their relationship to me? Sam knew me when I was in my pram. Ramsay knows me now that I am over 70. Who would the 'I' be to whom they have to relate? These are not problems that are specific to spiritualism, but would seem to me to face any account of a future life in which one meets up with people with whom had relationships across one's past.

In addition, there is the difficulty that seems to be involved in communication with the dead. If spirits have important things to say to specific people, why can't they identify, clearly, who they are and whom they wish to talk with? If such spirits were always there, and had things to say that were of significance, why did they wait until the mid-1840s

to start communicating? And why all the jiggery-pokery of tapping, tables tilting or lifting a little way into the air, ouija boards and all the other oddities associated with early spiritualism? There might be good reasons for all this, but has it been explained why all this is necessary?

I should stress that I am not advancing these things as objections to spiritualism, but, rather, as a suggestion that it is important for spiritualists to explicate and to render as coherent as possible, an account of what they think is taking place. Let me explain why.

#### **4. Philosophy and Spiritualism**

How philosophers might set about addressing issues to do with spiritualism, is likely to differ depending on the general views that they have about philosophy. Some people might be concerned just with the analysis of the use of language used by spiritualists and with the elucidation of the 'forms of life' in which they are engaged. Some might seek to disclose the ideological character of spiritualism. Others, to elucidate the distinctive perspective that spiritualists and those engaged in psychic research have on the world.

My own approach, here, is influenced by the views of Karl Popper. He argued that one should see philosophy as concerned with cosmological questions – and with how we might best set about evaluating competing approaches to these. Popper is well-known for having stressed – if we are concerned with a theory's scientific status – the importance of its openness to testing. More generally, here, he emphasised the importance not just the testing of theories, but also of how they were modified, over time. A refutation, for Popper, is not only fallible, but it is also a refutation of a bundle of theories and statements of 'initial conditions' – claims about what, specifically, was the case when a theory is tested. This means that it is open to those who are attracted by a theory to try modifying any part of this bundle, to deal with the problem. But for Popper, they need to be explicit about what they are doing, and to make sure that the theory, so modified, says more about the world that it did initially – and that they do not retreat in the face of refutations, by simply saying less than they did to start with, especially if they don't admit that this is what they were doing.<sup>15</sup>

A key role is played, in all this, by our theories. Science, in Popper's view, does not develop by way of the steady accumulation of empirical

evidence, collected by people who have biases or predispositions. On Popper's account, we are all biased in various ways – typically, in ways that we cannot identify on our own. On his account, we need to develop our ideas in forms which can be put to the test, or otherwise be opened up to criticism. Further, it is from other people – especially those who have views, and indeed, biases, different from our own – that we can hope to learn where we have got things wrong. Everybody's ideas – ours and theirs – are fallible. The development of knowledge is a social process, through which we can all hope to learn from one another.

Popper also stressed the importance of what he called 'metaphysical research programmes' – of the development of ideas about how we might hope to understand the world, and which could also serve to suggest the lines along which more specific scientific theories could be developed.<sup>16</sup> Not only may we see how useful – or otherwise – these ideas are in suggesting how the world might be understood. But they may also be appraised and assessed more directly. We may judge how sensible they are at explaining the problems in the field with which they are concerned, but we may also assess whether their attempts to explain things lead them into contradictions – either within their own ideas, or in terms of their clashing, unexpectedly, with other ideas which we wish to hold.

What is the status of these ideas of Popper's? Well, they are offered as suggestions about how we might appraise our ideas. It is not claimed that it can be demonstrated that they are correct, but, rather, they are offered as ideas which others should set about appraising, and trying to improve on.

If they were tentatively accepted, how might they help us in relation to spiritualism?

First of all, they would suggest that there is a lot that is wrong with how 'spiritual' phenomena have often been approached.<sup>17</sup> It certainly seems to be the case that a range of phenomena have been reported as occurring, which are not readily explained in terms of our common-sense knowledge, and our current knowledge in the sciences. But anything to do with mediums tends to come wrapped in an aura of credulity, and people's wish to believe – e.g. in the continuation, after



death of loved ones – seems to have led to a credulous acceptance of evidence of a kind which they would not accept as telling in other areas of their lives. (Or, if they would, would make them natural targets for confidence tricksters!) Mediums need to be open about the degree of uncertainty that attaches to their practises, and not to go fishing for spurious confirmations,<sup>18</sup> or resort to faking results if nothing happens. Rather, they should try to spell out what they take to be happening, take seriously anything that indicates that their ideas are not correct and need revising, and also take seriously – and attempt to find ways of testing between – cases in which their explanations, or messages from ‘spirit guides’, are at odds with one another.

It is perfectly possible that the conditions needed for the manifestation of psychic phenomena are such that these things cannot be tested under laboratory conditions. But if this is the case, we need to be offered explanations as to why this is so, and suggestions about alternative ways in which claims about these phenomena can be appraised. If it is the case that the manifestations of the powers of mediums vary at different times, and seem to fade over people’s lifetimes; fine. But again, we need to have suggestions offered as to why this is the case, and ideas developed about how these explanations can be tested or otherwise appraised. Above all, what the relation is supposed to be between what mediums report on, and our wider understanding of the world – from religious traditions, to our common-sense and scientific understanding of things – needs to be spelled out, and critically appraised. There is no problem if such an account, once it has been offered, turns out to be problematic: those interested in these things need, then, to admit what the problems are, and to try to offer better explanations.

Psychic research – i.e. the attempts to investigate phenomena such as extra-sensory perception, thought transference, and so on, under ‘scientific’ conditions – seems to me in principle a worthwhile enterprise, should people find such things interesting. But it has typically been influenced by poor ideas about the character of human knowledge. By this I mean that it has, on the one hand, not put a premium on inter-subjective testability (and, say, making sure that the work of enthusiastic proponents of the existence of psychic phenomena could be replicated by those who are sceptical). But perhaps even more

important, there has been a narrowly empiricist view of science – and thus a concern for the accumulation of empirical evidence, rather than their efforts being led by the development of theories about what might be taking place, and of empirical work consisting of attempts to critically appraise these theories. This would include theories to explain why it is that the performance of mediums and people involved in ‘thought transference’ seems itself to tail off, over time.

## **5. So, is anybody there?**

What is one to make of all this? I am not sure – in part, because it seems to me that how people have gone about the investigation of these phenomena has not followed what to me seem, currently, the best accounts of how we should study such things.

On the face of it, phenomena that we can’t currently explain certainly seem to occur. But what we are to make of them, does not seem clear. Further, I would echo Popper, and suggest that a real issue here is that nothing interesting seems to be being told to us about the universe or our place in it, at least so far. However, all our knowledge is fallible, and we should be open to the possibility that our current understandings of things – in common sense or science – are incomplete and possibly defective. We should be open to interesting ideas from any source – but should also stress that anything that is offered needs to be offered together with ideas as to how it might be appraised.

What, specifically, is going on? Well, people may have perceptions – even clear ones – which are incorrect. (I myself have a clear memory of having seen the Moon turn right round – something that I simply cannot explain.) In other cases, what we see is influenced by specific expectations and theories which may be incorrect. There may be ‘spiritual’ agencies at work in the world which we do not currently understand. But, as other religious traditions have suggested, if they are there, they are not necessarily benign. Alternatively, as Broad suggested, if human beings have capacities – of the kind with which psychic researchers have been concerned – these might offer an alternative explanation of some ‘spiritual’ ideas. For if such human powers exist, they could be things which may operate unconsciously and

thus be responsible for phenomena which currently are both unexplained and in some cases unwanted.

All told, there seems to me no reason why people should not make investigations in this area. But they need to pay attention to the fallibility of human knowledge, and the risk that 'confirmations' as such are worthless: all of us need to expose our ideas to critical appraisal by others whose views differ from our own, and to take seriously only ideas which withstand critical scrutiny. Above all, those interested in 'spiritual' and 'psychic' phenomena need to take ideas seriously: to spell out what they take to be going on, and to submit such theories to criticism. If they were to do that, more of us might find what they are doing more interesting than we do currently.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Kalvig, **The Rise of Contemporary Spiritualism: Concepts and controversies in talking to the dead**, London etc: Routledge, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Martineau, **Letters on Mesmerism**, London: Moxon, 1845.

<sup>3</sup> See the account in Alex Owen, **The Darkened Room**, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> See, on this, John Beloff, **Parapsychology: A Concise History**, London: Continuum, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See for an overview, and references,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Banks\\_Rhine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Banks_Rhine)

<sup>6</sup> He makes use of work from this field in his book **The Existence of Mind**, London: McGibbon and Kee, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> <https://koestlerunit.wordpress.com/research-overview/>

<sup>8</sup> 'The Relevance of Psychical Research to Philosophy', **Philosophy** 24, October 1949, pp. 291-309; the quotation is from p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> See the account at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/spiritualism/ataglance/glance.shtml>

<sup>10</sup> I.e. 'new age' devotees have been argued to select ideas and material which appeals to them subjectively, without any concern for the coherence of the different traditions upon which the different phenomena draw.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion of this in Kalvig.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of 'Spiritism' in **The Catholic Encyclopedia (1914)**: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14221a.htm>

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<sup>13</sup> Helen Sword's **Ghostwriting Modernism**, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002 has a chapter on 'spirit writing'. See also, for example, **Bertie: The Life After Death of H.G. Wells** by Elizabeth Hawley and Columbia Rossi, London: New English Library, 1974, which suggests to me that, if Wells survived death, his intellect certainly did not, and the Wikipedia article on 'Automatic writing':

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic\\_writing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic_writing). On music, see Melvyn J. Willin, **Paramusicology**, Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield, 1999, available at: <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/14778/1/299596.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.snu.org.uk/shop/animals-in-the-spirit-world>

<sup>15</sup> A useful brief overview of Popper's approach is offered in section 5 of 'Truth, Rationality and the Growth of Scientific Knowledge' in his **Conjectures and Refutations**, London: Routledge, 1963.

<sup>16</sup> A useful account of his views about these, is offered in his **Unended Quest**, London: Fontana, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> John Beloff's approach in his **Parapsychology: A Concise History** seems to me an important exception to this.

<sup>18</sup> As Popper argued, 'confirmations' are only interesting if they were the result of a serious attempt to refute one's ideas, or of a tough test of them.