

Book Review**Review of Deborah Blum's Book:
Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for
Scientific Proof of Life after Death**

Stephen P. Smith*

ABSTRACT

Psychical energy, even in its subtle form, is felt directly when our affections are found conflicted. Deborah Blum's "Ghost Hunters" provides many examples of conflicted affection, both in the positive and in the negative. You can find this book at Amazon http://www.amazon.com/Ghost-Hunters-William-Search-Scientific/dp/0143038958/ref=cm_cr-mr-title.

Key Words: William James, life after death, psychical energy, spirituality.

In the positive form, a dominant science is found expressing an outward arrogance; while concealing this very act of deception imposed to their own person (a self deception). For example, Charles Darwin discovered his theory of evolution by natural selection, and he found himself arrogantly extending his theory into areas of mind thereby replacing spirituality. Blum tells us that Alfred Russel Wallace co-founded this same theory, but Wallace expressed a more balanced sensibility. Eventually Wallace turned from dogmatic science, and became interested in spiritualism. Blum (page 40) writes: "As Charles Darwin promptly warned him, Wallace was sending the wrong message to their critics and lending unwarranted credibility to the concept of spirit powers. Darwin feared that Wallace now gave the impression that one of evolution theory's founders had abandoned science in favor of superstition."

The arrogance coming from the most vocal scientists was widespread in this day. Blum (page 54) quotes the gifted scientists John Tyndall saying: "the impregnable position of science may be described in a few words. We claim, and we shall wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory. All schemes and systems which thus infringe upon the domain of science must, in so far as they do this, submit to its control, and relinquish all thought of controlling it." Nevertheless, more free minded scientists, like Wallace, became interested in study of the paranormal.

In its negative form, conflicted affection may express an outward deception; while concealing an inside self arrogance. Most of the mediums that touted their powers of the paranormal were discovered to be frauds. And the free-minded scientists, such as Wallace and William Crookes, were most vulnerable to this deception. Crookes was taken by the beauty of Anna Eva Fay, concluding a successful test of her presumed skills. But Henry Sidgwick, Fred Myers and others, saw through the deceit. Blum (page 61) writes: "the Sidgwick group was reaching a new awareness -- that in their smug sense of superior intelligence and capabilities, trained scientists did not always see what was obvious to others. " Meyers was quoted (Blum, page 119): "There are natures ... which stand so far removed from the meaner temptations of humanity that those gifted at birth can no more enter into the true mind of a cheat than I can enter into the true mind of a chimpanzee."

Correspondence: Stephen P. Smith, Ph.D., Visiting Scientist, Physics Department, University Of California at Davis, CA
E-mail: hucklebird@aol.com

Our conflicted affections in the positive and negative are sense-certain, and these temptations must be outgrown to reach a genuine psychical awareness. Psychical energy as a power must be met with a brutal honesty. Otherwise, we will be confused by our own affections, seeing only what we want to see. Daniel Dunglas Home was thought to be such an honest medium, presumably he transcended above the temptations offered by his affections (which might explain his talent). Blum tells us that Home's "Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism" exposed the treachery of deception coming from supposed mediums. But this enlightened view could not be accepted by Crookes who became involved with yet another female medium. Ironically, it was Home that first impressed Crookes with spiritualism, yet the subtleness offered by psychical energy found its escape.

Blum tells us that the psychic researcher, Edmund Gurney, interacted closely with the famous philosopher and professor of psychiatry, William James. Gurney was to write "Phantasms of the Living". James had a first encounter (among many more) with the famed medium, Leonore Evelina Piper. Piper seemed to communicate the details of a tragedy that fell on James, the death of his own son Herman.

Blum (pages 158-159) writes: "In the debate over whether the scientific worldview should replace religion, [Darwinist] Huxley considered the answer already given. It had. William James, Henry Sidgwick, and their fellows, although they also counted themselves as rationalists, could not go nearly so far. To exclude from reality anything not demonstrated through the scientific method was to accept on faith, they would argue, that there is no reality beyond what a select group of people (on an insignificant planet) say is so. To deny the existence of the spirit--without thoroughly exhausting the subject through dogged research--to accept such arbitrary limits, was to them a prejudicial view, closed-minded and unscientific."

Blum (page 169) writes: " In this landmark psychology text [Principles of Psychology], James discussed trance personalities, telepathy, spirit possession, even Leonora Piper. He didn't, as Alfred Russel Wallace had done, declare psychic phenomena to be proven laws of nature. But he did emphasize that if one wished to understand the human mind, it was necessary also to understand why such phenomena were seen and experienced by so many people."

Blum (page 223) writes about spirit utterances coming from Piper: "If Mrs. Piper didn't cheat--and no evidence yet existed that she did--then it was still unclear to James how she accessed the information revealed in her trances. He continued to believe that she possessed some exceptional power; he continued to have no idea exactly what that power might be."

James was exceedingly fair-minded, and Piper was principled and honest [...]. And therefore, it is not surprising that the James-Piper interacting led to the greatest expression of psychical energy. Much of what Blum writes is about this unique interaction between two very rare talents. But what springs between them was meant to escape among the many (including the returning spirit of Richard Hodgson), leaving a feeling as it goes. Otherwise, the caricatures will confuse even the strongest mind.

References

Jesper Hoffmeyer, 2007, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*. Penguin.