

Nobel Prize Winner

Discusses Mediumship Research



above: Dr. Charles Richet

Winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Medicine, Dr. Charles Richet (1850-1935) was a physiologist, chemist, bacteriologist, pathologist, psychologist, aviation pioneer, poet, novelist, editor, author, and psychical researcher. After receiving his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1869 and his Doctor of Science in 1878, he served as professor of physiology at the medical school of the University of Paris for 38 years.

Richet was awarded the Nobel Prize for his research on anaphylaxis, the sensitivity of the body to alien protein substance. He also contributed much to research on the nervous system, anesthesia, serum therapy, and neuro-muscular stimuli. He served as editor of the *Revue Scientifique* for 24 years and contributed to many other scientific publications.

After attending experiments in Milan with medium Eusapia Palladino in 1884, Richet began taking an active interest in psychical research. He befriended many of the top psychical researchers of the day, including Frederic W. H. Myers, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Dr. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. In addition to Palladino, he studied Marthe Béraud (Eva C.), William Eglinton, Stephan Ossowiecki, Elisabeth D'Esperance, and others. He served as president of the Society for Psychical Research of London in 1905.

While clearly accepting the reality of mediumship and other psychic phenomena, Richet remained skeptical as to whether the evidence suggested spirits and survival.

"I oppose it (spirit hypothesis) half-heartedly, for I am quite unable to bring forward any wholly satisfactory counter-theory," he wrote. Publicly, he leaned toward a physiological explanation, but privately, at least in his later years, he apparently

accepted the spirit hypothesis as the best explanation,

This "interview" is based on Richet's 1923 book, *Thirty Years of Psychical Research*.

Except for word in brackets, inserted to provide a transition or flow, the words are his. The questions have been tailored to fit the answers. I did the "interview" for the current issue of the Journal of Spirituality and Paranormal Studies, a quarterly publication of the Academy of Spirituality and Paranormal Studies, Inc. The Academy is holding its 33rd annual conference at DeSales University, Center Valley, PA May 30 to June 2. The theme is "Beyond the Veil: Evidence for Life After Death." There's still time to sign up for the conference. For more information, go to <http://aspsi.org/> or e-mail bateyb@infionline.net

Dr. Richet, your book is dedicated to Sir William Crookes and Frederic W. H. Myers. I gather, however, that when Sir William was reporting on his research with D. D. Home and Florence Cook back during the early 1870s, you did not have a particularly high opinion of him.

"[True], the idolatry of current ideas was so dominant at that time that no pains were taken either to verify or to refute Crookes's statements. Men were content to ridicule them, and I avow with shame that I was among the willfully blind. Instead of admiring the heroism of a recognized man of science who dare then in 1872 to say that there really are phantoms that can be photographed and whose heartbeats can be heard, I laughed. This courage had, however, no immediate or considerable effect; it is only today that Crookes's work is really understood. It is still the foundation of objective metapsychics, a block of granite that no criticism has been able to touch."

Would you mind explaining the difference between objective and subjective metapsychics?

"Objective metapsychics deals with certain mechanical, physical, or chemical effects perceptible to our senses, not proceeding from known forces, but seemingly directed by intelligence. It states, classifies, and analyzes these material phenomena. Subjective metaphysics studies those phenomena that are purely intellectual. These are characterized by an indication of some realities that are not revealed by our senses. Everything takes place as if we had a mysterious faculty of cognition - lucidity - was the classical physiology of sensation cannot as yet explain. I propose to call this faculty cryptestheisa, i.e., a sensibility whose nature escapes us. Frequently, the phenomena pertain to both kinds and it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between them."

Thank you for that clarification, Dr. Richet. I would like to focus this interview more on the objective as I know you have had considerable experience with materialization phenomena. Who are the best among these objective or physical mediums?

"To mention Home, Florence Cook, Stainton Moses, Eusapia, Mme. D'Espérance, Eglinton, Linda Gazzera, Slade, Marthe Béraud, Miss Goligher, and Stanislaw Tomczyk is to name nearly all; it is obvious that they are but few. The number of those who give raps is very much larger, but I have no statistics regarding them."

With the possible exception of Home and Moses, all of those you just mentioned have been accused of fraud at one time or another.

"Unfortunately physical mediums often misuse their powers; they think to enrich themselves and give public séances for profit. The Fox sisters, the Davenport brothers, Eglinton, and Slade all did this, and from thence to fraud is but a step that has often been taken, so that professional mediums of this class are always to be looked upon with suspicion and the most rigid precautions must always be taken against trickery. Indeed, this is always necessary, even when there is no possible suspicion of conscious fraud."

Conscious as opposed to unconscious fraud?

"We have defined metapsychics as the science whose subject matter is phenomena which seem to arise from an intelligence other than the human intelligence. Mediums are therefore those persons who, in partial or total unconsciousness, speak words perform actions, and make gestures that seem not to be under control of their will and to be independent of their intelligence. Nevertheless, these unconscious phenomena show intelligence and system, and are sometimes most aptly coordinated. Therefore, the first thing to be discovered is whether they are due to a human or to a super-human intelligence."

So you are agreeing with Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir William Barrett, both of whom concluded that various movements on the part of the medium which have been interpreted as cheating or fraud are in fact prompted by the controlling intelligence and are involuntary movements as far as the medium is concerned?

"[Exactly], trance turns them into automata that have but a very slight control over their muscular movements. When a medium is nearly or quite insensible, his eyes shut, sweating and making convulsive movements, unable to answer any questions put to him, I do not think he ought to be reproached for anything he may do. He is not himself; he has not that poised and quiet consciousness which can

decided between right and wrong. He has forgotten who he is and what he ought to do."

But, clearly there has been much conscious fraud?

"[No doubt], completely criminal are such acts as those of Eldred or Mrs. Williams preparing paraphernalia for deliberate fraud, hidden in a chair or upon their person; this is radically different from the suspicious movements of an entranced medium."

Your reports talk about ectoplasmic arms extending from Eusapia and touching sitters or moving objects.

"[Yes], the ectoplasmic arms and hands that emerge from the body of Eusapia do only what they wish, and though Eusapia knows what they do, they are not directed by Eusapia's will; or rather there is for the moment no Eusapia. It is also quite easy to understand that when exhausted by a long and fruitless séance, and surrounded by a number of sitters eager to see something, a medium whose consciousness is still partly in abeyance may give the push that he hopes will start the phenomena....There is a quasi-identity between the medium and the ectoplasm, so that when an attempt is made to seize the latter, a limb of the medium may be grasped; though I make a definite and formal protest against this frequent defense of doubtful phenomena by spiritualists. More frequently, the ectoplasm is independent of the medium, indeed perhaps it is always so; though I do not mean to imply that the severance or capture of the ectoplasm can be effected without danger to the medium. The case of Mme. D'Espérance is on record to show that a medium may incur a long illness by reason of such an attempt."

I recall reading that there was much of this cheating that really wasn't cheating going on when you, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Frederic Myers studied Eusapia at Ribaud Island.

"At Ribaud Island, experimenting with Eusapia in company with Sir Oliver Lodge, Frederic Myers, and J. Ochorowicz - three objective observers whose competence and honesty cannot be called into question - I held one of Eusapia's hands firmly in each of mine. I then felt a third hand touch my shoulder, my head, and my face. This was not in darkness; there was a lighted candle in the room. All kinds of absurd hypotheses must here be eliminated: first that I was hallucinated - that is, disposed of by the fact that the slap on the shoulder given by 'John King' (Eusapia's spirit control or guide) was heard by all present; then that Myers, Lodge, or Ochorowicz should have perpetrated this bad joke; then that I had let go of one of Eusapia's hands, which could not be, for my friends could all see her hands held far apart, one in each of mine. Further, the same phenomenon of the materialization of a hand while Eusapia's hands were held separate by one person has been observed by Oliver Lodge, by Myers, and by Ochorowicz."

Would you mind explaining a little more about the séances with Eusapia?

"Provisionally, the sequence of materialization phenomena, as observed with Eusapia, may be stated as follows: At first, touches and raps produced both easily and frequently; this is the first stage, in which nothing is visible, for the material energy disengaged from her body is formless. In the second stage the hand is formed, but still cannot be seen, though it can execute well-defined mechanical actions, can take hold of a bell or book, and can touch one's head with fingers that are felt to be warm and jointed. Finally, in the third stage, which was rarely reached in my experiments with Eusapia, the hand becomes visible and can be photographed. In a still rarer, fourth stage, not only a hand but a whole body is formed and detached. Vassallo, Porro, Morselli, and Bottazzi have been able to witness these complete materializations. [And], luminous phenomena are relatively frequent."

History has not been particularly kind to Eusapia and others you mentioned earlier, treating them as either charlatans or as a mixed mediums (producing both genuine phenomena and fraudulent phenomena).

"Even if there were no other medium than Eusapia in the world, her manifestations would suffice to establish scientifically the reality of telekinesis and ectoplasmic forms... A powerful medium is a very delicate instrument of whose secret springs we know nothing, and clumsy handling may easily disorganize its working. It is best to allow the phenomena to develop in their own way without any attempt at guidance. It is probably a great mistake to try to educate mediumship...Mediums have not hitherto been treated with justice; they have been slandered, ridiculed, and vilified. They have been treated as *animæ viles* for experiment. When their faculties faded away they have been left to die in obscurity and want; when rewarded it has been with a niggardly hand, giving them to understand that they are only instruments. It is time that this inhuman treatment should cease."

But you observed much more dramatic phenomena with Marthe Béraud, correct?

"[Correct], the materializations given by Marthe Béraud are of the highest importance. They have presented numerous facts illustrating the general *processus* of materializations and have supplied metapsychic science with entirely new and unforeseen data...[Marthe is] the daughter of an officer, betrothed to General Noel's son, who died in the Congo before the marriage. She is a very intelligent and lively young lady, wears her hair short, and is a bright-eyed brunette...The first experiments at which I was present [in Algiers] impressed me greatly, but I always distrust first impressions. In the following year, I returned to Algiers resolved to repeat experiments under more rigorous conditions."

Please tell me what you observed on the second trip.

"The materializations produced were very complete. The phantoms of Bien Boa appeared five or six times under satisfactory conditions in the sense that he could not be Marthe masquerading in a helmet and sheet. Marthe would have had not only to bring, but also to conceal afterwards, the helmet, the sheet, and the burnous (hooded cloak worn by Arabs). Also Marthe and the phantom were both seen at the same time. To pretend that Bien Boa was a doll is more absurd still; he walked and moved, his eyes could be seen looking around, and when he tried to speak his lips moved. He seemed so much alive that, as we could hear his breathing, I took a flask of baryta water to see if his breath would show carbon dioxide. The experiment succeeded. I did not lose sight of the flask from the moment when I put it into the hands of Bien Boa who seemed to float in the air on the left of the curtain at a height greater than Marthe could have been even if standing up. While he blew into the tube the bubbling could be heard and I asked Delanne (editor of *Revue de Spiritisme*), 'Do you see Marthe?' He said, 'I see Marthe completely.'"

I know you said the room was checked and you were certain that nobody else could enter, but isn't it possible that Bien Boa was a confederate hiding in the materialization cabinet or some secret entrance or trap door into the room?

"It is absolutely impossible that this phantom should be a stranger invading the cabinet; and it is impossible that Marthe could have invested herself with a helmet and sheet, and induced at the same time the white cloud in front of the curtain. Everything happens as though fluidic vapour emerged from her head and her right side, masking both, and rising into the air without any means of support but her head and body."

I believe you reported an even more dramatic materialization with Marthe, didn't you?

"However striking [that experiment] was, another experiment seems to me even more evidential: Everything being arranged as usual, after a long wait I saw close to me, in front of the curtain which had not moved, a white vapour, hardly sixteen inches distant. It was like a white veil or handkerchief on the floor. This rose and became spherical. Soon it was a head just above the floor; it rose up still more, enlarged, and grew into a human form, a short bearded man dressed in a turban and white mantle, who moved, limping slightly, from right to left before the curtain. On coming close to General Noel, he sank down abruptly to the floor with a clicking noise like a falling skeleton, flattening out in front of the curtain. Three or four

minutes later, close to the general, not to me, he reappeared, rising in a straight line from the floor, born from the floor, so to say, and falling back to it with the same clicking noise."

I know the cabinet is required for the materialization to take place in complete darkness, but it still sounds so hokey to the skeptic.

"It seems to me impossible, however slight and supple Marthe may be, that she should creep under the curtain without disturbing it and give the illusion of a person rising straight from the floor; and how can the head, standing as if decapitated, be explained, and the sinking into the floor afterwards, when very shortly after we saw Marthe sitting quietly in her chair, asleep. Several photographs were taken by Delanne and myself, stereoscopic and other. They show some interesting details on which Sir Oliver Lodge has made some acute criticisms, saying that they were the best metapsychic photographs that he had seen."

These so-called ectoplasmic figures are often quite ridiculous looking and it is easy to assume that they are some kind of dolls. Of course, it is difficult to understand why a fraudulent medium would think she or he could dupe anyone with something that doesn't even resemble a human form.

"[True], it is imagined, quite mistakenly, that a materialization must be analogous to a human body and must be three dimensional. This is not so. There is nothing to prove that the process of materialization is other than a development of a completed form after a first stage of coarse and rudimentary lineaments form from the cloudy substance. The moist, gelatinous, and semi-luminous extensions that come from the mouth of Marthe are embryonic formations which tend towards organization without immediately attaining it.

What exactly is ectoplasm? The skeptics would say that it nothing but cheesecloth stuffed into some cavity of the medium and then exuded at an opportune time.

"The word 'ectoplasm,' which I invented for the experiments with Eusapia, seems entirely justified...Thanks to Ochorowicz, Schrenck-Notzing, and Mme. Bisson, and Crawford, who carried on Crookes's work, it seems now fairly proved that materializations are ectoplasms; that is, sarcodic extensions emanating from the body of a medium, precisely as a pseudopod from an amoeboid cell. All zoologists are aware that an amoeba can project a sarcode to seize upon alimentary matter and infest it. In a similar fashion fluidic filaments or extensions like clouds, veils, or stems may proceed from the body of the entranced medium, can then become organic, and take on the semblance of human limbs and occasionally of whole bodies...The ectoplasm is a kind of gelatinous protoplasm, formless at first, that

exudes from the body of the medium, and takes form later. This embryo-genesis of materialization shows clearly on nearly all the photographs. In the early stages there are always white veils and milky patches and the faces, fingers, and drawings are formed little by little in the midst of this kind of gelatinous paste that resembles moist and sticky muslin...[I observed] gelatinous projections come from the mouth or shoulders of Marthe. I saw the arm of Bien Boa formed in this way. At first it resembled a thin, rigid rod covered with drapery and became a stretched-out arm. The same phenomenon was very clearly observable with Eusapia. A kind of supplementary arm seemed to come from her body. Once I saw a long, stiff rod proceed from her side, which after great extension had a hand at its extremity - a living hand warm and jointed, absolutely like a human hand."

I'm confused on something here. Is ectoplasm always visible?

"In their first stage these ectoplasms are invisible, but can move objects and can give raps on a table. Later on they become visible though nebulous and sketchy. Still later, they take human form, for they have the extraordinary property that they change their forms and their consistence and evolve under our eyes. In a few seconds, the nebulous embryo that exudes from the body of the medium becomes an actual being; though the human ovum requires thirty years to evolve into the adult form. Sometimes the phantom appears suddenly, without passing through the phase of luminous cloud; but this phenomenon is probably of the same order as the slower development. This ectoplasmic formation at the expense of the physiological organism of the medium is now beyond all dispute. It is prodigiously strange, prodigiously unusual, and it would seem so unlikely as to be incredible; but we must give in to the facts."

Doesn't the materialization of garments discredit the hypothesis that a deceased human is materializing?

"What about the astral presentment of a garment, a hat, an eye-glass, or a walking-stick? This is the height of folly. It seems to me much wiser to verify without pretending to understand, and to admit that any explanation we can give can hardly escape being ridiculous. Instead of claiming that unknown powers pertaining to deceased humanity are capable of producing these phenomena, it is better to admit that we are dealing with facts as yet inexplicable, and await further elucidation. But there is no reason to deny a fact because it is inexplicable. Can anyone have the unpardonable presumption to claim to give an adequate explanation of all natural phenomena? In metapsychics we come up against the inexplicable at every turn."

In spite of your standing in the scientific community, mainstream science doesn't seem to accept the research on ectoplasm.

"Assuredly, it is possible that I may be mistaken, even grossly mistaken, along with Crookes, De Rochas, Aksakoff, Myers, William James, Schiaparelli, Zöllner, Fechner, and Oliver Lodge. It is possible that all of us have been deceived. It is possible that some day an unexpected experiment may explain our prolonged deception quite simply. So be it! But till it has been explained how we have all been duped by an illusion, I claim that the reality of these materializations must be conceded...What man of science worthy of the name could affirm that science has classified, analyzed, and penetrated all the energies of immeasurable nature, or could make the strange and pretentious claim that we know all the dynamic manifestations in the world! To admit telekinesis and ectoplasms is not to destroy even the smallest fragment of science; it is but to admit new data, and that there are unknown energies. Then why be indignant, when, on the basis of thousands of observations and experiments, we affirm one of those unknown energies?"

You've often used the word "absurd" when referring to the various phenomena.

"Yes, it is absurd; but no matter - it is true."