

Review of *William James: Psychological Research and the Challenge of Modernity*, by Krister Dylan Knapp. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 400 pp. \$39.95.

William James said that he was against “bigness” in all of its forms, which would imply being against bigness in corporations and government, for example. It might also imply that he’s against bigness in theories. *Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity* seems to present an ambitious interpretation of James’s career. Yet while doing so it presents many smaller but very useful insights about some misunderstood details of James’s life and philosophy. The overall impression is that of a solid work of scholarship that perhaps tries a bit too hard to tidy up the wild strands of James’s life and philosophy into one interpretation, namely that James was always working with a *tertium quid* (“third thing”) method.

Krister Knapp works diligently and admirably to draw out some very useful points for both James scholars and those interested in psychical research more generally. For example, to correct any misunderstandings about the relationship between James and his father in this regard, Knapp argues that the elder Henry James was actually not a fan of spiritualism, at least as it was generally practiced at the time. Knapp shows that Henry James Sr. saw the business as “a too easy path . . . that circumvented revelation with a quick and direct method—the séance—that did not require any effort on the sitter’s part.”¹ Personally, I am not even convinced that

Henry James, in the author's words, "admitted freely that spirits from the other world existed and operated in this one."² Henry James's writings on Swedenborg are philosophical and non-devotional, as if he were merely creating his own naturalistic, socialist philosophy from the texts. Yet Knapp is nonetheless right, and offers that Henry James believed "spiritualism must be useful to be valuable."³

Knapp's work is also useful for understanding the extent to which psychical research was part of James's career. Knapp notes that James's notorious decade-long lag in writing *The Principles of Psychology* was due not to laziness (or better yet, not *just* due to laziness) but rather to a concurrent engagement with the strenuous groundwork of psychical research. Knapp says James wanted to work on *The Principles*, but he "found psychical research much too absorbing, its work much too demanding, and its potential for a major breakthrough in mapping the human psyche much too great to keep that resolution."⁴ This helps us to understand that psychical research was more than just a quirky hobby for James but was integral to his career—for better or worse.

James's psychical research is almost as befuddling to James scholars as the psychical research itself was to him. This is why it is understandable in terms of general scholarship that the author sticks to an overarching *tertium quid* theory when interpreting James for us, but it is not clear that in James's case this is useful. The author concludes many of his topics by reiterating how they fit into the *tertium quid* method, yet it is not always clear to me that the meaning of *tertium quid* is fixed throughout the book. The author rejects the term as referring to an Aristotelian compromise, yet the general sense that comes from reading about James's interactions with scientists and religious people is that this is what he is trying to do.⁵ That might make sense, but it would interest largely only those who focus on academic organizational history and its applications for the current maintenance of academic organizations. When Knapp uses the term to reference more specifically philosophical matters, James starts to seem like a third-way political thinker. And insofar as James

approaches the philosophical equivalent of Tony Blair, he becomes less interesting. As Knapp describes it, the meaning of *tertium quid*

has evolved over time to include both the composite of two other things and some third option distinct from the first two choices. James' *tertium quid* method of inquiry reflected this more modern meaning that combined the positive elements of both extremes while filtering out the negative ones to create a distinct new position . . .⁶

The problem here could be the terms “extremes” and “filtering out.” Extremes, in philosophy and politics, are defined from what is taken to be the center, which is considered moderate and good. But James loved the extremes, and we love him for that. If he was trying to do the *tertium quid* for any other reason than just to help members of the Society for Psychical Research get along, James becomes more understandable, but, again, less interesting.

James loved looking at the big picture as much as any other philosopher, but he loved it only insofar as innumerable little things filled this bigness. As Knapp proceeds through the book, he swaths *tertium quid* over this picture so often that one is mischievously inclined to draw, as did James for his father, a picture of a man beating a dead horse. It is genuinely interesting to read Knapp, noting, for example, the extent to which James felt embarrassed whenever physical medium Eusapia Palladino was caught doing trickery. But then the author does not help James when he tries to explain the problem. In continuing to believe in the eventual verity of the Palladino phenomena, the author says “James’ position was unpragmatic” and “one of the very few times he betrayed his *tertium quid* method of inquiry in favor of a dogmatic one.” And according to Knapp, this represents “how difficult it was for James to defend his *tertium quid* approach over the decades.”⁷ Yet it is Knapp, more than James, who is defending the *tertium quid*.

However, if we step away from the *tertium quid*, we can still see that Knapp’s scholarship is diligent and skillful. *Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity* is a well-written work,

full of interesting and useful insights into the borderline madness of James's psychical research. It is important to highlight this appropriately in James studies since, as Knapp argues so well throughout this book, psychical research informs James's philosophy and psychology in ways that we cannot ignore. Knapp's work is useful largely because it does well in bringing out some questions important for the study of James. Was William James a figure for compromise and the preservation of a centrist *status quo*? Or was he searching for some new type of stability? Or was he neither, a perpetual disruptor of stability? I tend to favor James as a perpetual disruptor, a destabilizer of bigness in all of its forms, and, accordingly, I suggest breaking up James and letting him move through the history of philosophy like the sundry wisps of consciousness that he studied.

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NOTES

¹ Krister Dylan Knapp, *William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 42.

² Knapp, 38.

³ Knapp, 38.

⁴ Knapp, 125.

⁵ Knapp, 6.

⁶ Knapp, 6.

⁷ Knapp, 289.