



# The History of Parapsychology

## Three Major Events That Spurred Parapsychology into Existence



1. The Fox Sisters (1847): Kate and Margaret Fox in Hydesville, NY “make contact” with supposed spirits. The sisters would ask questions and receive knocking responses in response to their questions. These events were popularized by the Fox sisters, who claimed that they could contact the dead. Subsequent demonstrations produced PK, manifestation of phantom limbs and objects, and the sisters eventually engaged in mental mediumship, claiming to go into a trance that allowed the dead speak through them. The

Fox Sisters were the public beginnings of Spiritualism, the belief that the living could contact the dead. Séances and Mediums became prominent in English-speaking countries. It is estimated that, at the time, almost nine million people were part of the Spiritualist movement, which still exists today.

2. Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910): Eddy was a founder of Christian Science. In part, the foundation of Christian Science was formed within and in contrast to the Spiritualist Movement. However, Eddy’s involvement with Spiritualists played a role in the continuation of the religion/movement.
3. The Occult Revolution: In England, a new interest in magical practice and occultism sprang forth from spiritualism. Most prominent was the foundation of the Golden Dawn, a secret society that contained several famous members. Most famous of this founding group was Aleister Crowley, popularized in British media as “the beast.”



## Science Begins to Investigate: the Séances of D.D. Home

William Crookes was one of the first Victorian Scientists to examine séances with the consent of the Medium D.D. Home. Home was reported to be able to move objects with his mind and handle hot coals without being burned. Crookes placed Home in controlled conditions during a series of studies during the 1870s. Crookes claimed that Home was able to produce paranormal phenomena under controlled conditions. Home remains one of the few mediums who produced almost fantastical phenomena and was never successfully debunked (Braude, 1997).



### The Beginning of the Backlash of Science

However, after publication, stern criticism was placed on Crookes for his conclusions. At the time, and to a lesser extent than today, the philosophy of Materialism had become predominant in scientific practice. Materialism is a form of philosophical monism, which holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all phenomena, including mental phenomena and consciousness, are results of material interactions. **Materialism** is closely related to **physicalism**, the view that all that exists is ultimately physical. We note here that there are other related philosophies of science, but a discussion of these is too in depth to include here.

Paranormal phenomena had no place in a philosophy of science that involved accepting only that which was imminently observable and mandates that all operations of the universe must ultimately reside in some type of material interaction.



*Side Note: Materialism and Skepticism. Even today, parapsychology often suffers from prejudice and skepticism within mainstream science. Some of this bias is the result of scientists holding onto tenets or variant philosophies of science or often a poor understanding of the philosophy of science. However, quantum physics in many ways has invalidated these viewpoints. As a normal example, Wikipedia, despite abundant evidence, will not allow parapsychologists to edit their highly inaccurate and pseudo-skeptical entry on parapsychology.*



*Side Note: Parapsychology: The Prodigal Son of Psychology. The field of psychology was in its infancy at the time of the birth and spread of spiritualism. As a result, newspaper advertisements would often confuse spiritualist séances with psychologists. The strategy of early psychology was to investigate these claims in order to distinguish themselves from the practices of mediums. However, by the 1920s, psychology essentially disavowed the study of paranormal phenomena, along with the psychological study of religion. Whereas in the last several decades Social Psychology and Sociology re-embraced the study of religion, Parapsychology has remained outside the official recognition of the American Psychological Association.*



## The First Society of Scientists: The Society for Psychical Research



As a result of Crooke's negative reception by other scientists, spiritualist and writer Edmund Rogers proposed the formation of a society of scientists and professionals dedicated to the study of paranormal phenomena. Reaching out to several respected colleagues, the Society for Psychical Research was founded in England in 1882. Founding members included Henry Sidgwick, Frederic Myers, Edmund Gurney, Eleanor Sidgwick, Gerald Balfour, and Arthur Balfour. Future members included Sir William Crookes, Sir William Barrett, and Sir Joseph John Thompson. The SPR persists

today and continues to publish peer-reviewed research in its journal.

In 1885, William James, one of the early founders of psychology, started the ASPR, the American Society for Psychical Research. Unfortunately, the ASPR closed its doors and journal in the 1980s.

## Parapsychology Spreads



With the birth of the SPR and ASPR, parapsychology began to spread to America and across Europe. Highlights includes:

1884: Parapsychology Laboratory Research begins and starts using empirical statistics and mathematics to study possible claims of the paranormal and psychic phenomena. Examples include Charles Richet studies into psychic powers and John Coover's publication of ESP studies in 1917.

1927: William McDougall and J.B. Rhine set up a Parapsychology

Laboratory at Duke University. Rhine becomes a cornerstone of ESP and PK laboratory research over the next several decades.

1937: JB Rhine starts the Journal of Parapsychology, which is still in existence today and outdates many mainstream psychology journals.

1966: The Maimonides Dream Laboratory is formed to study possible psychic experiences while dreaming.

1974: Stanford Research Institute examines the possibility of remote viewing.

1979: Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Laboratory is formed to study PK.

During the 1980s in Europe, several academic institutions are formed to study parapsychology



including:

University of Bristol, Koestler Parapsychology Unit in Edinburg, University of Utrecht (Netherlands), University of Amsterdam (Netherlands), (L'institut Metapsychique Internationale) Paris, University of Gothenburg Sweden, Grenzgebiete der Psychologie and Psychohygiene in Freiburg Germany.

### America Becomes Anti-Parapsychology, Europe Expands Parapsychology



Unfortunately, most of the academic institutions in America that supported parapsychology ceased to do so. For the most part, parapsychology is now researched only in private institutions. Examples include the Institute of Noetic Sciences, the Rhine Center (The Parapsychology lab at Duke went private), and a few individual researchers maintain jobs at universities. One exception is the Division of Perceptual Studies (University of Virginia).

Europe has remained more open minded, and additional university programs have opened in the University of Edinburgh, University of Goldsmiths, and University of London. Likewise, due to the postgraduate work of the Koestler, graduated scientists have opened parapsychology research at the University of Northampton, University of Hertfordshire, and University of Greenwich.

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