



HOW MARTIN GARDNER BAMBOOZLED THE SKEPTICS



A LESSON IN TRUSTING A MAGICIAN

by *Greg Taylor*

The modern skeptical ‘movement’ has grown and thrived in recent years to the point where the public generally views self-appointed ‘skeptics’ as arbiters of the truth and defenders of rational thought. But how much of what they say can we really trust as being objective truth? Are self-described skeptics championing critical thinking, or are they simply defending one particular worldview? The late Marcello Truzzi came to think so: despite being the co-founding chairman of the influential skeptical group CSICOP (the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), Truzzi soon became disillusioned with the organization, saying they “tend to block honest inquiry, in my opinion... Most of them are not agnostic toward claims of the paranormal; they are out to knock them.” Truzzi claimed that by

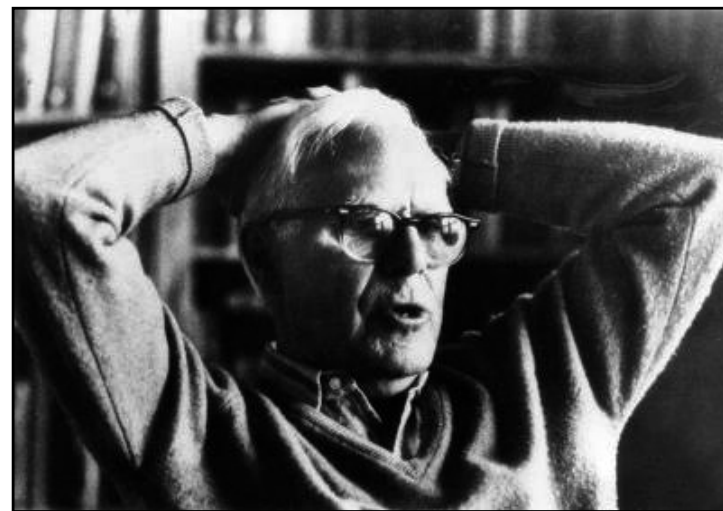
using the title of ‘skeptic’, biased debunkers had claimed an authority that they were not entitled to, opining that “critics who take the negative rather than an agnostic position but still call themselves ‘skeptics’ are actually pseudo-skeptics and have, I believed, gained a false advantage by usurping that label.”¹ Should we be more skeptical of the skeptics?

If there is one skeptic who stands above all others in terms of being regarded as an authoritative voice, it must surely be Martin Gardner. Through the course of his life, Gardner – who passed away aged 95 in May 2010 – published more than seventy books on such diverse topics as mathematics, science, philosophy, literature and skepticism. For a quarter of a century he was also the writer of the ‘Mathematical Games’ column in *Scientific American*, and as a consequence he has influenced many of the modern day’s top academics in the hard sciences. His opinion therefore commands much respect from intellectuals. Every two years a ‘Gathering for Gardner’ is held to celebrate his lifelong contributions (to maths in particular), and has been attended by the likes of Stephen Wolfram and John Conway. Douglas Hofstadter described Gardner as “one of the great intellects produced in this country in this century,” and Arthur C. Clarke once labeled him a “national treasure.”

Gardner has also long been one of the major voices in the skeptical movement; George Hansen describes him as “the single most powerful critic of the paranormal in the second half of the 20th century”. Gardner was writing ‘skeptical’ books long before the modern movement ‘began’ in earnest with the inception of CSICOP (now known as CSI) in the 1970s – his seminal deconstruction of pseudoscience, *In the Name of Science* (later renamed *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*), had been published two decades previous in 1952. Gardner’s antipathy towards the supernatural was perhaps a natural outgrowth of his academic interests, skepticism, proficiency and understanding of conjuring techniques, and – improbably – his religious beliefs. Gardner was not a Christian, but he did believe in

God; a primary motivation for his criticisms of parapsychology might be found in an essay he wrote titled “Prayer: Why I Do Not Think It Foolish”, in which he says “I am among those theists who, in the spirit of Jesus’ remark that only the faithless look for signs, consider such tests both futile and blasphemous... Let us not tempt God”.² Nevertheless, Gardner’s esteemed standing amongst academics has allowed his skeptical writings to be widely accepted as the final word on controversial topics. In the words of Stephen Jay Gould: “For more than half a century, Martin Gardner has been the single brightest beacon defending rationality and good science against the mysticism and anti-intellectualism that surrounds us.”

As an example of Gardner’s influence on discourse about paranormal topics, consider the reference to one of his essays in the *New York Times* review of Deborah Blum’s book *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*. Blum’s book tells the (partial) story of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) – a group of academics, including the likes of William James, Sir William Crookes and Sir Oliver Lodge, who came together in the



Martin Gardner

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late 19th century to try to solve the question of life after death – and its investigation of Mrs. Leonora Piper, one of the most successful mediums of modern times. Anthony Gottlieb’s *New York Times* review suggests that Blum might have taken a different view of Mrs. Piper’s mediumship if she had read Martin Gardner’s critique of the SPR’s research prior to writing *Ghost Hunters*:

The book is peppered with narratives reporting ghost stories and seances. Blum writes that these are “derived from” documents, often from the society’s archives, although the telling of them is her own. But these narratives obscure the methods that mediums like Mrs. Piper used – methods that have been explained by debunkers like Martin Gardner, who in 1992 published a long exposé called “How Mrs. Piper Bamboozled William James.” For example, Blum’s ghost narratives do not show, as Gardner did, how Mrs. Piper fished for information by gauging her sitters’ responses to all her wrong answers, or mined the information available from earlier sittings, from sittings with others and from things said while her sitters believed she was unconscious in a trance.³

In this particular instance all of Blum’s narratives, *sourced from documents written by the original researchers*, are painted over with one broad brush-stroke by invoking Gardner’s name. His essay, it seems, lays bare the techniques of deception used by Mrs. Piper – a mix of fishing (also known as cold reading) and devious information mining – which have over the course of a century fooled researchers and writers lacking the critical thinking skills and magical insights of a Martin Gardner. This is a bold claim – the original SPR reports on the Piper case had contributions from some of the finest minds of the time, and run to thousands of pages in total length. In short, the investigation of the mediumship of Mrs. Piper is one of the most comprehensive and well-documented in the history of psychical research. Is Gardner’s authority in this case being overstated?

SLEIGHT OF PEN

Leonora Piper is considered by many to be the foremost ‘trance medium’ in the history of psychical research. She was investigated by the SPR over a period of more than 40 years, beginning in the mid-1880s, and convinced nearly all researchers that she had access to information that was not available by ‘normal’ means. During her séances Mrs. Piper would fall into a trance, and her body would be ‘taken over’ by another consciousness known as a control (who often claimed to be the spirit of a deceased individual). This control would sometimes communicate directly with the sitter, and at other times would mediate communication from other spirits wishing to talk to the sitter. For the first 8 years of the SPR’s investigation her main control was ‘Phinuit’, a deceased French physician (though the SPR never found any historical trace of his identity), who spoke to sitters using Mrs. Piper’s voice. After Phinuit came ‘G.P’, a writer named George Pellew who was known to the SPR whilst alive, who died in an accident in 1892. During his ‘tenure’ communication continued via Mrs. Piper’s voice, but also with the addition of writing as well. In later years, a number of ‘advanced spirits’ known as the Emperor Group took over control of ‘the machine’ (their name for Mrs. Piper), with nearly all communication being via writing. The long period of the Piper investigation even resulted in a number of the original researchers ‘returning’ as spirits communicating from ‘the other side’.

Martin Gardner’s article on Mrs. Piper first appeared in the 1996 book *The Encyclopedia of the Paranormal*, and in 2003 was included in an anthology of his writings titled *Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries?* However, it is based on a longer essay published in *Free Inquiry* in 1992 (more simply titled “Communicating with the dead: William James and Mrs. Piper”), which was later included in another anthology of his writings, *The Night is Large*. Gardner prefaces this earlier essay with a statement of his “unbounded” admiration for William James, followed by what he thought was the reason for James’s “gullibility with respect to psychic phenomena”:

Had James been better informed about techniques of deception, practiced by magicians and mediums, he would not have been so impressed by Mrs. Piper's carefully contrived persona. Moreover, James had only a weak comprehension of how to conduct controlled tests of mediums.⁴

This criticism – that Mrs. Piper's positive results would have been less impressive with some knowledge of “techniques of deception” – is the first to set off alarm bells that Gardner may be dealing cards from the bottom of the deck when it comes to presenting the facts of this particular case. Although it glosses over the fact that William James had enough wits about him to debunk other fraudulent mediums before Piper, there is a far more important omission. Martin Gardner focuses almost exclusively on William James in his essay on the mediumship of Mrs. Piper, despite the fact that the primary researcher in this case was not James, but Richard Hodgson (James ‘discovered’ Piper in 1885 and spent some time investigating her on behalf of the SPR; Hodgson took over the investigation in



Richard Hodgson

1887, and continued as the lead researcher in the United States until his death in 1905). Gardner's criticism seems a whole lot less impressive once one knows that Richard Hodgson began his investigation highly skeptical of paranormal claims (though equally open to genuine evidence); he once warned others interested in Spiritualism that “nearly all the professional mediums are a gang of vulgar tricksters who are more or less in league with one another.” Hodgson was also extremely well-versed in the trickery employed by fraudulent mediums – he is famously known for a brutal exposé of the chicanery of the founder of Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky, and with S.J. Davy constructed a series of James Randi-like fake séances to test the observational

abilities of sitters and researchers, the results of which were reported in the *Proceedings of the SPR* under the title “The Possibilities of Malobservation and Lapse of Memory from a Practical Point of View”.⁵ Richard Hodgson *was* well-informed about techniques of deception, and he investigated Piper for 18 years on behalf of the SPR. And yet in Gardner's essay he is mentioned only in passing, and then only as “a British psi researcher” (though Hodgson was actually an Australian) “who came to Boston in 1887 to serve as secretary of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), and to edit its journal.”

Did Gardner deliberately omit this important point? Or was he so lacking in knowledge of the source material that he didn't even know who the primary investigator in the Piper case was? The latter conclusion may be supported by another odd aspect of Gardner's essay: he gets dates wrong. He says that Richard Hodgson died in 1909, when he passed away in 1905. Similarly, Gardner claims that the writer George Pellew died in 1881, when he died in 1892. It could certainly be the case that these mistakes were not the author's failing...many an editor or typesetter has committed errors as a manuscript passed through their hands on the way to publication.⁶ However, it is less easy to forgive other dating errors which can only be attributed to the author. For instance, Gardner asserts that “when [the alleged spirit of] Pellew began coming through Mrs. Piper, Hodgson was so skeptical that he hired detectives to shadow Mrs. Piper and her husband for several weeks to make sure they were not researching information about his friend.” In fact, Hodgson hired detectives almost immediately after he took on the Piper case, around 1887-88, whereas Pellew didn't die and start ‘coming through’ until 1892. Anybody who has read the original reports of the Piper case would know that Gardner is wrong in this instance – Fred Myers mentions Hodgson's use of detectives in his 1890 introduction to ‘the British report’ on Mrs. Piper's mediumship in the *Proceedings of the SPR*.⁷

Furthermore Gardner states ‘facts’ which are not just debatable, but completely the opposite to what can be found in the primary sources. He says of Mrs. Piper’s trances that they “never occurred spontaneously”, despite Fred Myers stating in his report that “[T]he trance has occasionally appeared when it was not desired.”⁸ Also, says Gardner, “they never began when she was alone or asleep”. Again, from the same page of the same primary source: “the access has several times come upon her during sleep.”⁹ Further, according to Gardner, “whenever a sitter paid for a séance, she had no difficulty going into a trance.” At this point we might assume that Gardner wasn’t too familiar with Fred Myers’ report on Mrs. Piper, as it continues (yet again on the same page): “These trances cannot always be induced at pleasure. A state of quiet expectancy or ‘self-suggestion’ will usually bring one on; but sometimes the attempt altogether fails.”¹⁰ And in case Gardner missed Myers’ statements, a rebuttal can be also be found on page 1(!) of probably the most important primary source concerning Mrs. Piper’s mediumship, Richard Hodgson’s report in Volume VIII of the *Proceedings of the SPR*: “Several times Mrs. Piper was unable to go into trance at all.”¹¹

There are additional reasons for thinking that Gardner may not have consulted the original research. For instance, he asserts that records of Mrs. Piper’s séances “show plainly that her controls did an enormous amount of what was called ‘fishing’, and today is called ‘cold reading’ [a technique where the ‘medium’ starts with educated guesses and then narrows in on only the positive responses from the sitter]”. Later he boldly says “cunning cold reading may account for most of Mrs. Piper’s hits.” It is important to note that Gardner is not offering a new insight and explanation for Mrs. Piper’s success here, despite what reviewers for the *New York Times* believe – he is in fact directly disagreeing with the considered opinion of the original investigators, who referenced the possibility of fishing/cold reading numerous times and dismissed it as an explanation. For example, James Hyslop said he “applied fishing, guessing, shrewd inference, and suggestion and found them wanting.”¹² Professor William Newbold noted that both he and Richard Hodgson

“have seen much of professional mediums, and are thoroughly familiar with the methods of ‘fishing’ upon which they generally rely. Hence we always had such possibilities in mind, and it would have been impossible for any large amount of detailed information to have been extracted from us in this way without our knowledge.”¹³ Contra the claims of Martin Gardner, Frank Podmore – perhaps the most cynical of all the SPR investigators – noted the hypothesis of cold reading was “clearly inadequate to explain even a small fraction of the later records.”¹⁴ Podmore noted that initially the investigators were wary that Mrs. Piper was using cold reading because...

...both Christian and surnames emerge frequently piecemeal, and obviously with considerable effort. This tentative exhibition of important information was naturally regarded at the earlier sittings as a suspicious circumstance, pointing to “fishing”... But in so far as it is founded on this circumstance, that reputation is apparently undeserved. For this same tentative and piecemeal emergence of proper names appears in the most fully reported sittings, where it is tolerably certain that no hints were given, and even in those sittings where the communication is made entirely by writing.¹⁵

Gardner also fails to note that a number of successful ‘hits’ by Mrs. Piper were on details which were not known to the sitters – that is, where the person that Mrs. Piper was supposedly ‘cold reading’ did not know anything of the details being ‘fished’.

These points are of crucial importance in judging Gardner’s essay, because – as the title notes – Gardner is supposedly showing “how Mrs. Piper bamboozled William James.” He writes that “James was aware of how Mrs. Piper’s controls shamelessly fished for data, yet he could not avoid thinking her messages were ‘accreted round some originally genuine nucleus.’” There is actually a very good reason why James looked elsewhere than the ‘fishing’ hypothesis for an explanation – the original investigators considered it, and dismissed it. The uninformed reader

would assume that Gardner has seen something that a naïve William James did not, when the reality of the situation is quite the opposite.

Being a knowledgeable magician, Gardner knows that there are other possible techniques for achieving ‘psychic abilities’, and so he doesn’t just rest with the fishing claim (even if he ascribes “most of Mrs. Piper’s hits” to it). For instance, he also points out that “Mrs. Piper usually held a client’s hand throughout a sitting”, which could be suggestive of ‘muscle reading’. This is certainly a point worth bringing up when investigating claims of mediumship, as it is another magician’s trick for ‘reading the mind’ and first came to prominence during the 1870s,¹⁶ little more than a decade before the testing of Mrs. Piper began. Muscle reading takes advantage of the ideomotor effect, where very slight involuntary reactions to questions can be ascertained through physical contact, often by holding a person’s hand. Ironically, William James was one of the first to bring the ideomotor effect to wide attention, in his foundational textbook *Principles of Psychology* – a point Martin Gardner does not mention in his essay. More concerning though is that once again Gardner seems to be disregarding the source material. For instance, in the British report on Mrs. Piper, Sir Oliver Lodge wrote:

I am familiar with muscle-reading and other simulated ‘thought-transference’ methods, and prefer to avoid contact whenever it is possible to get rid of it without too much fuss. Although Mrs. Piper always held somebody’s hand while preparing to go into the trance, she did not always continue to hold it when speaking as Phinuit.¹⁷

It is also worth noting that for the bulk of her career, Mrs. Piper’s ‘communicators’ used her hand(s) to write, rather than speaking ‘through’ her voice, severely limiting any chance of contact mind reading. It is difficult to see how Gardner translates Lodge’s notes on avoiding contact, and the reported circumstances of Mrs. Piper’s trance, into her “usually holding a client’s hand *throughout* a sitting” [my emphasis]. Similarly, elsewhere in his essay he claims that Mrs.

Piper’s eyes “were often only half closed, allowing her to observe reactions”. Gardner seems to ignore the fact that for the majority of her sittings, Piper’s trance conditions had her head buried in a pillow, with the eyes “not only closed but turned from the sitter.”¹⁸

Not content with fishing, muscle reading, and visual cues (though all dismissed by the original researchers), Gardner believes...

...she had other tricks up her sleeves. She constantly saw friends and relatives of clients. A vast amount of personal information can emerge in the give and take of séance conversation, to be fed back to sitters in later séances... Obtaining facts about prominent persons is not difficult. Obituaries can be checked. Courthouses contain birth and marriage records, real estate sales, and so on. Reference books abound in biographical data that sitters often swear a medium could not possibly know.

Even disregarding the fact that Mrs. Piper and her husband were shadowed by detectives to check whether they were in some way researching “clients” (as noted by Gardner himself), there’s good reason to doubt this claim based on the original sources. As Frank Podmore pointed out, Richard Hodgson instituted strict controls to lessen the chance that Mrs. Piper could ‘get up’ information on sitters prior to a séance. For instance, she...

...did not even know their names... The sittings were fixed sometimes a fortnight, sometimes only two or three days beforehand; the dates were sometimes changed... in one or other of these instances the precautions taken may have been insufficient... But it would be very difficult to suppose that that loophole was always left open, that malign chance favored Mrs. Piper for nine years so punctually that the sittings which have to be written down as failures now number barely 10 per cent.... And it is at least worth remarking that the one series of sittings where it would have

been least difficult to anticipate the names of the probable sitters and to provide for their advent – the well-known Professors of Harvard, who came when Mrs Piper was under Professor James' direction, – was one of the least successful here recorded.¹⁹

If, like Gardner, we (rather cavalierly) disregard the confidence of the original researchers that Mrs. Piper was kept in the dark about the identity of the sitters – how then did she collect information about them once she knew who they were? Gardner has a suggestion: “Mediums in a city know one another. Those who patronize one medium usually visit others. At the time there were scores of mediums in Boston, forming a network of scoundrels who passed information freely back and forth.” Once again Frank Podmore pre-empted Gardner's ‘revelation’ by a century, as noted in the *Journal of the SPR* in 1898.

[I]t was the rule to introduce sitters by assumed names. We had to suppose first, then, that Mrs. Piper was able to ascertain beforehand who were coming, and the exact date of their sittings. That Mrs. Piper should have worked up the dossiers of all the sitters some time before was practically impossible. No doubt it was permissible to assume a freemasonry amongst professional mediums, and that any information obtained by one of the fraternity would be at the disposal of all. But a considerable proportion of Mrs. Piper's sitters were not even numbered amongst the 500 odd Members and Associates of the ABSPR; and *very few had ever been to a professional medium before.*²⁰ [my emphasis]

Gardner also fails to mention that, as part of their testing, in 1889 the SPR ‘removed’ Mrs. Piper from the familiar surrounds of Boston and tested her in England for some time, with the same positive results. As Fred Myers pointed out in his report on these experiments:

Her sitters (almost always introduced under false name) belonged to several quite different social groups, and were frequently unacquainted with each other. Her correspondence was addressed to my care, and I believe that almost every letter which she received was shown to one or other of us. When in London she stayed in lodgings which we selected... We took great pains to avoid giving information in talk; and a more complete security is to be found in the fact that we were ourselves ignorant of many of the facts given as to our friends' relations, etc.²¹

As the reader may be noting by now, the more one is conversant with the original sources, the less impressive Martin Gardner's scholarship and knowledge on this particular topic seems. When he says “books about Mrs. Piper by believers seldom mention her information failures,” he is certainly not talking about the original research documents. Take for example William Newbold's report, in which he is at pains to point out that “I have been especially careful to bring into prominence all distinct failures and any other facts which would tend to detract from the surprising character of many of the statements made.” It may be worth noting that Gardner himself assiduously avoids mentioning any of Piper's ‘information successes’ in his own essay...

STUDIES IN SKEPTICISM

If there is one source that Gardner did consult, it is the 1910 book *Studies in Spiritism*, by Professor Amy Tanner and Dr. Stanley Hall. Hall and Tanner had six less-than-impressive sittings with Mrs. Piper, and devoted the bulk of their book to attacking the SPR's investigations into her mediumship. Gardner's reliance on this source is quite obvious as not only does he reference *Studies in Spiritism* on several occasions, but a number of his criticisms are taken directly from the book's pages – despite the SPR researchers having methodically dismantled

them some 90 years previous in their reviews of Hall and Tanner's debunking work. For instance, Gardner quotes extensively from *Studies in Spiritism* in claiming that a lot of personal information was given directly to Mrs. Piper through idle talk during the séance:

Sitters were asked to hold [Mrs. Piper's] hand, its palm close to their mouth, and to speak with a loud voice as if on a long distance phone call.²² Occasionally the hand would explore a sitter's face or body. Did the hand require shouting because Mrs. Piper was getting deaf? On the contrary her hearing was extremely acute. As Hall reports, she reacted to everything audible – "noise on the street, the rustle of clothing, the sitter's position, and every noise or motion."

By insisting that sitters address the hand in a loud voice, a strong impression was created that Mrs. Piper was "as much out of the game as if she were dead." If the hand could not hear voices in low tones, surely Mrs. Piper could not hear the conversation of sitters. Convinced that the sleeping Mrs. Piper could hear nothing, sitters felt free to talk to one another. Later they would not even remember what they had said. When information from such whispered conversations came out in later séances, or even in the same séance, they would be amazed.

Eleanor Sidgwick directly addressed this criticism in her review of *Studies in Spiritism*, noting that this supposed 'flaw' in the SPR's method seems to have been an outright assumption from Hall and Tanner, based only on their own failings while sitting with Mrs. Piper. In fact, Mrs. Sidgwick was incredulous that Hall and Tanner would...

...believe that the records are so incomplete that even important remarks by the sitter are omitted? Certainly at sittings at which I have been present either as manager or sitter this has not been the case. It has never been assumed by me, nor I think by other

English sitters, that any remark or sound made in the room was inaudible to the trance-personality, and it surprised me that Mr. Hall and Miss Tanner should ever have acted as if this were so.²³

James Hyslop echoed Mrs. Sidgwick's perplexity at the claim of séance chatter as the source of the 'supernormal' information obtained by Mrs. Piper: "If they supposed that Dr. Hodgson or I went about the experiments whispering and jabbering about them as these authors confess to doing, they are not only laboring under an illusion but might have obtained information to the contrary if they had read the reports carefully. We made it a most careful business not to talk about anything connected with the experiments in Mrs. Piper's hearing either in or out of the séance room...absolutely every word or whisper made during the trance was taken down."²⁴

Though the SPR investigators kept stenographic records of the séances whenever possible, Hall and Tanner incorrectly noted that "never in our own or in other Piper sittings was any full record kept of what her interlocutors said. Still less have involuntary exclamations, inflections, stresses, etc., been noted, and even the full and exact form of questions is rarely, if ever, kept". Hall notes in the passage above that full records of his own sittings were not kept, and yet Gardner claims in his article that Hall and Tanner's six sessions were "recorded verbatim". This is wonderfully ironic, given that Gardner bases his misguided 'séance chatter' theory on Hall and Tanner's own misguided claim that no stenographic records were kept by the SPR investigators.

Hyslop's dismissal of Hall and Tanner's 'research' could easily apply to a number of points in Gardner's ham-fisted critique:

It is the less excusable because the book pretends to show a knowledge of the various volumes published by the Society.... You would suppose from the authors of this book that they had discovered it and that psychic researchers were especially delinquent in this matter. In his first report Dr. Hodgson remarked his habit of making stenographic

records. (Vol. VIII., pp. 2 and 88.) Professor James had made them before Dr. Hodgson came to this country. (Vol. XIII, p. 2 and American Proceedings, p. 103).²⁵

Hyslop then explicitly points out that Richard Hodgson's motivation in taking stenographic records was "with exactly the same desire to enable readers and students to ascertain for themselves whether information had been imparted directly or indirectly by sitters."²⁶

Gardner's reliance on *Studies in Spiritism* is unfortunate, as is his misrepresentation of the objectivity of the authors in reassuring readers of his essay that "Tanner and Hall approached Mrs. Piper with open minds". Gardner's statement is rather difficult to reconcile with the introduction to *Studies in Spiritism*, in which Stanley Hall openly states his belief that "Spiritism is the ruck and muck of modern culture, the common enemy of true science and of true religion, and to drain its dismal and miasmatic marshes is the great work of modern culture... When genetic psychology has done its work, all these psychic researches will take their place among the solemn absurdities in the history of thought."²⁷ Furthermore, Hall deliberately ignored any possible evidential messages during his sittings with Mrs. Piper, noting that he "had no desire whatever to obtain 'test messages', my results from the published sittings having shown their triviality and dreariness and the impossibility of getting down all the remarks and other circumstances which might explain them". Meanwhile, Eleanor Sidgwick paraphrased Professor Tanner's own criticisms in taking her to task for ignoring the 'tremendous influence of a preconceived theory on one's interpretations of the facts': "In fact her presentation of facts and arguments cannot be assumed to be fair without reference to the originals. For...they constantly misrepresent the case and are essentially misleading."²⁸ In his own response to Hall and Tanner's book, James Hyslop devoted 98 pages to correcting errors, omissions and misstatements of fact.

Unfortunately, Gardner believes that Hall and Tanner's book offers other worthwhile criticisms:

Hall's greatest scam was presenting [the alleged spirit of] Hodgson, Mrs. Piper's main control at the time, with fictitious information and names. Hall had met Hodgson only once, but he pretended they had been old friends. Hodgson reciprocated by calling Hall "old chap" and by remembering a wealth of events and discussions that never took place. Hall invented a Bessie Beals. Hodgson had no trouble locating her on the "other side."

Both Gardner and Hall seem to place much importance on this 'scam', despite the fact that Hall had asked Mr. Dorr (Mrs. Piper's SPR 'manager' of the time) whether the investigators had tried such a trick previously. Mr. Dorr's answer was that "many have tried foolery and sometimes have succeeded splendidly, and other times have failed. *Controls are very suggestible and very willing to take up any ideas presented by the sitters*, so that they can be very easily taken in"²⁹ [my emphasis]. Certainly, this suggestibility should give one pause when trusting the words of Mrs. Piper (or any other medium). But given that the original SPR researchers had noted this aspect – it wasn't ignored or never tested, the researchers simply found that it couldn't explain away the convincing 'hits' that Mrs. Piper managed regularly – it doesn't seem quite as great a scam as Gardner would have us believe.



Leonora Piper in 1890

Continuing, Gardner makes much of the fact that "although Mrs. Piper always insisted she never recalled anything that transpired during a seance, Hall noticed a growing coldness in her attitude toward him and his assistant. After this final disastrous scene, she betrayed no hint of knowing how funny it had been." Gardner gives no reference for this assertion, but I assume that he's drawing from one particular passage in Hall's notes from *Studies in Spiritism*: "I fancied that I myself detected a faint left-over trace of coolness toward me in Mrs. Piper, after waking from the third sitting [of

six]...like [a] tenuous after-image".³⁰ Between the 'fancied', 'faint' and 'tenuous after-image', I find it difficult to ascribe too much importance to Gardner's claim of a "growing coldness". Reading Hall's notes, there seems to be no noticeable attitude from Mrs. Piper. Though, if so, given Hall's own obvious attitude (based on the parts of the book he wrote), it seems it would be just as (or more) likely that Hall and Tanner betrayed their personal feelings about Mrs. Piper's mediumship before and after the séance.

If Hall noticed any later 'coldness' from Mrs. Piper, it could well be due to the fact that he and Tanner performed harmful tests on Mrs. Piper in measuring her sensitivity to pain during the fifth séance, though they neglected to tell her afterwards:

It appears that some time after the [fifth] sitting red spots appeared on Mrs. Piper's palm, and her index finger was numb for two or three days, the red spots being the after-effects of the esthesiometer pressure, and the numbness probably due to the pain-pressure experiments. Her lower lip was also blistered from the camphor used. Her daughter wrote to Mr. Dorr the day after the sitting describing these effects, in some distress, saying that she had hoped that the need for such tests was over...Dr. Hall wrote both to Mr. Dorr and Mrs. Piper explaining the experiments and stating that we had finished them, and that we should not have gone so far had not the Hodgson control authorized us to do so.³¹

The sensitivity experiments were carried out to test Mrs. Piper's trance condition. Gardner himself has little doubt as to the fraudulent nature of this aspect of her mediumship, scolding that "[P]ersons suffering genuine trance seizures do not go in and out of them in theatrical ways calculated to impress audiences." It is worth noting the loaded language here – it is only Gardner's assumption that the seizure was "calculated" to impress audiences, regardless of whether one accepts that it was "theatrical".³² More importantly though,

in doing so Gardner disregards the opinion of the contemporary researchers. For instance, Frank Podmore made clear that "by an almost universal consensus of opinion her trance is a genuine one." But if Gardner feels that the SPR researchers' opinions can't be trusted, he can always turn to his own trusted source – as a result of their tests, Hall and Tanner themselves concluded that "certainly her respiratory functions, taste, smell, general tactile sensibility and motor innervation are asleep".³³ They began by using an esthesiometer on Mrs. Piper's hand: "Again [Professor Hall] pressed, and this time with enough force to give considerable pain if the sensitiveness were normal, but no response came." They then "uncorked a camphor bottle and held it close up to Mrs. Piper's nostrils so that it seemed as if she could hardly get any air unless saturated with camphor. I held it there for some seconds without any effect...I then put about one-third of a teaspoonful of camphor in her mouth...it produced no palpable effect."³⁴ It certainly produced an after-effect though, as noted above: the camphor blistered Mrs. Piper's lips. Similarly, Richard Hodgson held ammonia to Mrs. Piper's nostrils, but "could not detect the smallest signs of discomfort after [she] had taken several inhalations of strong ammonia." Hodgson nonchalantly added in a footnote that "Mrs. Piper suffered somewhat after the trance was over."³⁵ (it caused her nose to bleed and brought on chronic sensitivity³⁶) The British psychical researcher and well-respected scientist Sir Oliver Lodge wrote in his own account of Mrs. Piper's mediumship that the trance "is, to the best of my belief, a genuine one. In it Mrs. Piper is (sometimes, at least) insensible to pain, as tested by suddenly pushing a needle into her hand, which causes not the slightest flinching."³⁷ William James noted that her pupils were contracted during the trance state, and Hall and Tanner noted Mrs. Piper's change in breathing "from 20 to 22 for the normal, to between 7 and 10 during the trance, up to the time the hand ceases to write." The famous Nobel Prize-winning French physiologist Charles Richet investigated Mrs. Piper's mediumship and declared her trance to be

genuine. Who should we trust more, Richet's personal testimony, or Martin Gardner's speculation a century later?

Gardner's reliance on such a poor source as *Studies in Spiritism* suggests either intentional cherry-picking, or ignorance of the SPR's own extensive, primary sources on this topic. Mrs. Sidgwick, a very sober critic not given to hyperbole, mentioned that "it is likely enough that [*Studies in Spiritism*] will impress those who derive their knowledge of the evidence discussed from it alone; but a very different view will be formed by those who are able to check Dr. Tanner's version of the evidence by reference to the original sources." Those sentiments apply equally to Martin Gardner's essay – it is unfortunate then that Gardner's article will be read by a far wider audience than the original sources, as his negative influence is founded upon what seems to be almost complete ignorance of the case in question.

REAL SKEPTICISM

Gardner's criticisms are more successful when he brings up particular instances that concerned the original researchers. He rightly points out that Phinuit seemed unable to provide the contents of letters and secret messages written by the dead communicators he was in contact with: "Three times Phinuit tried vainly to guess the contents of a sealed envelope in James's possession, even though the doctor supposedly contacted the dead woman who wrote the letter." This particular case is a major stumbling block to the idea that the communicators were truly who they claimed to be – surely they would remember their own writings? All the same, there are still interesting facets to the case that are suggestive of some paranormal faculty, which Gardner doesn't mention.³⁸ But this genuine criticism is an isolated instance in Gardner's essay. If he was more conversant with the source material he certainly could have raised other concerns. One of William Newbold's sittings provided minor evidence of Mrs. Piper possibly purloining phrases

from dictionaries. And an odd mistake in a sitting with a Professor Bowditch could be an indication of prior research being done on the sitter. Gardner would have done better to concentrate on analysis of some of these isolated incidents, instead of broad criticisms that have previously been comprehensively rebutted.

If Gardner's essay was the only source consulted on Mrs. Piper's mediumship, the reader would walk away thinking he had revealed her secrets, exposed the original researchers as easily-duped amateurs, and shown that the Piper case is yet another simple case of fraud. Nothing could be further from the truth. While the case is perhaps now too far back in time to ever get to the truth, the SPR's resident curmudgeon Frank Podmore explained in 1899 why it is worth paying close attention to:

[T]he abundance of the material, the fullness of the records, the watchful supervision exercised over the medium herself for some years past, and the extraordinary and almost uniformly high level of success, make these records much more noteworthy than any previous accounts of the kind... In all these years – now thirteen or more – during which Mrs. Piper has been under the close observation, first of Professor William James, and afterwards of Dr. Hodgson and other competent persons – though she has been shadowed by detectives, though her personal luggage, as Professor Lodge has told us, has been searched, her correspondence read, her goings-out and comings-in closely watched – during all these years not the smallest circumstance has come to light reflecting in any way upon her honesty. Certainly no other medium has been exposed to so stringent an ordeal... Dr. Hodgson himself... [has] succeeded in bringing home the charge of dishonesty to very many professional mediums, that this medium should have passed through the most searching and prolonged inquiries without even a rumour of an exposure, or the discovery of any suspicious circumstances, is a fact entitled to some weight.³⁹

The ever-skeptical Podmore goes on to point out that even those cynical of the case should play close attention to it, given it would be a case study of one of the greatest scams of all time, being played out for more than two decades under the close supervision of scientists well-versed in exposing frauds:

In a word, if Mrs. Piper's trance utterances are entirely founded on knowledge acquired by normal means, Mrs. Piper must be admitted to have inaugurated a new departure in fraud. Nothing to approach this has ever been done before. On the assumption that all so-called clairvoyance is fraudulent, we have seen the utmost which fraud has been able to accomplish in the past, and at its best it falls immeasurably short of Mrs. Piper's achievements. Now, that in itself requires explanation... On the assumption of fraud the tremendous gulf between her and them is an almost insuperable obstacle.⁴⁰

There are other fascinating aspects for discussion in this case even on the assumption of deception. One of the more curious aspects of Mrs. Piper's trance mediumship was that for a time (during the transition from communication via the voice, to communication via writing), three different 'communicators' could hold 'conversations' with three different sitters *at the same time* – one through voice, one writing with the right hand, and one writing with the left hand. Yet Gardner casually explains away this bizarre simultaneous three-way mediumship simply by saying Mrs. Piper was "strongly ambidextrous". And there are other aspects that should give the curious mind pause before dismissing her as a fraud. Given her reputation after the first couple of years of investigation, Mrs. Piper could have left the service of the SPR and charged exorbitant amounts of money offering sittings for the rich and powerful, with much less chance of being caught. Instead, she remained on a compensatory wage under the skeptical eyes of investigators for a good portion of her lifetime. Further to that, if she was a fraudulent medium, why change 'technique' from voice

mediumship when it was so successful, to developing simultaneous voice and writing (and at times communicating via mirror writing) for no additional reward or benefit? And how did she fool scientists and physicians that her trance was genuine, showing no reaction to pain sensitivity tests including surprise needle jabs, flames held to her skin, and long inhalations of ammonia?

Martin Gardner could have engaged readers with any of these topics, but instead he steers them away from intelligent discussion of this case. He ignores the source material completely, raising criticisms that were comprehensively dealt with a century before he wrote his essay, and impugns the integrity of the original investigators despite having no grounds to do so. If Gardner is, in the words of Stephen Jay Gould, "the single brightest beacon defending rationality and good science against...mysticism", one would have to think that rationality and good science are in serious trouble on the evidence offered in this particular essay. By Marcello Truzzi's definition, given at the start of this article, Gardner here is certainly being a 'pseudo-skeptic'.

Probably the most egregious problem with Gardner's essay that I have mentioned – amongst many – is his convenient avoidance of Richard Hodgson's role in the investigation of Mrs. Piper. Fittingly, Hodgson's introduction to his first report on her mediumship addresses (and rebuts) the bulk of Gardner's revelations about Mrs. Piper's 'fraudulent techniques' in one simple sentence. Hodgson stated that in undertaking his investigation, he was...

...compelled to assume, in the first instance, that Mrs. Piper was fraudulent and obtained her information previously by ordinary means, such as inquiries by confederates, etc...further information given in various ways by the sitter, consciously or unconsciously, by speech, gesture, and other muscular action.⁴¹

My critique of Gardner's essay examines just one case covered by Martin Gardner, amongst a life-time of writings on a variety of topics,

and so it would be wrong to extrapolate too far from it, or say that it detracts in any major way from his positive contributions to academia. This topic is the only one that I personally know the source material well enough to feel comfortable rebuking Gardner's attempt to gloss over years of scientific investigation by the SPR researchers. What I hope it does show is that the claims of prominent skeptics should be subjected to as much scrutiny as any other person; there needs to be a change to the blind acceptance of the words of individuals who claim ownership of the title "skeptic". This might best begin within skeptical organizations themselves, by promoting more internal criticism and an end to the demagoguery that pervades the likes of CSI(COP) and the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF).

REPLIES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

In "How Mrs. Piper Bamboozled William James", Martin Gardner tells how the famous academic first discovered Mrs. Piper:

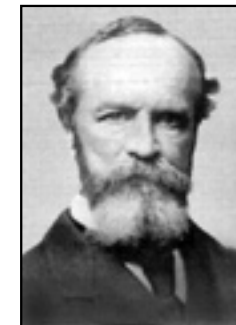
In 1885 they had an old Irish servant whose sister worked for a prominent Beacon Hill family often visited by James's mother-in-law. Yet when the mother-in-law sat with Mrs. Piper, William was flabbergasted to learn that her controls had named members of his family!

Let us compare Gardner's summation of William James as being "flabbergasted" (with exclamation point no less), with how James actually reported this moment, as noted in Robert Richardson's biography *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*: "Hearing these things from his sister-in-law and his mother-in-law, James's response was skeptical. 'I remember playing the *esprit fort* on that occasion before my feminine relatives and seeking to explain by simple considerations the marvelous character of the facts which they brought back.'"

Funnily enough, the only thing that James was "flabbergasted" about was how *little* the medium seemed to be able to produce about his famous family (beyond his own fame, his brother was Henry James, the eminent 19th century novelist):

The sceptical theory of her successes is that she keeps a sort of detective bureau open upon the world at large, so that whoever may call is pretty sure to find her prepared with facts about his life. Few things could have been easier, in Boston, than for Mrs. Piper to collect facts about my own father's family for use in my sittings with her. But although my father, my mother, and a deceased brother were repeatedly announced as present, nothing but their bare names ever came out...

Given the title and focus of Gardner's article, it is perhaps worth giving William James a right of reply, allowing him to defend himself from beyond the grave. Gardner, through omission and misrepresentation, portrays James and the other investigators as inept and falling over themselves to accept the afterlife theory, when this was far from the truth. It seems that self-appointed skeptics never change, as Columbia University academic James McKeen Cattell (then President of the American Psychological Association) claimed much the same things as Gardner at the time (with much the same 'evidence'), and William James's response could just as easily be applied to Gardner's essay. James responded to Cattell (and in many ways, Gardner too) by saying:



William James

Your reference to my name...justifies me in making some remarks of my own... Any hearing for such phenomena is so hard to get from scientific readers that one who believes them worthy of

careful study is in duty bound to resent such contemptuous public notice of them in high quarters as would still further encourage the fashion of their neglect.

...The scientific mind is by the pressure of professional opinion painfully drilled to fairness and logic in discussing orthodox phenomena. But in such mere matters of superstition as a medium's trances it feels so confident of impunity and indulgence whatever it may say, provided it be only contemptuous enough, that it fairly revels in the untrained barbarians' arsenal of logical weapons, including all the various sophisms enumerated in the books.

Your own comments seem to me an excellent illustration of this fact.

...what name should we assign to the fallacy by which you quote one of those five sitters as saying that he himself got nothing from the medium 'but a few preposterous compliments,' whilst you leave unquoted the larger part of his report, relating the inexplicable knowledge which the medium showed of the family affairs of his wife, who accompanied him to the sitting? I am not sure that the logic books contain any technical name for the fallacy here, but in legal language it is sometimes called *suppressio veri*, sometimes something still less polite. At any rate, you will admit on reflection that to use the conclusion of that sitter's report alone, as you did, was to influence your reader's mind in an unfair way.

...Please observe that I am saying nothing of the merits of the case, but only of the merits of your forms of controversy which, alas, are typical. The case surely deserves opposition more powerful from the logical point of view than your remarks; and I beg such readers... as care to form a reasonable opinion to seek the materials for it in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Part

XXXIII (where they will find a candid report based on 500 sittings since the last report was made), rather than in the five little negative instances which you so triumphantly cull out and quote.⁴²

Unscientific skepticism of the type exhibited by Gardner and Cattel is a corrosive one which, rather than defending science, instead shields it from possible new discoveries and viewpoints through irrational over-protectiveness. It also brings skepticism as a whole into disrepute when such cheap tactics are employed. In his article "How Mrs. Piper Bamboozled William James", Martin Gardner ignores the original scientific work done, misrepresents the competency of the investigators, and misleads the reader both through incorrect statements and loaded language. This is hardly the type of writing we would expect from "one of the great intellects produced in this country in this century."

Sadly for Martin Gardner, perhaps the most succinct summary of his essay can be found in James Hyslop's caustic response to Hall and Tanner's *Studies in Spiritism*, written nearly 100 years previous:

The calm critic can only say that the book either displays the grossest ignorance of the facts and the subject, or it is a colossal piece of constructive lying. The authors may take either horn of the dilemma they like.⁴³

Greg Taylor is the owner and editor of the online alternative news portal, *The Daily Grail* (www.dailygrail.com), and is also the editor of *Darklore*. He is widely read in topics that challenge the orthodox worldview, from alternative history to the mysteries of human consciousness. Greg currently resides in Brisbane, Australia. His first book, *The Guide to Dan Brown's The Lost Symbol*, is a guidebook to the esoteric history and locations featured in the best-selling sequel to *The Da Vinci Code*.