

**Traité de Métapsychique** by Charles Richet. Paris: Félix Alcan, 1922. 815 pp. Available free at <http://books.google.com/books?id=xo8FAQAAIAAJ&dq=richet+traite+de+metapsychique>, and <http://www.archive.org/details/traitedemtaps00rich>

Although overviews of psychical research such as the one reviewed here are appreciated, they are not generally considered to be particularly important or influential beyond the panoramic views, summaries, and bibliographies they provide. An exception is the book reviewed here, authored by French physiologist Charles Richet (1850–1935), which was later translated into English from its second edition (Richet, 1923). Richet had in mind the preparation of this book in 1905 when, in his Presidential Address to the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) he presented the term *métapsychique* (metapsychics) to refer to psychical research and mentioned that a possible title for his future book was *Traité de Métapsychique* (Richet, 1905b:13).

By the time *Traité* was published, Richet was well-known in psychical research. This was evident from the frequent and multiple citations he received in general French books about the topic (e.g., Coste, 1895:v, xiii, 59, 101, 199, 221). During the 1880s. he conducted research about what we would refer to today as ESP, as seen in his reports “La Suggestion Mentale et le Calcul des Probabilités” (Richet, 1884) and “Further Experiments in Hypnotic Lucidity or Clairvoyance” (Richet, 1889). Later on he was involved with bringing psychical research into the 1889 Congress of Physiological Psychology, the development and publication of the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques*, the medium Eusapia Palladino (Richet, 1893), and the presidency of the SPR. He authored many more papers about psychic phenomena and their study, among them a highly controversial report of materialization phenomena with medium Marthe Béraud (Richet, 1905a).

Richet’s Preface states that readers expecting “nebulous” discussions about “man’s destiny, about magic, about theosophy” (p. i) would be disappointed. Instead, he would write about facts without advancing a theory, because in his view theories in metapsychics were “astoundingly frail” (p. i).

The *Traité* is divided into four “books” or sections. The first is a general perspective on metapsychics, which was defined by Richet as “a science which object is phenomena, mechanical or psychological, due to seemingly intelligent forces or to unknown latent powers in human intelligence” (p. 5). He classified the field into subjective and objective metapsychics, terms he used to refer to mental and physical phenomena. The section also includes a discussion of history in which the author divided the subject into four periods. These periods were denominated by Richet as: mythical (up to Mesmer), magnetic (from Mesmer to the Fox sisters), spiritistic (from the Fox sisters to William

Crookes), and scientific (starting with Crookes). Richet hoped that his book would start a fifth period.

Richet saw the scientific period as the high point of the history of interest in metapsychic phenomena and separated it conceptually and methodologically from previous movements. In fact, he pictured mesmerism, as well as spiritism and spiritualism, as stages in the development of metapsychics. Previous movements, Richet believed, had too much theory, something that metapsychics must be careful with. But he believed it would have been an injustice to despise the magnetizers and the spiritists. Their work, Richet stated, “contributed to the founding of metapsychics” (p. 40). But in his view their time was past. Nowadays a medium should not be wasted in informal spiritistic circles “without the use of methods of research adopted by all the sciences, balances, photography, cinematography, graphic registration. Similarly . . . rigorous, strict investigation, similar to those the S.P.R. [Society for Psychical Research] has conducted, is indispensable” (p. 40).

The second part of the book is about “subjective metapsychics.” Richet started with a section in which he attempted to separate phenomena that could be explained via conventional ideas of the action of the subconscious mind such as automatism, personation, and pantomnesia (or memories of all the past experiences of the person), from phenomena such as telepathy and the like requiring explanations beyond the conventional (I have presented a reprint of this section elsewhere [Alvarado, 2008]). He wrote that:

“to separate the psychic [psychological] from the metapsychic, we adopt the following criterion: *Everything that may be done by human intelligence, even the very profound and skillful, is psychic. Everything a human intelligence cannot do . . . would be metapsychic*” (p. 62, italics in the original).

Two other sections were about chance and observation errors. Such discussions were not only proper in a book like this to show how psychical researchers have been aware of conventional explanations and the precautions they have taken to avoid them, but also served a rhetorical function in that it gave credibility to Richet’s defenses of the reality of the metapsychic realm beyond the counterexplanations of science.

The rest of this part of the book is devoted to what Richet called *cryptesthesia*. This meant a “hidden sensibility, a perception of things, unknown regarding its mechanisms, and of which we cannot know but its effects” (p. 74). Richet discussed spontaneous and experimental examples of this faculty. He included his own observations and studies, such as those with a woman he referred to as Alice, and discussed the topic as manifested in mediums such as Leonora E. Piper, and in various ways, among them psychometry and premonitions. The spontaneous occurrences were classified as monitions involving non-serious and serious events (other than death), death, and those perceived collectively.

Richet mentioned that cryptesthesia showed no time and space limitations. He wrote that the phenomena “is very strange, and we do not understand it at all,” but such lack of understanding did not mean the acceptance of spiritual entities following “savages who attributed forces of Nature to a Divinity . . .” (p. 252).

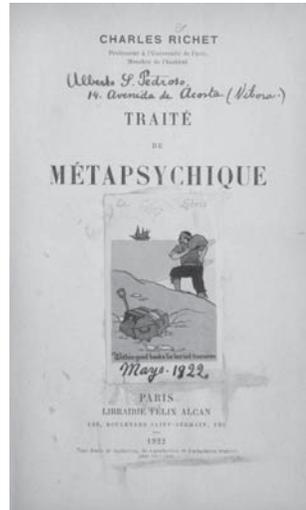
Part 3 is about physical phenomena. In addition to hauntings (and poltergeists), it includes chapters about phenomena infrequently discussed in modern parapsychology, namely telekinesis, materializations, levitation, and bilocation. The latter was defined by Richet as the simultaneous presence of a person in different locations. He rejected the existence of objective bilocation as the duplication of the human body, but accepted that apparitions representing the individual could be perceived as if the person was alive and that this represented a modality of cryptesthesia.

Regardless of the fraudulent practices of some physical mediums, Richet was convinced that there were real telekinetic and ectoplasmic manifestations. Among many observations, he discussed medium Florence Cook and the famous Katie King materialization, and his own observations with medium Marthe Béraud. Regarding Béraud, Richet presented some notes he compiled in 1906 in which he saw ectoplasmic forms move and take shapes. He also paid attention to many other mediums, among them Linda Gazzera, D. D. Home, Eusapia Palladino, and Stanislaw Tomczyk.

In the conclusion, the fourth part of the book, Richet states that the collective weight of all evidence shows the reality of metapsychic phenomena. This, he believed, was the case regardless of criticisms:

Therefore: 1) there is in us a faculty of knowledge that is absolutely different from our common sensory faculties of knowledge (cryptesthesia); 2) movement of objects without contact are produced, even in plain light (telekinesis); 3) there are hands, bodies, objects, that appear to be formed completely from a cloud and show all the appearances of life (ectoplasmy); 4) there are presentiments that neither perspicacity nor chance can explain, and sometimes they are verified to their smallest details. (p. 761)

Also in the conclusion, Richet returned to his view that metapsychics should be an empirical specialty whose current task should not be the defense of particular models. In fact, if there was a perspective characterizing the *Traité* it



was that of the need to have an ultra-empirical metapsychics with little theoretical content. Consistent with this view, Richet stated he was not convinced of any explanation so far offered to account for metapsychic phenomena and that at present (1922) no cohesive theory could be presented. He was particularly critical of explanations based on the concept of discarnate action, something he discussed in other publications. Nonetheless, and regardless of his protestations, Richet was not completely atheoretical. He was positive about the idea that unknown human faculties and forces were at work, and, as he discussed in the *Traité*, he used the concepts of personation and cryptesthesia to explain the manifestation of mental mediumship (Alvarado, 2008). Richet also speculated about forces in reference to materializations:

Materialization is a mechanical projection. . . . Is it not a very long way to consider possible, other than projections of heat, light, and electricity, a projection of a mechanical force? The memorable demonstrations of Einstein establish to what extent mechanical energy is similar to luminous energy. (pp. 597–598)

Such an idea, while perhaps too vague to be called a theory, was consistent with an old model of biophysical forces present throughout the literatures of mesmerism, spiritualism, and psychical research (for an overview see Alvarado, 2006).

Richet concluded his book with hope for the future, as he did in other publications. Currently, “when everything is still in darkness” (p. 793), Richet stated that there was a pressing need to move forward with research. “Then Metapsychics will come out of Occultism, as Chemistry was separated from Alchemy” (p. 793). The situation, Richet continued, may seem to be too dark and difficult to solve. He further wrote: “But this is no reason for not increasing our efforts and labors. . . . The task is so beautiful that, even if we fail, the honor of having undertaken it gives some value to life” (p. 793).

Such views were consistent with Richet’s general outlook on science. Like other scientists, he saw science as a slow process based on “patient, long, and difficult research” that could at best only promise to diminish slightly our overall ignorance (Richet, 1899:35).

This book received much publicity when it was first published in 1922. Richet presented it to the prestigious Académie des Sciences, referring to the phenomena in question as “new” and “inhabitual” (*Mémoires et Communications*, 1922:430). The reception of *Traité* was surprising for an introductory book about psychical research. It was repeatedly reviewed as a special book. Examples of this are the long and not always positive discussions of it in journals dedicated to psychic phenomena such as the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* (Holt, 1922), *Luce e Ombra* (Bozzano, 1922), and the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (Lodge, 1923). A prominent example of a review appearing in the journals of

other disciplines is that authored by Pierre Janet in the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* (Janet, 1923).

There is no question that the book was comprehensive and systematic, and this made it valuable as a general introduction to the subject. It is in fact one of the best overviews of psychical research for the period in question. Richet's insistence on the collection of facts, to the neglect of theories, made the book his personal manifesto of psychical research. He projected an image of metapsychics as a science, arguing for the existence of a field that had a subject matter and a right to exist. But as much as the book was a summary of facts, it was also Richet's attempt to construct and promote the subject of metapsychics.

However, in both *Traité* and later publications, such as his autobiographical memoir *Souvenirs d'un Physiologiste* Richet (1933), he described the discipline as being in a preliminary stage of development. Nonetheless, he stated in this later book, "I am convinced it is the science of the future" (p. 156).

Unfortunately, Richet's neglecting to summarize theoretical models properly and to include systematic discussions or research methodologies weaken the status of *Traité* as a rigorous textbook. I believe the empirical approach defended by Richet in the book would have received support in discussions of theories and methodologies.

For many, particularly in France, *Traité* became an exemplar of the "new" science, and this took place in spite of much criticism. Why, one may ask, did Richet's book attain such a status? After all, the content of *Traité* was not innovative or revolutionary, so why did it command so much attention and respect? In fact, in many ways *Traité* was rather dry and uninspired. I believe there are at least two reasons.

First, Richet's book cannot be dismissed as just a relatively unimportant exercise in synthesis. In fact, this characteristic of the book is one of the aspects identified by Ceccarelli (2001) as being important to produce influential books that assist in the development of interdisciplinary communities. Synthesis is present in *Traité* in the form of a modest non-theoretical integration based on the accumulation of facts presented to show the existence of a phenomenon. Ceccarelli believes that such influential books present two other characteristics, the development of an "authorial persona," and the fact that the text is addressed to more than one audience. The first point perhaps includes Richet's strong and repeated ultra-empirical and anti-survival stances, while the second may also be present in that several audiences benefited from the work: scientists, psychical researchers, and the general public. While I do not want to push this view too much, it seems to me that the book could be studied in more detail from this perspective.

Second, the author commanded much attention due to his eminence. Richet—who worked in such various fields as aviation, eugenics, history,

literature, pacifism, philosophy, psychical research, psychology, and sociology—was a well-known and highly respected intellectual. He published much research on physiological topics such as animal heat, breathing, stomach acid, serotherapy, and anaphylaxis. As early as 1879, he was referred to in an American medical journal as being “well-known to the medical public as one of the rising younger Frenchmen of scientific tastes and ability, already the author of several works of merit” (Putnam, 1879:815). He also had several important academic positions and honors before the publication of *Traité*. These included being editor of the *Revue Scientifique*, Professor of Physiology at the Faculté de Médecine in Paris, member of the Académie de Médecine and of the Académie des Sciences, and Nobel prize winner for his work on anaphylaxis. In addition, Richet had many social advantages. His wealth and high social position, coming both from his father and from his mother’s family, allowed him many personal connections that facilitated publishing and being heard in different forums (on these issues, see Wolf, 1993).

All this meant that a treatise about psychic phenomena from such a man would not be ignored and would be seen as a more important event than publications on the topic by less eminent individuals. His persona was a social and intellectual beacon that attracted many, who would either praise or condemn him for his positive belief in the existence of metapsychic phenomena and for his involvement with the topic.

Modern researchers will find *Traité* of value for several reasons. The book is a reference work presenting many summaries of studies, bibliographical references, and evidential claims about psychic phenomena for the pre-1922 period. In addition, those current researchers who are not familiar with the old psychical research literature will find in this book a window into the past, a past somewhat different from the present, as seen in the emphasis on gifted subjects, such as psychics and mediums, on the phenomena of physical mediumship, and on the issue of survival of death.

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### Context

Born in Montceau-les-Mines, Gustave Geley (1865–1924) completed his medical studies in Lyon before practicing medicine in Annecy until 1918. Richet (quoted by Tocquet, 1963, p. 270) stated that he had a very good reputation as a doctor in his region, but the demon of research finally made him leave his profession. A member of the Société d'Etudes Psychiques in Geneva since 1895, he had witnessed phenomena of lucidity, somnambulism, and premonition, which he recorded in his first book in 1897: *Essaidere Vue Générale et d'Interprétation Synthétique du Spiritisme*. Two years later he developed a model of the psyche from his observations in *L'Être Subconscient* (1899). Both these books were published under the pseudonym of E. Gyel.