

Shrink Rap Radio #388
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“William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology”

Dr. David Van Nuys Ph.D., aka ‘Dr. Dave’ interviews Dr. Mark B. Ryan PhD
(Transcribed from <http://www.shrinkrapradio.com> by Gloria Oelman)

Introduction:

On today’s show, I’ll be speaking with Professor Mark B. Ryan about the contributions of America’s first psychologist William James. Dr. Ryan is a graduate of Yale and has taught at other universities. He’s Associate Dean of the Wisdom School of Graduate Studies of Ubiquity University. You’ll find more detail on his background in our show notes.

Now here’s the interview:

Dr. Dave: Dr. Mark Ryan, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Mark Ryan: Well, Dave, it’s a real pleasure to be here. Thanks so much for inviting me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, well I’m thrilled to have you on the show. For some time I’ve thought I should interview someone about William James and I mentioned it on air and listener Jimmie Prior wrote to say that he’d heard you give an excellent presentation on James, so I’m really glad that you...

Mark Ryan: Ah, yes, yes I know Jimmie.

Dr. Dave: You do. I think you told me that that was a presentation you gave at the Houston Jung Society. Is that right?

Mark Ryan: That’s right, it’s called the C.G. Jung Educational Center of Houston. Very lively organization, I might add, some really interesting folks.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I’m aware of that because I think I’ve interviewed a bunch of them.

Mark Ryan: Ah, ha! It’s a very worthy organization.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. Let’s jump into it, you wrote a very intriguing article about William James and our interview’s mostly going to be based on that article although you can feel free to throw in any other relevant information. How did you first become interested in William James yourself?

Mark Ryan: Well this goes back at least to my graduate school, if not college, days. I ended up writing a masters thesis on James back in the late nineteen sixties. I’ve always found him a fascinating figure for a number of reasons. He just addresses core concerns that I think many of us have subconsciously, if not consciously, through our lives but he does it in a way that feels to me rather unique. You know he came from

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

a... his educational background was intriguing. He grew up as the son of a significant philosopher in his own day, Henry James Senior – remarkable family, he's the brother of Henry James, the novelist. They had a sister, Alice, who was also a remarkable intellectual figure, diarist in her own right and the family was prominent, had visitors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson around the dinner table. Emerson was actually a friend of Henry James Senior, William's father and the father also led quite a peripatetic life so James education was rather unique. He never went through school systems until his college days. He was tutored by a series of very knowledgeable figures, studied in France, Germany and England as a child, also Switzerland, became fluent in French and German, also spoke Italian and Portuguese.

Dr. Dave: Wow!

Mark Ryan: So he had a very varied and I think, stimulating form of education himself and then he was of a temperament that has always appealed to me because he has such range, really an incredible range. He trained early on as an artist; studied with William Morris Hunt, a major American painter of the time, alongside John LaFarge who became also one of the major artists in the States in his epoch but then veered towards the sciences. So he had this artistic temperament, yet a real interest in a strongly developed rational sense – studied chemistry, physics, geology before he went into anatomy and then medicine. And he had a side that was rational and empirical and he also had quite a mystical side to him. He wouldn't have called himself a mystic but he certainly had a religious sensibility as well as an artistic one. So we have a range in there that I think just a lot of people don't really capture and that drove him towards a way of thinking...

Dr. Dave: Well let me jump in here before you go on too much further. I really identify with him, you know. I also myself have felt like I've got one foot in the world of science and another foot in the world of humanities and maybe even, I don't know if I'd say mysticism, so I can understand why you related to him so strongly because I kind of get the sense that you and I have a fair amount in common as well. I never read James but I'm always encountering quotes of things that he's written, you know a paragraph here, or people will head a chapter with a quote from James and they always seem so contemporary and so I've felt like it's a great hole in my own background not to know more about him. So, as I mentioned, you've written this very fine paper on James and his relationship to what eventually became transpersonal psychology and your paper was published in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and I want my listeners to know that I'll be putting a link to it in the show notes that will accompany this podcast interview. So I really appreciate the family background that you gave us and a sense of the milieu and his father was also a follower of Emanuel Swedenborg, who's another interesting guy in his own right.

Mark Ryan: Yes, quite a mystical figure and I think it was a tension in William James's life, especially early on, because he came into maturity just as the intellectual world was getting supremely excited about the natural sciences, just after Darwin. So it was a time when universities were establishing scientific schools and the prestige of the natural sciences was rising to an unprecedented level and so James never fully identified with his father's way of thinking. He, I think somewhat in rebellion to his father, went into this study of chemistry and physics and anatomy and geology. He accompanied Louis Agassiz on a geological expedition to the Amazon, so there was a

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

tension there but he always had those religious yearnings that were so deep in his father as well. He went through something of a personal crisis in his late twenties, just in time for his first Saturn return if you know anything about the astrology but he really went into a depression and it was then I think that he really connected with his religious side and formed a genuine religious sensibility of his own.

Dr. Dave: Well, what was the depression about? Do we have any idea of what the content of that depression was?

Mark Ryan: Well, it had, I'm sure, a personal side. His cousin, who he was very close to, a young woman named Minnie Temple had died and there were some personal issues no doubt but he also thought of it in intellectual terms. So he really was oppressed by the rising materialism that he was being convinced of in his own mind. It was a kind of materialistic way of thinking that was associated with the rising science in his day in which really everything was seen as utterly determined and there was no place for free will. Determined by material, chemical and physical causes, all of life and each of our thoughts and behaviors and he found that quite oppressive.

Dr. Dave: Well, I think many of us have struggled with that.

Mark Ryan: Hmm, hmm. Well he made a comment then that if I... well, he made it much later and it was only after he made it that people identified the fact that he was talking about himself but its passages in his great work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he said that 'if I hadn't clung to scriptural texts that I think I would have gone really insane.' Texts like the ones he mentioned were 'the eternal God is my refuge,' 'I am the resurrection and the life' but he wasn't taking that in a strictly Christian way, even though those are Biblical texts. His family was not conventionally religious, nor was he ever in his life but he needed to believe and to accept that there was another dimension, that there was a larger reality than the strictly material world that we can observe.

Dr. Dave: Yes, you mention that he was strongly influenced by the American transcendentalists and that kind of led to a kind of broader sense of spirituality?

Mark Ryan: Well I think he was both influenced and somewhat in rebellion because he was... the transcendentalists of course were philosophers, they were not for the most part empirical scientists, although we have very careful observation. People like Thoreau for example but certainly that was part of the milieu that he had absorbed in his childhood, particularly with Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Dr. Dave: Am I correct that James was originally a philosopher and only later became a psychologist?

Mark Ryan: Well, no actually, it was really the other way around. He went into medical school – this was at a time when there was really no distinction in the academic world between psychology and philosophy. What psychology was done was usually done under the aegis of philosophy departments and his initial appointment was in anatomy and physiology but then he became interested in psychology and his first great work was *The Principles of Psychology* published in Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

1890. One could argue that that work, it was a major two volume, very comprehensive survey of psychological knowledge at the time, really solidified the field as an empirical enterprise. It really helped make it a science. He himself said that his purpose in the book was to try to make a science out of psychology by treating it as one. So that work is quite physical in orientation, it's always looking for physical components to associate with psychological functions and it tried to look at the psyche as something different than the traditional way of thinking of a soul, for example. So in that sense he was launched into the intellectual world as a psychologist and later took more of a turn towards philosophy and he was always interested in the very deepest questions that psychology might raise. After all psychology is the study of human nature and he never abandoned really a quest to know what can we know and how can we call it true. Those really deepest questions that are raised in both epistemology and in psychology.

Dr. Dave: Yes, so as a philosopher his stance was something you characterized as radical empiricism and I believe he's also credited as creating the first the first psychological laboratory in the U.S., which was at Harvard.

Mark Ryan: That's right. This was a time when experimental psychology was just getting going. There may be a rival claim to that but many people really feel that his was the first whether it was the... well, as I said anyway there are some other claims but I think that's true.

Dr. Dave: Let's see, we talked about his psychological crisis and you write that James was a seeker, that he sought out and studied non ordinary states, he experimented with what we would call alternative medicine from homeopathy to hypnotism and to mind cure. I assume by mind cure you mean mind over matter kind of thing, maybe as in Christian Science?

Mark Ryan: Exactly. Christian Science begins in Boston and it was a time when it was on the rise and he was very concerned, very impressed really, with the results of the kind of healing that could happen outside of the medical establishment.

Dr. Dave: And you also write that his curiosity about the potential of the psyche prompted him to experiment occasionally with hallucinogenic substances. Say a bit more about that if you will.

Mark Ryan: There was a rather eccentric upstate New York writer by the name of Benjamin Paul Blood who had a mystical experience in the dentist chair with nitrous oxide, which was used as an anaesthetic. Blood wrote something called *The Anaesthetic Revelation* based on his experiences with nitrous oxide particularly. It fascinated James enough to try it and it really had a profound effect on him because he understood in a way that he hadn't before what we mean when we use the term nowadays of a non-ordinary state of consciousness. He could see that the world of consciousness that we operate in was really a very limited one and that there were many other possible ways for consciousness to take form.

Dr. Dave: So, in a way he's kind of a predecessor of the whole nineteen sixties psychedelic experiment, or discovery, that opened so many people up to the idea that well there might be more going on than meets the way.

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

Mark Ryan: Yes and he came to that – he was certainly not a frequent user of drugs – but he came to a very fundamental understanding with his own experience with nitrous oxide but another phenomenon that captivated him really through much his life, utterly dismissed in the scientific circles and unexplained by materialism, was the phenomenon of spiritualism. This was a time when that was quite popular in the popular culture, of mediums apparently making contact with the dead, or at least going into a kind of trance state and channeling something and feeling that that's what they were doing. And he saw that there was no way that the dominant materialistic outlook could explain that and could explain some of the resulting phenomena. He came to it... he got involved in 1883 when travelling in England with a group called The Society for Psychical Research which was interested in these phenomena but interested in exploring them in as scientific a way as possible at the time, really investigating and putting controls on these mediumistic figures and the results that they were having in trance sessions. They were also working with hypnotism. He himself did quite a bit of experimentation on Harvard students, I might add, with hypnosis and shortly after getting linked up with the Society for Psychical Research, he met a particular medium by the name of Leonora Piper, who was active in Boston and he was actually dragged to a visit with her by his mother-in-law. He went with a skeptical attitude but she was able to somehow know things about relationships in the James family that she had no way of knowing in her ordinary state of mind. She would go into trance states and he saw repeated examples of this and then began to really study her in earnest and promoted others studying her, others from, including in Britain, who were part of that Society.

Dr. Dave: So they attempted to do scientific controls and so on to make sure that it wasn't deception of some sort.

Mark Ryan: Absolutely. They would keep her isolated from the people she was going to interview or to meet with. They would make sure that she was not meeting with other people. At given times they would even have her with her own... she was very much part of these experiments but she would be, by her voluntary agreement, confined, when she visited in England so as to not raise any possibility that she might have had contact with some of the people who would attend her séance, that sort of thing. So they and he, they meaning the Society and he, tried to walk a kind of middle path in these studies. On the one hand they didn't just accept that the explanation was necessarily the visitation of the spirit of a dead person as the spiritualists immediately thought of it. They were looking for more psychological explanations but it drove them towards a point of view in which the psyche was much more than it was conventionally thought of in the popular culture and certainly than it was thought of in academic circles. So he was walking the line between the spiritualist on the one hand and the strict materialist on the other, who simply dismissed these phenomena as impossible and really wouldn't engage, often wouldn't even engage in the experiments because they just thought it was nonsense or they were threatened enough by it that they didn't want to let that into their world view, so to speak.

Dr. Dave: Well I think his position that... I assume he was considering that the information might be coming telepathically somehow, or as you say part of a broader sense of consciousness than we normally conceive of. That actually probably would

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

fit quite well with contemporary parapsychologists that theorize about these things.

Mark Ryan: Yes, well it's interesting Dave you mention the word 'telepathically.' The word 'telepathy' was coined by James's colleague in The Society for Psychological Research – the SPR we refer to it as – Frederick Myers was his name and he can really be credited, vastly under known figure, he was a much more important than... probably not a name that many of our listeners know but he really came up with the first comprehensive theory of the subconscious mind in the early eighteen nineties. Telepathy was one way they were explaining this. For example it could be, say a person in a room communicating telepathically with the medium but sometimes they would come up with facts that the person in the room wasn't conscious of but could later be verified. So then maybe the theory became, it's a telepathic communication, not from one conscious mind to another but from a subconscious mind to another subconscious and eventually this pushed James towards a notion of, Myers as well actually, of a collective unconscious, well before Carl Jung investigated that phenomenon. James eventually wrote about what he conceived of as a kind of mother sea of consciousness, where all our memories exist in some way.

Dr. Dave: Now James would have been older than Jung, right?

Mark Ryan: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And is there a chance that Jung was influenced by James's thought or writing in his developing his ideas about a kind of universal consciousness?

Mark Ryan: On that specific topic I'm not sure but he was certainly aware of James. The two of them actually met once in 1909 at the Clarke University conference. That was the conference that lured Sigmund Freud to the United States for his only visit. It was called by a man named G. Stanley Hall, who had been a student of James, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary, I believe it was, of the beginnings of Clarke University, which was at the time seen as a major graduate school with great ambitions. But at that conference they met and it's interesting that Jung wrote a letter, which still exists, describing his meeting, he was very impressed by James, impressed especially by his openness and the two of them had, I think two lengthy discussions, I believe they were dinner discussions on two evenings, in which they were talking about some of these more spiritual elements of the psyche. But that was not the tenor of the conference at all, it certainly wasn't the tenor of Sigmund Freud's work, so they had a connection around that notion. And in fact Jung's doctoral dissertation was about a medium. She happened to be his cousin, Helene Preiswerk was her name, so he was quite interested in these phenomena himself.

Dr. Dave: Oh, they must have had a marvelous conversation. I can imagine them getting on famously.

Mark Ryan: I think so but June also observed that James at that point wasn't taken so seriously at the conference, precisely because of his interest in these phenomena and his work with Leonora Piper. This is despite the fact that by that time he was so famous, particularly for *The Principles of Psychology* and for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which was published about seven years before that conference in 1902 (?unclear).

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

Dr. Dave: Ah, yeah fascinating. Do we know whether Jung and James had correspondence after that?

Mark Ryan: I don't think there was correspondence between them that I'm aware of but they both mentioned the meetings they had with others.

Dr. Dave: Okay, well I would think that Jung... you know from what you've said, it just seems like such a strong hypothesis that Jung would have read James after that meeting and would have been influenced to some degree.

Mark Ryan: Well, it is quite possible, for this reason, most of James' writing in this vein remained rather obscure. Some of it is included in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* but that's a more mainstream work. For the group, The Society for Psychical research, he was publishing in their in-house journal, the journal of the Society. So that was not widely read however it was read by people who were interested in these phenomena. Also Jung and James had a link through a man named Théodore Flournoy, a Frenchman who was very interested in these phenomena and wrote a book on his own investigations of mediums. The title of his best known book in that vein was titled *From India to the Planet Mars* about somebody who felt that she could enter the consciousness of someone in India and a Martian. So, some of these things we can not take fully literally but Flournoy was a teacher of Jung and also a very good friend and collaborator with James.

Dr. Dave: Interesting. Of course Jung is well know for reading far and wide and reading things that you would really have to dig for.

Mark Ryan: Hm, hm. Hm, hm. Yeah one aspect of this that I'd like to know more about, if there's any evidence for it, is how much Jung knew about the psychological model that James was entertaining at the time. It was a model really created by Frederick Myers but Myers made the analogy of a spectrum of consciousness. About consciousness being analogous to the spectrum of light that was just being investigated in those years and just as light is visible only in a very narrow range along the possible spectrum of light waves, Myers suggested that our ordinary waking consciousness was, too, really just a narrow range of our potential consciousness. There's an interesting distinction here between this model and Freud, for example because Freud's notion of the subconscious was, as you probably know better than I, has to do with repressed traumas and trivia, things that never make it to the level of consciousness because they have such a small impact in our lives and it was also the source of neuroses. But James and Myers were looking at a model in which all of that included all of that but also saw the subconscious as the source of supernormal knowledge, of greater capacities, of the kinds of insights, the clairvoyance that could be shown by mediums, or telepathy as another element in it and genius. You know we tend to think of genius as hyper development of the rational mind but for them genius indicated a permeable boundary between the conscious mind and all that we might be putting together of our inner unconscious minds, so that we really had a capacity much greater than we normally suppose and normally exhibit. And this for Myers and to a major degree for James as well, leads up to the capacity to have mystical experiences and really greater insights than the norm, into the nature of ultimate reality.

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

Dr. Dave: And that model also certainly fits very well with Jung but also seems to anticipate Ken Wilbur. Didn't he write about a spectrum of consciousness?

Mark Ryan: He certainly did. He uses that term but it's quite interesting to me that Myers was drawing such an analogy seventy years before Ken Wilbur although Ken Wilbur develops it in other sorts of ways.

Dr. Dave: It's always mind blowing when we go back and read the original texts of some of these historical figures and it's always kind of mind blowing to discover that hey, they were really smart and they were onto a whole lot that we think that we've discovered or invented.

Mark Ryan: Well and there's such an example of that in transpersonal psychology. As you know that term gets employed in 1968 or thereabouts and transpersonal psychology is usually traced to Abraham Maslow and his work on peak experiences and fully developed humans in the late sixties, or to the work with psychedelics done by Stanislav Grof and others but so many of the, what they originally thought they were discovering for the first time, we can find in some of these earlier psychologists like James and Myers and Jung. They did recognize that they had forebears, Willis Harman wrote about, referred to at least as forebears, R.M. Bucke, who wrote *Cosmic Consciousness* and Harman, at least, was aware of Myers's major work which was called *Human Personality and the Survival of Bodily Death* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was another one he referred to. But I really think that a lot of the philosophical underpinnings of transpersonal psychology were elaborated in enduring prose really by William James a full half century or more earlier.

Dr. Dave: Yes and speaking of Maslow by the way, you write that James had had a couple of what Maslow would call peak experiences, while in nature. What do we know about those and I assume those probably came for him a lot earlier than some of the stuff that we've just now been talking about.

Mark Ryan: I'm not sure that it was earlier. James actually initiates in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the modern discussion of mysticism. Before he used the term in that book, it was seldom used as a noun. The term 'mystical' was around and he didn't coin the term 'mysticism' but mystical experience was usually examined within the confines of a particular religious tradition and with that term, what James was doing was at least giving currency that this is something that's cross-cultural, that penetrates many different religious traditions. He himself didn't think of himself as leaning strongly in that direction, he wasn't prone to mysticism, he thought of himself as quite a rational sort of person, however he did have two ways in which he had what I think we can fairly call some level of mystical experience. One of them was through the nitrous oxide as we mentioned and the other was through experiences in nature. He was an inveterate hiker, he walked a lot and he refers in his letters to two different experiences. One of them in the Adirondacks and another in the Swiss Alps in which he seemed to have a very strong sense of, I think, oneness with nature and beyond nature.

Dr. Dave: Okay, so before you mentioned that there seemed to be some impact on his reputation from his willingness to explore psychical phenomena. What was the Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

impact on his professional reputation as a scientist and at what point in his life did that become an issue.

Mark Ryan: Well it was in those later years when he kept studying people like Leonora Piper and working with The Society for Psychical Research. You know psychology in those days was taking a very materialistic turn, as it was trying to establish as a legitimate science and as I understand it, one of the reasons Freud didn't want to talk much about these phenomena was because he was afraid that it would work against the establishment of psychoanalysis as a scientific enterprise. And so psychologists, that was a time when behaviorism became a major force as well as psychoanalysis but if you look at the long history of psychology, I think if you go back prior to behaviorism and prior to psychoanalysis, we find quite a vibrant, in the late nineteenth century, a vibrant schools of psychology that very much made room for spirit, for some kind of spiritual experience. And that fell out of favor in the early twentieth century and so James was taken less and less seriously as a psychologist by many of his colleagues until we have the rise of transpersonal psychology in the sixties and then I think, I'd like to think, that article helps to point the way towards a kind of resurrection of James's work in this vein. By the way I can't talk about these things without paying homage to the work of Eugene Taylor who did a great deal to unearth this side of James and bring it to public attention with a couple of books published in the nineteen eighties or thereabouts.

Dr. Dave: When did your article appear by the way, I didn't see a date on the copy that I read?

Mark Ryan: Some time around 2008 I guess, 2009 perhaps, I can't tell you offhand.

Dr. Dave: Okay, reasonably recent. I want to go back to something you were saying about there was a time when the early psychologists were perhaps more open to the spiritual dimension and some probably were in the closet because you mention Fechner. Now I remember Fechner when I was studying the history of psychology as a graduate student, he was an important name, I'm trying to remember for what, maybe it was psychophysics and you said that... tell us a little bit about Fechner and his other side.

Mark Ryan: James was fascinated by Fechner and I think they both had some distinct religious experiences at a given point and that helped them with depressions but Fechner goes back quite a bit earlier, he did work in the eighteen thirties and forties and he became best remembered in psychology because of very empirical physical investigations in the establishment of the field of psychophysics but it comes as a surprise to many people who know something of his name and associated with that, to look into the side that James became more and more intrigued with as his own life went along. Fechner wrote a book in the eighteen thirties called *The Little Book of Life After Death* and James some forty or fifty years later wrote an introduction to a version of that. There was a translation of that published in English and then he, in one of his last works, *A Pluralistic Philosophy* (sic) James explores Fechner in detail in chapters in that work and what he's especially interested in is Fechner's panpsychism in which Fechner has this idea that consciousness really is part of all of reality, that many aspects of reality have not only a physical manifestation but a conscious side as well. He would trace that down to the smallest items in physical

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

nature and into the earth. So Fechner believed in a kind of Gaia, he didn't use that term, but it was an earth consciousness and saw this consciousness as kind of building up in wider and wider spheres and the widest sphere he would call God, or at least say that was what people referred to as God. And James took that idea seriously and eventually he felt that some kind of collective consciousness was as good an explanation as he could come up with of the phenomena he was observing with mediums and with people in trance states. So he has this beautiful passage, which is inspired by Fechner, he says 'our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The trees comingle their roots in the darkness underground and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea or reservoir.'

Dr. Dave: Wow!

Mark Ryan: So that Mother Sea, for James, was a scientific explanation if you will because it could give us a better explanation than most of the others he could try, about some of these phenomena that he observed.

Dr. Dave: Now, also, I get the impression that James to some extent really anticipated Thomas Kuhn's idea of paradigm revolutions. Tell us about that.

Mark Ryan: Yeah, you know James was, he was principally interested, I'd say in making spiritual experience valid before scientifically oriented minds and he could see that the way the academic and scientific world was tending towards to a strict materialism and he felt that that was itself a philosophical position but not a scientific one. That is to say it was not proven by evidence, it was a leap of faith. So he made this strong distinction between the procedures of science on the one hand and the philosophy of positivism or materialism on the other hand. It's somewhat what he meant by radical empiricism because he felt that his empiricism was radical because it didn't exclude empirical observations that the normal science often excluded. So he gives an analysis of the development of science that yes, I feel really anticipates what Kuhn wrote about half a century later in the nineteen sixties and that is, if you look at the procedure, it's that you have a kind of ordinary science, a kind of consensus but there are always facts that can't be explained by the scientific framework of the theory that's at hand and geniuses will come in and really look at those extraneous anomalous observations, facts, and when they do, they end up redefining the scientific consensus. That's when theories really move forward and become more all encompassing. So that's an analysis that emphasizes the importance of what James called 'wild facts.' Facts that are observed that are simply not accountable in the theory that is the consensus of the moment.

Dr. Dave: And so he really felt that as time went by science would evolve and some of the notions that he was setting forth would be accepted and some kind of empirical ways of substantiating them would come along. Do I have that right?

Mark Ryan: I think you do, yes and he also saw, or at least entertained the notion, Myers argued it a little more forcefully, was that our minds are evolving. Michael Murphy's work on the future of the body is anticipated here, whereas these capacities, these somewhat supernormal capacities that some individuals show, can reveal the

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

way consciousness might be evolving in the future.

Dr. Dave: Hm, hm. Well, let's turn the spotlight on you now. You are Associate Dean of the Wisdom School of Graduate Studies of Ubiquity University, so that's something that some listeners might be interested in because when I went to the website I saw that on the, sort of, advisory faculty I saw that there were people like Jean Houston and Stan Grof. So tell us about that institution and your involvement in it.

Mark Ryan: Well yes, he has some exciting people teaching with us; Caroline Myss, Rick Tarnas and Ralph Metzner, I think, has done some work with the group. The Wisdom School itself is older than what we're calling Ubiquity University. What was known for a while as Wisdom University, grew out of the University of Creation Spirituality founded by Matthew Fox in Berkley and it was taken over some eight or so years ago by the current President of Ubiquity, Jim Garrison, and went under the name of Wisdom University for seven or so years and recently has been incorporated into an entity now being established called Ubiquity University but that is an internet based university and it has not yet come online and is not yet offering courses. It's still in formation and it has strong ambitions to have a global reach and really make a difference in educating people across the world but meanwhile the real courses that are being offered are through what we now call the Wisdom School of Graduate Study.

Dr. Dave: And is that online study, or how is that structured?

Mark Ryan: It's both online and in person. Many of the classes are offered in one week intensives, so people meet and study a particular item very intensively for a week and often the place is related to the field of study. I first got acquainted with them by attending a class on mediaeval mysticism given by them at the Chartres Cathedral in France and also went with them to a study of St Francis that was done in Assisi. And we have people who teach quite a bit about the natural world and spirituality associated with it in the California Redwoods and in central Texas. Will Taegel is our Dean. He's written a book called *The Mother Tongue* that really I would say draws on, or at least, his roots are Native American but it certainly comports with the notion of a conscious living universe that Fechner articulated and that James was tending towards himself.

Dr. Dave: This sounds like maybe this is oriented towards people that are already established in their lives and careers rather than people who are just starting out and looking for licensing as therapists or something like that?

Mark Ryan: Yeah, most of our students are people, middle aged or beyond but not all, we also have some young ones as well. Ubiquity is more of an undergraduate school, or will be but the Wisdom School itself is licensed by the State of California, it's not accredited by one of the regional accrediting agencies yet but it does appeal primarily to people who are in it for their own edification, more than licensure.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, okay. So as we wind down now, I wonder, in relation to James and what we've been talking about, if there's anything you'd like to add by way of summary?

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

Mark Ryan: Well, thank you, Dave. Yeah well I'd like to go back to why I find James such a personal inspiration.

Dr. Dave: Oh, good.

Mark Ryan: And I think I would tie that to two characteristics of his thought, well three, really. One being that he's just a master of English prose. He's one of the one of the great, great prose writers that this nation, I feel, has produced. But beyond that his way of thinking has such a humility and authenticity about it and what I mean by that is, by the humility, is that he's very conscious of the limitations of both his own way of thinking and what humanity itself is equipped to grasp. He's sometimes used the analogy of a dog in our libraries; we interact with the dogs as we're talking about whatever we may be reading, or as we're having political discussions at the dinner table but the dog presumably has a limited ability to grasp all of what might be in our conversation, or in the library that surrounds us. And we humans might be the same way so, he always kept an open mind and was always willing to recognize that even his own formulations were limited and could be improved upon. And the other aspect of it is that he always insisted that experience be authentic in the sense that, especially as he's talking about religious experience. He really felt that it was meaningful only if it engaged that whole person and that really believed it, so he was always resistant toward accepting anything simply on the basis of authority. One comment here which I find quite inspirational, he says: 'The wisest of critics is an altering being, subject to the better insight of the morrow and right at any moment, only up to the date and on the whole. When larger ranges of truth open, it is surely best to be able to open ourselves to their reception, unfettered by our previous pretensions.' So, he honored what each person could bring to the table and that was the root of a philosophy that he later elaborates, called pluralism, where he felt that if each person stays in his own experience and others tolerate him there, that's the way that's the best and it's only when you put all those voices together that you get something closer to a whole truth. Those are perhaps coming out of a rather dogmatic religious training in my own roots, I've found inspirational through much of my adult intellectual life.

Dr. Dave: Well that is a great wrap up for our interview. Mark B. Ryan I want to thank you for being my guest on Shrink Rap Radio.

Mark Ryan: Thanks so much Dave, it's been a real pleasure talking to you.

WRAP UP:

Although Dr. Ryan is based in Texas, he let me know that he frequently visits guests in Sebastopol which is not too far from where I live, so I suggested that the next time that he's in the area that we get together for coffee. I think we're more or less the same age and seems like we have a lot in common. One other fact that didn't come up in our interview is that, among other things, he's a senior trainer for Stan Grof's Holotropic Breathwork seminars. Well it should be clear that Dr. William James was way ahead of his time in so many respects. It's probably taken until our time for his work to be fully appreciated. I came to the interview with considerable respect for him but that was based mostly on hearsay and references to him in other readings. Dr. Ryan's article and my conversation with him gave me more basis for admiring

Shrink Rap Radio #388

William James as Progenitor of Transpersonal Psychology with Mark B. Ryan PhD

William James. If I weren't so busy written by my guests I'd take time to read his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Maybe when I retire some day, when I really retire – hah.

One thing I meant to ask about but lost track of in the interview, has to do with his standing, versus that of his brother, Henry James the novelist. As I recall William James was highly regarded for his writing, more than Henry James. I once read something by Henry James, I think it was in college and as I recall it wasn't terribly compelling. By the way I just took a look at the Wikipedia entry on William James and there's a lot of additional information there about him and his thought. For example he earned an M.D. but never practiced medicine and he's quoted that the first lecture he ever heard on psychology was one he gave. You gotta love that. As I mentioned in the interview I've put a link in our show notes to Dr. Ryan's very fine article that appeared in, it turns out, the 2008 *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. It's really worth your taking time to read it if you're at all interested in William James or the conversation you heard here.