ABSTRACT: As the transpersonal movement develops, it comes to understand more about its precursors and its own intellectual history. Current scholarship has renewed interest in a major forebear, the British psychological investigator F. W. H. Myers (1843–1901), who can be credited with the first comprehensive theory of the unconscious mind. Myers’s transpersonal perspective is evident in his rigorously empirical methodology; his assertion of the reality of the spiritual and the inadequacies of materialism; his expansive concept and map of the psyche, as encompassing a spectrum of states of consciousness; his view of the unconscious as a vehicle of transcendent experience and higher potential, reaching beyond the self; and his belief in the evolution of consciousness. Though his work received little attention in the century after his death, recent writings have prompted a rediscovery of his pioneering ideas.

If life after death is not a grand illusion, the soul of Frederic William Henry Myers has cause to celebrate. After a century of neglect, the prolific British psychological investigator, dismissed by successors for his preoccupation with mediumistic phenomena and with demonstrating an afterlife, is once again getting his due, his reputation regaining an earthly immortality, whether or not his spirit is enjoying a heavenly one. The transpersonal orientation in psychology has forged an intellectual milieu in which Myers’s investigations seem courageous, some of his innovative theories ingenious, some of his insights prescient. This article will chart the recent rise in his reputation, delineate aspects of his relevance to contemporary transpersonal thought, and argue that he deserves recognition as a major precursor of the transpersonal movement. It should serve to present Myers’s essential psychological ideas to a general readership interested in transpersonal studies, and to mark a place for him in the history of the field.

At the time of his death in 1901, F. W. H. Myers commanded high esteem from across the still fledgling profession of psychology. A classicist by training, he had collaborated with some of the best-known psychological investigators of his day. He was lionized by prominent colleagues for his wide-ranging knowledge, prodigious memory, mastery of scientific and psychological literature, exacting investigation, and intrepid exploration of less accessible realms of the mind (see Crabtree, 1993, p. 327, and Gauld, 1968, p. 276). He had intensively explored the phenomenon still now known as “telepathy”—a term that he coined—and many other phenomena that he viewed as related to it, and out of that data he had constructed a far-reaching theory of human personality (see Murphy, G., 1954). William James credited him with the discovery of the subliminal mind: he had pulled observations of scattered
phenomena into a coherent, systematic concept of a subliminal self. The question of how that unconscious territory is constituted, thought James, deserved to be called the “problem of Myers” (James, 1901/1986, p. 196; see also James, 1909/1986, p. 374). To Theodore Flournoy, he was “one of the most remarkable personalities of our time in the field of mental science” (cited in Crabtree, 1993, p. 327). Though his work was controversial and incited some vigorous criticism, particularly for its more mystical and metaphysical leanings (see Alvarado, 2004 pp. 15–18), Frederic Myers was a presence to be reckoned with in the emerging field of dynamic psychology.

The driving motivation behind Myers’s accomplishments in the field, however, was his absorption with an issue that was increasingly inadmissible in professional inquiry: the question of life after death. As scientific life generally, and psychology in particular, took a resoundingly materialistic turn, Myers endeavored to demonstrate the existence of an autonomous soul, one that outlasted physical demise. In that pursuit, he helped to found the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) to coordinate rigorously empirical investigations of psychic and paranormal phenomena; he participated indefatigably in its efforts for over twenty years; he elaborated a pioneering and comprehensive theory of unconscious life, published in the pages of its journal and review; and he assembled his evidence and theories in a massive, posthumously-published work, Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death (1903), which now, a century later, is attracting renewed attention. To William James, that work was “a scientific construction of a very high order” and “a masterpiece of coordination and unification” (James, 1903/1986, p. 211).

The admiration of James and his contemporaries, however, was not enough to salvage Myers from the flood of twentieth century scientific materialism. His theories were often expressed in a florid and now seemingly antiquated prose, and his investigations centered on phenomena that were ever more widely dismissed as illusory. He may have been remembered in certain circles of parapsychological research (and in spiritualistic worlds, where interest was sustained by supposed post-mortem appearances of Myers in séance sessions); he may have been considered by specialists in the history of psychology or history of medicine. But the ideas of Frederic Myers largely disappeared from the more general psychological literature.

Alan Gauld’s The Founders of Psychical Research (1968) outlines Myers’s psychological theories, but the bulk of the book is devoted to the SPR’s efforts to confirm or disprove the validity of spiritualistic phenomena. Henri Ellenberger’s monumental The Discovery of the Unconscious, published in 1970, is still the most comprehensive treatment of the early history of depth psychology. Despite identifying Myers as “one of the great systematizers of the notion of the unconscious mind” (1970, p. 314), Ellenberger’s 900 pages grant him only passing references, delving deeply, instead, into the contributions of Janet, Freud, Adler and Jung. Daniel Robinson’s An Intellectual History of Psychology, revised a decade later, makes no mention of Myers at all (1981). When not ignored entirely, Myers and his circle in the SPR were sometimes recalled with harsh or dismissive criticism (see, for

Even in the more general literature of the transpersonal movement, until quite recently, Myers has cut a slight figure. As the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology was launched in the late 1960s, Willis Harman listed Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death as among the “pioneering books in the exploration of supraconscious processes,” along with two contemporaneous classics, R. M. Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness and William James’s Varieties of Religious Experience (Harman, 1969, pp. 22–23). But while those other works are widely read and have been republished in numerous editions, Myers’s magnum opus has scarcely been available.¹ There is nary a reference to Myers in the significant works of such major figures of the movement as Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, and Ken Wilber. Overviews of the field such as Transpersonal Psychologies (Tart, 1975), Paths Beyond Ego (Walsh & Vaughn, 1993), Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology (Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996), and Shadow, Self, Spirit (Daniels, 2005) refer to James and Jung as forebears, but collectively make almost no mention of Myers. Major writings of more parapsychologically oriented researchers familiar in the movement, such as Charles Tart, Russell Targ, and Dean Radin, provide occasional fleeting references to Myers’s investigations, but no sustained discussion of his psychological ideas.

Transpersonal psychology, however, has discovered realms, and investigated phenomena, that now are calling Myers back to life. Among historians of psychology, Adam Crabtree signaled the need for a renewed interest in Myers in his notable account of magnetic sleep and the early years of psychological healing. From Mesmer to Freud provides an account of the founding of the Society for Psychical Research and of its role in the psychological investigation of phenomena associated with spiritualism, mesmerism, and hypnotism. In a cogent and insightful summary chapter on Myers, Crabtree describes how those and associated investigations ultimately led Myers to formulate his comprehensive theory of the subliminal self (Crabtree, 1993: see especially pp. 269–273, 327–344). In recounting Myers’s accomplishments, Crabtree observes the incongruity between his former stature and his subsequent neglect, lamenting that he “is today almost unknown in the field of psychology” (p. 327). At about the same time, Sonu Shamdasani (1993), sounded a similar note in a Jungian-oriented journal, calling attention to Myers’s role in the “discovery of the unconscious” (p. 109), despite the fact that he had “fallen into obscurity” (p. 120) and is remembered in the history of psychoanalysis “if at all,” only for presenting Freud and Breuer’s work on hysteria to an English-speaking readership (p.108). Myers’s investigations of automatic writing and telepathy, argued Shamdasani, served, in Myers’s own terms, “to reveal our unconscious to our conscious selves” (cited on p. 112). Since the publication of these studies in 1993, Myers’s name has gained currency.

At the heart of this renewed interest are not so much Myers’s psychical studies, or his success or failure in demonstrating an afterlife, but his comprehensive theory of the unconscious mind. He was perhaps the first visionary of modern
psychology to portray the unconscious as a universal human attribute. In 1893, he had introduced the works of Freud to Britain (Mishlove, 2001, p. vii), but his view of the unconscious was of far greater scope than that which held sway in Vienna. While Freud saw the unconscious as composed of lost memories and repressed impulses, Myers viewed it as also the source, or a potential source, of wisdom, clairvoyance, genius, and transcendent vision. It may have been the repository of trauma and trivia, but it was also the font of greater human potential. The subliminal that Myers presented extended beyond the individual: it was linked to an evolving collective mind and, ultimately, to a spiritual core in human nature.

**SEARCHING FOR SPIRIT IN TIMES OF LOST FAITH: THE LIFE OF MYERS**

Frederic Myers was born in 1843, into an evangelical Anglican household in the town of Keswick, in the northern English county then called Cumberland. His father was a clergyman, his mother the pious daughter of a prosperous landowner and impresario, owner of flax mills in Leeds. In his childhood, he was steeped in Biblical readings and even then showed a preoccupation with death and afterlife (Gauld, 1968, p. 42; see also Myers, 1900, p. 294). His father’s early death, when Myers was only eight years old, undoubtedly reinforced that focus. But Myers came to intellectual maturity at a time in which traditional faith was challenged by historical and textual criticism of the Bible and by the post-Darwinian rise of scientific rationalism. W. H. Mallock characterized the mood of his fellow British intellectuals in the 1870s: ‘It is said that in tropical forests one can almost hear the vegetation growing,’ he wrote. ‘One may almost say that with us one can hear faith decaying’ (cited in Gauld, 1968, pp. 63–64).

Nostalgia for the comforts of a lost faith was felt by many in that generation, Myers, for sure, among them. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he distinguished himself as a classical scholar and poet, while undertaking studies in the natural sciences as well. Subsequently he accepted a lectureship at the College, during which he received further recognition for his poetry. For a time, his heretofore waning Christianity was revived by contact with a beautiful and crusading acquaintance, and perhaps by a conversion experience (Gauld, 1968, p. 95), but the effects did not last. Nearly dying of pneumonia at the age of 25, he found that though he dreaded the potential loss of his life, his faith had deserted him (Gauld, 1968, p. 99). But soon thereafter, he grew fascinated with the occult and anomalous phenomena associated with the spiritualist movement, then in high vogue both in the United States, where it originated, and in Britain. Spiritualism seemed to hold out hope for personal immortality, but unlike traditional religious teachings, it held the potential for empirical investigation.

Together with his Cambridge friend and associate Henry Sidgwick, Myers plunged into the study of alleged spiritualistic phenomena—the mysterious rappings and table-turnings, automatic writing, the clairvoyant insights of mediums, their supposed communications from another realm, and even the materializations of ghostly human forms (or parts thereof). Always interested
in questions of education, Myers left his lectureship at Trinity to work on behalf of the education of women; subsequently, in 1877, he was appointed school inspector in Cambridge, a position that he retained for the remainder of his professional life. But the investigations of spiritualism and associated phenomena—the effort to test those phenomena empirically and to explain them scientifically—remained the focus of his intellectual endeavors. In those investigations, he consistently saw himself as navigating between unremitting skepticism on the one hand, and superstitious credulity on the other.

In the succeeding years, Myers continued his literary activities, producing long poems, a widely disseminated study of Wordsworth (Myers, 1880), and critical essays on both classical and modern literature (Myers, 1883, 1888). He fell deeply in love with the former Annie Eliza, the wife of his troubled cousin Walter Marshall. Annie Marshall eventually committed suicide; some years later, Myers married Eveleen Tennant, daughter of a wealthy family, a gifted portrait photographer who was fifteen years his junior. Eventually the couple had three children. In 1882, Myers joined with Sidgwick, their friend and associate Edmund Gurney, physicist William Barrett, and various spiritualists and academic investigators in the formation of the Society for Psychical Research. The Society’s purpose was the exact and systematic investigation of a wide range of seemingly paranormal phenomena, including thought-transference, effects associated with mesmerism and hypnotism, testimonies about apparitions, as well as phenomena associated with mediumistic trances. By 1890, it had over 700 members, including such prominent figures as William Gladstone, former Prime Minister; Arthur Balfour, future Prime Minister; Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Ruskin, William James, and Lewis Carroll (Gauld, 1968, p. 140). Among its first major productions was *Phantasms of the Living*, a two-volume study of crisis apparitions—in which people report seeing the figure or hearing the voice of a person at the moment of the latter’s death, or of some other major crisis. Myers collaborated in the investigations, developed, with Gurney, the central thesis, and wrote the long historical introduction (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). In 1892, he began to elaborate his theory of the subliminal mind, publishing a series of studies on the topic in the SPR’s *Proceedings* and *Journal*, and introducing his preliminary ideas to a wider public in other forums, including a collection of miscellaneous essays (Myers, 1893). His effort to assemble this material, and the evidence behind it, into a thorough magnum opus was nearing completion when he was stricken with a series of illnesses affecting his heart, arteries, and breathing. In January of 1901, at the age of 58, Myers died in Rome. William James, who accompanied him at the time, remarked that he faced the final transition not only with serenity but eagerness (cited in Gauld, 1968, p. 332). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* was prepared for publication by Myers’s colleagues Richard Hodgson and Alice Johnson, and published in 1903.

**A NEW FRONTIER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL INQUIRY: PHASE ONE**

In launching the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1969, Anthony Sutich referred to the application of empirical investigation to “extraordinary subjective experience” as a “new frontier of psychological inquiry” (Sutich,
1969, p. iv). But that frontier had been crossed decades before, especially by figures associated with the SPR, including Theodore Flournoy, Henry Sidgwick, Edmund Gurney, William James, and certainly F. W. H. Myers. Like transpersonal psychologists of more recent times, these investigators aimed to understand spiritual experiences, transcendent states of awareness, and the further reaches of human potential. Over two decades after Sutich pointed to that frontier, Denise Lajoie and S. I. Schapiro’s surveyed definitions of the field he had helped to initiate; their integration of those definitions remains an enduring summation of central concerns. Transpersonal psychology, they wrote, was characterized by the investigation of at least five key interests or themes: states of consciousness; humanity’s highest potential; the extension of consciousness beyond ego or self; the notion of transcendence; and the validity and importance of spiritual concerns (Lajoie & Schapiro, 1992). Those very interests and themes permeated the work of Frederic Myers.

For Myers, the most profound question of human life was whether “any element” of the human personality might survive bodily death (1903/1954, v. 1, p. 1), and he was radically innovative in arguing that it could be addressed by experimental psychology (1893, p. 44). With the systematic investigation of near death experiences by investigators such as Russell Noyes and David Rosen in the 1970s, and particularly with the popular accounts of Raymond Moody and Kenneth Ring (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980), which spawned a new generation of intensive studies, the question has become an admissible one in transpersonal circles, even if it still stands outside the pale of mainstream psychology. Although Ring’s classical study makes only passing reference to Myers, and Moody’s none at all, the burgeoning study of near-death experiences surely helped forge an intellectual ambience that would be receptive to a renewed interest in his work. David Fontana’s comprehensive review of evidence for an afterlife (2005) builds directly on material collected by Myers and his colleagues; and other recent investigations into the possibility of survival, such as those by the team headed by Ian Stevenson at the University of Virginia Medical School (e.g., Stevenson, 1970; 1997), and the Survival of Bodily Death Seminar Series at the Esalen Institute, have been to some degree inspired by Myers’s work (see E. F. Kelly, E. W. Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso, & Greyson, 2007).

The thrust of Myers’s efforts, however, was not simply to gather evidence of the possibility of survival, but to construct a model of the human psyche that would make survival plausible. In the process, he explored phenomena, developed methodologies, and arrived at concepts that would prefigure central interests and themes of the transpersonal movement. We can recognize Myers as a precursor of transpersonal thought especially in his rigorously empirical methodology; in his assertion of the reality of the spiritual and the inadequacies of materialism; in his expansive concept and map of the psyche, as encompassing a spectrum of states of consciousness; in his view of the unconscious as an avenue to transcendent experience and higher potential, reaching beyond the self; and in his belief in the evolution of consciousness.
For Myers, the “method of modern Science” was the most effective way to acquire knowledge, so effective that it merited, in whatever way possible, application to some of the deeper preoccupations of human life, and to questions about human nature, that traditionally had been the province of religion and philosophy. The resulting science may be rudimentary, and inevitably limited, for the most profound questions about reality are not susceptible to scientific inquiry (1900, p. 297; 1903/1954, v. 1, p. 79). But Myers’s task, as he saw it, was to expand the reach of science, identifying issues involving mind and reality that could be subjected to dispassionate and systematic study, careful and cumulative observations, and critical analysis of findings (1903/1954, v. 1, pp. 1–2). Like other sciences, such inquiry should be built upon observable facts and whenever possible, on repeatable experiments (p. 7).

This new science would delve into areas not yet subject to empirical study, ferreting out new facts. Indeed, it would examine phenomena whose very reality had been subject to question. To date, science had achieved only a “narrow glance” into infinite realms of the unknown (p. 249). As it forged forward, it assuredly would uncover facts that were incompatible with inevitably limited reigning assumptions or theory. In Myers’s view, anomalous facts clashed with reductive materialist assumptions. But already, in his time, the new psychology had revealed substantive occurrences behind phenomena that scientific minds had previously dismissed as superstition and delusion. Investigations into hysteria and hypnosis had disclosed realities behind unusual manifestations associated with witchcraft and Mesmerism (pp. 4–5); stigmata, to choose another example, were related to other effects of suggestion on the vaso-motor system (p. 188).

Myers’s own research examined such extraordinary subjective experiences as telepathy, clairvoyance, remote viewing, automatic writing, precognition, inspirations of genius, visions, perception of apparitions, hypnotic states, trances, and spiritual ecstasy. By the systematic study of these phenomena, he aimed to show that they were both real and governed by natural laws, thus marking a middle ground between materialistic outlooks that dismissed them as delusional, and religious convictions that saw them as miraculous. His approach was to classify the evidence into types, track the frequency with which like phenomena recur, and consider how well alternative explanations might account for them. By standards of modern research, his evidence might appear anecdotal and statistically unsophisticated, but as Trevor Hamilton recently has demonstrated, it was, by the standards of its time, subjected to rigorous scientific canons (Hamilton, 2009, pp. 245–272). Always vigilant against the possibility of fraud, Myers insisted that anecdotal evidence be subject to confirmation, that as many cases as possible be examined before reaching conclusions, and that natural and psychological explanations be considered in advance of any that seemed extramundane (Kripal, 2007, p. 408). The great bulk of Human Personality was given over to evidence rather than theory, to a copious array of detailed case studies accumulated by Myers and his colleagues at the SPR. His expository strategy was to present these accounts
in what he saw as a continuous sequence, from the more accepted phenomena of hypnotic suggestion, through various forms of thought transference, leading ultimately to the perception of phantasms, first of the living and then of the dead.

THE REALITY OF THE SPIRITUAL

Myers believed that these investigations empirically demonstrated the reality of the spiritual. They showed that humans had faculties that could not be explained in terms of material cause and effect, at least as normally understood—faculties that seemed to operate independently of sense impressions and functions of the brain. For Myers, telepathy, which he defined as “the transference of ideas and sensations from one mind to another without the agency of the recognized organs of sense,” was a “Rubicon between the mechanical and the spiritual conceptions of the Universe” (1903/1954, v. 1, p. 24). Telepathy, “teleaesthesia” (what we might call remote viewing), precognition and other faculties were not limited by the normal constraints of space and time; their natural milieu was on a different plane, one that interpenetrated but was distinct from the world of matter. Myers tracked these phenomena extensively, in spontaneous cases, in automatic writing, and in non-ordinary states such as hypnosis and mediumistic trances. They led inexorably, he thought, to a conception of reality that included a spiritual realm, a realm that showed order and elements of consistency with the natural world, but that extended beyond it and was free of many of its constraints. For him, there was a steady progression from the direct transference of ideas from one mind to another, to the well-demonstrated perception of apparitions of a distant person as that person was undergoing a crisis or death, to apparitions of still extant deceased persons, or to their communications with the living in automatic speaking and writing.

Myers pursued the study of all of these perceived phenomena, believing that he had accumulated ample empirical evidence of their reality, though his explanations for them often differed from the popular ones and from the uncritical assumptions of the spiritualists. In them, he saw, in varying degrees, the “disengagement of some informing spirit from the restraint of bodily organism” (p. 25), and therefore the possibility of life apart from the physical plane. Each of us, he wrote, is “essentially a spirit, controlling an organism” (p. 217). Although well aware of contemporaneous research linking specific brain functions with mental functions, Myers did not conclude that the former necessarily caused the latter. Much of his research was pitched towards the discovery of instances in which elements of consciousness could be seen as acting on the physical plane, including the brain. True, there was correlation between certain brain functions and mentation, but the relationship could be seen as interactive, or as one in which, to use terminology elaborated by William James, the brain is more of a transmitter than a producer of consciousness (James, 1898). In the final analysis, according to Myers, brain is acted upon by spirit (see, for example, 1903/1954, v. 2, pp. 197, 254). In opposition to the materialistic tenor of his era, he accepted “the ancient
hypothesis of an indwelling soul” (p. 35), with an existence beyond the physical plane even during earthly life, and persisting after bodily death. In fact, he believed that such a soul was provable, indeed proved, by “direct observation” (1903/1954, v. 1, p. 35).

The spiritual world existed as the largest context of life, beyond not only the material realm but an intermediate energetic one as well, conceived of as “ethereal vibrations”—we might call it a realm of energetic fields. “That the world of spiritual life does not depend on the existence of the material world,” he argued, “I hold as now proved by actual evidence” (p. 215).

**THE SUBLIMINAL SELF: CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SPECTRUM**

To explain the anomalous phenomena that he so carefully investigated, Myers developed his theory of the subliminal self, his great and original contribution to theoretical psychology. That contribution, first conceived as early as 1885 (Hamilton, 2009, p. 127), deserves far greater recognition than it generally commands, and it is of particular relevance in today’s transpersonal studies.

Previously psychologists, by and large, had treated the supraliminal—the familiar, conscious mind—as the substantive element of the psyche, and the subliminal as something on the fringes of it, evident primarily in cases involving psychoses. But Myers proposed a far more extensive view of what constitutes the psyche. The supraliminal, conscious self, he argued, exists within the context of a much wider and “more comprehensive consciousness, a profounder faculty,” from which it merely makes selections (1903/1954, v. 1, pp. 12, 72). In the first of a series of nine articles on subliminal consciousness that he wrote for the *Proceedings* of the SPR, Myers declared:

> Each of us is in reality an abiding psychical entity far more extensive than he knows—an individuality which can never express itself completely through any corporeal manifestation. The Self manifests itself through the organism; but there is always some part of the self unmanifested; and always, as it seems, some power of organic expression in abeyance or in reserve (1892, p. 305).

Telepathy, trance experiences, secondary personality, possession, and the full range of occult and paranormal phenomena Myers saw not simply as products of pathology, but as windows into the psyche’s farther extensions. The supraliminal forms a privileged element, well adapted to normal life; but in its subliminal reaches, the mind extends far further and deeper into the individual personality, and even beyond.

In the view of most contemporaneous psychologists, the significant content of the unconscious derived from conscious experience that later was repressed. But for Myers, the subliminal had its own, profounder links to reality, ultimately extending into collective and spiritual domains. As William James forcefully argued, Myers made the first attempts to map out the full range of
the subliminal mind as a universal human phenomenon. In the process, he “quite overturns the classical notion of what the human mind consists in,” making the unconscious not secondary but central (James, 1901/1986, pp. 195–196).

At least eight decades before Ken Wilber (1977), so seminally for the transpersonal movement, interpreted consciousness as analogous to the spectrum of light, Frederic Myers had done the same. Just as the eye finds visible only a limited range of the sun’s rays, so does normal consciousness encompass only a limited range of our mind’s perceptions and cognitive processes. The spectrum of consciousness may be viewed as extending from organic processes in one direction to higher mental faculties in the other, and beyond each “extends a range of faculty and perception, exceeding the known range, but as yet indistinctly guessed.” In one direction lie subtle awarenesses that affect normally involuntary organic processes and movements; in the other, perceptions that can result in supernormal faculties and religious ecstasy (1903/1954, v. 1, pp. 17–18, 76). Myers saw his validation of latent faculties as extending the spectrum in both directions. The full spectrum encompassed trivial, repressed memories and insane delusions as well as precious insights and transcendent visions; it was “a rubbish-heap as well as treasure house” (p. 72). In a tripartite division that would prefigure later distinction among pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal, Myers saw distinctions between lower, mid-level, and higher centers of the subliminal (pp. 72–74).

**Wisdom and the Unconscious**

Myers was well aware of contemporaneous studies linking the unconscious mind with disintegrations of personality, including, for example, the work on hysteria of Janet, Breuer and Freud. Like others of his time, he knew the unconscious could involve the inconsequential and the destructive. But his distinctive role was to call attention to the other side of the scale, to its possibilities for supernormal insight and transcendent capacities, to its indication of what he termed the “evolutive” side of human nature. Beneath its “realm of dream and confusion,” he wrote, lay a “wisdom profounder than we know,” one “wiser than our sanity itself” (1903/1954, v. 2, p. 100).

Myers traced those capacities in dreams, hypnosis, automatic writing and other avenues to the subliminal, where he found ample illustration of telepathy, teleesthesia or clairvoyance, and other forms of extraordinary perception. Under hypnosis, people frequently displayed medical clairvoyance—we might refer to an “inner healer”—diagnosing and prescribing treatments for themselves or others. They could have telepathic knowledge of the hypnotizer’s thoughts. In dreams they located lost objects; they resolved business dilemmas or professional issues, even solving mathematical problems or deciphering what had been unintelligible inscriptions. In both states, they might have monitory hallucinations that save them from some danger and might perceive distant and even future scenes. They could have visions of the past and intimations of the future. Myers explained genius not as the hyper-development of
a rational capacity, but rather as an “uprush” from the subliminal mind, bringing into normal consciousness ideas that had matured in the unconscious, sometimes with little or no conscious awareness on the part of the person involved. Geniuses were individuals who had a low threshold between the supraliminal and subliminal (see 1903/1954, v. 1, pp. 20, 71, 78). Thus great artists often thought of themselves not as inventing, but as recording inspirations that seemed to burst fully blown into their ordinary consciousness.

In its profounder reaches, Myers believed, the subliminal was involved with, and expressive of, humankind’s unity and, beyond that, its essentially spiritual nature. He saw the universe as ultimately not a collection of individual experiences, but as “a plenum of infinite knowledge of which all souls form part” (1903/1954, v. 2, p. 273). In that plenum, what we experience as past and future is part of an ever-present reality. Contemplating those nether reaches, Myers turned to Platonic notions, where ideas or archetypes have a timeless presence, and where our profounder realizations are “reminiscences” of truths that we have known in our existence on a spiritual plane. The deepest of those realizations came through religious ecstasy, or mystical experience, which Myers conceived of as a “traveling clairvoyance” to the spiritual realm, and as the supreme uprashes from the subliminal self. “True ecstasy,” wrote Myers, “I regard as a condition where the centre of consciousness changes from the supraliminal to the subliminal self, and realises the transcendental environment...” (p. 572). Such mystical experience was common to all religions, and though it might differ “morally and intellectually” from one to another, in “psychological essence” it was the same in all (p. 260). Those illuminating experiences were inevitably interpreted, and confused, by earthly cultures and concepts, but they remained the highest flights of consciousness that incarnate souls can take.

**Evolution of Consciousness**

The extraordinary capacities of the subliminal mind pointed towards an evolution of consciousness. Myers wrote at a time when the enthusiasm for Darwin’s notion evolution, and its application in social thought, was at its apex, despite the resistance of churchmen and others who saw it as a threat to traditional theological convictions. He saw possibilities not only of human physical evolution, but of growth in human mental faculties, in perceptual subtlety and powers of concentration. Telepathy, for example, could become a universal experience. Genius represented the possibilities of evolutionary development, ways in which common capacities might eventually evolve. While Myers had absorbed the Darwinian concept of natural selection, he also envisioned the possibility of humanity’s exerting more control over its future evolutionary development, in part by a wider application of hypnosis and self-suggestion. His notion that supernormal capacities represented glimpses into the direction of evolution was absorbed by Michael Murphy and others in the Human Potential movement (see Murphy, M., 1992).

His emphasis on evolution, we should note, did not rob Myers of a respect for the accomplishments of primal cultures. At times his rhetoric reflects a
condescending attitude towards the “primitive” that was typical of his era, with its apotheosis of the doctrine of progress and its view of Western civilization as the apex of human achievement. But Myers recognized that his studies were reconfirming notions and experiences that had been part of human culture’s earliest manifestations, expressed in healing rituals and such ancient practices as crystal-gazing. Indeed, he saw himself as returning, at times, to “the language of a ‘paleolithic psychology’ (1903/1954, v. 1, p. 247) and acknowledged that “the ‘humble thinkers’ of the Stone Age, the believers in Witchcraft, in Shamanism, have been my true precursors in many of the ideas upheld in this book” (1903/1954, v. 2, p. 218). Spiritual insight was subject to evolutionary development, but supernormal powers and profound spiritual experiences were integral to all cultures, not least that of “the shaman, the medicine man” (p. 260).

For Myers, the evolutionary trajectory was inseparable from humanity’s spiritual nature. It released latent capacities in a subliminal mind that drew sustenance from a spiritual universe. Telepathy, ultimately, is based on a “mutual gravitation or kinship of spirits”—that is to say, on love (p. 282)—and it gives us a glimpse of the interconnectedness, the final unity, of that ultimate web. As evolution progresses, humanity comes to know a progressively wider environment, which eventually must include the spiritual context of human life. Psychic capacities were a way in which humanity strives to know that context, and a way in which the context strives to be seen. In Myers’s vision, as in the Vedantic, human life was infused with, was part of, divine life, and was in a process of discovering the nature of, and returning to, its source. Spiritual development was humanity’s central purpose; through it, we cooperate in cosmic evolution. “That which lies at the root of each of us,” he wrote, echoing a notion of Atman, “lies at the root of the Cosmos too. Our struggle is the struggle of the Universe itself; and the very Godhead finds fulfilment through our upward-striving souls” (p. 277). Citing Plotinus, Myers portrayed the whole evolutionary process as “the flight of the One to the One” (p. 291).

**MYERS REVIVISCENT**

In the century following his death, interest in Myers, such as it was, persisted primarily in circles of parapsychology. Occasional books on spiritualism or psychic research examined his role and ideas (see Cerullo, 1982; Gauld, 1968; Oppenheim, 1985); and some accounts of his work appeared in his own forum, the *Journal of the SPR*, and in other parapsychological journals (see Angoff, 1962; Murphy, G., 1971; Salter, 1958). In mainstream academic circles, especially in more recent years, scholars of more renowned figures in the history of psychology, such as James, Jung, and Flournoy, noted his influence on or intellectual kinship with their subjects (see, for example, Barnard, 1997; Shamdasani, 1994, 1998, 2003; Taylor, 1982, 1996). Eugene Taylor’s study of James’s approach to “consciousness beyond the margin” (1996) provides perhaps the most substantial commentary on Myers in these discussions.
But the centenaries of Myer’s death and of the publication, two years later, of *Human Personality* sparked a new round of thoughtful appreciations of his psychological ideas, for their own sake. Although addressed primarily to the researchers in parapsychology, these appraisals asserted Myers’s significance in the broader history of psychology and called attention to notions that have been central in his recent revival (Alvarado, 2004; Kelly, 2001).

Although so much of Myers’s writing centered on paranormal phenomena and the question of an afterlife, William James had anticipated the focus of more recent interest in Myers’s work by highlighting his theory of the subliminal mind. By no means, thought James, had Myers empirically demonstrated all of his claims, nor proven survival (see letters to F. C. S. Schiller and James Ward, cited in Perry, 1935, v. 2, pp. 376, 649–650). But as early as 1892, James extolled the historical importance of Myers’s theory, and of his efforts to subsume within it a wide-ranging spectrum of human capacities (James, 1892/1986, p. 98). Particularly in two essays published shortly after Myers’s death, first a eulogy and then a review of *Human Personality*, he elaborated on the significance of these innovative, indeed revolutionary, ideas, and the manner in which Myers arrived at them (James, 1901/1986; 1903/1986). Myers had brought the full array of occult phenomena, normally ignored in scientific investigation, under fair-minded scientific scrutiny (see also James, 1896/1986, p. 132), striking a proper balance between the denial of materialists and the credulousness of enthusiasts. He was “the pioneer who staked out a vast tract of mental wilderness and planted the flag of genuine science upon it” (1901/1986, p. 202). Moreover, he brought the phenomena encountered in that vast tract into relation to one another, arranging them into incremental series, and subsuming them under a general theory, the spectrum view of a universal subconscious mind (pp. 195–196). In the upper reaches of that spectrum, we encounter both spiritual awareness and adumbrations of further evolution of consciousness. James viewed these speculations as preliminary, the first attempt to mark out and map a territory for further study; but whether they would stand or fall in the future, they were the kind of bold and original hypotheses by which “the scientific researches of an entire generation are often molded” (pp. 199–200).

Through Michael Murphy, the memory of Frederic Myers was revived at the Esalen Institute. According to Jeffrey Kripal’s sweeping recent history of Esalen, Murphy was introduced to the thought of Myers by Willis Harman in 1962, just after the Institute’s founding, and was inspired by *Human Personality*. Myers’s philosophy is reflected in early Esalen brochures, particularly in their emphasis on “psychical research” as one of the Institute’s three pillars, and in their insistence on applying scientific procedures in the investigation of religious or occultist phenomena. Ultimately, Murphy was influenced by Myers’s empirical and comparative approach to religious phenomena in the writing of his own *The Future of the Body*, published in 1992 (Kripal, 2007, pp. 317, 406–408). In that work, Murphy, like Myers, gathers an immensely wide array of evidence related to the supernormal; arranges it in categories that are related but progressively more challenging to conventional explanation, emphasizing their continuity; interprets it with a
broad concept of evolution, as demonstrating the emergence of more highly evolved human capacities; and even takes up the question of postmortem survival (Murphy, M., 1992). Lamenting that “few people today appreciate Myers’s work” (p. 10), Murphy draws extensively on Human Personality and on the Journal and Proceedings of the British and American Societies for Psychical Research, examining many of the same metanormal phenomena that fascinated Myers and his circle. Explicitly following Myers and William James, Murphy attributes at least some extraordinary human capacities to “incursions” from a transcendent order that ultimately is part of human identity (Murphy, M., 1992, pp. 549–551).

A central figure in this revival of a broader interest in Myers has been Emil Williams Kelly of the University of Virginia, who first encountered his writings during the 1970s, and who was intrigued by his effort to link the particulars of psychic research to a more comprehensive understanding of mind and consciousness, and even of the universe at large (Kelly, personal communications, October 14 and 16, 2009). In the 1990s, Kelly completed a dissertation on Myers at the University of Edinburgh (Cook, 1992), where the ambience was more receptive to her interests than at graduate schools in the United States (Kripal, 2007, p. 444). She subsequently presented lucid accounts of Myers’s approach and theories to the parapsychological world, noting their wider implications for psychology in general (see especially Cook, 1994). Myers, she argued, deserved credit for not abandoning the most basic questions of psychology: the nature of consciousness and the relation between mind and body.

In the year of the centennial of Myers’s death, Kelly published an assessment of his influence on psychology in the Journal of the SPR, reviving a theme that James had planted in the same journal a century earlier (Kelly, 2001). Like James and others, Kelly praised Myers for the abundance of his research, the range of his subject matter, the breadth and cogency of his theory. But for her, Myers’s chief significance lay in how he delineated and approached the territory of his investigations, transcending the debate between naturalism and supernaturalism. His effort to encompass paranormal phenomena within a framework of natural order led Myers beyond the old dichotomy of matter and mind, to adumbrations, supported by the new physics, that the two, in some way yet to be imagined, may be part of a greater unity. Exploring situations in which mental phenomena might be seen to have physical effects, rather than vice-versa, Myers portrayed a consciousness that was far greater in extent, with far greater capacities, than we normally assume. In so doing, by Kelly’s assessment, he articulated a seminal perspective on the place of mind in the natural world.

Other articles at the time of the centennials asserted that Myers’s influence has been greater than commonly recognized. Ann Taves discerned Myers’s ideas, especially his concept of the subliminal, behind William James’s influential psychological model of mysticism as promulgated in The Varieties of Religious Experience (Taves, 2003). A perceptive essay by psychical researcher Carlos Alvarado (2004) argued that many of Myers’s ideas had permeated
psychological thought, particularly parapsychology, even though they were no longer linked to his name. The notion that extra-sensory perception, telepathy and other supernormal functions were linked to the subconscious, prevalent in parapsychological studies for a century, could ultimately be traced to Myers. Although his ideas run against the grain of dominant psychological models of our own time, they nevertheless have contemporary relevance, calling attention to a psychology of “optimal functioning” (p. 21); reminding us that materialistic assumptions are subject, at least, to question; emphasizing the evolution of consciousness; and interpreting certain experiences in terms of a lower threshold between unconscious and conscious activity. Human Personality, concludes Alvarado, “helps us to keep open the possibility of a psychology in which the mind is seen as more of a causal agent than is generally assumed” (p. 27).

The paramount contribution to the resuscitation of Myers is a massive recent study by a team of psychological investigators. Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century grew out of a seminar sponsored by the Center for Theory and Research of the Esalen Institute, initiated by Michael Murphy in 1998 (Kelly et al., 2007, p. xiii). Shaped in part by Emily Kelly’s longstanding immersion in Myers’s thought, the study is structured around issues that Myers had seen as central in the investigation of consciousness. Besides Kelly, contributors to the volume include Adam Crabtree, neuroscientist Edward F. Kelly, psychologist Alan Gauld, philosopher Michael Grosso, and near-death researcher Bruce Greyson. The seminar involved an annual conference on the question of the survival of bodily death; it regularly drew other prominent researchers, such as Dean Radin and Marilyn Schlitz of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, psychical investigator Charles Tart, and quantum physicist Henry Stapp (Kelly et al., 2007, p. xv; Kripal, 2007, pp. 442–443). For these researchers, as for Myers, the question of postmortem survival hinges on the relationship between consciousness and matter, between mind and brain.

It is that relationship that forms the focus of this nearly 800-page volume, which is dedicated to Myers as “a neglected genius of scientific psychology” (dedication page), and which characterizes Human Personality as “a great but neglected classic” of the field (p. xiii). In the estimation of these authors, Myers provided the first “effective” description of the unconscious mind (p. 302), and his work represents “the most systematic, comprehensive, and determined empirical assault on the mind-body problem” that psychology has produced (p. xxix). Irreducible Mind reviews Myers’s contributions, critically examines subsequent research on topics he considered crucial, and on that basis, assesses the current state of the mind-body problem, presenting a radical, empirically based challenge to the dominant materialistic consensus. It offers a thoroughgoing examination of phenomena that are unexplained by physicalist assumptions—by the notion that all consciousness is produced by the brain—even as represented in such advanced and sophisticated fields as cognitive neuroscience and computational theory. Many of those phenomena had been identified and explored by figures associated with the SPR, and the results were most fully synthesized by Myers himself. Among them were telepathy, clairvoyance, psychophysical influences, psychokinesis, multiple and alternate
personalities, near-death and out-of-body experiences, apparitions, genius and mysticism. Although phenomena such as these continue to be dismissed in mainstream circles, their reality is supported by a steady accumulation of evidence that has expanded greatly in the past century. By examining them empirically, the contributors to *Irreducible Mind* continue in the tradition of Myers—in subject matter, in philosophical orientation, in their broad definition of the scope of psychology, and in their faith that the ultimate question of mind’s relation to matter can be approached with scientific methodology.

Following Myers’s method, the authors arrange discussion of such phenomena along a continuum from the most to the least susceptible to conventional interpretations. A discussion of the effects of consciousness on physical processes, for example, begins with a discussion of well-recognized psychosomatic factors, such as the effects of mental stress on immune and cardiovascular systems, and the positive effects of meditation on health; it extends to less widely accepted but empirically verifiable phenomena such as various forms of faith healing and placebo effects, then moves progressively through more inexplicable phenomena, passing through such factors as stigmata, physiological changes in the emergence of multiple personalities, hypnotic analgesia and cures, skin writing, and apparent effects of one person’s mind on the body of another; it culminates, finally, in discussions of distant mental influence, such as inducing trances, distance healing, psychokinesis, and birthmarks linked to cases implying reincarnation (pp. 117–239). The authors argue explicitly that the understanding of any particular phenomenon is best achieved by placing it in the context of related ones (p. 415); and in subsequent chapters they apply that method in analyses of phenomena related to near-death experiences, genius, and mysticism, all the while building on the content and presentation of Myers’s studies.

The renewed interest in Myers’s contributions—and the appeal of his ideas not to specialists alone, but to readers generally concerned with phenomena of mind—promises to grow apace. Cultural historian Roger Luckhurst (2002) provides a nuanced and many-faceted account of social and intellectual forces behind the early controversies over telepathy, propelled in great measure by SPR investigations and by Myers’s coinage of the term in 1882. Reviewing the prominent place of telepathy in Myers’s psychological theory, and acknowledging his influence on figures such as Binet, Janet, Flournoy and James, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870–1901* charts the emergence and popularity of the notion that Myers had named, its adaptation into literature, and the complex discourses that focused on it in various social contexts and fields of study. *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life after Death* (2006), by Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist Deborah Blum, tells the collective story of the major SPR researchers, and the relationships among them. Touching on Myers’s theories of telepathy and of the subliminal, it probes his personal psychology, particularly the effects on his pursuits of his relationship with Annie Marshall. Eugene Taylor, whose earlier pioneering works on William James (1982, 1996) explore Myers’s influence on James’s view of consciousness, has recently issued an historical overview of dynamic
psychology. The Mystery of Personality: A History of Psychodynamic Theories gives Myers due recognition, calling him “a lynchpin linking dynamic theories of personality in England, Europe, and America” (2009, p. 26). Taylor provides an account of the investigation of mediumship, hypnosis, automatic writing and crystal-gazing by Myers and his colleagues in the SPR, and notes the originality of Myers’s theory of subliminal consciousness, with its various strata and its supernormal capacities.

Moreover, Myers has lately become the subject, for the first time, of a full-length biography. Trevor Hamilton’s Immortal Longings: FWH Myers and the Victorian Search for Life after Death pays far more heed to Myers’s investigation of spiritualistic phenomena than to his psychological theories, but it ably sets Myers’s life and studies in their social and intellectual context, tracks the progress of his research and the development of his ideas, and provides a valuable assessment of his research methodologies (Hamilton, 2009). Another major new discussion of Myers is by social historian and religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal, whose comprehensive account of Esalen is cited above (Kripal, 2007). From a perspective centered in the field of religious studies, Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred (2010) focuses on four outstanding scholars of the paranormal, beginning with Myers. Kripal attempts to nudge his academic colleagues towards an ontology that would allow for occurrences conventionally viewed as impossible. In that effort, he provides a sophisticated and sympathetic account of Myers’s psychology and metaphor-laden writings, which he views as providing a foundation for his own “hermeneutical model of the paranormal.”

CONCLUSION

It is one of the elemental truths of intellectual history that seemingly new ideas are often less radically innovative than their enthusiasts know. Innovators invariably have their predecessors, who sometimes have developed concepts far beyond what the successors assume, and who may have left a legacy in the cultural and disciplinary background on which later figures unconsciously draw. In the history of psychology, for example, Pierre Janet came upon a small coterie of magnetizers, and thus was led to rediscover the forgotten writings of the Marquis de Puységur and his associates, whose work on “magnetic sleep” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had prefigured much in Janet’s own investigations of hypnotic trance and subconscious ideation (Ellenberger, 1970). With regard to its basic premises, transpersonal psychology faces an analogous moment, as its practitioners rediscover the work of a coterie of late nineteenth-century investigators, including William James (see Ryan, 2008), F. W. H. Myers, and others associated with the London-based Society of Psychical Research.

For Frederic Myers, the question traditionally phrased as the ‘immortality of the soul’ was the pre-eminent concern of human life. His investigations were in pursuit, ultimately, of an empirically based answer to that question; and his analyses of human psychology, his map of the subliminal mind, were framed by
transcendental experience; he created an immensely expanded model of consciousness, seeing it as a spectrum that reached, ultimately, beyond the ego; and he saw the subliminal as an avenue to higher human potentials, heralding an evolution in human consciousness. In all of that, Myers prefigured aspects of modern transpersonal thought. As his newfound recognition attests, Myers assuredly deserves a place as a major precursor of the transpersonal movement.

**Notes**

1 The original two-volume edition, comprising 1,360 pages, was published in London by Longmans, Green and Co. in 1903 (Myers, 1903) and reissued in 1920 (Myers, 1920). The same publisher issued a one-volume edition abridged by Myers’s son Leopold Hamilton Myers in 1907 (Myers, 1907), reissuing it in slightly modified form in 1936 (Myers, 1936). The original two-volume text has since been reprinted in the United States by small or specialty presses: by arrangement with Garrett Publication in 1954, with an introduction by Gardner Murphy (Myers, 1954); by Arno Press in 1975 (Myers, 1975); and by Helios Press, in connection with the book’s centennial in 2003. The 1954 edition is available through a “Rare Reprint” from Kessinger Publishing. The only
version currently in significant circulation is a much-abridged one-volume edition, edited by Susy Smith with a foreword by Aldous Huxley and an introduction by Jeffrey Mishlove, originally published in 1961 (Myers, 1961), and reprinted in 2001 and 2005 (Myers, 2001, 2005). That version, unfortunately, mutes the more theoretical aspects of the work. The publishers of the newly issued *Irreducible Mind* have included a compact disc of the original edition (Kelly, E. et al., 2007).

2 Freud himself wrote an article for the Society’s *Proceedings* contrasting the two outlooks (Freud, 1912).

3 Although he did not explore it extensively, Myers was aware of the phenomenon that later became known as “near death experience.” In *Human Personality*, he observed the capacity for “traveling clairvoyance,” in which consciousness seems to move away from the location of the physical body. Such experiences sometimes were associated with comas preceding death, he noted, and they could prompt visions of a spiritual realm (1903/1954, v. 2, pp. 129, 218, 525). The same volume includes a detailed account of a case that later researchers might characterize as a classic near-death experience. It involved an apparent death, separation of consciousness from the body, its movement away from the immediate scene, its sense of its own persistence and security after death, and an impression of an encounter with an infinitely loving and intelligent presence, followed by a sudden return to ordinary reality (pp. 315–323).

**References**


The Author

*Mark B. Ryan* is on the Board of Directors, the Academic Council, and the faculty of Wisdom University. He holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale University and Masters’ Degrees from Yale and the University of Texas at Austin. For twenty years he was Dean of Jonathan Edwards College and a teacher of American Studies and History at Yale. Subsequently he became Titular IV Professor of International Relations and History at the Universidad de las Américas in Puebla, Mexico, where he served as Dean of the Colleges, Master of José Gaos College, and Coordinator of the Master’s degree program in United States Studies. He has also taught at Williams College. Mark is a certified Holotropic Breathworker; for fourteen years he served on the Board of Trustees of Naropa University. His writings include *A Collegiate Way of Living* (Yale University, 2001) and articles on educational and transpersonal topics, including two previous pieces in the JTP.