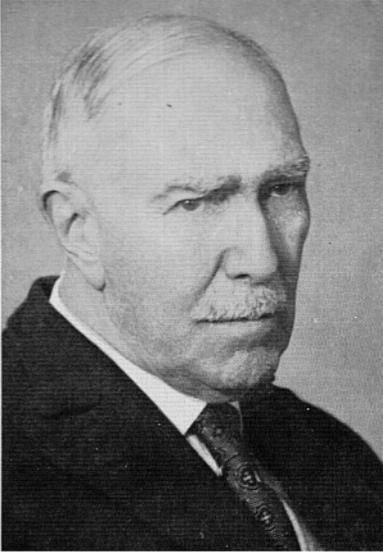


BOOK REVIEW

Metapsichica Moderna: Fenomeni Medianici e Problemi del Subsciente by William Mackenzie. Rome: Libreria di Scienze e Lettere, 1923. 450 pp. ASIN B006MSD3YO.

The psychical researcher William Mackenzie (1877–1971) was born in Genoa of Scottish parents and spent almost his entire life in Italy, while formally remaining a British citizen. He studied at several Italian and European Universities, graduating in Biology and Philosophy, and in 1905 he established a marine biology laboratory in Quarto dei Mille. During that period he published his first important work, *Alle Fonti della Vita (To the Sources of Life)* (Mackenzie 1912a), and his speculative nature and his passion for the philosophy of biology are already evident. In that work, Mackenzie claims that materialism is insufficient to explain biological phenomena, and he drew the foundations of a neovitalistic theory which asserted the specificity of a biological realm ruled by an intelligent and psychic energy needed to explain the teleological complexity of living organisms.

Between 1912 and 1914 Mackenzie gained notoriety following the studies conducted with the founder of Psychosynthesis Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974) on the famous “calculating horses” of Elberfeld, which issued their responses to complicated mathematical calculations by rhythmically beating their hooves. The calculating horses attracted a large group of European scholars, including some of the most eminent Italian psychologists such as Father Agostino Gemelli (1878–1959) and Giulio Cesare Ferrari (1867–1932) (Zocchi no date). The studies were in the journal founded by the latter in 1905 in Bologna, *Rivista di Psicologia (Journal of Psychology)*, a journal of central importance for the then-fledgling field of Psychology in Italy (Marhaba 2003:60ff). In 1912 Mackenzie published the paper *I Cavalli Pensanti di Elberfeld (The Thinking Horses of Elberfeld)* (Mackenzie 1912b) in that journal. Still in Germany and with Assagioli, Mackenzie studied Rolf the Mannheim’s dog, another “thinking” animal supposedly with a strong metaphysical and mathematical intelligence. The synthesis of those years of research resulted in *Nuove Rivelazioni della Psiche Animale (New Revelations of the Animal Psyche)* (Mackenzie 1914), in which Mackenzie claimed that the phenomena were genuinely produced by the intelligence and will of animals.



William Mackenzie (1877–1971)

During World War I he was drafted by the Italian army in order to organize psychological assistance to the troops. During this time he published *Significato Bio-Filosofico della Guerra* (*The Bio-Philosophical Meaning of War*) (Mackenzie 1915), a philosophical analysis of war seen first of all as a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated because it is rooted in the biology of living beings.

During World War II, however, Mackenzie lived in exile in Switzerland: His British citizenship made him an enemy in the eyes of the Italian state, which expropriated all his material possessions. From 1939 to 1945 he still managed to earn a living teaching the Philosophy of Biology at

the University of Geneva. One of the most successful courses which he held during those years was *Dix Étapes sur la Route de l'Esprit* (*Ten Steps on the Road of the Spirit*), dedicated to the great spiritual masters of human history and their doctrines. In fact, he concluded that spirituality, read in the Jungian interpretation, was fundamental to explain the human being. The course was published several years later in French, Italian, and other languages under the title *Les Grandes Aventures Spirituelles* (*The Great Spiritual Adventures*) (Mackenzie 1967).

Undoubtedly, contact with the enigmatic phenomena of the animal psyche steered Mackenzie to psychical research. Over the years he became Honorary President of the *Società Italiana di Parapsicologia* (*Italian Society of Parapsychology*) of Rome, Member of the *Institut Métapsychique International* of Paris, and in 1955 he founded and directed a quarterly journal that lasted only two years, *Parapsicologia* (*Parapsychology*) published by the publishing house Fratelli Bocca, which collected many contributions from international researchers. Between 1915 and 1950 he experimented with various mediums such as Jan Guzyk (1875–1928) and Stephan Ossowiecki (1877–1944). However, it was the séances in which he participated in 1921 in Brussels, during which the alleged mediumistic entity Stasia manifested, that established him permanently in psychical research (Beverini 1988, Talamonti 1971).

The experiences with Stasia constitute one of the chapters of *Meta-*

psichica Moderna (Modern Metapsychical Research) (Mackenzie 1923), published in Rome in 1923 and quite recently reprinted under the title *Guida ai Fenomeni Medianici (Guide to Mediumistic Phenomena)* (Mackenzie 1988). In the Italy of the 20s the study of paranormal phenomena had already been ostracized by both psychologists and the academics, and was increasingly polarized between spiritualists and metapsychical researchers determined to oust the spiritistic hypothesis from the theoretical knowledge of the discipline; moreover, due to the aftermath of World War I, researchers were struggling to keep pace with the international community (Biondi 1988, Biondi & Tressoldi 2007). That is why *Metapsichica Moderna (MM)* can be seen not only as Mackenzie's greatest legacy to the field of psychic studies, but also his contribution as to the philosophy of biology, which is making metapsychical research a science and thus detaching it in a decisive manner from any form of spiritualism.

Contents

Mackenzie wrote *MM* to spread the view of metapsychical research he learned from Morselli (1908) and Richet (1922), which is a positive, factual, and empirical metapsychical research, free as possible from early hypothesis. He was convinced that working in the direction set by those two scholars of metapsychical research would, in a short time, obtain "the right to citizenship in the republic of science" (Preface, ii). The important thing was to avoid at all costs the "maximum danger for the scholar," i.e. "the spiritualism as affective interpretation of some phenomena" (Preface, iii).

The influence of Richet (1922) is evident not only in the choice of the phrase *metapsychical research* instead of *psychical research*, but also in the first four chapters, which are a sort of introduction, free as much as possible from doctrinal comments, to the facts, phenomena, and categories of the discipline. Those chapters follow the path taken by Mackenzie to approach metapsychical research: the thinking animals and Stasia's mathematical mediumship and metapsychical research with its mental and physical phenomena. The fifth and sixth chapters break with the previous method, giving free rein to the philosophical speculations of Mackenzie, who, however, claimed to be aware "of the point at which ends the finding of fact, and begins the commentary around it" (Preface, vi).

In the first chapter Mackenzie returns to the discussion of the thinking animals, particularly the new case of the dog Lola, daughter of the Mannheim's dog. According to his source, Kindermann (1922),¹ Lola was able to understand human conversations, count, speak, and write using proper signs, do weather forecasting, and finally perform small philosophical

and moral speeches. Mackenzie felt sure that animals possessed a sort of rudimentary mathematical intelligence anchored in their organic substrate and activated by training; but he was also sure this fact could not explain the philosophical speculations of Lola. Discarding the possibility of fraud, Mackenzie made a step forward compared to his surveys in 1914 and advanced the zoopsychological hypothesis of the “psychic concomitant automatism” (*automatismo psichico concomitante*): The mind of thinking animals, refined by training, would become the receptacle of subconscious thoughts of their masters, or of other people, thanks to the establishment of an automatic and unconscious psychic relationship. The source of all manifestations of intelligence that were not mathematical were attributable to humans (p. 63ff).

Supernormal mathematical skills connect first to the second chapter. In 1913 in a mediumistic circle in Brussels there began to manifest an alleged mediumistic personality who called herself Stasia; initially she proved to be able to influence at will the output of a playing card from a deck, then she began to predetermine the extraction of a specific card, unknown to the investigators until the last moment, through complex arithmetic operations whose results, combined with a code, restored the name of the card that was actually taken from the deck. Thanks to the accounts of Poutet (1919) (p. 67ff), the organizer of the circle in Brussels, and to his séances in 1921 (104–125), Mackenzie guaranteed the authenticity of the mathematical skills of Stasia, whom he recognized as an autonomous subconscious personality, and excluded the skills that were attributable to the conscious intellect of the medium. According to Mackenzie, Stasia also operated through clairvoyance and telekinesis, but those two capacities constituted “so to speak only the skeleton of the events. Around this skeleton, the living pulp is formed by the unprecedented power of calculation Stasia reveals” (77–78).²

In Chapter 3 Mackenzie said that after numerous studies with the medium Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918) (e.g., Alvarado 1993, Biondi 1988), who gave life to facts established by a large number of people, the time had come for a decisive step toward the scientific and experimental investigation of mediumistic facts. This meant that metapsychical research after Palladino had to eliminate, as we have already said, any theoretical and emotional contamination with spiritualism, “the vice of origin which weighed heavily on the young branch of study” (p. 148), and embrace the research program conceived by Richet (1922). For Mackenzie, metapsychical research studied the whole phenomenology of *mediumship* or the *supernormal*; the two terms were understood as synonyms but without spiritualist implications (p. 154). The term *supernormal* designated

all the activity occurring outside the neuromuscular mechanism of the subject, i.e. veridical perceptions created by mediums without the use of their sense organs, and the actions performed by the mediums, which can be determined objectively, without the use of their body. Recovering the distinction of Richet (1922) between subjective and objective phenomena and adapting over it his own distinction, Mackenzie divided mediumship into “perceptual or static” (in broad terms mental mediumship) and “physical or dynamic” (physical mediumship). In turn these two classes are part of two other higher categories, that of “supermediumistic phenomena” (*fenomeni supermedianici*) and of “mediumistic and submediumistic phenomena” (*fenomeni medianici e submedianici*), based on the distance of the phenomenon from the medium. For example, a phenomenon that takes place away from the medium, such as the clairvoyance of an event in another city, will be a supermediumistic phenomenon, a closer one will be mediumistic (p. 239ff).

Referring to a large and thriving tradition of research on dissociation, multiple personalities, and potentialities of the subconscious mind (e.g., Alvarado 1991, Cardeña and Alvarado 2011), Mackenzie claimed that under certain circumstances during the séances, it is as if the mind of the medium dissociates into at least two parts, the cerebro-spinal psychism, which continues to preside over the normal physiological functions of the individual, and the supernormal psychism, which is totally subconscious and has the power and knowledge to now completely refute any conventional scientific explanation as to supernormal perceptions and actions. Mackenzie wanted to specify that mediumistic dissociation is not entirely comparable to that of hysteria; rather, between the two is a relationship of homology that could reveal a common phylogenetic origin and a natural spread of dissociative phenomena. Therefore, the dissociative forms of mediumship are probably, in embryo, in most normal subjects, both in waking, better still in sleep (dream); they turn out to be more precise in insights, especially when they are very brilliant; can assume greater importance in some states of hypnosis and somnambulism; and, finally, may reach maximum size during the deep trance of the fully developed medium (pp. 167–168).

The third chapter closes with a succinct review of the perceptual mediumship phenomena: telepathy, clairvoyance, psychometry, psychic photography, mediumistic tiptology, automatic writing,³ polyglot mediumistic phenomena, cross-correspondences, direct writing, and mediumistic dictation. Mackenzie drew from a vast range of sources, thus demonstrating his knowledge of the literature (e.g., Bozzano 1921, Flournoy 1900, Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886, Myers 1903, Ochorowicz 1889, Richet 1922, Sage 1904, Warcollier 1921). While he considered cross-correspondences as one



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of the few pieces of evidence strongly in favor of the spiritistic hypothesis, he considered direct writing and mediumistic dictation as phenomena in which counterfeiting and fraud were plentiful. It is worthy of mention, however, that the invitation that he turned to the experimenters do not blame and do not detract too much the mediums found to cheat, because fraud could also be attributed to an expression of their unconscious wishes and aspirations (p. 180ff).

The fourth chapter is devoted to physical mediumship, whose phenomena were for Mackenzie the most numerous and well-documented: “It is certainly an excellent title, especially about the many who tend to deny a priori, [it] can show diagrams of recorders, weight charts, impressions, casts, photographs” (p. 197). Through discussion of some works on ectoplasmy, telekinesis, and, to a lesser extent, on other physical phenomena such as materializations and dematerializations (e.g., those of Bisson (1921),⁴ Bozzano (1919), Crawford (1918), Ochorowicz (1889), Schrenck-Notzing (1920), and Zöllner (1878)), Mackenzie found three indisputable experimental results: the existence of a substance that comes out from the medium and forms the ectoplasms, the fact that the output of this substance causes a decrease in the weight of the medium proportional to it, and the intervention of the substance in the phenomena of telekinesis (p. 198ff).

As Alvarado has shown (2006), at the time Mackenzie was writing it was still widely thought that there were forces or substances that go out of the body to produce the phenomena of mental and physical mediumship, forces that seemed to Mackenzie “a new physics that violates, in any way, and from the foundations, all our regular physics, and violates all our fundamental physiological laws” (p. 199). For the author, the central point was the need for someone to explain the way in which the body of the medium disintegrated partially and then recomposed as a new substance, because it was precisely that aspect of the phenomenon that allowed him to present a dissociative/aggregative vision of the mediumship, therefore composed by psychic dissociation and, in the dynamic phenomena, also by physical dissociation.

The fifth chapter and sixth chapters constitute the theoretical (and more original) part of *MM*. Mackenzie is dissatisfied with Geley's (1905) explanation for ectoplasms, due to the somewhat outdated hypothesis of Entelechy described by the vitalist philosopher Driesch (1909). Driesch played a leading role in the revival of Vitalism, which lasted until the 1930s (McLaughlin 2008) and influenced Mackenzie and many other researchers. For Mackenzie the real problem regarding physical mediumship "must be just that of the twofold psychophysical 'dematerialization' of the subject: homologous system, probably, of the twofold dematerialization which takes place in radioactive phenomena of inorganic matter" (pp. 270–271). Remaining doubtful about the nature of the substance and because physical dissociation is dependent on trance mediumship and therefore on psychic dissociation, Mackenzie went on to present his original interpretation of mental mediumship, the naturalistic and anti-spiritual "polypsychical hypothesis" (*ipotesi polipsichica*).

In developing that hypothesis he claimed to have been inspired by Schopenhauer (1925) for the philosophical aspect and by Durand de Gros (1894) for the biological aspect, integrating them with his own studies in those disciplines. Mackenzie argued that every natural being is polyzoic (*polizoico*), or colonial, that is composed of several independent living units that join together and form a new and more articulated being. The polyzoism (*polizoismo*) is naturally occurring from unicellular algae that combine to pave the way for a multicellular organism, to man. The polyzoism brings with it the polypsychism (*polipsichismo*): When the new body is formed from individual minds or psychisms, a new psychic entity emerges that is more complex and of a higher order, greater than the sum of the individual parts and supernormal compared with them. Consider, for example, the apparently intelligent behavior of social insects (p. 276ff). Mackenzie extended the idea that the supernormal can be biological to mediumship: Personalities that manifest themselves during the séances would not be spirits of the deceased, nor even the simple subconscious of the medium or of the individual investigators, but instead the polypsychic entity that emerges from the psychisms of the medium and the sitters, with all the hallmarks of complexity and supernormality that we find in the biological kingdom. In fact, a medium's psychic *quid*, somehow free and active thanks to trance and dissociation, would be able to act on the psychic entities of the experimenters and aggregate them in a completely new polypsychic personality. Once formed, that personality would also produce the paranormal phenomena:

Such a completely new “mediumistic personality” would therefore in genuine cases be observed in the best séances and “would animate” the most different phenomena: from the spiritual manifestations of the medium to the real “ghosts”—not excluding other physical manifestations—clearly revealing an “intelligence” that models and directs them. (pp. 286–287)

Mackenzie realized that in the explanation of cross-correspondences, identification of mediumistic personality, and haunting phenomena his hypothesis was weaker than that of the spiritists. To solve this problem, he proposed the probable existence of psychic entities unrelated to those present, but still far removed from a deceased person with his own identity and memory (p. 296ff).

The sixth and last chapter is a heterogeneous set of considerations on spiritualism, metapsychical research, philosophy, and science. For example, Mackenzie rebuked spiritualism as being materialistic (p. 309ff), and used the latest discoveries in physics showing increasingly subtle energies and matter to show the robust dualism of the past (p. 315ff). The real dualism, Mackenzie continued, is not between spirit and matter but between the life domain of biology and the non-life domain of physics. “Metapsychical research . . . would be, or at least should aspire to be, the nascent chapter of a widely understood Biology” (p. 338). Moreover, Mackenzie had a psychoanalytical reading of the visions of some mediums, and expressed the idea

that, perhaps, *psychoanalysis and metapsychical research are two closely related sisters*; the two youngest legitimate daughters of the great concept of the “subconscious,” which, in many ways, enlivens the psychological doctrines of man. (p. 343)

MM concludes with indications for the future development of metapsychical research. According to Mackenzie, it should incorporate the psychoanalysis of mediumistic dreams, investigating the desires of the polypsychic supernormal community which are expressed in them; the physical survey, to understand how chemical and physical ectoplasm could exist; and, finally, the biological survey to study the psychic force of the human body (p. 347ff).

Conclusions

The theorist in Mackenzie prevailed over the experimenter, and tried to offer an explanation of paranormal phenomena in a biological and anti-spiritical key. In his view, the spiritistic hypothesis could not definitively rule out the intervention of the living in the production of mediumistic phenomena and

could not bring any crucial evidence for spiritism. So he proposed a viable alternative, rooted in biological fact and free of any emotional and religious creeds, to the survival hypothesis.

The mixture of metapsychical research and the philosophy of biology is what is intriguing in Mackenzie's book. We can agree with Talamonti (1971) that Mackenzie's speculations consist of the following points:

- 1) the priority of the psyche, understood as an element that gives order to biological matter;
- 2) the existence of a collective psyche for each animal species, which operates on a subconscious level;
- 3) the existence of psychic fields, from which individuals draw subconscious patterns of behavior;
- 4) individuals aggregate to form a new polyzoic and polypsychic entity, from which emerge new and more complex behaviors;
- 5) some polypsychic entities produce mediumistic phenomena.

As we said, for Mackenzie the new polypsychic entity is supernormal compared with the individuals who generate it: For example, the behavior of a colony of termites is supernormal compared to that of the single termite, and is driven unconsciously by the psychic field. In this way, the mediumistic supernormal is only a further degree of that organic supernormal, with all those complex, directed, and non-mechanical behaviors of living beings that occur regularly in nature and are equally difficult to explain. There is no difference between the two. Consequently, mediumship is a biological fact present at all levels of life, without exceptions.

Although *MM* received positive reviews, the polypsychic hypothesis generated some concerns in the research community. For example, in France, Sudre (1923) agreed with Mackenzie's criticisms of spiritualism, but stated that the constancy and coherence of the phenomena, regardless of the composition of the mediumistic circle, denied or made unlikely the polypsychic hypothesis as an explanation for any kind of mediumistic phenomena. In Italy, Bozzano (1923a), moving from a position diametrically opposed to that of Sudre, was in fact a strong supporter of the spiritistic hypothesis, but also had the same criticisms of the polypsychic hypothesis. While recognizing the validity of Mackenzie, of whom he was a friend, he said that according to his case studies he could provide numerous examples of mediumistic personalities who maintained their own and very specific identity during several sessions with different participants, or even in cases of a single participant, thus demonstrating their complete independence from the psychism of the experimenters. With these arguments, Bozzano

(1923b) also wrote to support the spiritual and not polypsychical nature of the mediumistic personality Stasia.

Notes

- ¹ In the last part of Kindermann (1922) we find an essay by Mackenzie dedicated to the evolution of the thinking animal studies from 1914 to 1919 (Mackenzie 1922), the translation of a booklet originally published in Italian (Mackenzie 1920), in which he argued the same ideas presented in the first chapter of *MM*.
- ² In the Appendix of *MM* there is *Contributo allo studio dell'attività intellettuale subconscia di "Stasia"* (*Contribution to the Study of Stasia's Subconscious Intellectual Activity*) written by the Italian mathematician and logician Alessandro Padoa (1868–1937). He tried to reconstruct, on the basis of reports by Poutet (1919) and Mackenzie (1923), some of the calculations and mathematical reasoning made by Stasia to determine the output of the cards. His conclusions were that the calculations were not prepared and stored by the medium before the séances and that the phenomena, therefore, could be entirely due to Stasia, a real subconscious personality with its own memory and intentionality (Mackenzie 1923: Appendix A, 369–391).
- ³ In the Appendix of *MM* we find *Note introspettive del Dott. N. N. sulle proprie sensazioni durante le sue prime prove medianiche* (*Dr. N. N.'s introspective notes on his feelings during his first mediumistic experiences*), an anonymous report of “a prominent scholar” (p. 185) of impressions and physical sensations experienced during some séances in which he developed automatic writing (Mackenzie 1923: Appendix C, 405–411).
- ⁴ In the Appendix of *MM* we find *Relazione della signora J. A. Bisson al 1° Congresso Metapsichico Internazionale (Kopenhagen, 1921)* (*Report of Mrs. J. A. Bisson at the 1st International Metapsychical Conference (Copenhagen, 1921)*). Juliette Bisson was a French sculptor and psychical researcher who studied the mediumship of Eva Carrière for years; in this report, included in the original language, she described Eva's materializations and the substance that produced them. She argued that the phenomena were genuine, that the substance was not ingested and then regurgitated, and that the driving force behind the materializations was intelligent (Mackenzie 1923: Appendix B, 392–404).

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