

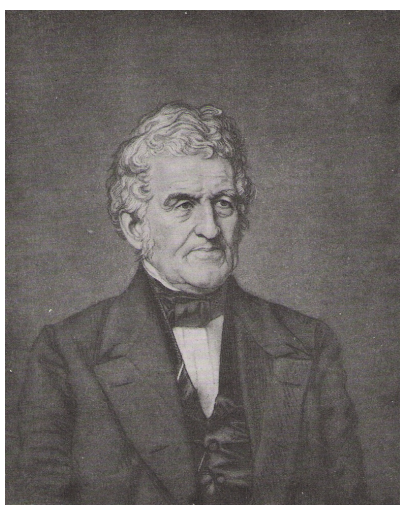
Philosophical Discussion

An “Interview” with Professor Robert Hare

by Michael E. Tynn

*Abstract: This “interview” with Professor Robert Hare, one of the first psychical researchers, is based on his actual words as set forth in his 1855 book, **Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations**. Except for words in brackets, added to permit a flow or transition, the words are verbatim from the book. The questions have been tailored to fit the answers.*

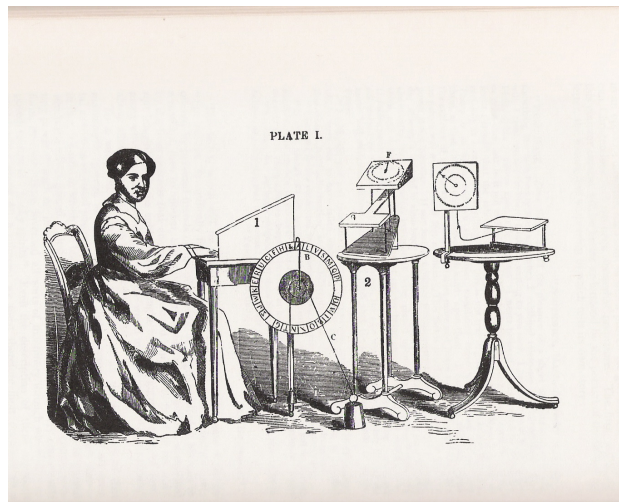
The author of more than 150 papers on scientific subjects, Professor Robert Hare (January 17, 1781 to May 15, 1858), the son of an English emigrant, was a world-renowned inventor and an esteemed professor of chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania before becoming one of the first psychical researchers. Only John W. Edmonds, a New York Supreme Court judge, seems to have preceded Hare as a serious and dedicated psychical researcher.



Robert Hare

Hare invented the oxy-hydrogen blowpipe, a forerunner of the modern welding torch, before he was 20 years old, and was the first person to fuse lime, magnesia, iridium and platinum. In 1816, he invented the calorimotor, a type of battery from which heat is produced. This led to his invention of the deflagrator, which was employed in volatilizing and fusing carbon.

In 1818, Hare was called to the chair of chemistry and natural philosophy at William and Mary and that same year was appointed as professor of chemistry in the department of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, where he would remain until his retirement in 1847. He was awarded honorary M.D. degrees from Yale in 1806 and Harvard in 1816. In 1839, he was the first recipient of the Rumford Award for his invention of the oxy-hydrogen blow-pipe and his improvements in galvanic methods. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and an honorary life member of the Smithsonian Institute. In addition to frequently writing on scientific subjects, Hare also wrote, using the pen name Eldred Grayson, articles on political, economic, and philosophical issues. In an 1810 article, *Brief View of the Policy and Resources of the United States*, Hare advanced the idea that credit is money. He also wrote frequently in opposition of slavery.



A Hare invention

Hare began investigating mediums in 1853 after writing a letter to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* denouncing the “popular madness” being called Spiritualism by the American press. One Amasa Holcombe then wrote a letter to Hare and suggested that he investigate before coming to such a conclusion. Hare agreed it was the proper thing to do. His conversion to Spiritualism took place within three months of his first sitting with a medium and his 1855 book, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* detailed his investigation and his new-found philosophy.

Inventor that he was, Hare contrived an apparatus called the spiritoscope, to facilitate and expedite communication, as the process he had observed was very slow. It was made up of a circular disc, the letters of the alphabet around the circumference of the disc, and had weights, pulleys, and cords attaching it to the tilting table. The medium would sit behind the table in order to supply the “psychic force” through which the spirits caused the table to tilt, but the medium could not see the wheel and had no idea what was being spelled out. Put to the test, the contraption worked and the first spirit to communicate was Hare’s deceased father, Robert Sr. When Hare continued to doubt, the message came through, “Oh, my son, listen to reason!” At a second sitting, his father again communicated, saying that his mother and sister also were there but not his brother. Personal information was given to Hare, information which Hare was certain the medium could not have researched.

Professor Hare, what prompted your early conclusion that spirit communication was nothing but a “popular madness”?

“In common with almost all educated persons of the nineteenth century, I had been brought up deaf to any testimony which claimed assistance from supernatural causes, such as ghosts, magic, or witchcraft...[and] I was at that time utterly incredulous of any cause of the phenomena excepting unconscious muscular action on the part of the persons with whom the phenomena were associated. The inference of [Professor Michael] Faraday, tending to the same conclusion, I thoroughly sanctioned.”

So you did not even consider the spirit hypothesis?

“As no allusion to spirits as the cause had been made by [Faraday] in the letter which drew forth mine, they were not contemplated in my view of the subject. Had I ever heard spiritual agency assigned as a cause, so great was my disbelief of any such agency, that it would have made no impression on my memory.”

Your book suggests that you have done a complete turnaround.

“It is a well-known saying that there is ‘but one step between the sublime and the ridiculous.’... I sincerely believe that I have communicated with the spirits of my parents, sister, brother, and dearest friends, and likewise with the spirits of the illustrious Washington and other worthies of the

spirit world; that I am commissioned, under their auspices, to teach truth and to expose error...If I am a victim to an intellectual epidemic, my mental constitution did not yield at once to the miasma.”

What kind of mediumship have you witnessed?

“There are two modes in which spiritual manifestations are made through the influence or sub-agency of media. In the one mode, they employ the tongue to speak, the fingers to write, or hands to actuate tables or instruments for communication; in the other, they act upon ponderable matter directly, though a halo or aura appertaining to the media; so that although the muscular power may be incapacitated for aiding them, they will cause a body to move, or produce raps intelligibly so as to select letters conveying their ideas, uninfluenced by those of the medium”

I recall reading that your first sitting involved communication by raps or taps.

“[True, we were] seated at a table with half a dozen persons, a hymn was sung with religious zeal and solemnity. Soon afterward tappings were distinctly heard as if made beneath and against the table, which, from the perfect stillness of every one of the party, could not be attributed to any one among them. Apparently, the sounds were such as could only be made with some hard instrument, or with the ends of fingers aided by the nails. I learned that simple queries were answered by means of these manifestations; one tap being considered as equivalent to a negative; two, to doubtful; and three, to affirmative. With the greatest apparent sincerity, questions were put and answers taken and recorded, as if all concerned considered them as coming from a rational though invisible agent.

“Subsequently, two media sat down at a small table (drawer removed), which upon careful examination I found to present to my inspection nothing but the surface of a bare board, on the underside as well as upon the upper. Yet the taps were heard as before, seemingly against the table. Even assuming the people by whom I was surrounded, to be capable of deception, and the feat to be due to jugglery, it was still inexplicable. But manifestly I was in a company of worthy people, who were themselves under a deception if these sounds did not proceed from spiritual agency.”

But why such crude method of communication, such as raps and table tilting?

“An effort has been made to throw ridicule on spiritual manifestations, on account of phenomena being effected by means of tables and other movable furniture; but it should be recollected that, when movements were to be effected, resort to movable bodies was inevitable; and as generally the proximity of media, if not the contact, was necessary to facilitate the movements, there was no body so accessible as tables. But these violent mechanical manifestations were always merely to draw attention; just as a person will knock, or even kick, violently at the front door, until some one looks out of a window to communicate with him. The more violent manifestations ceased both at Hydesville, at Rochester, and at Stratford in Connecticut, as soon as the alphabet mode of communicating was employed. I never have had nay to take place during my intercourse with my spirit friends, unless as tests for unbelievers, when intellectual communications could not be made. It is more than 15 months since I have resorted to instruments which have nothing in common with tables.”

Will you give an example of the kind of evidence that was convincing to you?

“[Certainly,] having my apparatus (spiritoscope) at the residence of the lady by whom it had been actuated in the third trial, this lady sitting at the table as a medium, my sister reported herself. As a test question, I inquired ‘What was the name of a partner in business, of my father, who when he had left the city with the Americans during the Revolutionary war, came out with the British, and took care of the joint property?’ The disk revolved successively to letters correctly indicating the name to be Warren. I then inquired the name of my English grandfather, who died in London more than seventy years ago. The true name was given by the same process. The medium and all present were strangers to my family, and I had never heard either name mentioned, except by my father. Even my younger brother did not remember that of my father’s partner.

“Subsequently, in the presence of a medium utterly unacquainted with my family, to whom I was first introduced in December, 1853, and who had only within two years previously moved to our city from Maine, I inquired of my (deceased) father the name of an English cousin who had married an admiral. The name was spelled out. In like manner, the maiden name of an English brother’s wife was given – an unusual name, Clargess.”

There are those who would say the mediums were simply reading your mind, still a non-mechanistic theory but one in opposition to spirit agency. Can you give an example of some information conveyed of which you were unaware?

“[Yes,] on one occasion, sitting at the disk (spiritoscope) with Mrs. Hayden, a spirit gave his initials as C. H. Hare. Not recollecting any one of our relations of that name precisely, I inquired if he were one of them. The reply was affirmative. ‘Are you a son of my cousin Charles Hare, of St. Johns, New Brunswick?’ ‘Yes,’ was spelled out. This spirit then gave me a profession of his grandfather, also that of his father, and the fact of the latter having been blown into the water at Toulon, and of the latter having made a marvelous escape from Verdun, where he had been confined until his knowledge of French enabled him to escape by personating in disguise an officer of the customs. Only one mistake was made in referring to my English relatives, respecting an uncle’s name. Other inquiries were correctly answered. Subsequently, the brother of this spirit made us a visit in Philadelphia, and informed us that the mundane career of his brother, Charles Henry, had been terminated by shipwreck some few years anterior to the visit made, as mentioned, to me.

“[At this same sitting], no one being present beside myself, and the medium ignorant of Latin, my father spelt out upon the disk the words he had pointed out to me in Virgil more than fifty-five years ago, as expressive of the beating Entellus gave Dares, as described by Virgil – ‘*pulsatque versatque*’; also the word which so much resembles the sound of horses’ hoofs trampling on the ground, ‘*Quadrupedante*’.”

I recall reading about you having lost something and then a spirit telling you where it was.

“[True,] while at Boston, having read to a friend a communication from my father through a writing medium, I placed it in one of my pockets, and proceeded to the Fountain Inn. When there, I felt for it without success. Unexpectedly, I went to Salem by the cars, and returned the same evening. On undressing myself the scroll was missing, and I inferred that it had been lost between the place where it had been read and the inn above named, where I felt for it unsuccessfully. On going the next morning to Mrs. Hayden’s, and my father reporting himself, I inquired whether he knew what had become of my scroll. It was answered that it had been left upon the seat in the car on my quitting it at Salem. Inquiring of the conductor, who was on duty in the car where it had been left, he said that it had been found on the seat, was safe in Portland, and should be returned to me the next day. This promise was realized.”

Were you able to come to any conclusion as to what is behind mediumship?

“The aura of a medium which thus enables an immortal spirit to do within its scope things which it cannot do otherwise, appears to vary with the human being resorted to; so that only a few are so endowed with this aura as to be competent as media. Moreover, in those who are so constituted as to be competent instruments of spiritual actuation, this competency is various. There is a gradation of competency, by which the nature of the instrumentality varies from that which empowers violent loud knocking and the moving of ponderable bodies without actual contact, to the grade which confers power to make intellectual communication of the higher order without that of audible knocking. Further, the power to employ these grades of mediumship varies as the sphere of the spirit varies.”

Did you ever inquire of the spirits as to what it was all about?

“Agreeably to my spirit father’s communication, the manifestations which of late have given

birth to Spiritualism, have been the result of a deliberate effort on the part of the inhabitants of the higher spheres to break through the partition which has interfered with the attainment, by mortals, of a correct idea of their destiny after death. To carry out this intention, a delegation of advanced spirits has been appointed. Referring to this statement, I inquired how it happened that low spirits were allowed to interfere in the undertaking. The answer was that the spirits of the lower spheres being more competent to make mechanical movements and loud rappings, their assistance was requisite.

“Likewise, I inquired why it was deemed expedient to make these manifestations in the first instance at Hydesville, near Rochester, through the spirit of a murdered man. The answer to this was that the spirit of a murdered man would excite more interest, and that a neighborhood was chosen where spiritual agency would be more readily credited than in more learned or fashionable and conspicuous circles, where the prejudice against supernatural agencies is extremely strong; but that the manifestations had likewise been made at Stratford, in Connecticut, under other circumstances. Nor were these the only places. They had been made elsewhere without much success in awakening public attention.

“Thus, it appears that at the outset, the object was to draw attention, and in the next place to induce communication. It will appear from the account of the manifestations at Hydesville and Stratford, that as soon as through an ingenious agreement upon signals rational intercommunication was established, the manifestations became changed in character. The mischievousness displayed in the primitive derangement of furniture ceased. This was attributed to the replacement of spirits of inferior grade, by their superiors.”

Any indication as to why it didn't start until 1848?

“It is often inquired, wherefore were not these efforts to communicate with mankind at an earlier period of the world's duration., but it may be demanded in return, wherefore did not Christ come until the earth had been peopled, even according to Scripture, about four thousand years. Why was not the use of the compass, of gunpowder, printing, the steam-engine, steamboat, railway, telegraph, daguerreotyping, electrotyping, contrived earlier in this terrestrial sphere? Let orthodoxy take the beam out of its own eye.”

Don't you find it strange that orthodox religion has so vigorously opposed Spiritualism?

“[Indeed,] if human testimony is not to be taken when advanced by contemporaries known to be conscientious, truthful, and well-informed, how is to be relied on with respect to those of whom we know nothing available beside what their own writings mention...Orthodox Christians are generally educated to believe not only that the revelation on which they rely is true, but that no other can be justifiable. Hence, they are evidently displeased that spiritualists should allege themselves to have come by other means to that belief in immortality which is admitted on all sides to be the greatest comfort under the afflictions to which temporal life is liable. There is, moreover, this discordancy in doctrine: Agreeably to Scripture, man is placed here for probation, and is liable to be eternally punished if he prove delinquent. According to Spiritualism, man is placed here for progression, and when he goes to the next world, still will have the opportunity to progress, however wicked he may be when he departs this life...Believers in revelation stare incredulously when mention is made of a spirit, as if its existence were an impossibility; yet it has been shown, that according to orthodoxy, death extricating the soul from the body, it must forthwith commence its spiritual life. The existence of spirits being thus established, that they should communicate with us would be more probably than that they should not, excepting that it has not been heretofore generally known to take place.”

Mainstream science has certainly not accepted your conclusions or those of others who have testified in favor of spirit communication.

“Men who are only nominally Know Nothings have proved a formidable party in politics; unfortunately, Spiritualism has, in its most active opponents, real Know Nothings, who will not

admit any fact of a spiritual origin, unless such as they have been educated to believe. In that case, many have powers of intellectual deglutition rivaling those of the anaconda in the physical way.”

The press has also been antagonistic, has it not?

“Almost every editor is, more of less, a censor to the press, and a peon of popularity. The tendency is not to repress, but to gratify, and, of course, promote existing bigotry. This bigotry and its Siamese brother, intolerance, have, in all countries and ages, been exercising a mischievous, though often a well-intended, vigilance, over any innovation of a nature to emancipate the human mind from educational error; and whenever supported by temporal power, has resorted to persecution – even to the use of the sword, of the rack, or the fagot; and, in this country of boasted freedom and much-vaunted liberty of the press, shows its baleful power by defamation, or alleging disqualification for employment, wherever its influence can be exerted.

“A conspicuous printer in this city refused to print an edition of my recent pamphlet, as he would allow nothing to go through his press which is against the Bible. This shows how far fanaticism will go, even at this advance era of science and in this country of vaunted intellectual freedom.”

I believe you mentioned that certain spirits can only communicate through certain mediums, or something to that effect.

“It has been stated that mortals have each a halo perceptible to spirits, by which they are enabled to determine the sphere to which any individual will go on passing death’s portal. Spirits cannot approach effectively a medium of a sphere much above, or below that to which they belong. As media, in proportion as they are more capable of serving for the higher intellectual communication, are less capable of serving for mechanical demonstration, and as they are more capable of the latter are less competent for the former, spirits likewise have a higher or lower capacity to employ media. It has been mentioned that having made a test apparatus, my spirit sister alleged that it could not be actuated by her without assistance of spirits from a lower sphere.”

What is your idea of God?

“While we have as much evidence of a Deity as we have of our own, we are utterly incapable of forming any idea of his form, mode of existence, or his wondrous power. We are as sure of the immensity and ubiquity of his power as of the existence of the universe, with which he must at least be coextensive and inseparably associated. That his power must have always existed, we are also certain; since if nothing had ever prevailed, there never could have been any thing: out of nothing, nothing can come.”

You frequently mention the spheres. Would you mind elaborating a little on that subject?

“It is plain that between the lowest degrees of vice, ignorance, and folly, and the highest degrees of virtue, learning, and wisdom, there are many gradations. When we are translated to the spheres, we take a rank proportional to our merit, which seems to be there intuitively susceptible of estimation by the law above alluded to, of the grossness being greater as the character is more imperfect. Both the spirits and spheres are represented as having a gradation in constitutional refinement, so that the sphere to which a spirit belongs is intuitively manifest. Rank is determined by a sort of moral specific gravity, in which merit is inversely as weight.”

Do you find it difficult to reconcile science and spirit?

“I do not conceive that in my change of opinion I have been involved in any inconsistency in principle. It always appeared to me that in explaining the planetary movements, after arriving at the Newtonian boundary made by momentum and gravitation, there could be no alternative between appealing to the spiritual power of God or resorting to atheism. An appeal to the power of God has always been my choice; nevertheless holding that wondrous power to be of a nature wholly unintelligible to finite man.”

Thank you, Professor Hare. Any parting thoughts?

“[Yes,] it is evident from the creative power which the spirits aver themselves to possess, that they exercise faculties which they do not understand. Their explanation of the mysteries of mediumship only substitutes one mystery for another. [And] it has appeared to me a great error on the part of spirits, as well as mortals, that they should make efforts to explain the phenomena of the spirit world by the ponderable or imponderable agents of the temporal world. The fact that the rays of our sun do not affect the spirit world, and that there is for that region an appropriate luminary whose rays we do not perceive, must demonstrate that the imponderable element to which they owe their peculiar light differs from the ethereal fluid which, according to the undulatory theory, is the means of producing light in the terrestrial creation.”

Professor Robert Hare received numerous communications from his father, also Robert Hare. The senior Hare had served as Speaker of the Senate in the Pennsylvania legislature and had also owned a brewery in Philadelphia. Here is some of what he imparted to his son about the spirit world.

Spiritual body: “The spiritual body is a perfect human form, originating in, and analogous to the corporeal organization in its several parts, functions, and relations...Man in the rudimental state is tripartite, consisting of soul, of spirit, and flesh; but in the spheres a duality, composed of soul and spirit. Having approached the portals of death, he disrobes himself of the exterior form as he would put away a worn-out garment. The gross and cumbrous physical machine, which was given for the purpose of developing his more beautiful and excellent spiritual body, and of bringing him into more immediate relationship with the outward world, can serve his purposes no longer.”

Spirit form: “Instead of being, as many of you imagine, mere shadowy and unsubstantial entities, we are possessed of definite, tangible, and exquisitely symmetrical forms, with well-rounded and graceful limbs, and yet so light and elastic that we can glide through the atmosphere with almost electric speed...We are, moreover, endowed with all the beauty, loveliness, and vivacity of youth, and are clothed in flowing vestments of effulgent nature suited to the particular degree of refinement of our bodies. Our raiment being composed of phosphorescent principles, we have the power of attracting and absorbing or reflecting the rays evolved, according as our condition is more or less developed. This accounts for our being seen by clairvoyants in different degrees of brightness, from a dusky hue to the most intensely brilliant light.”

Spirit world: “The spirit world lies between sixty and one hundred and twenty miles from the terrestrial surface; the whole intermediate space, including that immediately over the earth, the habitation of mortals, is divided into seven concentric regions called spheres. The region next the earth, the primary scene of man’s existence, is known as the first or rudimental sphere. The remaining six may be distinguished as spiritual spheres. The six spiritual spheres are concentric zones, or circles, of exceedingly refined matter, encompassing the earth like belts or girdles. The distance of each from the other is regulated by fixed laws. You will understand, then, they are not shapeless chimeras, or mere projections of the mind, but absolute entities, as much so indeed as the planets of the solar system or the globe on which you now reside. They have latitudes, longitudes, and atmospheres of peculiar vital air.”

Time: “We have no divisions of time into days, weeks, months, or years; nor alternations of seasons caused by the earth’s annual revolution; those periods being observed with reference only to the affairs of earth.”

Social constitution: “With regard to the social constitution of the spheres, each is divided into six circles, or societies, in which kindred and congenial spirits are united and subsist together,

agreeably with the laws of affinity.”

Teachers: “Each society has teachers from above, and not unfrequently from the higher spheres, whose province it is to impart to us the knowledge acquired from their instructions and experience, in the different departments of science, and which we in turn transmit to those below... We do not, as many persons in the rudimental state imagine, abandon the studies which we commenced on earth, which would presuppose the loss of our reasoning powers, and our consequent inferiority to yourselves; but on the contrary, we go on progressing in knowledge and wisdom, and shall progress throughout the boundless ages of eternity.”

Evil spirits: “Evil or misdirected spirits find their affinities in the second sphere, where the lowest and most undeveloped are associated together and remain for indefinite periods, but with all the moral depravity and darkness with which they are enveloped, through the benign influence exerted over their perceptive and rational faculties by higher intelligences, each begins to feel, sooner or later, the low and degraded position he occupies... The groveling propensities of his nature yielding to the dictates of reason his grosser passions subside, causing him to aspire to higher associations and circumstances, which in turn beget new wants, thoughts, and feelings.”

Mediums: “When we wish to impress the mind of the medium by the effort of our magic will, provided always that he or she is in sympathy with or sustains a negative relation to the operator, we can dispose and arrange the magnetic currents of the brain so as to form or fashion them into ideas of our own. We can also learn to read the thoughts of another – conditions being favorable – as readily as you can gain a knowledge of the characters or symbols of a language foreign to your own.”

Automatic writing: “To influence mechanically the hand of a medium to write, we direct currents of vitalized spiritual electricity on the particular muscles which we desire to control. In order to produce the physical manifestations, it is not by any means requisite that the medium should be possessed of a good moral character or well-balanced mind, as an individual of small mental caliber would answer our purpose equally well; but an advanced spirit could not directly impress or control the organs of a mind with which he is not in affinity, and *vice versa*.”

Language: “As there are no words in the human language in which spiritual ideas may be embodied so as to convey their literal and exact signification, we are obliged oftentimes to have recourse to the use of analogisms, and metaphorical modes of expression. In our communion with you we have to comply with the peculiar structure and rules of your language; but the genius of our language is such that we can impart more ideas to each other in a single word than you can possibly convey in a hundred.”

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