

THE CONTENT-SOURCE PROBLEM IN MODERN MEDIUMSHIP RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the methodological issue of whether the *content* of mediumistic/channeled communications can be used to determine the *source* of those communications (“content-source problem”) within the context of the trance-possession mediumship of Jane Roberts. The Seth material receives a thorough new examination in light of three approaches to the content-source problem in modern mediumship research that promises to advance the present state of discussion of this issue. A process-oriented investigation of phenomenological processes underlying Roberts’s channeling experience, a hermeneutic examination of Roberts’s channeling behavior, and a rhetorical analysis of the dictated Seth material offer novel analyses of the Seth phenomenon that might shed some light on the case.

Keywords: channeling, Jane Roberts, phenomenology, hermeneutics, rhetorical analysis

The problem of determining the source of discarnate communications is perhaps “the most important as well as the most difficult challenge facing modern parapsychology” because of its bearing on the case for postmortem survival (Palmer, 2009, p. 160). This article examines the conceptual and methodological issues of the “content-source” problem in modern mediumship/channeling research; that is, use of the *content* of mediumistic/channeled communications to determine the source or origin of those communications—whether normally, abnormally, or paranormally conceived. The popular literature commonly uses the terms “medium” and “channel” interchangeably to refer to any individual who transmits messages from a purportedly nonphysical or discarnate personality to living persons. The two terms, however, can be distinguished. The traditional spiritualist medium allegedly conveys veridical information of an extrasensory nature from survival personalities (termed discarnates) for interested observers or relatives to provide evidence for the existence of life after death. The modern psychic channel typically does not deal with apparent communications from the dead, but instead conveys esoteric information of a scientific, philosophic, theological, sociological, or psychological nature from purported discarnate entities that may or may not have been human.

The Content-Source Problem

The problem of confirming the *discarnate* source of a mediumistic/channelled communication by an analysis of its content alone is more difficult in the case of channeling than in the case of mediumship. One reason is that the content of a channelled communication usually does not provide

sufficient veridical extrasensory information to prove the entity's discarnate identity. A second reason is that communication is with an entity who may never have existed as a human being or who does not belong to physical reality and of whose condition we have no independent knowledge. The absence of veridical extrasensory information and objective confirmation of the communicator's identity makes determining whether channeled material is a genuine communication from a discarnate entity especially problematic.

Myers's problem. Determining the *independent* status of the alleged discarnate source of a mediumistic/channeled communication from an analysis of its content alone is also problematic. As F. H. W. Myers (1889, 1892, 1893) recognized, even if a discarnate personality external to the medium's own self is the source of the material, that material must first be communicated through subconscious levels of the medium's psyche. Mediums are personalities who must interpret the information they receive. The conditions and manifestations of any discarnate communication, therefore, will be limited by the capacity of the medium (e.g., medium's vocabulary) and colored by the medium's personal subconscious. There are no pure channels through which information magically flows undistorted, in other words. Myers's problem was how to distinguish between mediumistic communications that originated within the medium yet outside her (his) normal waking consciousness, and communications that originated in a source external to the medium's own psyche.

Despite this problem, Myers was able to use the content of mediumistic communications as a heuristic basis for arranging messages into a taxonomy of probable sources with some success. In a classic study of motor automatism, Myers (1893) categorized written and other messages that professed to come from discarnate personalities into four categories of possible origins "judging by their definite contents alone" (p. 41). One category identified messages that came from the medium's own mind with content supplied from ordinary long-term memory or more extensive subconscious memory. A second category pertained to messages with content derived telepathically from the minds of other living persons who were either conscious or unconscious of transmitting the information. A third category consisted of messages with content emanated from some "unembodied intelligence of unknown type," conventionally known as "guides" or "guardians." A fourth category involved messages with content ostensibly derived from the mind of the surviving personality from whom the communication was claimed to come.

One difficulty that faces the investigator who employs Myers's taxonomic approach is that alternative explanations for the source of mediumistic communications can always be conceived. Even corroborated evidential information received from persons recently deceased and unknown to the medium, giving facts connected to their identity that afterwards are found to be correct (termed *anomalous information reception*),

would not by itself provide incontestable proof of the identity of its source. As Myers' (1893) observed, "parallel with the possibilities of reception of such knowledge from the influence of other embodied or disembodied minds lies the possibility of [the medium's] own clairvoyant perception, or active absorption, of some kind, of facts lying indefinitely beyond its supraliminal purview" (pp. 42–43).

Historically, the analysis of mediumistic communications based on content alone has not been able to reliably differentiate between hypotheses of survival of consciousness and alternative parapsychological interpretations, such as survival psi, super-ESP, or psychic reservoir explanations—even under so-called "ideal" experimental conditions (Beischel, 2007). As a result, the parapsychological research community has found it exceedingly difficult to identify what conditions must be fulfilled in order for a mediumistic communication to indicate *prima facie* the influence of a discarnate mind (Braude, 2003; Fontana, 2005; Gauld, 1983). The mere assertion that written or spoken messages come from a discarnate personality is no proof, and one cannot accept communicators at their face value.

Kelly (2010) has observed that mediumship "is the only phenomenon directly relevant to the survival problem that can be produced and observed under conditions of experimental control" (p. 248). What happens in the situation where the medium or channel is deceased and thus no longer available to be interviewed or studied in a manner that permits control, manipulation, and measurement in a laboratory or field setting? Theoretically, the content of a channeled text can and should stand on its merits, regardless of its source. Practically speaking, however, judgments concerning the credibility of any textual material cannot be separated from the question of its source. Establishing proof of identity of the communicator is important in assessing the evidential character of the communication. Establishing the identity of the communicator is also important for determining whether the communications will be valued, whether the communications have come from their attributed source, and whether the communicator is believed to exist in the first place or not (Stevenson, 1978).

The Problem of Seth's Origin: A Case Study of the Trance-Possession of Jane Roberts

To advance the present state of discussion of the content-source problem in mediumship/channeling research, a thorough new examination is presented of a channeling phenomenon which has "exerted an enormous (and still underestimated) influence on the development of the New Age movement" (Hanegraaff, 2000, p. 299)—the trance-possession mediumship of Jane Roberts of Elmira, New York. The phenomenon is termed a "trance" because it occurred in a "sleep-like state" with characteristic dissociation,

amnesia, and excursion of the ego (Sher, 1981) and can be distinguished from nontrance mediumship, which “occurs in a conscious and focused waking state” (Buhrman, 1997, p. 13). The phenomenon is termed “possession” because “*possession* is a more developed form of motor automatism in which the automatist’s own personality does for a time altogether disappear, while there is a more or less complete *substitution* of personality . . . speech being given by a spirit through the entranced organism” (Myers, 1903/1961, p. 345).

For approximately 21 years, from December 1963 to August 1984, Jane Roberts (1929–1984) channeled an entity named “Seth,” who produced an extensive body of writings collectively known as *The Seth Material* which “essentially launched the New Age phenomenon known as ‘channeling’” (York, 2004, p. 43) and “brought [channeling] to the attention of a new generation of Americans, laying the groundwork for the current phenomenon” (Babbie, 1990, p. 259). Examples of present-day “New Age” channels (and channeled entities) include Siofra Bradigan (“Moita”), Ken Carey (“Raphael”), Lita De Alberdi (“Ortan”), Virginia Essence (the Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, etc.), Serge Grandbois (“Kris”), J. Z. Knight (“Ramtha”), Brent Haskell (“Jeshua”), Ester Hicks (“Abraham”), Jessica Lansing (“Michael”), Barbara Marciniak (“Pleiades”), Mary-Margaret Moore (“Bartholomew”), Duane Packer (“Da-Ben”), Jerry Prim (“Jubal”), Jach Pursel (“Lazaris”), Pat Rodegast (“Emmanuel”), Sanaya Roman (“Orin”), Kevin Ryerson (“John”), Alfred Schwab (“O”), Katherine Torres (“Malachi”), Penny Torres (“Mafu”), Neale Donald Walsch (“God”), Meredith Lady Young (“Agartha”), and the channel of *A Course in Miracles*, among many others (see Bjorling, 1992; Brown, 1997; Hastings, 1991; Klimo, 1987; York, 2004). According to Hughes (1999), “the material channeled through [Jane Roberts] forms the basis of the cosmology and worldview of present-day trance channels” (p. 163).

Seth, who always claimed discarnate status and an independent existence from Jane Roberts, was not a “control” as the word is generally used in mediumship research; that is, “a spirit or entity that acts as the primary intermediary between the medium and other discarnates who wish to communicate to the living through the medium” (Guiley, 1991, p. 118). Seth came for his own teaching purposes to communicate his own message: “You create your own reality” (Roberts, 1977a). Unlike conventional messages communicated by mediums from deceased loved ones,

the basic firm groundwork of the [Seth] material, and its primary contribution lies in the concept that consciousness itself indeed creates matter, that consciousness is not imprisoned by matter but forms it, and that consciousness is not limited or bound by time or space; time and space . . . being necessary distortions, or adopted conditions, forming a strata for physical existence. (R. Butts, 1997b–2002, Vol 1., p. 312)

Hanegraaff (1999) observes, “few New Agers realize how many of the beliefs which they take for granted in their daily lives have their historical origin in Seth’s messages” (p. 150).

Outer history of the case. Seth, “probably the best known, most widely published channeled entity in the twentieth century” (Klimo, 1987, p. 30), initially emerged under the auspices of the Ouija board on December 8, 1963. By the 8th session, on December 15, Jane received answers to questions mentally before the board spelled them out and began dictating the words sounded within her. By the 14th session, a deepening of Jane’s voice and darkening of her eyes were observed during dictation, and at the 26th session, on February 28, 1964, the Ouija board was laid aside and Jane spoke for Seth for the first time before a witness (R. Butts, 1997b–2002). From then on, Seth spoke through Jane Roberts at scheduled days and times, usually twice a week, on Monday and Wednesday around 9:00 p.m., and otherwise spontaneously with Jane’s permission. Jane continued to channel Seth until August 30, 1984—six days before her death from rheumatoid arthritis-like symptoms on September 5, 1984, at the age of 55, after being bed-ridden at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Elmira, New York, for 21 months (R. Butts, 1997a).

Robert (Rob) Butts, Jane Roberts’s husband, who died on May 26, 2008, at the age of 89, transcribed Seth sessions verbatim as they occurred and supplemented the written record with commentaries that provide a psychosocial context for the approximate 21-year history of the Seth phenomenon. A visual record of Seth speaking through Jane Roberts and a filmed interview of Jane and Robert Butts provide additional evidential material (R. Butts, 1986b). Eyewitness reports by individuals who attended Jane Roberts’s “ESP” class from 1967–1979 (Watkins, 1980, 1981) and a biography of the life of Jane Roberts (Watkins, 2001) supplement the public record. Original verbatim transcripts of all Seth sessions, letters of correspondence, personal notes and notebooks, and other artifacts of Jane Roberts and Robert Butts are available for public inspection in the Sterling Memorial Archives at Yale University and offer a good outer history of the case.

The Seth material. Between 1972 and 1997, Seth dictated 10 books through Jane Roberts on topics ranging from art to zoology (R. Butts, 1995, 1997a; Roberts, 1972, 1974, 1977a, 1979a, 1979d, 1981a, 1986). Each Seth book was dictated in its final form and published as received with the punctuation, underlining of certain words, and use of quotation marks indicated by Seth (Roberts, 1972). In addition to the 10 “official” Seth Books, a second collection of the Seth material is published in a nine-volume set of books called *The Early Sessions* (R. Butts, 1997b–2002). *The Early Sessions* cover the period from November 26, 1963, through January 19, 1970, and contain the first 510 “sessions” before Jane Roberts began dictation of the first published “Seth” book, *Seth Speaks*, on January 21, 1970, in the 511th session. *The Early Sessions* present a description of events surrounding Seth’s emergence through the Ouija board, extensive

conceptual information providing a theoretical background for material dictated in subsequent Seth Books, and a psychohistory of Jane Roberts's growth as a trance-possession channel speaking for Seth.

A third collection of the Seth material is published in a seven-volume set of books called *The Personal Sessions* that contain "deleted" Seth material not included in regular Seth sessions because of its private and highly sensitive nature and to avoid any public embarrassment to the individuals being discussed (R. Butts, 2003–2006a). *The Personal Sessions* present intimate detail about the private lives of Jane Roberts and Robert Butts and their relationship with one another that Seth discusses with honesty and candor. Numerous examples of Seth's penetrating psychological insights into the human condition and psychotherapeutic teachings are found throughout *The Personal Sessions*.

A fourth collection of the Seth material called *The Early Seth Class Sessions* is currently published as a four-volume set and consists of Seth sessions held in Jane Roberts's ESP Class in Elmira, New York, from 1967 through 1971 (L. D. Butts, 2008–2010). There is also a *Seth Audio Collection* that contains recordings of Seth actually speaking during Jane's ESP classes from 1972–1979 with written transcripts available from New Awareness Network (<http://www.sethcenter.com/>), which publishes Seth books by Jane Roberts, Seth tapes, and previously unpublished Seth material.

The works of Jane Roberts. Jane Roberts produced a body of work while not in a Seth trance that includes two books of poetry, three novels, and seven books of derivative theories and writings that were inspired by her experiences as a channel for Seth and by the events of her everyday life (R. Butts, 1986a; Roberts, 1966, 1970, 1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1979b, 1979c, 1981b, 1982, 1984). According to Jane, her growth as a channel helped her discover "many other levels of awareness, each distinct and bringing its own kind of perception and experience" (Roberts, 1975, p. v).

One of these developments was the reception of psychical material obtained from what Jane Roberts called "The Library" (Roberts, 1976). In addition to her other writings, Jane produced three books from this inner psychic realm: (a) *The After-Death Journal of An American Philosopher* (Roberts, 1978), which purportedly presents the psychical worldview and postmortem thoughts of William James, (b) *The World View of Paul Cézanne: A Psychic Interpretation* (Roberts, 1977b), and (c) *The World View of Rembrandt* (R. Butts, 2006b), in which she ostensibly comes in contact, not with Cézanne and Rembrandt personally, but with Cézanne's and Rembrandt's understanding of the meaning of art, its greater implications, and their painting techniques. These three "psychic" books that Jane produced in non-Seth trance states of consciousness are rhetorically different from the books dictated by Jane's Seth trance personality in their manner of production, structure, content, and style.

The problem of Seth's origin. The channel (Jane Roberts) and her scribe (Robert Butts) are now both deceased. In the absence of an

opportunity to study either Jane or Seth under conditions of experimental control, manipulation, and measurement in a laboratory or field setting, how does one establish proof of Seth's identity or ascertain the source of the Seth material? Can a process-focused phenomenological study of Jane Roberts's channeling experience based on an analysis of her narratives presented in the public record lead to an understanding of the source of the information communicated in Seth sessions? Can a hermeneutic analysis of the meaning of the actions for participants directly affected or involved in Seth sessions provide a practical understanding of the Seth phenomenon, broadly conceived? Can a rhetorical or literary analysis of the content of the vast corpus of dictated material collectively known as *The Seth Material* provide evidence for the discarnate status or independent existence of its claimed source—Seth? Or must we be satisfied with the conclusion that the content of information conveyed in mediumistic/channeled communications can never provide evidence for its source (J. Beischel, personal communication, September 18, 2010)?

Phenomenological Analysis of Channeling Experience

One approach that has the potential of addressing Myers's problem for differentiating between information that originates solely from within the medium and information that originates from an "outside" source is used in modern process-oriented mediumship research (<http://www.windbridge.org/>). It involves the systematic training of talented mental mediums to introspectively distinguish the phenomenological processes underlying their experience of channeling information from one source and another (Beischel & Rock, 2009; Rock & Beischel, 2008; Rock, Beischel, & Cott, 2009). According to Rock, Beischel, and Schwartz (2008),

A detailed understanding of these processes may, in turn, assist researchers with regards to determining the *source* [emphasis added] of the purportedly non-local, non-sensory information mediums receive. That is to say, the phenomenological elements underpinning discarnate communication readings might include the medium's sense of whether the discarnate is imaginal (i.e., a projection of the medium's mental set) or exosomatic (i.e., independent of the medium's mind-body complex), and whether or not discarnate communication is experienced as arising by the same mechanisms as does telepathic communication for the living. (p. 189)

The subjective processes underlying Jane Roberts's experiences during different kinds of discarnate communications can be distinguished using a similar process-oriented approach.

The present phenomenological analysis of Jane Roberts's channeling experiences draws upon the detailed narratives of her experience in Seth trance and in non-Seth states of consciousness that are described in her own words and on her own terms in the public record. To avoid extensive in-text citations and minimize the use of overly long quotations, only representative samples of supporting narrative are presented here. The reader is encouraged to consult the entire corpus of works collectively known as *The Seth Material* to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenological processes underlying Jane Roberts's experience during different kinds of purported discarnate communications.

Speaking for Seth. Early in her development as a channel, Jane described her experience speaking for Seth in the following way:

I seemed to "click out" when Seth spoke, yet a tremendous sense of energy rushed through me as he did so (Roberts, 1970, p. 37). . . . I am seldom so "blacked out" as to feel as if I were sleeping. Usually I know what is going on, although I may almost instantaneously forget what has happened. On occasion Seth and I can take turns talking so that I can go in and out of trance in seconds. Sometimes it seems I merge with Seth, feeling his emotions and reactions completely, rather than my own. In this case, the Jane-self is far in the background, dozing but dimly conscious. Other times, though less seldom, I am in the foreground and Seth advises me as to what to say (Roberts, 1970, p. 77). . . . My own conscious thoughts recede, along with my consciousness of my surroundings. There is nothing compulsive about this, however. At any time it is possible for me to return to normal consciousness. No invasion is involved. (Roberts, 1966, p. 34)

Jane Roberts reported experiencing a Seth trance as "an accelerated state characterized by a feeling of inexhaustible energy, emotional wholeness, and subjective freedom" in which she was aware of two streams of consciousness—Seth's and her own (Roberts, 1979a, p. 16). Jane's inward experiences frequently paralleled whatever information her Seth trance personality was orally expressing but without forming part of her short-term or long-term memory. Often she had no idea what material would be dealt with in a Seth session before it began.

Jane could introspectively differentiate the subjective processes involved in the production of Seth's channeled books and the phenomenological processes underlying the production of her own literary works in non-Seth states of consciousness. Comparing her awareness of the creative process involved in writing poetry with her subjective feelings when dictating Seth's first book, *Seth Speaks: The Eternal Validity of the Soul*, Jane wondered:

If both are coming from the same unconscious, then why the subjective differences in my feelings? These differences were obvious from the first. When I'm caught up in inspiration, writing a poem, then I'm "turned on," excited, filled with a sense of urgency, and discovery. Just before this happens, however, an idea comes out of nowhere, it seems. It is "given." It simply appears, and from it new creative connections spring. . . . I'm alert, yet open and receptive—suspended in a strange psychic elasticity between poised attention and passivity. . . . The highly personal involvement, the work and play involved in helping the idea "out," all make the poem mine. . . . I am not connected in this way with Seth's book [*Seth Speaks*], and had no awareness of the creative processes involved. I went into trance as I do for our regular sessions. Seth dictated the book through me, speaking through my lips. The creative work was so distant from me, that in this respect I could not call the product my own. . . . I can only state my own feelings and emphasize that Seth's book, and the whole six thousand-page manuscript of Seth Material, doesn't take care of my own creative expression or responsibility. If both came from the same unconscious source, it seems that there would be no slack. (Roberts, 1972, pp. xvi-xvii)

Process-oriented research that compares a channel's experience during ostensible communication of an entity (e.g., Seth) with experiences during nonchanneling "control" conditions (e.g., poetry writing) has the potential of identifying those phenomenological conditions that must be present to indicate the prima facie influence of a discarnate mind, such as Seth's.

Speaking for Seth II. In addition to channeling Seth, Jane channeled an entity that she called "Seth II." Seth II places Seth in the same relationship to himself as Seth stands in relation to Jane Roberts. The Seth II entity initially emerged on April 22, 1968, and manifested sporadically throughout the remaining history of the Seth phenomenon, including in Jane Roberts's ESP classes (L. D. Butts, 2008–2010). Jane experienced channeling Seth and channeling Seth II as involving two distinctly different phenomenological processes. Comparing the two trance-possession states, Jane observes:

When we have a usual Seth session, I sort of feel Seth take over, though I don't like that term. With this [Seth II] personality I go somewhere, out of myself, and seem to make contact with it in some nowhere, leaving my body empty. I don't know how I get there, wherever it is, or how I get back. (Roberts, 1970, p. 228)

Unlike Jane Roberts's experience of channeling Seth, her experience channeling Seth II characteristically involved what she termed "a pyramid effect" described in detail in the 406th through 413th sessions conducted between April 22, 1968, and May 29, 1968 (R. Butts, 1997b–2002, Vols. 8-9).

Speaking for surviving personalities. In addition to channeling the Seth and Seth II entities, Jane Roberts occasionally channeled surviving personalities (termed *discarnates*). The 390th ("Blanche Price") and 391st ("Billie Kramerick") sessions on January 8–13, 1968, were Jane Roberts's first séances where she tried deliberately to contact a surviving personality as a medium would ordinarily do for interested observers or relatives. Spontaneous séances also occurred that included communications with a Sarah Wellington who died in England in 1748 at the age of 17, a Malba Bronson who died in South Dakota in 1946 at the age of 46, a nameless spokesperson for a "group" of discarnates, and a Father Trainor who was a priest-friend of Jane Roberts when she was growing up in a Catholic orphanage as a child (R. Butts, 1997b–2002, Vols. 1-3).

Jane Roberts reported that mediumistic processes underlying her communications with survival personalities were *experienced as subjectively different* from those channeling processes that occurred when communicating for Seth. Jane's subjective experience channeling Seth, nevertheless, did share some of the "comprehensive constituent themes" identified by modern mediumship research as common to mental mediums' experience during communication with discarnates (Rock, Beischel, & Schwartz, 2008). Shared elements between channeling Seth and communicating with surviving personalities include: (a) the functioning of multiple sensory representational systems, (b) the presence of visual imagery, (c) the presence of auditory imagery, (d) alterations of affect, and (e) feelings of empathy. Jane did not experience "feeling the discarnate's ailments or cause of death" or "smelling fragrances associated with the discarnate prior to his or her bodily death" when channeling Seth. She did report this latter phenomenology occurring on various occasions when communicating with survival personalities during her séances.

Based on her experience of felt subjective differences between channeling Seth, Seth II, and surviving personalities, Jane Roberts concluded: "I do think that Seth is part of another entity [Seth II], and that he is something quite different from, say, a friend who has 'survived' death" (Roberts, 1970, p. 272). The present process-oriented analysis of the Seth material constitutes only an initial step toward distinguishing the phenomenological processes underlying Jane Roberts's experiences during different kinds of ostensible discarnate communications to determine the psychical source or origin of the information she receives.

Hermeneutic Analysis of Channeling Behavior

Hermeneutic analysis of *behavioral content* contained in the Seth material constitutes a second qualitative approach that can assist researchers

with regard to determining the origin of the Seth phenomenon, broadly conceived. Specifically, this approach involves application of hermeneutic processes of interpretation to narrative accounts of verbal and nonverbal acts in order to understand their “lived” meanings for participants directly affected or involved (Dilthey, 1900/1976; Hirsch, 1967; Polkinghorne, 1983; Ricoeur, 1976). One aim is to understand the lived world of actors and observers participating in the Seth phenomenon and the meanings that they attribute to their modes of engagement with the Seth material. This includes Seth’s understanding of himself, Jane Roberts’s own interpretation of her personal experience as a trance channel, and Robert Butts’s lived understanding of Seth’s impact on his life with Jane when Jane was not in a Seth trance.

Behavioral record. Eyewitness accounts report that Jane could perform a variety of motor movements in a Seth trance, such as smoking a cigarette, drinking wine, and striding across the room while speaking steadily for hours in long and complex narratives, without having conscious memory of what was said afterwards. When Jane Roberts “clicked out” into Seth, physical alterations were observed in her facial features, gestures, volume and accent of voice, word inflection, and marked dilation of eye pupils. The following description by Robert Butts identifies some of the characteristic effects that Jane Roberts displayed when channeling Seth.

Usually Jane goes in and out of trance with remarkable speed. Her eyes aren’t closed during sessions, except for relatively brief periods—but they can be barely open, say, or half-open, or wide open and much darker than usual. She sits for sessions in her Kennedy rocker, but on occasion she gets up and moves about. She smokes in trance and sips a little wine, beer, or coffee. Sometimes, when her trance has been very deep, it takes her a few minutes “to really come out of it,” as she puts it. . . . Jane’s voice in trance can be almost conversational in tone, volume, and pace, but is subject to a wide range of these qualities. Usually it is somewhat deeper and stronger than her “own” voice. Once in a while her “Seth voice” is very loud indeed, much more powerful, with definite masculine overtones. . . . There are two more effects that Jane always manifests while she is in trance. One is a more angular quality in her mannerisms. The other is a rearrangement of her facial muscles; a tautness, resulting, I believe, from an infusion of energy—or of consciousness. (Roberts, 1972, pp. 1–2)

Robert Butts describes his own lived understanding of Jane’s transformation into Seth in the following way: “Her transformation as Seth is original, absorbing to watch and participate in. Regardless of degree, Seth is

uniquely and kindly present. I am listening to, and exchanging dialogue with, another personality” (Roberts, 1972, p. 2).

Seth as Jane looked directly at the person to whom he was speaking, laughed and joked, expressed affection, and displayed wit and intelligence in his conversations with others. Seth’s characteristic mode of engagement with Jane, Rob, and people who witnessed Seth sessions is described by Jane in the following way:

(Seth’s) effect upon others is immediate. Apparently he has considerable “presence.” He reacts to others, and relates much better than I do to people from various walks of life . . . though, he has made it plain that the characteristics by which we know him are only a portion of his personality. . . . Seth is not static; he does not just methodologically deliver the Material as if we were recorders. He responds to questions, so that to some extent the questions put to him must, at times, cause him to change the particular way he discusses a particular subject. (Roberts, 1970, pp. 269, 275)

Even the family cat (Willy) sensed Seth’s manifestation, at times reacting with strange behaviors that ceased as he grew more familiar with Seth’s presence (R. Butts, 1997b–2002, Vol. 1).

The dialectical movement of the hermeneutic process goes from the available evidence of Seth’s actions, spoken words, and nonverbal expressions published in the public record to interpretive hypotheses about the lived meaning of those actions and behaviors for participants directly affected and involved, back to evidence, back to an altered interpretation, and so forth. This “hermeneutic circle” can assist researchers in determining the validity of various hypotheses that may be proposed about the nature of the source of the Seth material (e.g., Seth is a part of Jane Roberts’s personality; Seth is a secondary personality; the Seth material is purely a subconscious production of Jane Roberts; Seth is Jane’s channel to revelational knowledge). For the hermeneutic method, it is Jane Roberts’s own lived understanding of the meaning of her experience and behaviors in Seth trance and out of Seth trance that has crucial significance for the fundamental problem of determining the source of the information she channels and the nature of its source.

Hypothesis of subconscious causation. Jane’s years of experience communicating with Seth and Rob’s knowledge of Jane’s past and his familiarity with her personality convinced both of them by the standards of comparison that Seth was not a part of Jane Roberts’s personality. Jane states:

I am a fairly intelligent human being, and a good conversationalist, but by no stretch of the imagination

could I speak consciously, without pause or backtracking or confusion, for hours at a time on any of the subjects covered in the Seth sessions (Roberts, 1966, p. 35). . . . The personality is not mine. (Roberts, 1970, p. 3)

To assume the presence of a dissociative identity disorder or to expect pathology, mental disorder, psychosis, or ego dysfunction in Jane Roberts is to raise what is essentially a misleading, though culturally expectable, response to an uncanny encounter (Gowan, 1975; LeShan, 1976; Stevenson, 1978). Here we have a public record of actions and behaviors displayed by Seth and Jane over a 21-year period that depart from the established characteristics of dissociative identity disorder in a number of ways (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Beahrs, 1982; Decuyper, 1991; Hughes, 1991, 1992; Richards, 1990; Richeport, 1992). Here is a mass of writings, containing hundreds of thousands of words on all kinds of subjects, showing no trace of pathological tendencies. Jane as Seth displayed no trace of abnormal tendencies or coercion, no evidence of excessive emotionalism or superiority complex, no smugness or sarcasm, no hatred or prejudices, no vulgarity or tantrums, no compulsive ideation or obsessive acting out. Nor does Jane Roberts's own creative writing contain obsessive (fixed) or compulsive (insistent) ideas of a morbid nature. Unlike most dissociated personalities, Seth is morally sound. The Seth personality made no demands or impositions upon either Jane or her husband, did not manifest himself in reaction to stress, and no precipitatory cause such as shock, strain, or marital strife preceded his appearance. There was no invasion in Seth's relationship with Jane, and she possessed self-consciousness at all times during the scheduled trance-sessions. Her consent was necessary at all times and she could terminate Seth sessions whenever she chose (R. Butts, 1997b–2002).

Is Seth purely a subconscious production? Both Jane Roberts and Robert Butts were convinced that the Seth material did not originate with Jane's personal subconscious, as the word is conventionally understood. Jane explains why.

For one thing, we can discover no satisfactions or needs that are being satisfied in the sessions that are not satisfied in my daily life. For another thing, it seems that even the subconscious would grow tired of having sessions twice a week at specified times, sessions that last two or more hours. The subconscious does not usually work in such a well-ordered, disciplined fashion, even when conditioning is taken into consideration (Roberts, 1966, p. 39). . . . Looked at merely as an example of unconscious production . . . Seth's book [*Seth Speaks*] clearly shows that organization, discrimination, and reasoning are certainly not qualities of

the conscious mind alone, and demonstrates the range and activity of which the inner self is capable. I do not believe that I could get the equivalent of Seth's book on my own. The best I could do would be to hit certain high points, perhaps in isolated poems and essays, and they would lack the overall unity, continuity, and organization that Seth has here provided automatically. (Roberts, 1972, p. xvii)

If Seth *is* purely a subconscious production, then conceptualization of what is termed the "New Unconscious" must be extended and broadened (Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2005). The so-called "unconscious" subconscious would need to include a capacity for communications "of an ethical and spiritual nature" that "are specific and organized, purposeful, and directed toward an audience," delivered in a manner that is "effortless, immediate, and spontaneous, with no apparent conscious construction," by "skills demonstrated that come from outside the conscious mind of the person... at the level of exceptional human capabilities" (Hastings, 1991, p. 25).

Hypothesis of supraconscious causation. Jane Roberts's and Robert Butts's lived understanding of the Seth phenomenon convinced them that Seth is not a secondary personality or a purely subconscious production. Is Seth a channel to revelational knowledge? Are we seeing a kind of exaggeration of unconscious creative activity—a hypertrophy of genius? As Socrates had his Daemon and Jeanne D'Arc her Voice, did Jane Roberts have her Seth? Jane Roberts considered this hypothesis as having a greater probability of being correct (valid) because it most adequately takes into account her own lived understanding of channeling Seth and the information contained in the Seth material. Jane states:

Above all, I am sure that Seth is my channel to revelational knowledge, and by this I mean knowledge that is revealed to the intuitive portions of the self rather than discovered by the reasoning faculties. Such revelational information is available to each of us, I believe, to some degree (Roberts, 1970, p. 268). . . . I am not saying that Seth is *just* a psychological structure allowing me to tune into revelational knowledge, nor denying that he has an independent existence. I do think that some kind of blending must take place in sessions between his personality and mine, and that this "psychological bridge" *itself* is a legitimate structure that must take place in any such communication. Seth is at his end, I am at mine (Roberts, 1970, p. 272). . . . Seth would be Seth as patterned through Jane, for example; not Jane's version of Seth, necessarily, but the Jane version of Seth. . . . Seth represents a multidimensional consciousness reflected

through my experience; a deep part of the structure of my psyche, but also a definite personification of a multi-world or multi-reality consciousness that may well be beyond our present ideas of personhood. (Roberts, 1975, p. 128, 132)

The fact that Seth reveals himself as a component in the psyche of Jane Roberts does not necessarily mean, however, that it is the subconscious in which Seth has his origin. Seth himself presents an analogy to clarify his relationship to Jane Roberts as he understands it in the 28th session on February 24, 1964 (the second consecutive Seth session without the Ouija board): “My communications come through Ruburt’s [Seth’s name for Jane Roberts’s entity] subconscious. But as a fish swims through water, the fish is not water, and I am not Ruburt’s subconscious” (R. Butts, 1997b–2002, Vol. 1, p. 215).

Validity in interpretation. These interpretations of Seth’s origin and the source of the Seth material, derived from Jane Roberts’s own lived understanding of her experience and actions in and out of a Seth trance, can be validated because “the method of hermeneutics provides a means for testing interpretations” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 232). The validity process in hermeneutics requires that various interpretations be compared to other interpretations until one interpretation is judged to be more probable (Hirsch, 1967). Which interpretation is judged more probable than another can only be ascertained in the light of what is known. All the relevant data presently known about the Seth case can be found in the published record of *The Seth Material* and in Jane Roberts’s and Robert Butts’s notebooks, journal notes, and correspondences available for public inspection in the Sterling Memorial Archives at Yale University. Because interpretations are inferences based on data and new evidence can be developed that may lead to a different understanding, the correct (valid) interpretation is only a “qualitative probability” and never a certainty or ever final (Ricoeur, 1976). “The norm of correct interpretation is the most probable intention of the author of a text (or act)” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 231).

In the present context of the Seth case and in light of what is known, the “authors” of *The Seth Material* are Jane Roberts, Robert Butts, and the Seth personality (R. Butts, 2003–2006a). The intentions, meanings, and purposes of each of these authors are conveyed throughout the public record of the case. Based on Jane Roberts’s and Robert Butts’s lived understanding of Jane’s experience channeling Seth and on Seth’s practical understanding of himself, the interpretation that Seth is *not* a secondary personality and *not* purely a subconscious production is probably correct (Roberts, 1970; R. Butts, 1997b–2002). The interpretation that Seth is an aspect of Jane Roberts’s psyche, while nevertheless having his own reality outside of it, brought alive through personification in line with the extradimensional level of being contacted during a Seth session and is the distinctly real source of the Seth material, is probably the *least incorrect* interpretation because it

is the one which most adequately takes into account all of the information and which the weight of available evidence in the public record seems to support.

In order to be willing to submit this interpretation to a validation process where it could be compared to other interpretations reasonably, objectively, and self-critically, the researcher would need to believe in the possibility that personality and identity are not dependent upon physical form. This requires an openness of mind and “an attitude of humility in relation to the present state of scientific knowledge” that not all investigators find easy to adopt (Kelly et al., 2007). As Klimo (1987) observes: “The scientist who stays open to the possible reality of channeling runs into this problem by holding what McClenon (1984) calls ‘beliefs . . . that violate some of the [current] metaphysical foundations of science’” (p. 206). Otherwise, investigators will limit themselves to the judgment that the ultimate source of the material remains unidentified.

Rhetorical Analysis of Channeled Texts

In addition to process-oriented studies of Jane Roberts’s channeling phenomenology and the use of interpretative (hermeneutic) methods to make the lived meaning of her channeling experience and Seth’s actions and behaviors practically understandable, the use of a third approach—rhetorical, literary, or other analyses of the channeled Seth material itself—may assist the researcher with regard to determining the origin of the material that Jane Roberts communicated during a Seth trance. The use of an analogy approach can help advance understanding of the broad range of application of rational analysis to documentary evidence and how content can aid in the characterization of its source. The study of solutions to the content-source problem in familiar academic fields—such as psychobiography, forensic science, historical studies, and literary analysis—has the potential of assisting the researcher in solving difficult content-source problems in more esoteric fields such as parapsychology (Gentner, Holyoak, & Kokinov, 2001).

Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Henry Murray, and Robert White, for instance, constructed logically coherent psychobiographies of historically significant individuals by studying archival records using “salience markers” to identify significant patterns of life events across the lifespan (Elms, 1993; Schultz, 2005). Forensic science uses the informational content at a crime scene to determine the identity of a perpetrator. Historians commonly attempt to determine the author of a historical document by examining its content. Rhetorical analysis uses the characteristic features of structure, content, and style of social discourse to identify different literary genres (Bitzer, 1968; Burke, 1968; Campbell & Jamison, 1976; Miller, 1984). Channeled texts have been approached in this way to determine if they constitute a separate genre (Petit, 2009).

Textual analysis. Textual analysis of literary works is an area where the systematic study of the content of a written text has assisted the researcher in determining its source with some success. Historical scholars of ancient Greece, for instance, have gone back and forth on the existence of a single “Homer” as author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on the basis of their study of the content of these literary documents. In a notorious case in the late 1980s where an individual claimed to have discovered Hitler’s diaries in a sealed case at the bottom of an Austrian lake, literary analysis of its contents allowed historians to determine the fraudulent nature of its claimed source (M. Menke, personal communication, October 26, 2010). The diary “find” followed only a few years after the publication of an authoritative edition of Propaganda Minister Goebbels’s diaries. The language and themes were very similar in both diaries. Historians know that Goebbels meant to use his diaries to project a desirable image to posterity. Historians also know that Hitler wrote almost nothing in his own hand and dictated nearly everything to a corps of secretaries. The Hitler diaries contained very little personal information but did contain phrases and vocabulary probably not used before 1945 and not by an autodidact like Hitler. Eventually the fraud was discovered and confirmed by forensic analysis of the volumes.

By analyzing the structure, content, and rhetorical style of the dictated Seth material and comparing it to the abilities and knowledge of the person “speaking” the text (Jane Roberts) and the person taking dictation (Robert Butts), the researcher can establish the likelihood (qualitative probability) that the channel or the scribe has authored the channeled material themselves. Seth’s “voice” would be established as a benchmark index by systematic analysis of the content, structure, and style of the Seth material so that Jane Roberts’s and Robert Butts’s usual, ordinary waking utterances could be compared. Seth’s dictated material can also be compared with Jane’s written books to see if they are by the same author. This would permit researchers to exclude Jane Roberts and Robert Butts as authors of the Seth material and rule out the likelihood of fraud. In the case of Jane Roberts’s *Library* material, her fluent, mediumistic rendering of the worldview of William James would be compared stylistically to the original writings of William James.

Using this method, a rhetorical analysis of *Jane Roberts’ A View from the Other Side* channeled by Mary Marecek (1997), which purports to be a communication from the deceased Jane Roberts, was conducted to determine similarities and differences in structure, content, and style with the published writings of Jane Roberts (Butts, 1986a, 2006b; Roberts, 1966, 1970, 1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1977b, 1978, 1979b, 1979c, 1981b, 1982, 1984). Results indicated some similarities between the two works in terms of key themes (e.g., thoughts create reality, purpose of incarnating, Point of Power, probable selves, Framework I and II, belief systems, self-acceptance, responsibility). There were significant differences, however, between Marecek’s channeled text and Roberts’s collective work in regard to :

1. *structure* (i.e., how the text is set up, organized, and intended to be read; orderly presentation of ideas; continuity in thematic development; unity, cohesion, and continuity of paragraphs);
2. *content* (i.e., topical areas discussed; depth at which a topic is covered; consistencies in how content is addressed);
3. *style* (i.e., formal vs. casual tone; use of stylistic devices such as paradox, metaphor, parallelism, ambiguity, irony; sentence variation, sentence length, and complexity of sentence structure; grammar and syntax; verb tense; wordiness, redundancy, and economy of expression; word choice and use of phrases; denotative and connotative meaning of words; the use of jargon and colloquial expressions; use of active vs. passive voice; use of noun strings, synonyms, and pronouns; use of transition devices; precision, clarity, and smoothness of expression; level of diction; abstractness vs. concreteness of ideas).

Overall, Marecek's channeled text is characterized by features of structure, content, and style that are uncharacteristic of Roberts's collective work and inconsistent with the knowledge level, intellectual capacity, and personal interests of Jane Roberts when she was alive.

Truth-tests. The Seth material represents a kind of information ostensibly rising from subconscious sources and dimensions of psychological activity beyond the ego of Jane Roberts that are arguably transpersonal in nature (Hastings, 1991; Liester, 1996; Richards, 1990). Since many of humanity's most practical theories have been attributed as coming from subconscious sources, it is reasonable to suppose that the Seth material contains empirically verifiable propositions that can be evaluated by various "truth-tests" (i.e., coherence, correspondence, pragmatism) which could assist researchers with regards to determining the source of the information.

A *coherence* truth-test of the Seth material would involve identifying fact-claims contained in the dictated texts that are in concordance or inconsistent with established facts in recognized academic disciplines. A *correspondence* truth-test involves identifying those propositions that are susceptible to hypothesis-testing using qualitative or quantitative research methods, and conducting appropriate descriptive, correlational, and experimental investigations to determine their validity. A *pragmatic* truth-test involves assessing the practical consequences that the Seth material has had in the lives of individuals—intellectually, emotionally, psychically, spiritually, and biologically. "Whatever the origin, it is evident that this process of channeling has the capability of making important contributions to our knowledge and experience" (Hastings, 1991, p. 25).

Truth-testing the content of Seth's channeled communications does not permit researchers to determine Seth's discarnate nature, independent existence, or authorship of the Seth material with certainty but only as a qualitative probability. Even if specific predictions based on novel hypotheses derived from the Seth material were demonstrated to be true by descriptive, correlational, or experimental study, for example, the predicted outcomes could always be interpreted as only providing evidence suggestive of Jane Roberts's own clairvoyant ability and not necessarily proof of Seth's discarnate or independent status. Truth-testing the content of Seth material will nevertheless allow researchers to reach qualitative *probability judgments* regarding agreement that a hypothesis about its source is probably correct (valid) because it is "the one that best explains all the relevant data" (Hirsch, 1967, pp. 244-245).

Conclusion

Regardless of Seth's discarnate status, the trance-possession mediumship of Jane Roberts raises important questions about the nature of subconscious perception, memory, cognition, affect, and motivation. The challenge for psychology is to explain how Jane Roberts of Elmira, New York, could suddenly possess and exhibit an ability to compose a mass of writings consisting of complex, discursive, internally consistent, and highly rational narratives of a very high order of sophistication and intellectual rigor on a diverse range of scientific, philosophic, theological, sociological, and psychological topics, much of it produced in an animated, light trance state of consciousness (with characteristic dissociation, amnesia, and *excursus* of the ego), with no previous study or instruction, in sudden full-blown fashion, with the same facility and power from start to finish over a 21-year period.

Some may consider the Seth material altogether suspect because of its purportedly channeled nature and production in so-called "altered" states of consciousness. The psychical origin of the Seth material does not automatically invalidate its claims, however. The Seth material and the derivative theories and writings of Jane Roberts can and should be assessed on their own merits, irrespective of their source. This article proposes three novel analyses which might shed some light on the Seth case. One approach involves relating the phenomenological processes underlying the trance-possession of Jane Roberts to findings in modern process-focused mediumship research to understand how it fits within theoretical frameworks constructed to explain sources of information in mediumship and other similar phenomena. A second approach involves using hermeneutic techniques to scrutinize the meaning of experiences and behaviors for participants affected or involved in the Seth phenomenon to understand the effect that it produces in individuals' experience of themselves and of their lived world. A third approach involves conducting

systematic, comprehensive, broad-based, and integrated textual and other analyses of the Seth material to understand how it fits within existing academic bodies of knowledge.

An adequate (*adequatio*) understanding of the trance-possession mediumship of Jane Roberts grounds itself in the public record of the case and includes Jane Roberts's lived understanding of her own experience as a trance channel and Seth's own practical understanding of himself. Seth either is or is not a production of Jane Roberts's psyche. In either case, we are led to the possibility that human personality may have a greater reality and awareness than is generally supposed.

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Abstracts in Other Languages

German

DAS PROBLEM DER HERKUNFTSQUELLE IN DER MODERNEN MEDIALITÄTSFORSCHUNG

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Dieser Artikel überprüft die methodologische Frage, ob der Inhalt der mediumistischen/gechannelten Botschaften herangezogen werden kann, um die Herkunft dieser Botschaften („Problem der Herkunft des Inhalts“) innerhalb der medialen Trancebesessenheit von Jane Roberts zu identifizieren. Das Seth-Material wird im Licht dreier Zugänge zum Problem der Herkunft des Inhalts innerhalb der modernen Medialitätsforschung einer gründlichen neuen Überprüfung unterzogen, die verspricht, den gegenwärtigen Diskussionsstand in dieser Sache voranzubringen. Eine prozessorientierte Untersuchung der Roberts' Channelingerfahrung zugrunde liegenden phänomenologischen Prozesse, eine hermeneutische Überprüfung von Roberts' Verhalten während des Channeling sowie eine rhetorische Analyse des diktierten Seth-Materials bieten neue Analysen des Seth-Phänomens, das etwas Licht in den Fall bringen kann.

Spanish

EL PROBLEMA DE ORIGEN-CONTENIDO EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN MODERNA DE LA MEDIUMNIDAD

Resumen: Este artículo examina la cuestión metodológica de si el contenido de las comunicaciones mediúnicas/canalizadas se puede utilizar para determinar el origen de tales comunicaciones (“problema de contenido-origen”) dentro del contexto de la mediumnidad de posesión de trance de Jane Roberts. El material de Seth recibe un nuevo examen a fondo a la luz de tres enfoques del problema de origen-contenido en la investigación moderna de la mediumnidad que promete avanzar el estado actual de la discusión sobre este tema. Una investigación orientada a los procesos fenomenológicos que subyacen a la experiencia de canalización de Roberts, un examen hermenéutico de la conducta mediúmica de Roberts, y un análisis retórico de los dictados de Seth ofrecen nuevos análisis sobre el fenómeno Seth que pueden arrojar algo de luz sobre el caso.

French

LE PROBLEME CONTENU-SOURCE
DANS LA RECHERCHE MEDIUMNIQUE MODERNE

RESUME: Cet article examine le problème méthodologique de savoir si le contenu des communications médiumniques ou channelisées peut être utilisé pour déterminer la source de ces communications (soit le « problème contenu-source »), dans le contexte de la médiumnité à transe-possession de Jane Roberts. Le matériel de Seth reçoit ici un nouvel examen à la lumière de trois approches du problème contenu-source dans la recherche médiumnique moderne qui promettent de faire avancer l'état actuel de la discussion de ce sujet. Une investigation orientée vers les processus des processus phénoménologiques sous-jacents à l'expérience de channeling de Roberts, un examen herméneutique du comportement de channel de Roberts, et une analyse rhétorique du matériel dicté par Seth offrent de nouvelles analyses du phénomène Seth qui peuvent apporter certaines lumières sur ce cas.

