

## La Revue de l'hypnose et de la santé

Numéro 18, pp. 107-110

This is a draft copy of the article that was published in French

---

### An Interview with Dan Short by Armelle Touyarot about the new book, *De William James à Milton Erickson - Prendre soin de la conscience humaine* SATAS, 2021

**Armelle Touyarot (AT):** You said that Bernhard Trenkle was one of the first to help you fully appreciate the importance of this project and its place in the world of ideas. In what way?

**Dan Short (DS):** Like other highly respected leaders in the Ericksonian movement, Bernhard is an encouraging person who likes to nurture talent. He was the first to look at my partial manuscript and provide feedback. His statement was, *“This is the most important thing I have seen written on Erickson in the past ten years. ... You must publish this work.”* So with valued input from Roxanna Erickson-Klein, and many others, I finished the manuscript and now the information is available in English and French, with a German translation in progress.

**AT:** In this book you write “When we shine the powerful intellect of William James upon the clinical work of Milton Erickson; it casts a different shadow than students of Erickson are accustomed to seeing.” Can you clarify what this different shadow is?

**DS:** That is a great question. My comment was an open-ended suggestion. I imagine that every reader has different individualized understandings of Erickson (with “understanding” being a synthesis of thought and emotion). Thus, we end up with as many different shadows as there are points of light. With this in mind, I will tell you how this project reshaped my understanding.

In my first book about Erickson, *Espoir et Resilience: Comprendre les strategies therapeutiques de Milton H. Erickson* (SATAS, 2006), I attempted to summarize the essence of Ericksonian therapy using a single philosophical concept. I created the term “meta-teleological” to describe the importance of goal-oriented functioning for psychological health. In other words, I felt that Erickson’s main goal in therapy was to help his patients establish and then meaningfully pursue some goal, any goal, of subjective value—with hope and resiliency.

Many years later, I learned that William James’ philosophical work on pragmatism was a much more expansive and elegant answer to my question. Pragmatism argues that the world of ideas should be constrained by concrete outcomes (for all human endeavors we must look to the end that is produced). After two years of reading everything I could find written by James, I came to the conclusion that pragmatism holds the secret for the care of human consciousness—once you combine it with the concept of utilization!

The most important statement in my book is made at the end of the introductory chapter: *"...the combined contributions of James and Erickson overlap in the realization of human potential, such that natural gifts, weaknesses, and biological instincts are garnered for practical application. James's philosophy of pragmatism establishes the foundation for these dynamics, which Erickson develops further in his philosophy of utilization. As we will soon see, the secret to the care of human consciousness is the utilization of who we are toward some practical end."* The celebrated neurologist Michael Merzenich puts it another way, *"The human brain is essentially a problem-solving machine."* Modern studies in neuroplasticity suggest that for our neurological machinery to operate correctly, we must always have a set of emotionally compelling, and concretely achievable goals (practical outcomes) towards which we strive.

**AT:** James' doctrine of pragmatism is not well known in France. I would like for you to explain it further. Also, Thierry Servillat wonders if modern therapeutic hypnosis could have been born from the integration of American pragmatism to nineteenth century hypnosis. What was the contribution of pragmatism to Ericksonian psychotherapy?

**DS:** The answer to this complex question can be summed up in three words. According to Jeff Zeig, Erickson's central mandate was, *"Use what works."* Later, solution focused therapists would apply the same pragmatic principle, *"If what you are doing is not working, try something different."* Pragmatism is essentially the triumph of observable outcomes over theoretical doctrine. From this philosophical approach comes greater flexibility and ingenuity.

**AT:** In therapeutic hypnosis, we mainly learn to work with unconscious processes, everything that for Erickson was not conscious. You wrote, "these two giants -- Milton H. Erickson and William James -- shaped the modern conceptualization of human consciousness and its care." When you talk about the care of human consciousness, what do you mean?

**DS:** I heard Erickson state in a lecture that the care of human consciousness began with the introduction of psychosomatic medicine. But this early medical endeavor still reflected René Descartes' duality—the body versus the soul. The body was the providence of science-based medicine. The care of the soul belonged to the church. Thus, psychosomatic medicine was care for the sake of the body. James was the first to critically define human consciousness in psychological terms (in a 1904 paper titled, *"Does 'Consciousness' Exist?"*) and to argue for "mind care." James also conceived of the concept of neuroplasticity, arguing that the neural systems throughout the body "must be plastic." He reasoned that all psychological phenomena, such as thought and emotion, are an embodied experience and that our lived experiences physically alter our neural pathways. Erickson built on these ideas arguing that any significant or lasting change to the psyche (conscious and unconscious) must be the product of experiential events. Erickson used hypnosis and therapeutic directives to this end. He turned "talk therapy" into a lived experience—the embodiment of new adaptive knowledge.

**AT:** In France, Pierre Janet (1859-1947) was probably the most interesting hypnosis theorist and hypnotherapist of that time. You mention him often in your book. What is there of Pierre Janet in Erickson's work?

**DS:** Janet's contributions to hypnosis were vast, including the use of trance as a context for *transformational unconscious process work* (using hypnosis for days or even weeks without offering any specific suggestions), *utilizing the temporary absence of symptoms* during formal hypnosis (e.g., letting anorectic patients eat and drink during trance), *giving symptom-oriented suggestions* (e.g., performing an exorcism on someone who claims to be possessed by the devil), *identifying fixed ideas* that were operating at subconscious levels by using dissociative techniques such as "automatic writing" and "automatic talking" (what later came to be known as psychodynamic therapy), and utilizing a dissociative state to *introduce new ideas without conscious review* as an essential procedure. Janet also convincingly argued for designing individualized treatment strategies and treating patients as individuals.

Finally, in a seminal conference paper of 1896, "*The Somnambulistic Influence and the Need for Direction*," Janet described the subconscious transmission of the clinician's ideas to the patient and the dramatic results in terms of dependency and indirect hypnotic suggestion. This literature might have helped Erickson develop his conceptual framework for indirect suggestion as a therapeutic strategy (though I cannot be certain of this).

Erickson admits to being deeply influenced by Morton Prince and his pioneering work in multiple personalities (Dissociative Identity Disorder). But before Prince, the concept of dissociation was created by Janet. After studying thousands of hours of Erickson's work, I found dissociation to be central to Erickson's preferential use of hypnotherapy. He repeatedly argued that some aspects of therapy cannot succeed if the experience is exposed to conscious review. In sum, Janet was practicing in a way that looks a lot like Ericksonian therapy, long before Erickson was born.