

# An evolutionary theory of psychism: the legacy of Paul Diel (1893-1972)



## Hervé Toulhoat\*

President Association de Psychanalyse Introspective, France

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\***Corresponding author:** Hervé Toulhoat, President Association de Psychanalyse Introspective, France

### Abstract

The legacy of Paul Diel, a French psycho-analyst of Austrian origin, is reviewed. Diel joined CNRS in 1945 under the recommendation of Albert Einstein. He developed an introspective method to explore our inner world, and discover the laws of psychic functioning, theorized in details in his first book "Psychologie de la Motivation". On this basis, besides applications to therapy and education, he deciphered the symbolism of myths, dreams and psychopathic symptoms. He trained disciples, who themselves formed today's generation of dielian analysts, devoted to study, transmit and develop this considerable heritage.

### Introduction

At the present point of its scientific infancy, human thought develops a focused interest on brain phylogenesis and ontogenesis. The so-called emerging "neurosciences" will probably attract the best talents and considerable material support in most developed countries in the next century. The stakes are indeed considerable, considering only the point of view of public health and social evolution: is it possible to define mental sanity scientifically, and therefore develop both curations and prophylaxis against mental insanity? New investigation techniques progressing at a rapid pace, bio-engineering, genome decoding, etc... open exciting perspectives for further deciphering this object of ultimate complexity among evolved living organs, the human brain.

Brain's self-study, will in this way, how formidable be the mobilization, concern only its objectal, or somatic, organization. Obviously, one will not say that human brain aims at studying *itself*, but at studying *himself*, unless motivated by an un-natural, pseudo-objective formalism. Let us rely on the deep-rooted meaning of language and admit that in this quest, it is equally important to realize that brain coordinates a *self*, extends as an *it*, and rejoices or suffers as a *him* (and *I* rejoice or suffer in myself). This implies that both the objectal (somatic) and personal (psychic) aspects should necessarily be included in a complementary way into any complete "neuroscience". Such an understanding should moreover involve the evolutive dimension in a strict parallelism between the objectal and personal aspects in order to take into account the fact that life evolves psycho-somatically.

Physical means of observation and quantitative methods are appropriate for the program of objectal neurosciences, including the recording of animal behaviour. It is not the case for establishing a science of psychic functioning, as the latter is in no way extensive, but intimate and intensive. Where the subject of concern is the human psychic life, that one which matters most, the appropriate way of investigation is intimate self-observation, in another word introspection. Our introspection is the only way to deal with the immense inner world of our human motivations. What could in principle close the way of this world to science? The problem is obviously to find an objective basis for the analysis of motivations, which does not necessarily mean a point of view external to any particular individual, but a basis on which all individuals without exception can agree after they have lived an experiment. Human motivations, insofar as they are produced by living organisms, have to come out of a biological framework common to all species. Their interplay in each individual's intimacy should obey an underlying logic, the more often unraveled to conscious control. This is of course the proviso, generally left unspoken, for the construction of any psychological approach, *id est* deciphering the logic of psychism. Early attempts to found psychology were all based on the psychologists self-observation, more or less overtly. *Paul Diel overtly and systematically used introspection.*

Freud introduced the subconscious psychic functioning in his psychoanalytic pansexual theory, in order to account for neurotic and psychotic symptoms which remained enigma to theories

hitherto introspectively confined to the mere conscious field. The pansexual theory, in principle “open to revision” according to Freud’s own words, was never revised in practice, and its multiple off springs of nowadays rather characteristically share dogma like the “Aedipus complex”, or the exclusive determination of psychological disorders by external trauma suffered in the prime infancy. The stagnation of psychoanalysis since Freud testifies for its lack of methodological foundation. Indeed, Freud’s introspective intuition was outstanding, and nobody will now seriously contest the reality of the unconscious, nor that of many elements of the psychic functioning like the phenomenon of repression of guilty desires he also discovered. He was not able however to systematize his own introspection to the point it would have acquired the status of a true method for unveiling motivations, and particularly the pathogenic ones. Freudian psychoanalysis for that reason has always remained a promise of science only.

Behaviorism developed partly in reaction to the excessive speculations of the various psycho-analytical schools, with the idea that an objective psychological knowledge could be derived only in terms of quantified (statistically significant) typical responses of the living organism to a situation. Although behavioral observations greatly improved our appraisal of the animal world, and contributed to shed light on its unity, attempts to bridge the huge gap between even higher mammals and man proved deceptive, particularly in view of the extreme ability of the latter to respond individually by innovative behaviors. Behaviorism does proceed methodically, but this method tends to exclude introspection as a supposed source of speculative interpretation of behaviors. In some extreme instances, some psychological chapels overtly banned introspection in application of a radical behavioral program. After a few decades, the immense disparity of psychological doctrines which prevails proves at least the radical failure of this program in unifying the field, which would have been otherwise a convincing test of scientific efficiency. Albert Einstein wrote to Paul Diel in the late forties “I consider as a fashionable disease the present times anathema against introspection...Introspection is obviously the privileged source of psychological knowledge”.

Introspection does include a danger of morbidity either under the form of self-underestimation (exaltation of guilt), or under the form of the ambivalent self-overestimation (vanity). These will in turn be projected into a false interpretation of the external world and others: over-estimation (sentimentality) or obsessive and projective depreciation (accusation). Morbid introspection may even, under some respect, be considered as the essential cause of psychic disease. However, this does not preclude in principle the possibility of an elucidative, or objectifying, introspection. As a natural counterpart of morbid introspection, elucidative introspection might well be the condition of psychic sanity. In order to be cast into a tool of scientific investigation of the inner world of motives, elucidative introspection needed its methodical

basis. Such was the considerable input of Paul Diel more than fifty years ago [1].

Diel trained himself as a philosopher, but later his essential quest inclined him towards psychological advances of the time (late twenties) and in particular Freud’s opus. Both deeply impressed by Freud’s insight on unconscious and utterly unsatisfied by the arbitrariness of the pansexual theory, Diel looked for an enlarged driving framework as the basement of psychic life. Diel also gave credits to A. Adler and C.J. Jung for having pointed out respectively the significances of material/social and spiritual needs. For Diel, the *evolutive* drive complements *the sexual and material drives*, to form the basic framework of psychic life required for methodical consistency.

The evolutive drive, also termed *vital impulse* by Diel, manifests itself in the self-organization of living forms, *id est* the organization of their material and sexual adaptations. Diel introduced the “vital impulse” as a manifest phenomenon which should be clearly distinguished from the spiritualist idea (e.g. in Bergson) of a transcendent cause to life. Rather, the vital impulse is for Diel the analog of force(s) in physics, a working hypothesis at the basis of a methodical theoretical development subject to internal consistency rules, and to be submitted to experimental proof [1, Introduction]. The experience proposed according to Diel’s theory is reproducible by every individual, for instance the dissolution of ambivalent resentments after their motivating source has been elucidated. Dynamical self-organization can be understood as a very general condition of temporal subsistence of anything, not limited, by the way, to what we perceive as *living* forms. At the human level, the evolutive drive has itself evolved into a function, the human spirit, which role is to elaborate for the individual both its orientation and the evaluation and sorting of satisfaction promises of his material and sexual appetences. It is the valorizing function.

The three drives necessarily and sufficiently complement each other in order to soothe the vital anguish, inseparable from life and its permanent face to face with death. This dialectic of life versus death determines the evolutionary process [2]. Life manifests the progressive awakening of an impulse to survive and, in correlation, the emergence of multiple species, or more or less viable organisms in a given set of external conditions. Such a conception includes Darwinian selection (survival and reproduction of the “fittest” individuals) as a way to satisfy the immanent intentionality of the vital impulse, and not only as a random process, exclusively determined by conditions external to the individual organism. In other terms, one should also account for vital anguish as a « driving force » able to trigger an intense reworking of the somatopsychic organization down to its molecular memory so that new aptitudes can emerge, survive and stay recorded. One might state that random selection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for evolution, as suggested by simple statistical estimates of the probability to produce at random the present times complexity over a finite

and relatively small period of time. Noteworthy, all attempts to exclude an intention to survive as a driving force to evolution, in the name of an ill-defined objectivity, will have to re-introduce it at some stage for consistency, would it be only to account for the (introspectively evident) human appetite for the satisfactions of life. Instead of the ostrich's strategy, still prevalent in life sciences, it is methodically justified and an opening of fruitful prospects, to accept *excitability* and its intentional evolved manifestations as a property inherent to what we call "matter", and which we know from the point of view of physics to exist (or persist) exclusively as organized levels in legal relationships.

In his theoretical synthesis [1], Diel defined psychic life as a "suspended reaction" following excitation, a common character to all forms of life (with the corresponding somatic inscription), from the most primitive unicellular to the highly differentiated human level. The origin of existence, including the immanent excitability, is considered by Diel as a metapsychological question, in analogy with physics seeing the origin of force(s) as metaphysical. Excitability, the characteristic of life, is given as a proviso, of origin definitely mysterious to the human spirit, himself a mere (although highly evolved) instance of psychic life. This methodical principle is extremely important and plays a founding role in Diel's thought. It is actually the epistemological solution to the problem of origins, considering that it is beyond the capacity of human spirit, well defined as the *valorizing biological function* and therefore a modality of existence, to find an ultimate cause to existence. Recognizing spirit as a functional expression of the evolutive pulsion instead of a transcendent entity, Diel solves the longstanding conflict between spiritualism and materialism: both are dead ends for thought. History unfortunately still daily demonstrates the bloody consequences of these ambivalent motivations erroneously justified into multiple and bloodily expressed contradictory ideologies.

Human intentionality is an immediate subjective experience: the projection of this intentionality in the outside world has been a powerful adaptative mean of orientation since the early animists, and this projective process later found motivating poetical summits in the various mythological constructions. In attempts to counteract doubt, myths necessarily degraded into dogmatic and superstitious credentials when their intuitive deep-rooted meaning was no longer perceptible to the emerging conceptual thought. Indeed, the history of science is that of a vital effort against dogmatic tendencies, and it is easily understood why it has for a long time been considered "scientific" to exclude intentionality from the explanation of phenomena. This has been the method of physics, devoted to studying phenomena of an (abstracted) "external world". There is no reason to limit science to this particular method, and instead, intentional phenomena will be scientifically appraised thanks to an appropriate method. The question is to what extent can intention be methodically projected, analogously to animism and myth, but on a conceptual level, comparable in orientational power to that reached by

physics. Diel actually achieved the foundation of such a construct in a rather lonely effort.

Along this way, his quest started with the introspective discovery of the legal (essential) conditions of human satisfaction and dissatisfaction, which turn out to be to a large extent independent from the external situation. Elaborating over Freud's discovery of the symbolization of repressed desires, he developed a consistent understanding of psychopathic symptoms and of their meaning concealed to the conscious. He realized that the symbolization process has a universal significance and can be considered as the very first mode of expression of the human psychism. Diel's basic idea was that any symbol (of extra-conscious origin) uses analogy in order to express a psychic conflict by features of the external world. This analogic language of the intimate need for satisfaction is an archaic language. It predated the conceptual languages, themselves characteristic of the conscious level. Freud had had the intuition that ancient mythological stories could condense a psychological pre-science. Hence his hypothesis about the meaning of the myth of Aedipus, upon which he developed the famous theory of the Aedipus complex. Diel was puzzled by the inconsistencies of this theory as much as by its potential source of insight, and he ventured into a psychological translation of Greek mythology as an ensemble, on an entirely new basis: he gave himself the rule that once the psychological meaning of one symbol had been established by way of analogy, it should hold not only across the whole story, but moreover for all myths in the same culture, and under similar forms, even for all myths in every cultural cycle. In other terms, this rule is a requirement of universality of the symbolic language, on grounds that it is a psychic production of primary biological significance common to the entire species and not particular to one or the other culture. This method proved indeed fully fruitful. Diel achieved a highly consistent translation of Greek mythology into psychological terms [3]. He further exemplified the method with the Judeo-Christian myth (The symbol God [4], Genesis and main characters of the bible [5], John's gospel [6]). Myths of other cultural cycles have been also translated by Diel although they remained unpublished (Nordic and Southern Amerindians myths, Aegyptian myths...). More recently, I applied his method to a translation of the Irish myth [7]. These translations verified the universality rule into striking details, thus demonstrating indeed the psychological pre-science common to all myths, although expressed to various degrees of refinement according to the state of ethical evolution reached by the corresponding culture.

Simultaneously, Diel started to address the enigma of dreams, correctly but prematurely termed by Freud "the royal way towards the unconscious". Diel noticed a common feature of dreams, myths and pathological symptoms: illogicalities. He had established that illogicality is a meaningful process of the symbolic language in its attempt to reach the conscious layers of psychic life. Therefore, it was highly likely that the same method of translation which proved itself effective for collective myths was applicable to the

individual dream. Such was the case indeed, to the impressive extent that the same deep-rooted symbols recognized by Diel in myths of cultures completely separated in space and time, do appear *here and now* with the same meaning, in the dreams of individuals quite independently of their age, sex, or socio-cultural context [8]. This fact was another clue of the existence of a common function producing both the collective (myth) and individual (symptoms, dreams) symbolism. This function, termed by Diel the *superconscious*, plays a vital role, that of warning man from the errors of his *calculus for satisfaction*. This function can be considered as an evolved form of the animal « instinctive » decisional ability, and as such is also a manifestation of the *vital impulse* introduced above. The emergence of such a biological psychic authority was necessary as the *anthropos* acquired an ever more precise imaginative ability, which became the foreseeing and conscious intellect, the definitive capacity to master the ambient external world. Indeed, such an evolutive jump, figured by Prometheus (that one who thinks before acting) in the Greek mythology, implies besides new possibilities of securing satisfaction, an immense danger: the imaginative exaltation (or over-valorization) of desires. Actually, desires can now be multiplied beyond biological needs, and their natural avidity overexcited by imagination. The superconscious has to harness imagination in order to avoid the dissatisfactions stemming from the contrast between exalted representations and reality, not only of the perceptible ambience, but also of oneself. The superconscious works through both spiritualization (clarification of the representation), and sublimation (decrease of the affect). Exalted desires and their false justification define the content of the *subconscious* function, the pathological psychic functioning, which emerges only with the human level, as a correlate to imaginative capacity. The human being is half conscious, that is to say half-conscious of his motivations: he will realize the immanent evolutive sense of his individual life by allowing his superconscious to « penetrate » his subconscious. To that extent, he may liberate himself from the various forms of anguish and dependencies and expand his emotional perception of reality. Diel has amply shown how this « vital task » tends usually to be excluded from our daily conscious concerns, too accidental, but furnish the exclusive content of our nocturnal deeply extra-conscious deliberation, dreams.

Paul Diel did not limited himself to the elaboration of a theory, but moreover largely developed the psychotherapeutic applications [1,9,10]. Diel refined his very efficient practice with adults over the last three decades of his life. He also elaborated adapted approaches with children and teenagers as part of his CNRS research when member of Henri Wallon's « Laboratoire de Psychobiologie de l'Enfant » between 1945 and 1966. Diel was able to train selected students over many years, who became the second generation of Dielian therapists, and nowadays train themselves the third generation. Training activities, lectures

and seminars, public conferences, are organized by a non-profit association, founded by Diel's closer student and legal heiress Jeanine Solotareff [6,8,11]. This association [12] is the recommended point of contact for people wishing to develop interactions with the living Dielian thought.

Although well known in a certain sense, as shown for instance by the uninterrupted sales of his books since over fifty years, Diel's work suffers from a striking deficit of acknowledgement in view of its major significance. One reason for this, but probably not the only one, should be found in the absence of academic affiliation in Diel's work. A self-made scholar, Diel was only late in his life given the opportunity to become a professional scientist (through his admission to CNRS by Frédéric Joliot-Curie, under Albert Einstein's recommendation). His primary task at that time was to complete and publish his main books, leaving little time to engage in a formal promotion of his ideas towards the university of his time. The latter, in France strongly bipolarized ideologically into materialist marxism and spiritualist judeo-christianism, was anyway very reluctant to consider his original approach. However, as new trends of thought are emerging nowadays with the momentum of evolutionary biology, and given the fact that Diel's ideas build fundamentally an evolutionary understanding of psychic life as a biological phenomenon, we may expect at last fruitful recognitions in a near future.

To give only one example, we may refer to A. Damasio's recent book [13], and his attempt to identify the somatic substrate of emotions, or to show that archaic neural structures devoted to the permanent evaluation of somatopsychic integrity do preside over decisional processes of vital value. In other terms, common sense would be closely connected to the individual's ability to perceive the fulfillment of his vital needs. This neurobiological finding can be put in parallel with the superconscious function in Diel's conception, in that the latter is an evolved form of the ability to orient the individual towards the fulfillment of his vital needs. The superconscious is evolved, and evolving, in the sense that rather to overcome vital dangers coming from the external world, it has to face the specific dangers created by the intensification of the inner world: the multiplication of exalted desires. As any psychic phenomenon, the superconscious does have a somatic and neural inscription, still to be precisely identified, but probably not too far from the systems studied by Damasio et al. [13].

We can foresee rich possibilities of cross-fertilization between neurobiology and Dielian psychology, with considerable prospects of therapeutic progress both from the medicinal and spiritual re-education standpoints. Because a unitary biogenetic understanding of psychic life, and of the conditions of its sane formation and insane deformation, will have also considerable sociological impacts, we expect that a renewed interest would not remain confined to specialized fields but would rather span across the entire intellectual life on a global scale.

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