

Hans Driesch's Interest in the Psychological Research. A Historical Study

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Abstract. In recent times the source of interest in psychical research in Germany has been subject of relevant studies. Not infrequently these works have dealt with this phenomenon through the interpretation of the various steps and transformations present in Hans Driesch's thought, from biology and medicine to neovitalism, and finally to parapsychology. However these studies identified the causes of this growing involvement in paranormal research either in the historical context of "crisis" of modernity (or "crisis" in psychology), or in an attempt to "normalize" the supernatural as an alternative to the traditional experimental psychology. My paper aims instead at throwing light on the constant effort by Driesch to conceive (and found) psychical research as a *science of the super-normal*, using the methodology successfully adopted by the scientific community (especially German) in the late nineteenth century.

Key words: Driesch, medicine, parapsychology

Introduction. Driesch's Life and Education

Although formerly educated as a scientist, Hans Adolf Eduard Driesch became a strong proponent of vitalism and later a professor of philosophy. In 1886 he spent two semesters at the University of Freiburg, studying medicine under August Weismann. Then at the University of Jena, he received his doctorate under Ernst Heinrich Haeckel in 1889; later he studied also physics and chemistry at Munich. In 1891 Driesch performed his most important experiment, contrasting with results obtained by Wilhelm Roux in his 1888 seminal study of the two-cell frog egg. He discovered that if the sea urchin blastomeres were separated at the 2-cell stage, two complete but smaller than normal sea urchins would develop. Driesch interpreted these results as signifying that a cell can form parts that it does not normally form during its development. The "fate" of a cell is a function of its position in the whole: the cell forms an organized, whole individual.

His many valuable contributions to experimental embryology were mostly carried out at the Stazi-

one Zoologica in Naples, Italy. He published his first wholly theoretical pamphlet in 1891, in which he aimed at explaining development in terms of mechanics and mathematics. In the *Analytische Theorie der organischen Entwicklung* his approach was still mechanistic. However, by 1895, according to his own testimony in *Lebenserinnerungen*, he became a convinced vitalist. He summarized his ideas about the existence of a vitalistic force in *Der Vitalismus als Geschichte und als Lehre* (1905). In fact, he failed in explaining on a mechanistic basis the ability of half of a two-celled egg to form a whole larva, for he could not envisage a machine that could divide itself into two machines, each able to reconstitute itself into a whole. "The action of living beings could not be explained on physical and chemical principles alone, but [...] their actions exhibited a purpose or design" (1). Therefore, he invoked an "agent-outside-the-machine" (to this end he borrowed Aristotle's word "entelechy") as a regulator of organic development. Although entelechy is a vital agency indefinable in terms of physics and chemistry, Driesch believed that its action is somehow facilitated

by enzymes (ferments) conceived as regulatory agents in development.

Driesch was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures in natural theology at the University of Aberdeen in 1907 and 1908. These lectures (first published in 1908 under the title *Science and Philosophy of the Organism*) summarized his experiments and the subsequent philosophical conclusions. Driesch performed his last experiments in 1909, the same year he obtained a faculty appointment in natural philosophy at the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Heidelberg. Deeply influenced by Kant, he later wrote many philosophical articles and books on organic form and organic wholeness and on the mind-body relation, devoting attention both to logic and metaphysics. As a philosopher, he was interested in the concepts of organic form and wholeness, and in the mind-body problem.

Asked to lecture on his conception of vitalism at Cambridge University, he met there Henry Sidgwick and he became interested in the research on psychic phenomena. He joined the Society for Psychical Research of London (SPR) in 1913, and he was its president in 1926-27. When he wanted to investigate psychic phenomena further in Oslo in 1935, the Nazis denied his passport, so he did not pursue this work further. Invited to lecture on philosophy by many universities (in Europe, United States, South America and the Far East), Driesch had the opportunity to work with some pioneers in the field of psychic research: Walter Franklin Pierce in Boston, Gustav Geley and Eugène Osty in Paris, Oliver Lodge in Britain and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing in Germany. He sat with mediums such as "Margery," Mrs. Osborne Leonard and Willi and Rudi Schneider. Although impressed by Mrs. Leonard and the Schneiders, Driesch was not always convinced of the genuineness of mediumistic phenomena. According to Gerda Walther, "He was somehow uneasy about physical phenomena, more so than [about] mental phenomena" (2).

Passing through Psychology

Investigating "the possibility of deception" in psychical research, Driesch mentioned English researchers as a proper methodological model, because they pos-

sessed "in equal degree" the quality of scientists, psychologists and psychiatrists. Since people constantly confused spiritualism with psychical research, both Driesch and the British physicist Oliver Lodge (who was President of the London Society for Psychical Research from 1901 to 1903) stressed that the first is a pronouncement of faith, while the second aims at being a science "as chemistry and geology". In fact, although psychical research deals with topics ignored by scientific people, it deals with them in according to scientific methods. Driesch's program sought to stimulate his colleagues scientists into domain of the psychical research. However, psychical research constituted a specific field of investigation which met a particular difficulty. Such investigation had to fight on two fronts: against the dogmatic negativists and against too credulous people. Unfortunately "in Germany the methods of both sceptics and believers [...] have much to be desired". The sceptics claimed that "uniformity of expectation", which is a property of the normal experiments, is absent in psychical research. But – Driesch objected – also in medicine and biology higher variable conditions exist, which are not within the control of experimenter.

Since 1925 Driesch intended to link his interest in *parapsychology* to psychology. It should be noted, incidentally, that not a few historians today sustain that psychical research in the late nineteenth century's Germany was performed as an alternative to physiological psychology. It was not by chance that many German scientists, physicians and psychologists such as Adolf Flick, Hermann Munk, Max Dessoir and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing were interested in hypnotism and "abnormal" mental phenomena. This involvement contributed to the fusion of the Munich "Psychologische Gesellschaft" and the Berlin "Gesellschaft für Experimental-Psychologie" in 1890, two societies which were already founded having the London SPR as model (3).

"Parapsychology" was a term introduced in 1889 by Max Dessoir to designate the science dealing with phenomena "that step outside the usual process of the inner life" (4) (and in 1932 Driesch defined it as "*die Wissenschaft von den okkulten Erscheinungen*"). He was convinced that one of the five critical points in psychology was *really* parapsychology, since it occurred "to extend psychical research to new facts" (5). At the time of the publication of *The Crisis of Psychology*, a

work originally written in English, Driesch was already Professor of Philosophy in Leipzig University, and he was invited by the Princeton University to contribute a volume to its scientific series (6). As scientist he had already dealt with the fundamental questions of the mental life and of unconscious processes (7), and he was convinced that unconscious was a *normal* aspect of the mental life. Likewise he sustained the “factuality” of the paranormal phenomena, whose evidence seemed quite demonstrated. Nevertheless some problems concerned the real nature and modalities of parapsychological phenomena: “*Who* performs such phenomena?”, “*What* is used, and *how*?”, “Is it only *apparent* knowledge?”, “Is the conscious mind *disturbed*”, “Why so *few* persons are affected by such phenomena and/or sensations?”. The first problem in this domain is the factuality: are there really “facts” in this field?

Driesch distinguished parapsychological phenomena in three categories:

1. (para)physical phenomena
2. (para)psychical phenomena
3. psychophysical phenomena

Levitations, materialisations and telekinesis, i.e. movements of objects without human contact, are “physical phenomena”, veritable actions. They are not creations out of nothing, and even assuming that matter is everywhere, it must to be *ordered*. But what kind of order is it, if the hands are not employed for ordering? For the cases comprehended in this first class, Driesch used concepts and terms derived from biomedical and philosophical theories. He had developed the above mentioned concept of *order* in his basic philosophical work in 1912, *Ordnungslehre (The Theory of Order)*, in which he aimed at disclosing all the primordial elements of order first given in basic intuition. Driesch sought to establish an order in the experience. He sustained that “it is enlightening” all knowledge investigating forms of order. Even the Soul as “the unconscious foundation” of the conscious experience is “posited in the server of order”: “My primordial knowing of the meaning of order and my primordial willing of order indicate a certain primordial state and dynamics of my soul”.

In this regard Driesch refers to the above-mentioned concept of entelechia. Derived from a biological-metaphysical context, it denoted a vital agent, an inter-

nal perfecting non-mechanical principle existing in all living organisms, “a unifying, non-material, mind-like something” (8), and Driesch sustained that “we have an interaction in the purely natural sphere, i.e. between entelechy and the matter of my body”. Nevertheless, the *working* of entelechia had to be parallel to that of the soul: “the working of my soul ... and [its] certain states are ‘parallel’ to ‘my conscious havings’”. Driesch postulated three parallels – among the agencies of entelechy, of soul and of some conscious states, a solution that himself found “very artificial”. He admitted that, in fact, in the normal morphogenesis *we do not know* as entelechy acts, but it could regulate organic development and explain several paraphysical actions. Above all, paraphysical phenomena are cases of a kind of “enlarged” vitalism, a “supervitalism”, an aspect which he would have further developed in the work on psychological research in 1933. Although he complained that some critics erroneously mixed his psychology with his vitalism, Driesch was sure that vitalism represented “a fundamental breach” in the normal science, being a bridge connecting normal (scientific) and psychological research. Therefore he refuted any psychophysical (or psychomechanical) parallelism, conceiving mind as an independent entity, “enthroned by the side of the physical body”. Its physiological effects are well known, since a lot of bodily symptoms can be *mentally* produced (inflammation, pregnancy, stigmata etc.).

Nevertheless Driesch did not deny matter and its role. “Matter is everywhere in the space”, and the vital agent makes a constructive use of it, or, the mental part of the individual acts purposely on matter. Its influence is visible in the simplest of supernormal phenomenon, in which matter is under the influence of *assimilation*, an established process highlighted by Justus von Liebig in his organic chemistry. Materialisation and its varieties (telekinesis and levitation) constitute a kind of organized assimilation, a kind of supernormal embryology. So, if regarded as vitalistic actions, or forms of “behaviour” of some unconscious entity, paraphysical phenomena lose their negative character of absurdity, since they respect the principle of economy or of parsimony, according to which no phenomenon may be considered fundamental if it can be reduced to another.

However, the reference to *causae verae*, to which parapsychical phenomena could be reduced, is inappli-

cable to the psychical research, since the hypotheses of radiation and sensory hyperesthesia are inadequate as explanation of the supernormal transference of knowledge between an agent and a receiver or percipient, who may be active or passive. In particular, the intensity of radiation diminishes with the distance, whereas the strength of transference of knowledge is independent of it. Moreover the radiation hypothesis implies that transference is a process "of homogeneous things", although nothing is known of apparatus of reception in the brain.

Meanwhile all parapsychical phenomena imply a material continuity with the body, the case of mediums originate not a few difficulties, because the appearances of human forms are at great distance from the medium, and one can wonder whether "abnormal organs" growing from the medium's body produce such anomalous formations. About this Driesch supposed a *dynamic* relation between mind and mind, a particularly useful hypothesis to explain psychical phenomena, which entail no material agency. Phenomena such as mind-reading and telepathy do not require any hypotheses *ad hoc*, but only "extensions of dynamic relations already established".

At this regard Driesch postulated the existence of a *supermind* split up in several individual minds: "All mind is one at bottom", an unconscious mind as a whole, which is more important than the conscious part (the Ego) of the mind. Driesch believed that unconscious and subconscious sides of mind performed parapsychological phenomena more strongly than "the Ego-side" of the mind, and he recognized that these questions implied not only a parapsychological reflection, but also metaphysical and theological issues.

Higher problems are represented by psycho-physical phenomena such as clairvoyance and prophecy. They entail sensations which are not normally known. In fact, clairvoyance is the capability of making correct statements about "objective natural situations" beyond the reach of the senses, without it being possible to have knowledge of it with transference of mental contents by other persons. Neither the "Leibnizian" hypothesis of the "mirror of the universe" nor the idea of a correspondence between minds are satisfactory, because rarely there is a "tuning" in the two brains of the agent and recipient: one can "have" consciously what the other has forgotten! Besides, prophecy denotes

that time is nothing else than a restriction in the domain of appearances. Frequently prophetic statements reveal themselves based on self-suggestion and sub-conscious, two states both investigated by Charles Richet and Pierre Janet. Suggestion and self-suggestion may produce effects, such as illness or death, which can be object of prophecy. Definitely prophecy perhaps is not a fundamental phenomenon, but it can be traced to telepathy or other forms of transference of mental content or mental states among living minds.

Psychical Research as a Science: Methodological Carefulness

Driesch's attitude towards the methods of medicine and orthodox science is reflected especially in his effort to discover all the "forms of possible deception". In the first part of his book on psychical research, his main purpose is to ascertain "how we can safeguard ourselves against conscious and unconscious fraud" by means of a "carefully comparative method". Therefore he lists a lot of tricks, precautions, methods of control etc. such as, for example, sealing the room of the *séances*, undressing and redressing the medium, replacing darkness by good light in the rooms of the sittings, putting – in the phenomena of telekinesis – a distance between the object and the medium, holding his hands, controlling his boots and laces and so on. In the field of psychical research it is important to state that there are three kinds of facts: certain, probable and doubtful. The task of discovering them is easy in the parapsychical phenomena, because in this field the eventuality of fraudulent deception is high. On the contrary, telepathy and thought-reading are "quite certain facts", especially if "united" phenomena.

Driesch mentioned the conditions that the psychiatrist Schrenck-Notzing carried out in his sittings. His methods were considered among the best in the recent times. Schrenck made use even of the electrical method invented by the animal psychologist (as well as experimental parapsychologist) Karl Krall: medium's head, arms, feet, hands etc. were in contact with electric light circuits; when some parts of his anatomy were not in contact, a red light automatically switched off and the lack of control was discovered.

A proper investigator would take account of other negative circumstances and conditions such as vagueness of the statements made by mediums, coincidences, use of schematic-intuitive statements, autosuggestions, possibility of acquiring informations about the past life of the persons with which the medium comes into contact, “fishing” (because the sitter may give medium many important unconscious indications), errors of memory etc. On the another hand, Driesch deprecated exaggerated precautions, over-valuation of experiment and excessive suspiciousness. All experiments (also in chemistry and physics) can be imitated, meanwhile it is not always true that all scientific observations can be repeated at will. Not so in astronomy and geophysics as well as in psychological research.

The “negativist” severe sceptics are generally mechanists “in the sense of certain neo-Kantian schools”, which – opposing to vitalistic biology – deny the “existence of the ‘mind’ as independent (empirical) entity” (ivi). Mediums should not *a priori* be treated as fraudulent, on the contrary they should be “of tranquil mind” and treated with care, without feeling continuously observed. Driesch hoped that the number of the mediums should be increased (even by use of chemical substances!), because there is only a quantitative difference between mediums and normal people. Therefore it is probable that the real difference between normal and supernatural states consists of a “variation in the so-called threshold of consciousness”: “what remains in the deepest subconsciousness of normal people rises into consciousness in metagnomes [mediums]”.

Finally, as in all fields of science, negative cases never can cancel positive ones, and if they are controversial, they should be “put aside” as “possible genuine” because certain techniques of investigations are still inadequate. It is just a question to waiting and suspending judgement. Driesch invoked this critical attitude and he applied it to the experiments with Schneider brothers and Eusapia Palladino.

Driesch's Conclusions

Driesch was convinced that there is another way to explain parapsychological phenomena, a form of psychic or vital energy. Again vitalism constitutes “a

bridge” from biology to psychological research: in “biological vitalism” a “‘whole-making’ X-agency” is postulated to explain the organic development, and in parapsychology “something superpersonal” occurs.

Driesch thought that in biology Darwinian and Lamarckian theories fail, since they require some form of entelechy in the process of development:

We have further experimentally established facts of regeneration and of the development of several complete organisms out of one egg after the separation of the cleavage cells from one another [...]. These facts, which I have discussed in detail under the name of “the One and ther Many” [in *The Philosophy of Organism*] force us to speak here of the activity of a supersonal entity.

This agency operates out of the space, in a non-spatial *mental field*. However, Driesch believed that both animism and the concept of mental field were not sufficient to explain the “*rapport*” (*Abstimmung*) – a kind of emotional link – between agent and percipient. All that it remains is an alternative: the “jamesian” doctrine of a cosmic consciousness (or Osty’s *plan transcendental*, or von Hartmann’s “telephone-connection” in the absolute) and the monadism (or spiritualism). Both these doctrines – the cosmic subject and the monadism – implicate relevant different aspects of the “supernormal”: i.e. on one hand, the idea of a superpersonal subject and the possible existence of plans concerning the future; on the other hand, the non-physical modification of mind and telepathy between the living and the dead. In all cases, Driesch was convinced that the question of the personal survival was the main problem of all science. He was leaning towards the “impossibility” of a definite decision: all these questions remain in a state of suspense. On this regard he mentioned the research of the composer Emil Mattiesen and of the Italian psychologist and psychological researcher Ernesto Bozzano, “the best theoretician(s) in our field”, wondering if a medium can “grasp” the plan of the cosmic subject. More unambiguous perhaps was the monadic doctrine, according to which communication from one specific deceased person seems to be present. Definitely Driesch sought an uniformity in the field of psychological research, in respect of the principle that body and mind are two separated entities, and that mind has the power of a supernatural transference of knowledge, two hypotheses in fact “strange” since unexplored.

Others researchers

It could be interesting to make a comparison between Driesch and other *fin-de-siècle* researchers, especially Italian investigators. For example, it is almost impossible not to find similarities between Driesch's intellectual biography and Bozzano's education. Bozzano asserted that he was deeply influenced by the positive philosophy of the Victorian thinker Herbert Spencer, who introduced him to an empirical methodology in his observations. On the other part, the Spencerian concept of "Unknowable" could stimulate his interest in the psychical phenomena. In fact Bozzano at first defined himself "a positivist materialist" (9) converted to the psychical research by the lecture of the first issue of "Annales des Sciences Psychiques" and other material sent to him in 1891 by the French psychologist and philosopher Théodule Ribot. Bozzano used to collect, classify and organize the phenomena reported in the mediumistic literature. His "analytic-bibliographic-classificatory" approach has been compared to that of a naturalist in late nineteenth century (10). For Massimo Biondi, however, Bozzano "worked backwards": preferably he started with a conviction, and he aimed at finding evidence within the available material to support his thesis (11).

Therefore, we may discover an important difference respect to Driesch's scientific approach. Bozzano became immediately convinced of the reality of psychic phenomena and he was a passionate sustainer of the hypothesis of a *discarnate* agency at the survival of death. One of his best topics were the deathbed visions. He did not feel the necessity of proving the existence of apparitions, carrying out experiments on these phenomena, which for him became "immediately valid". He was persuaded that spirits produced visions, auditory perceptions, premonitions, bilocations and other manifestations.

From a theoretical standpoint, Driesch argued against the "dogmatic Darwinism", which conceived organisms as mere arrangements of particles of matter and "nothing else", and Bozzano rejected the role of biological evolution applied to the psychic phenomena. He did not believe that the powers of the subconscious mind were regulated by evolution. Like Bergson, Driesch sustained the idea of non-physical causes,

without which life and mind could not have emerged from physical matter. On one hand, a pre-existent power intervenes as unifying principle attracting and compelling material atoms to group themselves into the formative process, on the other hand a hypothetical pre-existent soul-monad acts as unifying principle, which has an effect on the psychical atoms of experience. With the psychical investigator Frederic H.M. Myers, Bozzano shared the conception that subliminal mind is independent of evolution and of any interference from the brain. This is about a spiritual dimension, particularly expressed after death of the living by a non-physical spirit. Moreover he postulated the existence of an *etheric* brain immanent within the somatic one. Nevertheless, for Bozzano, psychical phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance were manifestations of the spiritual nature alone, independent of the functions of the cerebral organ (12): a feature connecting him with the position of Driesch on psycho-physical parallelism.

Driesch believed that Bozzano was a deep theorizer, but "far too slipshod in accepting the alleged facts". Furthermore Bozzano was criticized by many investigators, and his controversy with Richet and René Sudre is well-known. In the pages of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* there were people who deplored his "low evidential standards".

It would be more interesting to compare Driesch's parapsychology to the psychic research of another scientist, the above-mentioned German physician Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, who shared with him the conviction that "the true causes of these strange occurrences [referred to Schneider brothers] would be located in the laws of biology, psychology and physics" (13,14). Quoting the work of the Berlin physician and sexologist Alfred Moll, historians of the parapsychology emphasized that Driesch "referred to Schrenck-Notzing as an exemplary researcher" (15). Other best reports were those of Walter Prince, "a very careful investigator", meanwhile the Italian Ernesto Bozzano, despite being "one of the our acutest theorisers" was "unfortunately" careless in accepting alleged facts.

Meanwhile the relationship between Driesch and Osty is a subject of study in the context of the inquiry on metapsychics in France (16), the relationship between Driesch and the Italian investigators has not

yet been sufficiently thorough. Harry Price observes that generally French were the most sceptical about psychic facts, whereas the Italians were the least, and several of them became spiritualists. For example, Cesare Lombroso was one of the first to accept survival: not “a scientific certainty”, but “a great probability” (and his book *After Death – What?* was published in London in 1909). Driesch considered death a “transition” from one mode of existence to another, and he was convinced that “personal immortality could attain a certain degree of probability on the basis of the experiments of students of psychical research” (17). Together with other several psychical investigators, both Lombroso and Driesch shared the interest in the exceptional and inexplicable phenomena occurred in the sessions with Eusapia Palladino (18). In particular, it seems that Lombroso was impressed by the materialisation of his deceased mother and he interpreted those phenomena as manifestations of a psychic force (or power), emanating from the medium’s body.

Harry Price observed that, at a certain point, the Fate meddled (19): in early 1929 both Schrenck and Karl Krall died, and the German psychical research “received a shock from which it has never recovered”. In conclusion, eminent scholars of British cultural area stressed that, at the turn of the century, the German parapsychology was characterized by efforts to *normalize* the supernatural and that, especially in the case of men of science devoted to parapsychology, “the effort to normalize the exceptional has come at the price of social stigmatization”. This was certainly true of Driesch. However, one may ask whether in the case of Driesch this process was a *real* normalization, or if he wanted always to claim the exceptional nature of the supernatural to which to apply a new science.

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