

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From Astronomy to Transcendental Darwinism: Carl du Prel (1839–1899)

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Abstract—German philosopher Carl du Prel (1839–1899) was a leading theoretician and proponent of research into dissociation, hypothetical postmortem survival, alleged psi phenomena and related areas. The impact of his works on several more widely known authors within and outside psychological research was often considerable. This article provides a concise biography of du Prel, gives an overview of his model of mind, and finally suggests avenues of research which were pursued by du Prel but nowadays are largely forgotten.

Keywords: Carl du Prel—Eduard von Hartmann—altered states of consciousness—survival research

Introduction

Recent works in cultural history have identified philosopher and psychological researcher Carl du Prel (1839–1899) as a hitherto obscure key figure in the intellectual scene of *fin de siècle* Germany (see, for example, Kaiser, 2008; Treitel, 2004; Weber, 2007). Du Prel, whom Sigmund Freud, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, called “that brilliant mystic”¹ (Freud, 1900/2000: 68 FN), arguably had a certain influence not only on other psychologists, such as Carl Gustav Jung (Shamdasani, 2003) and potentially Frederic W. H. Myers (see below), but also on several artists of fame, for example, Wassily Kandinsky (Treitel, 2004) and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who was an outspoken admirer of du Prel (Magnusson, 2008). The present paper aims to provide an outline of du Prel’s life and work and a brief introduction to his ideas in psychological research and philosophy.

Biographical Sketch

Baron Carl du Prel was born on 3 April 1839 in Landshut, Bavaria, from which his family, who had originated from old Lorraine nobility, moved to Munich shortly after his birth.² In 1858 he entered Munich University to study law but joined the Bavarian army 2 years later, serving as a lieutenant and officer until

1872. In 1868 he received his Ph.D. in philosophy *in absentia*³ from the University of Tübingen. His thesis, a philosophical study of the metaphysical implications of temporal divergences in dreams, was published in the following year (du Prel, 1869). From 1872 du Prel pursued a career as a freelance writer and began to publish a large number of articles and essays on philosophy, aesthetics, literature, astronomy, and psychical research, several of which were subsequently compiled in book form (Kaiser, 2008).

Du Prel's philosophical starting point is rooted in Kantian epistemology and the metaphysical systems of Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906), with whom he corresponded over a span of 16 years. In his early years du Prel studied not only the implications of dreams for philosophy and psychology, but also astronomy and the works of Darwin, leading to the publication of his first critically acclaimed monograph, which is a proposal to apply the principles of natural selection to astronomy (du Prel, 1873/1882). A later astronomical study, involving epistemological speculations about the bodily organisation and thus the nature of perception in hypothetical inhabitants of other planets (du Prel, 1880a), eventually led him to acknowledge the logical possibility of supernormal phenomena as a result of our epistemic limitations. Before publishing his groundbreaking *Die Philosophie der Mystik* (*The Philosophy of Mysticism*, du Prel, 1885), he wrote a hiking guidebook for the Alps, Italy, Dalmatia, and Montenegro (du Prel, 1875) and a treatise on the psychology of artistic productions (du Prel, 1880b), the latter of which anticipates several crucial elements of his theory of the unconscious, later to be presented more systematically in *Die Philosophie der Mystik*⁴ and *Die Entdeckung der Seele durch die Geheimwissenschaften* (*The Discovery of the Soul through the Secret Sciences*, du Prel, 1894–95).

In 1886, du Prel became a founding member of the Munich Psychological Society, which was formed after the example of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) and which published the journal *Sphinx*, an important early German psychical research periodical. Other members of the Munich Society were theosophist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), the physician Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929), later to be known for his researches in physical mediumship, and the young philosopher and psychologist Max Dessoir (1867–1947), who coined the term “Parapsychologie” (Hövelmann, 1987), but also renowned artists like Albert von Keller (1844–1920) and Gabriel von Max (1840–1915).

Du Prel's defence of the reality of reported physical phenomena of spiritualism against Eduard von Hartmann's proposal to explain the effects in question in terms of hallucinations (von Hartmann, 1885, 1887) led to a clash between du Prel and von Hartmann, who, in an essay on somnambulism, had criticised du Prel's transcendental individualism, as presented in his *Die Philosophie der Mystik* (von Hartmann, 1886). At the core of the dispute lay diverging opinions regarding the nature of hypothetical survival of death, which du Prel tried to show was personal, while von Hartmann, in the vein of Schopenhauer, granted survival in an abstract form only, as a merging of the mind into a monistic “world-substance”.

This period also marks a significant theoretical development in German psychical research. Du Prel, who had launched his career by publishing an astute defence of von Hartmann's philosophy of the unconscious against a raging critic of von Hartmann's (du Prel, 1872), eventually took sides against his former ally with the Russian Alexander Aksakoff (1832–1903), a proponent of the survival hypothesis and founder of the first German psychical research journal, *Psychische Studien*.⁵ In response to von Hartmann's *Der Spiritismus* (von Hartmann, 1885), Aksakoff published two volumes containing counter-arguments to von Hartmann's theory of hallucinations as applied to physical mediumship (Aksakow, 1890).⁶ When von Hartmann issued a reply to Aksakoff (von Hartmann, 1891), du Prel took over to counter his arguments (du Prel, 1891b, 1893), thus widening the chasm between von Hartmann and himself.

Du Prel also became known for his commented edition of Kant's *Vorlesungen über Psychologie* (*Lectures on Psychology*, Kant, 1821/1889), an obscure collection of post-critical lecture notes first published 17 years after Kant's death. Through his new edition of the *Vorlesungen*, du Prel hoped to correct the widely promulgated image of Kant as a critic of occultism in general and of Swedenborg in particular, arguing that Kant's *Träume eines Geistersehers* (*Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant, 1766) had been misrepresented as a mere parody on Swedenborg, whereas the *Vorlesungen* contains significant passages suggesting that Kant shares crucial insights on the nature of mind with both Swedenborg and du Prel.

After publishing more books on psychical research (e.g., du Prel, 1888, 1890–91, 1894–95, 1899) and a “hypnotic-spiritistic” novel (du Prel, 1891a), Carl du Prel died on 5 August 1899 in Heiligkreuz in Tyrol. He was survived by his children, Hildegard and Gerhard, and his wife Albertine, who later edited a volume containing several of his articles that had not previously been published in book form (du Prel, 1911). Biographical research on du Prel became considerably hampered by the complete destruction of his estate during the Second World War. The most comprehensive biography and bibliography of du Prel currently available is Tomas Kaiser's recent Ph.D. thesis (Kaiser, 2008), which also compiles a number of previously unpublished letters.

Du Prel's “Monistic” Model of Mind

At the heart of du Prel's philosophical-psychological system lies the concern that approaches which exclusively study everyday waking consciousness not only miss important potential insights for philosophy and scientific psychology, but yield false premises about the nature of mind. As a philosopher, du Prel argues that materialist, Cartesian, and idealist positions are mistaken because they are based on the phenomenology and epistemology of waking consciousness only and thus fail to take into account the enormous implications of the unconscious aspects of the mind. While applauding von Hartmann's approach, which seeks to remedy this ailment, he criticises his pantheistic system for presupposing that the “world-substance” is directly at work in individual organisms, whereas du

Prel proposes an intermediating or underlying and co-ordinating link between the physical domain and von Hartmann's "Unconscious" (which is similar in many respects to Schopenhauer's "World Will"). This link du Prel calls the *transcendental subject*.

According to du Prel, the transcendental subject is the actual metaphysical individual, of which the everyday waking personality or self-consciousness is but a pragmatic phenomenological excerpt and product of biological evolution. Hence, the transcendental subject is only imperfectly illumined by self-consciousness, but is predicted to gradually emerge into the sphere of the empirical self of man in the course of evolution. The perceptual dividing line, or epistemological threshold, that is shifting in the course of biological evolution and which determines the degree and scope of sensual perception is equated with G. T. Fechner's "psychophysical threshold". Du Prel suggests that a shift of the threshold can already be observed and experimentally induced, for example, in somnambulism and hypnotism. The transcendental subject, of which consciousness is an activity, is the formative agent underlying anatomical and physiological processes. It is therefore both the thinking and organising principle or soul in man. Thus, du Prel proposes that the physical and mental alike can be derived from the transcendental subject as a common underlying monistic principle (du Prel, 1888).

Concerning scientific psychology, du Prel argues that it needs to study the properties of the psyche (aka the transcendental subject) in altered states of consciousness rather than the ordinary waking self alone. This approach is in contrast with the experimental psychology of Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), which explicitly dismisses altered states of consciousness as a subject of psychological investigation. As areas of research du Prel suggests the everyday phenomena of dreams, spontaneous somnambulism, the appreciation of time in sleep, and artistic creativity. More exotic phenomena revealing the existence of the transcendental subject include hypnotism, "magnetic" somnambulism (an altered state of consciousness induced by mesmeric passes, which du Prel holds is different from hypnotic trance), instances of exceptional memory, but also psychopathological phenomena, particularly hysteria and autoscopy. Finally, du Prel stresses the scientific importance of the study of documented anomalies such as temporary lucidity in the dying (including alleged spontaneous remission of mental health in psychiatric patients despite severe symptoms and even organic causes), apparitions (especially of the living), extra-sensory perception, xenoglossy, and physical mediumship. He seeks to establish the organising function of the soul through the study of "phantom limbs", spontaneous and hypnotically induced vasomotor and other physiological effects, maternal impressions, materialisations, and related phenomena that seem to presuppose physiologically efficacious conscious and unconscious volition and intrinsic knowledge of the organism and its functions by its supposed producer, the transcendental subject.

Du Prel's chief concern, however, is to show that human consciousness is capable of surviving bodily death. Echoing Immanuel Kant, who held that the

existence of God and the afterlife need to be postulated since they serve as powerful moral regulatives, du Prel suggests that a belief in survival is a necessary condition for altruistic motivation: “It could be demonstrated easily that all social diseases are associated, at their deepest roots, with a generation’s view on death. . . . In order to be good, which may be an inbred trait, the belief in immortality might be dispensable, but it is indispensable in order to become better” (du Prel 1888: 309), and he holds that “it is for morality’s sake that the belief in immortality appears desirable in the first place” (du Prel, 1899/1901: 63).⁸ He argues that since the (preexisting) transcendental subject is the producer of the body, it follows that it will be unaffected by physical death. Postmortem survival is conceived of as an epistemological rather than an ontological transformation, for “the beyond is the here and now, [only] perceived differently” (du Prel, 1899/1901: 73).⁹ A study of certain functions of the human psyche (aka transcendental subject) suggests that they are adapted to disembodied existence, just “as the embryonal formation of the retina has us infer to a life in the world in which the sun shines” (du Prel, 1888: 306), which is why du Prel, who is sceptical regarding the teachings of spiritualism and the identity claims of mediumistic communicators, proposes that “spiritism is quite dispensable for the problem of immortality; the analysis of the living is sufficient for that purpose” (du Prel, 1888: 320). However, du Prel realises that an experimental approach towards survival may aid the acceptance of survival as a scientific hypothesis. Hence he proposes to use postmortem suggestions in dying volunteers in order to induce—and thus predict—objective postmortem materialisation and activities at a given place and time (du Prel, 1894), a suggestion which understandably provoked ethical concerns (e.g., Hübbe-Schleiden, 1894).

Reception and Criticisms Within and Outside Germany

Readers familiar with the work of Frederic W. H. Myers (1843–1901) will have noted the striking similarities between du Prel’s “transcendental subject” and Myers’s “subliminal Self” (e.g., Myers, 1892, 1903). Both authors embrace an evolutionary framework for the interpretation of certain properties of the human psyche, such as creativity or extra-sensory perception, which they conceive of as latently preexisting to their biological conditions of expression. The “transcendental subject” (du Prel) and the “subliminal Self” (Myers), which both authors anticipate to gradually emerge into the empirical self in the course of biological evolution, are conceived of as the psychical entity underlying our everyday, empirical consciousness and as the bearer of psychic and psychological functions (du Prel, 1885: 61; Myers, 1889: 190). The perceptual dividing line, or epistemological threshold, that is shifting in the course of evolution and which determines the degree or scope of sensual perception is conceived of as a “membrane” by Myers and is equated with G. T. Fechner’s “psychophysical threshold” by du Prel (however, Myers sometimes also uses the term “psychophysical threshold”, e.g., Myers, 1891: 83). Moreover, in regard to the problem of survival, it is obvious that

du Prel also followed what Alan Gauld (2007) calls a “broad canvas” approach: i.e., rather than through a discussion of the evidence directly suggestive of survival alone, both he and Myers developed a view of human personality whose capacity of postmortem survival has a certain *a priori* plausibility. Since du Prel did not read English (Kaiser, 2008) and published his key ideas prior to Myers (who did read German), it is likely that the hypothesised influence was largely unidirectional.¹⁰

Initially, du Prel’s work was received with great enthusiasm by most fellow German psychical researchers as well as by his British colleagues at the SPR, but criticisms were raised increasingly. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, for example, parted ways with his former teacher because he deemed him to be too uncritical and lacking a sufficiently scientific attitude (Schrenck-Notzing, 1932). Du Prel’s somewhat arbitrary terminology did not aid his search for academic recognition either. For instance, he used the word “mystic” as an umbrella term to describe phenomena and processes that bear no relation to actual mystical experience, and which might have been better referred to as “psychic”, or “supernormal”. In fact, *Sphinx* editor Hübbe-Schleiden once had to apologise to readers, some of whom had written letters of complaint about du Prel’s indiscriminative use of the “M word” (Hübbe-Schleiden, 1889).

Occasionally, du Prel conducted or participated in experiments, investigating physical mediums like the German Elisabeth Tambke in Munich (du Prel, 1894/1916), the Briton William Eglinton in Vienna (du Prel, 1886), and together with Charles Richet, Cesare Lombroso and others, the Italian Eusapia Palladino in Milan (du Prel, 1892, 1893). However, his philosophical speculations were based mainly on outdated and rather anecdotal evidence, such as the phenomena reported (but poorly documented) by adherents and practitioners of mesmerism. This was a major criticism raised by Oxford philosopher Ferdinand Schiller (1894) and William James (1894), both of whom wondered why du Prel did not focus on contemporary data, particularly the empirical material collected and presented by the SPR. In part, the answer is of course that du Prel, who was fluent in French but did not know English, could not cite literature he was unable to read.

Regarding the attribute “monistic”, as applied by du Prel to his philosophical system, it has to be argued that his theory can pass as a psychological monism at best, as it presupposes at least a phenomenological mind-body dualism and is rather vague about the ontology of the “astral body”, a concept which du Prel increasingly comes to embrace, and about whose nature and relationship to the transcendental subject he is somewhat inconsistent (compare, e.g., du Prel, 1888 and 1899).

Conclusion

Despite these criticisms Carl du Prel has to be remembered as an important author whose work has stimulated several eminent intellectual figures and which

may inspire fascinating avenues of research even today. As a philosopher, he raised the importance of the individual unconscious for the philosophy of mind, which up to the present day usually ignores the enormous implications of unconscious and dissociative processes for a scientific theory of the mental. Moral philosophy can receive valuable stimulation from du Prel's arguments on the importance of the scientific evidence for survival as a potential motivating factor for altruistic behaviour. For Kant scholars, his edition of Kant's *Vorlesungen* remains a hitherto largely unexplored field of historical and conceptual research. The increasing interest in Myers's subliminal psychology in a historical context (e.g., Crabtree, 1993; Ellenberger, 1970; Koutstaal, 1992) and the recent critical appreciation of his work in the light of current data (Kelly et al., 2007) justifies the question regarding the striking similarities in Myers's and du Prel's concepts. From a perspective of the history of science, the case of Carl du Prel is an instructive example for the importance of psychical research and some of its proponents in the making of late 19th century psychology (see also Kohls & Sommer, 2006). Finally, du Prel's thoughts on the importance of alleged apparitions of the living, the phenomenology of autoscopy, and reported cases of lucidity and anomalous restoration of normal mental functioning in mentally impaired patients shortly before death, and other now forgotten phenomena, might stimulate a new interest in potentially still-promising areas of research for neuroscience, psychology and anomalistics.

Notes

- ¹ From A. A. Brill's 1913 translation of Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), published by Macmillan (New York). All other translations from the German are mine.
- ² Biographical details are mainly taken from Kiesewetter (1891), Tischner (1960), and Kaiser (2008).
- ³ *In absentia* means that a Ph.D. is being awarded based on the submission of a thesis only, with the candidate not being required to be enrolled at the awarding university.
- ⁴ *Die Philosophie der Mystik* was the only work of du Prel to appear in an English edition and was translated in two volumes by Frederic Myers's friend C. C. Massey, published in 1889 by Redway (London).
- ⁵ The journal was launched by Aksakoff in 1874 and continued as *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie* from 1926 to 1934. Aksakoff's name was spelled inconsistently in the German publications, "Aksákow" being the most common version.
- ⁶ In *Animismus und Spiritismus*, which was compiled from a series of articles previously published in *Psychische Studien*, Aksakoff proposes three terms describing in his view distinctive categories of phenomena observed in psychical research: *Personismus* ("personism", pertaining to phenomena appearing as if caused by discarnate spirits involving *no* supernormal information or effect, merely stemming from a medium's or percipient's intra-personal unconscious dramatization, as, for example, in most instances of automatic writing); *Animismus* ("animism", describing phenomena appearing as if caused by discarnate spirits, but emerging from unconscious dramatization plus involving psi among the living); and *Spiritismus* ("spiritism", delineating phenomena

appearing as if caused by discarnate spirits and suggesting actual postmortem authorship). Aksakoff's tripartite account of psychic phenomena has been used in German language parapsychology up to recent times (see, e.g., Mulacz, 1976).

⁷ In contrast to out-of-body experiences, autoscopic experiences present the focus of perception as remaining "in" the body, while an external double of oneself is hallucinated.

⁸ Du Prel fails to distinguish between survival, which is not necessarily eternal, and immortality proper.

⁹ This implies that du Prel ascribes to the brain the role of an organ limiting rather than producing consciousness.

¹⁰ I am currently investigating the potential influence of du Prel on Frederic Myers.

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