

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Anomalous Phenomena and the Scientific Mind: Some Insights from “Psychologist” Louis Favre (1868–1938?)

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Abstract—At the turn of twentieth century, in France, psychical research wasn't fully separate from psychology. The Institut Général Psychologique (IGP) was created in 1900 as an attempt to integrate the scientific study of anomalous phenomena into modern science. One forgotten actor in this society was “psychologist” Louis Favre, a polymath researcher with a passion for scientific methodology and the “scientific mind.” He developed a pioneering experiment on the influence of magnetic passes on plants and microbes, with a control group. He also participated in IGP's 3-year study of physical medium Eusapia Palladino, from which he made general suggestions for the study of anomalous phenomena. Later in life he classified this study as at the forefront of scientific dynamics, naming this field “Anomalialogy of phenomena.” According to him, this field is highly compatible with the scientific method, and may even be the best place to train our “scientific mind.”

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anomalistics—Institut Général Psychologique (IGP)

In France, the competition between psychology and parapsychology is now well documented by historians (Plas 2000, Méheust 1999, Brower 2010, Lachapelle 2011, Evrard 2016a). But psychology and parapsychology first shared the same institutions, journals, and research objects. Historian Andreas Sommer (2013:11) noted that “the intersection between ‘official’ nascent modern psychology and psychical research was, albeit relatively short-lived, nowhere as overt as in France.” But it's only through integrative or symmetric work that we can understand the historical significance of this “strong albeit clandestine historical continuity” (Sommer 2013:12) between orthodox and heterodox psychology (Evrard 2016b).

One attempt to build such continuity was one of the first formulations

of what we now call *anomalistics*, as an epistemological posture that generalizes the scientific approach to border-areas.¹ Within the framework of psychical research in early twentieth-century France, at the Institut Général Psychologique (IGP), the psychologist Louis Favre tried to identify the place of “parapsychology” in the classification of sciences and to justify the importance of the study of *anomalous phenomena* for all people with a “scientific mind.”

The Institut Général Psychologique

During the Fourth International Congress of Psychology in Paris in 1900, the psychologist Théodule Ribot announced the launching of the *Institut Psychique International*, soon renamed *Institut Général Psychologique* (IGP). Physician and psychologist Pierre Janet (1859–1947) and physiologist Charles Richet (1850–1935) were to be the two heads of this new scholarly society which was funded by a young Russian prince, Serge Youriévitich (1876–1969), who interpreted some of his experiences as paranormal and wished them to be studied scientifically (Youriévitich 1944). Spiritualist and religious interpretations of these phenomena were shelved to make way for a self-proclaimed more positivist and empirical approach: psychical research (Lachapelle 2011).

The IGP received a lot of support from elite scientists and soon became the major private society studying the mind (Brower 2010:47–74). But the mission of this institute was soon “rectified” by Janet—according to historian Régine Plas (2000:148)—to become more “psychological.” Evidence of that is the immediate replacement of the epithet “psychical” with “psychological” in the name of the organization and its bulletin, during the launch, leaving the impression of a diplomatic mess.

Membership in the IGP was diversified. Psychologists were in the minority (Plas 2012:99) among physicists, biologists, physicians, and psychical researchers, many of them members of respectable Academies and occupying prestigious positions in the academic system. The historian Matthew Brady Brower (2010:59) saw in them the ideological and institutional heirs of Claude Bernard, Louis Pasteur, and Jean-Martin Charcot. After one and a half years of activity, the IGP had more than 400 members.

Janet said that he didn’t recognize himself in this approach of giving too much space to popular expectations of the empirical and theoretical study of the paranormal that went beyond his psychopathological scope (Plas 2012). According to him, so-called paranormal phenomena revealed subconscious activities requiring clinical management, rather than encouraging a spiritist delusion (Le Maléfan 1993). Quickly, he would subtly divert some resources

from the IGP to create, first within it, a *Société de Psychologie*, which would become independent in 1904 and later became the French Society of Psychology. This *Société de Psychologie* was autonomous, with its own membership limited to 40 psychologists (without any foreign or psychical researchers), and a more hierarchical functioning.

The paradoxes of the birth of the IGP were criticized by proponents of psychical research (De Vesme 1901): Several issued a call for the creation of a genuine society for psychical research (Sage 1904, Geley 1905). But the IGP nevertheless conducted a masterly study of the medium Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918) among several other clever studies (Courtier 1908; on Palladino see Alvarado 1993). It was done through a subdivision of the IGP, the *Groupe d'étude des phénomènes psychiques* (GEPP). We can see that parapsychology was integrated as one of the specialties of this institute, in the larger undertaking of understanding the nature of mind and its role in nature, adjacent to the study of mind in animals, social groups, criminals, etc.

Introducing Louis Favre

One of the main researchers of the GEPP was Louis Favre (1868–1938?), an agricultural engineer, who was professor of experimental methods at the School of Psychology.² Without clinical training, he was part of a heterogeneous group of scholars with an enthusiast interest in psychology, before the professionalization of the discipline in France (Carroy, Ohayon, & Plas 2006). He had published several treatises on scientific methodology (Favre 1898, 1900, 1903, 1904b) and an application of that methodology on the “things of everyday life” (Favre 1899) which was confined almost exclusively to demonstrate, through logic and psychology, the innocence of Alfred Dreyfus! (In these publications, he had already highlighted the problem of prejudice and categorical statements.) Favre also had a degree in science, one in law (which made him a lawyer at the Court of Appeal of Paris), and was once a president of the *Société des gens de science* (Society of Men of Science). He spent time in the Laboratory of Experimental Phonetics at the College de France where he worked on diction; and inaugurated in 1898–1899 a free course on the “experimental method” at the Sorbonne. He participated in the First Congress of the “physiological psychology” section of the French Association for the Advancement of Science, in July, 1914.

In the Bulletin of the IGP, his publications shed light on many aspects of research and epistemological reflections current at the IGP. Favre’s obsession was methodology. This obsession was such that his colleagues were forced to cut short his interventions, so that he was known as the professor of the experimental method! When he published his pioneering experiments on the influence of magnetic passes on microbes (Favre 1905),

only one paragraph lost in the middle of the presentation described (loosely) the results! Yet some of his works deserve some attention. Psychical research or “Metapsychics” (as Richet coined it in 1905) fascinated him because of the methodological and epistemological challenges it poses (Favre 1925).

Experimental and Conceptual Studies of Anomalous Phenomena

Favre therefore began with a study of magnetic passes in 1903. He innovated by testing firstly their effect on plant seeds and secondly on microbes because their control is easier. Not using human or animal targets allowed him to avoid any effect of suggestion. He introduced a control group of microbes from the same strain and left them in identical experimental conditions, except for magnetic passes. Differential effects were measured (Favre 1904a). He first presented this work at the IGP, then at the 5th International Congress of Psychology in Rome in 1905 (Favre 1906). The results were encouraging but not completely convincing due to biases he himself found. However, his methodology would be perfected in later studies of direct mental interactions of living systems (DMILS) (Schmidt 2012).

In 1905 the study of the medium Eusapia Palladino began, in which he participated assiduously. In the group of renowned scholars, he took the floor during the final discussion (see Courtier 1908:547–578), providing some ideas that he later deployed in several communications:

- One idea is that psychical researchers should express their séance observations as percentages, that is to say in degree of plausibility (Favre 1910a). This should reflect variability in observations, opportunities, and abilities, thereby improving discussions.
- On several occasions, Eusapia produced phenomena after a meeting was over. Controllers slackened their attention and the light was relit, and suddenly the long-awaited phenomena appeared. Obviously, the relaxation of controls was canceling the interest of these phenomena. Favre, pushing the logic to its extreme, therefore suggested feigning adjournment of the experiment, turning on the light, and keeping close watch on the medium (Favre 1910b). With the light, the controls are better and the elusiveness of the phenomena is thwarted.

Favre understood that the difficulty in such studies is to obtain an optimal balance between production and control. “Production” defines all the conditions that allow the psychic to produce phenomena (darkness, songs, trance, etc.); “Control” refers to all the conditions that establish their scientific value (brightness, measuring devices, fraud controls, etc.). It is rare that the two meet easily; and that’s why psychical researchers cultivate the

delicate art of maximizing both production and control. They wait patiently, establish a trusting relationship, encourage the subject to work under the conditions that are most comfortable to him. Then they add controls, helping the subject to increasingly accept stringent constraints, without breaking the trust bond and other production-conducive factors. Psychology professor and psychical researcher Théodore Flournoy explained the interest of such a methodology:

For phenomena which are still so mysterious, with a very complex and delicate determinism, one should start by patiently observing their spontaneous production, before venturing to experiment, that is to say, to impose certain conditions. And since their main factor is in any case a human being, the medium, whose psychology and physiology we know so little, it is above all [important] not to rush him, but rather to surround him with compliance and respect, to show him and inspire in him the most confidence, to even enter into his views and those of the "Spirits" he is supposed to be the instrument for, by temporarily adopting his perspective; in short, one has to encourage him by treating him humanely and sympathetically, instead of running the useless risk of paralyzing him through contradictions or by immediately subjecting him to control processes which he does not feel the need for and which seem purely vexatious to him. It will be soon enough when his faculties will bloom freely, and that phenomena have begun to deploy, to bring him gradually, by persuasion and by gradual trials, to operate in conditions which are better and increasingly conform with the stringent requirements of the experimental method. (Flournoy 1911:371)

The logic of such an approach is strongly advocated by Favre (1912a:1): "To control facts, first you need to have some. This is why it's essential—here as in any other scientific field—to take care not only of the controls, but also (contrary to what too many psychical researchers do) of the production." This special methodology, between psychology and physics, is at the heart of discussions between psychical researchers and their opponents. Psychical researchers would inevitably blame the skeptics as they are not looking enough at meeting all the conditions favorable to production; while those skeptics, in a dialogue of the deaf, would swear only by the quality of controls.

Favre found that the progression to maximum control was not obvious, for a good reason: Control devices were sometimes disturbed by anomalous phenomena! Several failures and destructions were observed during Palladino's study and, very often she announced ahead of time her enmity toward the targeted device (Favre 1910c). But if the best means of control are rejected by the medium or rendered unusable, this affects the overall quality of results.

To solve this problem, Favre offered a psychologically based solution (Favre 1910b, 1912b). One must know the psychology of the medium to locate objects and devices that are sympathetic or unsympathetic to him. Then, using ruse, one might associate pleasant and unpleasant control devices, so as to develop recursive control possibilities. Knowledge of the medium should be used to provide attractive and fun targets, like the flour that could be thrown in the face of the experimenters (!). Or a wax doll which would be placed on the light switch, so that its telekinetic displacement immediately actuates a reinforcement of the control. Using other similar ideas, Favre behaved as an engineer convinced that every problem has a logical solution, without suspecting that attempts to outwit the subjects will lead *ad infinitum* to new tricks from them, while damaging confidence in the relationship.

Favre also offers other simple devices to establish controls with minimal interference in the production of mediumistic phenomena. For example, the light should not be directed directly on the medium but reach him by reflection. If, nonetheless, the experiment could not be conducted in the light, bright marks in the form of phosphorescent strips could be placed on what is likely to move: the medium, objects, and experimenters. Finally, to remove more doubt about the distance between the subject and target objects, a fixative device called “distancer” could help maintain and measure that distance.

Favre concluded that, according to this dialectic of production and control, it would be wrong to dismiss a phenomenon that disappeared when you changed the conditions of the experiment, usually to more effectively trap the genuine phenomenon or its fraudulent avatar: “When an attempted control seems contrary to production (which is rather common), it is up to the experimenter to find an equivalent that does not eliminate the phenomena” (Favre 1910c:23).

Favre’s legacy seems to lie more on the conceptual side, as we found few details about his involvement in other experimental studies of mediumship or other paranormal phenomena. Apparently, Favre hadn’t had the opportunity to implement all his ideas as part of IGP’s work. However, he did discuss the study of metapsychics itself, its methodology, and its place in the classification of sciences.

The Place of Metapsychics in the Classification of Sciences

By stepping back, Favre has defined psychic phenomena as anomalies or paradoxes. They are abnormal, irregular, unusual, exceptional. (Here as elsewhere, Favre should have used the word “anomalous” referring to the “anomalies” instead of “abnormal,” but the French language is under the

influence of an etymological blockage that does not exist in the Anglo-Saxon languages.) These are monsters, but even monsters have their place in science. There is indeed a “teratology of beings” which studies, from biology, zoology, and soon genetics, all the anomalies of the animal and plant kingdoms, all exceptions to the rules. If this teratology had already been a science for a century when Favre evoked it, the “teratology of phenomena”—to which he equated metapsychics—“has not yet reached the scientific stage where it is already the teratology of beings” (Favre 1921:9).

This delay is detrimental because, as Favre said: “Where there is a paradox, there is a discovery to make.” Exceptions, anomalies, or exaggerations—whatever the field—put us on a path of discovery: “because they reveal or make sensitive the action of unknown factors, they facilitate the study that will explore these factors” (Favre 1909:6).

Then Favre tried to lay out the lineaments of this science in gestation, which led him to reject abusive names such as “psychic sciences,” “parapsychology,” or “metapsychism” (Favre 1921:13), because they were too soaked with interpretations. The outlines of this science are poorly established, everything remains to be done, he claimed. Thus he started from scratch. As he expressed at the 3rd International Congress of Psychical Research in Paris in 1927, the place of metapsychics should be as a branch of a more general science, the *Anomalialogy of phenomena*, that is to say, the study of anomalies, of all anomalies. One should not only be focused on the *supernormal*, in new and revolutionary phenomena, but also on the *infranormal* such as pathologies, illusions, frauds, etc., that can explain these strange phenomena. The “tactical” is to deal systematically with all the abnormal—whether supra- or infra-normal—so that no one can deprecate this approach (Favre 1928:284).

This science of anomalies, with such a neutral approach, perfectly fits into the normal scientific process and could garner more researchers:

To attract more and more researchers, it is necessary that this science cease to appear to them as an unscientific thing. Metapsychics is not (. . .) a study of the supernatural, but a study of the abnormal (. . .), of the *abnormal* [anomalous] *phenomena* (that is to say, of the *Anomalialogy of the phenomena*), and particularly of the abnormal [anomalous] phenomena which seem, rightly or wrongly, to depend on hidden intelligent forces. (Favre 1928:285; his italics)

More than an anomalistic psychology, as it is developing today, Favre caught a glimpse of an *anomalistic science* that embodies this eminently scientific function of the treatment of the unknown, of the brush clearing of border areas. This study, now called “anomalistics,” must retain its

subversive dynamic, its principle of innovation that leaves the door open to exceptions which should not be perceived only as nuisances. This is at the price that the study of anomalies can be integrated into the process of scientific discovery, despite the resistances and dogmatic trends of “normal science.”

On this ridge, Favre still clung more and more to this meta-knowledge of the scientific method. He pointed this out in the conclusion of his analysis, which is also a true metapsychical profession of faith:

In summary, we can say—in this house of Science [the 3rd Congress was at the Sorbonne]—that Metapsychics is a science, a classified science. And we can add that it is we the scientists, *because* or *when* we endeavor successfully to broaden and deepen the field of general science, adding to the knowledge of the normal (with which most men are satisfied) the knowledge of the abnormal—which, in nature, complements and enlightens the normal. We are the pioneers, the vanguard men. We are going toward the darkness, it is true; but it's to fight and destroy it, if possible. We want to bring the light there. We want to disoccult the occult, to naturalize the supernatural—or rather what some mistakenly take for the supernatural. We want to normalize the abnormal, recognizing and showing the links between the two forms, seemingly opposite, of natural phenomena.

To accomplish—without fear and without reproach—our beautiful task (certainly the most difficult of all the scientific tasks, because of the many causes of errors that can play there), we will charge ourselves to track and always more rigorously apply the rules of the experimental scientific Method. Thus Metapsychics will be scientific. It will be scientific or it will not be. (Favre 1928:285; his italics)

Metapsychics and the Scientific Mind

Favre was nevertheless aware that all researchers are not equipped in the same way to move toward these border studies. He based his argument on his studies of the “scientific mind,” which he defined as “all the features needed to advance science” (Favre 1909:9). This psychologization of the scientist resulted in the consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of:

- the affective order (such as “disinterested love of the truth”),
- the intellectual order (such as “critical thinking free of all authority” or “the spirit of invention”),
- and the order of the will or character (patience, boldness, prudence, tolerance, courage, modesty) (Favre 1909:9–13).

Not only did Favre anticipate the study of epistemic virtues (Kidd 2014), but he had already used metapsychics as their privileged vantage

ground. Research in heterodox areas seems relevant to test the strengths and shortcomings of available scientific methods from other orthodox fields. Moreover, among the good reasons to study psychical phenomena, he included the “excellent training” (Favre 1909:7) from confrontation with these areas for the training of the scientific mind. An exercise where, unfortunately, many fail:

He who acts as a scientific mind when he studies other objects, appears unscientific when addressing these difficult issues or this land where you have to walk alone, where the good guides and good examples that you can follow or imitate easily, are quite lacking. (Favre 1909:11)

Favre met there the observations later collected by Walter Franklin Prince (1930) and gathered in his book on *The Enchanted Boundary*. But rather than denouncing the excesses of rationalism, he made it an additional asset of metapsychics: “This study is the reagent of choice to detect and meter the scientific mind—our own and that of the individual with whom we speak or discuss” (Favre 1909:19). The way this field excites the passions, making many people partial and unscientific, supported his idea of a metapsychics as a “sensitive reagent.” This discipline would have this “touchstone” function by the yardstick of which we could re-evaluate the claims of the supposed holders of the scientific mind. Who truly combines curiosity and critical spirit, benevolence and rigor? According to Favre, very few of his contemporaries can consider themselves as such:

When we do the test or the assay, we find that people with enough scientific mind or a sufficient ‘title’ are rare. Many who have a head ‘full of knowledge’ are far from having a rightly shaped mind. (Favre 1909:8, with a reference to a famous quote of Montaigne)

Favre deconstructed the figure of the scientist because he noted repeatedly that people give their opinion on metapsychics without having studied it, something which is usually doomed from the outset in any other field. He gave several examples of conversations with scholars who opposed him with prejudices, “common sense,” authority arguments, peremptory affirmations, or a refusal to examine based on the conviction that the whole issue has already been adjudicated and resolved (Favre 1909:13–18). He observed that many established scientists failed to apply rigorous science in these areas because of personal, economic, or social prejudices. What is happening in this zone of turbulence may also reflect the psychological and social investment of *orthodoxy*, even when it is minimized through the rhetoric of openness, truthfulness, and disinterested and dispassionate scientific practice. His conclusion was unequivocal:

At the present time, the best area for scientific intolerance is that of psychic phenomena. The prouds who know everything can not tolerate that those who claim to know only what they have studied expressed a different opinion. (Favre 1909:27)

In the face of this, Favre could only ask, as a former lawyer, to “appeal” and get a “revision” of the scientific trial against metapsychics. He did it in the name of Science, of its Methodology, its Spirit, which are both his deep ideal, the heart of his profession, and the religion that the contemporary world allows him to preach.

Favre’s discourse is exemplary—even if we find a similar enthusiasm among several other members of the IGP—in that it shows, on the epistemological level, to what extent the supporters of metapsychics conformed to the scientific ideals of their time—which are not so different from ours. . . . We may oppose their disappointing results and methodological biases, but it’s difficult to take away their “right” will to do science. The *science of the mind* meets the *scientific mind*.

Conclusion

We have few clues about the reception of Favre’s works among his circle of colleagues. In the archives of the Institut Métapsychique International (IMI), we found offprints of his articles sent personally to Dr. Eugène Osty, director of the IMI from 1925 to 1938, but no correspondence. The IGP archives are still missing, making it difficult to fully understand his connections with other psychical researchers and contemporary scholars.

A contextual analysis brought us two hypotheses: firstly, Favre, partly because of his personality and partly because of his lack of high-level credentials, was a jobber in the midst of IGP scientific elites; secondly, his focus on general methodological and epistemological issues in psychical research was not the most central to the evidence-driven debate, but maybe it was—for that very reason—particularly ahead of its time and relevant to contemporary research. These two hypotheses may explain why Favre’s contributions were swallowed up in the history of metapsychics.

A key point in his work is his attempt to integrate the psychology and ecology of experimental subjects into experimental design, in an adequate balance with scientific constraints. This is still a major epistemological issue in all human sciences, and may especially distinguish standardized quantitative parapsychology following J. B. Rhine’s research and other more ecologically driven paradigms, such as metapsychics (Méheust 1999, Evrard 2016a). Another key point is his neutral approach to anomalistics, which brought the same level of interest to the study of psi and non-psi

processes. This orientation gives more legitimacy to a scholar's approach to paranormal phenomena, but its success depends on the ability of researchers themselves to tolerate the undecidability of their hypotheses. What might have happened if Pierre Janet had agreed to participate in the experimental study of Eusapia Palladino, despite and thanks to his critical attitude, as he had previously with the lucid somnambule Léonie Leboulanger (Le Maléfan 1993)? Favre showed us that the study of paranormal phenomena gives good examples of how a psychology of science and scientists may contribute to the understanding of conventional scientific practices (Feist & Gorman 2012, Kidd, 2014).

Notes

- ¹ A previous version of this article was published in German (Evrard 2015), thanks to Gerd Hövelmann, whom I also acknowledge for his authorization to publish this material again.
- ² The Paris School of Psychology opened its doors in 1884 and gathered, at the time of Favre, teachers such as Edgar Bérillon, Paul Magnin, Felix Regnault, Paul Farez, Caustier, Lépinay, Binet-Sanglé, and Felix Régamey. The teaching was public and was intended for physicians, students, and minds eager to know about scientific acquisitions in the fields of positivist psychology and sociology (see *Revue de l'hypnotisme Journal*, 20(7)(January 1906):193–194).

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