

Ernst August Dölle's Views on German Psychosomatics¹

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Abstract. The significance of *Ernst August Dölle's* contribution to the growth of German psychology, especially during the 20s and 30s, has already been widely appreciated. Oddly enough, however, hardly anyone outside the field of German psychosomatics has realized the important role *Dölle* has played as an encouraging and constructive critic of psychosomatic medicine; his ideas have been eagerly adopted by some of the best-known German psychoanalysts and specialists in psychosomatics. In the interests of psychosomatic medicine we warmly recommend taking up some of the lines of thought he developed in his later, largely unpublished, works and in the discussions he held during the last years of his life.

It may seem rather strange to you that I am giving a paper on one of the 2 chairmen of this symposium. Perhaps I should explain: just before our programme went to press, it became all too evident that the grand old man of psychosomatic medicine, our much honored *Ernst August Dölle*, would not be fit enough to take the chair at this session. The illness which forced him to retire to a bed in our university hospital is a chronic one, and this, coupled with his considerable age, prevented him from joining us at the Congress.

¹ This text is the fruit of a series of conversations which I held with *Ernst August Dölle* during the planning stages for the VIIth World Congress of the International College of Psychosomatic Medicine, Hamburg, July 17-22, 1983. It seems appropriate, therefore, to print the paper in the original discursive style in which it was delivered.

Actually this paper owes its whole existence to the fact that *Dölle* decided that the best hospital in the world, apart from the University hospital in Chicago, was our hospital in Hamburg, with the result that he had himself transferred here from his retreat in Bavaria. Until recently I must admit I had only come across *Dölle* in the literature, in particular in the volume issued to celebrate his 75th birthday 10 years ago, which was entitled *Dichotomy and duplicity, fundamentals of psychological perception*. Now at last I had a chance to meet him face to face, and I must admit that the numerous talks I shared with him in the University Hospital Hamburg-Eppendorf in recent weeks have proved some of the most rewarding and fascinating encounters I have ever had the privilege to enjoy. *Dölle's* views on the current state of psychosomatic

medicine were so stimulating that I was bold enough to suggest passing some of them on to you. He agreed, with the reservation that we should not make use of his diaries, which he is planning to publish, since diaries in general have a rather poor reputation at the moment. He much preferred the idea that I act as a really trustworthy go-between.

For those of you who are not acquainted with *Dölle*, let me briefly sketch some of the important landmarks in his life. *Dölle* was born in 1898 in Dinslaken in what is now Lower Saxony as the son of a clergyman, and grew up in a vicarage in Celle. He had 3 sisters (fig. 1–3).

After attending grammar school in Celle, Lower Saxony, and gaining a war-time leaving certificate, he joined the forces in 1915 as a balloon observer, and was seriously hurt in a crash. From 1920 onwards he studied psychology in Berlin under, amongst others, *Karl Köhler* and *Max Wertheimer*. In 1925 he took his doctorate with a dissertation on 'Gestalt theory and hearing noises'. In 1924 he became assistant to *Geyer*, a pupil of *Freud*, in Greifswald. In 1927 he gained his habilitation and was granted a professorship in Konstanz, where he lived and worked until his retirement in 1968.

Dölle's most fertile years were the 20s and 30s. His scientific work covers an astonishing range: hermeneutics as the 'logic' behind activity, the positivist debate, phenomenology, his theory on binaural rivalry, his works on the problem of values and the principle of duality from a materialistic standpoint, learning theory and the psychology of teaching, contributions to linguistics, to measuring probabilities, to new experimental techniques, all mark milestones in the development of German psychology [*Herrmann*, 1974].

So much to his life, which every reasonably informed German psychologist knows a little about. Only those who have had the luck to meet *Dölle* in person, however, realize that his true genius does not lie in his relatively rare though germinal publications, nor in the force of his arguments, his didactic and dialectic gifts, but above all in his overflowing personality which has won him the friendship of the most important minds of his day. On the other hand, there is no need to hush up the fact that *Dölle* had also made a lot of enemies with his refreshing bluntness.

As well as being a theorist of quality and a bold experimenter, *Dölle* has always been brimful of life and zest, warm-hearted, fond of a good wine; quite unlike those streamlined career fanatics one tends to find perching on professorial chairs nowadays, he is an inventive and critical man, rebellious and argumentative, inconvenient and with a heart of gold, incorruptible, witty, unpredictable, and very often flippant. No wonder he has made enemies of the Philistines and the mediocre, and has won the hearts of the great.

He did admit that whilst he has much enjoyed taking full advantage of the liberties a professorship offers, he took even more pleasure in being almost 85, as everyone assumed he was already senile and could no longer be held responsible for what he said. This meant that he did not have to worry at all about his utterances and could say whatever occurred to him, the privilege of fools.

It struck me that the critical and ironic aspects of his thinking had come increasingly to the fore in his old age. This could well partially explain why in the special birthday edition mentioned above, *Dölle* is described as having passed away long before his 75th birthday on May 8, 1972. Admittedly he did



Fig. 1. *Dölle's* birthplace in Dinslaken, Lower Saxony, FRG. This house does not exist any more. There is now a Burger King restaurant on the same site [by kind permission of the publishers, Hans Huber].

his best to make this a memorable date by spreading word of his own demise in the academic world in order to pull a colleague's leg.

As some of you probably know, encouraged by his friend *Arthur Jores*, *Dölle* accepted a teaching post at the Catholic university in Eichstätt in the Altmühltal (Old Mill Valley), Bavaria (fig. 4).

To be honest, I had often wondered why on earth a famous university man like *Dölle* – and an ardent opera fan – should consider retiring to the silent provinces, and why the son of a Protestant clergyman should want to teach at a Catholic institution. I put this to



Fig. 2. *Dölle's* family – before the birth of the youngest sister.

him rather cautiously, suggesting that perhaps the rumor that he was dead had something to do with the fact that Eichstätt in the Altmühltal, though doubtless one of the prettiest corners of Germany, was really rather behind the times. This upset him very much, and my doubts whether one could do any decent work in psychosomatics at a Catholic university threw him, in spite of his weakened state, into a fit of rage. He retorted that we should never forget that the Catholic Church is considerably older than psychosomatics and understands a whole lot more about human problems than all the psycho people in the world put together. In particu-



Fig. 3. Father's vicarage in Celle, Lower Saxony, FRG.



Fig. 4. The town of Eichstätt, in Old Mill Valley (Altmühltal), Bavaria, FRG.

lar, the Catholic Church really knows how psychological and social processes intermesh with one another, an aspect which, as we all know, tends to be given scant attention in our research projects. To illustrate his point he suggested I should cast an eye over the programme for our own World Congress, where most interest seems to be focussed on people who are in every sense of the word too thin.

This led us to the way German universities are run; he made some very cutting remarks about the lecturers there, their tendency to take the easy way out and their cowardice when confronted with new and unconventional ideas. He attributed this lack of originality, which was just as obvious in psychosomatics as everywhere also, to the fact that the Germans have lost any sense of identity since the Nazis turned them into moral outcasts and the best minds left for the New World. The result is that we seem to

have lost all hope of ever having a good idea of our own and leave all the good ideas to the Americans.

Naturally this has a crippling effect on any native talent. One of the symptoms was our readiness to give up using our own mother tongue, and with it any prospect of ever having an original thought of our own. He scoffed at our plan to hold this Congress in English and was quite certain that no good would come of it, prognosing a gloomy future. Half jokingly he added that he was sure his illness was a sign of his unconscious resistance to being forced to sacrifice the subtleties of his native tongue to alexithymia, in that it would have to be translated into another language. He did, however, add that this was not meant to imply any criticism of our gifted translator, Dr. *Jane Wiebel*.

On the other hand, *Dölle* has the greatest respect for his Catholic colleagues in Eich-

stätt, whose thinking and teaching can draw on a century-old tradition. Here, he remarked, he had for the first time in his life grasped the relevance of social norms, the role ideologies play, and the interrelationship between morality and aesthetics. Recently the concept of alexithymia had been occupying his mind. He thought it was a generally useful concept, and praised *Michael von Rad's* researches into it in Heidelberg; he was nevertheless sure that it had not yet been seen in its proper social context. Whilst alexithymia is often diagnosed in psychosomatically ill patients, many people either cannot or refuse to acknowledge that this is just a special form of a more general social disease. *Dölle* defines social alexithymia as a process whereby symbols and modes of expression lose their emotive power and subtlety so that expression and communication can only take place at a reduced and impoverished level. He sees this as a highly relevant social phenomenon, and to bring out what he meant by it he chose examples from three different fields.

Turning first to the aesthetic mode, he picked out two prominent and typical personalities who suffer from severe social alexithymia and are, in his characteristically blunt words, highly overrated. Both have become idols with the help of journalists posing as critics who themselves fit so perfectly into the pseudodemocratic dedifferentiated alexithymic mould that the poor misled public is bound to believe what they write.

The first of these unfortunates is the architect *Mies van der Rohe*. During a visit to Chicago some years ago *Dölle* realized that the man made an orgy of monotony and had in fact designed the dullest skyscrapers in the whole city of Chicago. This did not matter much in America, as there were plenty of

gifted nut-cases there to make up for it; the effect of reimporting this kind of German alexithymia back into the old country has, however, been quite devastating. Our architects, all ardent followers of this depersonalized style, have turned into little *Mies van der Rohes* themselves, and the awful results are all too plain to see in the style, or lack of it, in which the German cities have been rebuilt after the war, without a trace of individuality or imagination.

His other example is the contemporary German theater producer *Zadek*. The obtuse critics praised this prize victim of alexithymia to the skies, whilst any toddler could have told him that he was making a garbled mess of *Shakespeare's* finest works, sullied his lovely language, employed actors who could belch but did not know how to deliver a line, and, when nothing better occurred to him, reduced them to prostitutes by making them strip on stage.

This led him to discuss a trendy attitude in Central Europe which he thought served very well to illustrate the effects of social alexithymia. It was particularly prevalent in Germany, where good taste has never felt particularly at home. Currently it is fashionable to regard nakedness as something progressive, liberal and democratic, as something quite natural which only reactionaries could possibly object to. He thought we could learn a lot from this example, for instance that it is terribly easy to convert utter rubbish into a socially acceptable norm, provided there is some theory around to support it. The Germans have always been fatally susceptible to this kind of manipulation. He quoted something which the German writer *Hermann Peter Piwitt* once wrote: 'Morality is in a way like an air bubble in a sealed container full of water; however much you shake

it around, the air won't come out ... there is always something left which one "does not do", and if you don't do it you are morally streets ahead of the others' [Piwitt, 1982].

The women who work in peep shows, or the 3 million Germans who lie naked on the beach have never been allowed to realize that what they are doing is practising a diluted and rather silly form of prostitution, or, more precisely, a form of exhibitionist and voyeuristic promiscuity. This is the trivial, everyday form of social alexithymia which wipes away the vital distinction between private and public matters and breaks the fundamental laws governing intimate relationships. Intimacy is a prerequisite of social sensibility; when the most private matters are made public, the very idea of intimacy gets lost and with it the feelings and attitudes which only an intimate relationship can generate. The business interests and exploiters behind the media share the misguided public's view that moral laws in general, and in particular a sense of propriety or modesty, have become quite superfluous.

But man cannot rely on the integrity and rightness of his social instincts, or in other words on inborn moral principles. If one no longer supports the Church in its efforts to make up for these individual shortcomings, this implies that one is ready to hand over the whole moral basis of society to the money-makers who are greedy for profits and therefore bound to try to undermine the social laws. Denouncing our sense of modesty as reactionary and irrelevant was an excellent way of going about this. In this way our traditional, long-standing social taboos were gradually being replaced by their extremely destructive opposites.

Many wretched people, he went on, were oblivious to the way the media manipulated

their ideas, and quite honestly believed that they had gained a new sense of freedom. The truth was, however, that they had been tricked into sacrificing something very valuable for an ephemeral pleasure. They had forfeited a genuine feeling of intimacy, which is the source of the most precious human experiences, for the sake of a perfect all-over tan. The cultural implications of this trend have not yet been understood. What good reason, he enquired, can there be for someone to commit himself or herself to an exclusive and faithful relationship, the quintessential source of our sensibility, if his or her partner was prepared to reveal his or her genitals to any passerby? None, was his reply.

So far psychosomatic medicine has completely failed to grasp what this trend implies for the future of mankind. It is high time that we start looking at the way in which intimacy, exclusiveness, fidelity, respect for personal boundaries and our capacity to feel and express ourselves in a personal and subtle manner are all interdependent, and how all these fundamental social categories are guided and guaranteed by our sense of propriety or modesty. If we lose this sense, then we inevitably lose our ability to establish intact relationships, and the result is then a kind of social mindlessness reminiscent of the self-destructive tendencies the lemmings developed. If the laws of intimacy are broken, we cannot provide the next generation with the supportive, close-knit environment which is indispensable for healthy development. The number of people suffering from damage dating from earliest childhood would increase so dramatically that the problem of overpopulation would solve itself without the help of Pershing II and SS 20 rockets. In *Dölle's* view, psychosomatic medicine should acknowledge the vital role played by a sense

of modesty in influencing our capacity to respond to one another in a personal and differentiated manner, and realise that losing it is a symptom of a social malaise.

Yesterday, when I said good-bye to him, *Dölle* asked me to tell you that psychosomatic medicine should above all avoid succumbing to social taboos and ideologies. Nowadays everyone is talking about pollution, but there is a total taboo on discussing the effects inner pollution has on our mental health and our intimate relationships, on society in general and on the upbringing of our children, an inner pollution brought about by the belief that modesty, the human feeling which distinguishes between what is private and what is public, is unnecessary. Just as I was leaving his room, he called after me, wondering why none of the people involved in psychosomatics understood the secular relevance of this problem, and when I rather helplessly shrugged my shoulders, he snorted: 'You are nothing but a bunch of ignoramuses.' As I went down the hall he shouted after me that if I were to offend against the laws of privacy and reveal to you the nature

of his illness he would heap the most terrible curses upon my head. I must admit that such tastelessness simply had not occurred to me.

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