

**OBITUARY**

**Rémy Chauvin  
(1913–2009)**



Rémy (André Joseph) Chauvin was a French biologist and entomologist, Professor Emeritus at the University Paris V–Sorbonne. His brilliant scientific career led him to direct three different laboratories, successively: the Laboratory of biology of the bee at the National Institute of Agronomic Research (INRA) in Bures-sur-Yvette, from 1948 to 1964; the laboratory of psycho–physiology in Strasbourg, from 1964 to 1968; and the Experimental ethnology laboratory of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (University of Paris, Mithrasville), from 1969 on. He was an authority on the science of social insects and birds. Tributes from his colleagues praise his enthusiasm, his openness, and his dynamism, qualities that made him an exceptional research director (Arnold, 2010).

Author of more than 50 books (with translations in 11 languages including Japanese), he wrote on topics ranging from the academic textbook to the science fiction novel, to the popularization of science, sociology of science, and philosophical essays. Chauvin wrote at least 200 scientific publications and supervised Ph.D. candidates for more than 35 years.

*JSE* long-time readers may know that Rémy Chauvin was an early Council member of the SSE. “Scientific exploration” truly expresses the process that motivated his research in frontier areas. I will describe his important role in the development of parapsychology in France and his other adventures into unorthodox areas.

### Parapsychological Contributions

Chauvin discovered the books of J. B. Rhine about 1955. His scientific openness encouraged him to repeat the ESP experiments with Zener cards in order to “see for himself.” His experimental subjects were usually himself or his relatives, including many of his young family members. To improve his knowledge and his confidence in the methods of scientific parapsychology, he decided to do a summer internship at Rhine’s Parapsychology Laboratory in 1959. He thought he was the first Frenchman to go there, but Christiane Vasse, a teacher from Amiens, had been a visiting scholar in the summer of 1958 (Vasse & Vasse, 1958). Chauvin returned to the Rhine Center at the end of 1969 with his engineer student Pierre Janin. His friendship with Rhine was steadfast, and unwarranted criticism against him could put Chauvin into a huff (Lignon, 2010).

From 1962 on, Chauvin was involved with the Institut Métapsychique International (IMI), a French parapsychological foundation active since 1919. There he directed the committee on comparative parapsychology where he regularly presented his parapsychological work with animals. In 1973, following the death of philosopher Gabriel Marcel, Chauvin agreed to succeed him in the position of Honorary President of IMI, which he retained until his death. He gave courses on methodologies in parapsychology that were developed by IMI for the general public from 1974 to 1976. From 1975 to 1977 he was the first president of the Fédération des Organismes de Recherche en Parapsychologie et Psychotronique, which was an attempt to structure the field of French parapsychology.

On the experimental side, he invented a random generator based on the radioactive decay of uranium (Chauvin & Genthon, 1965, 1967, Chauvin, 1968a). He did several ESP experiments with cards (Chauvin, 1959, 1961, Chauvin & Darchen, 1963) and PK experiments with dice (Chauvin, 1964). With such work, he was the best representative in France of the scientific

parapsychology of Rhine. But he also made a very original contribution with the famous nutritionist Jean Mayer, which was recognized in 1970 with the McDougall Award, a distinction given by Duke University's Parapsychology Laboratory. By combining his knowledge of ethology with his interest in parapsychology (Chauvin, 1961–1962), he created a random device that administered electric shocks on one side or the other of a cage in which a mouse was placed. The question to be answered was, would the mouse position itself beforehand to avoid the shock more often than chance would allow? The test did not require the intervention of an experimenter during trials (Duval & Montredon, 1968a, 1968b, Chauvin, 1986, Montredon & Robinson, 1969). This protocol is consistent with behavioural models then in place, but without adherence to their ideologies. The fate of this experiment is surprising. Walter J. Levy, then director of the Institute of Parapsychology, successfully replicated the study. But he was found committing fraud in 1974. The device acquired a bad reputation and was no longer used (Chauvin, 2002). Chauvin published this work under the pseudonym of Pierre Duval. His bitterness at having to use a pseudonym was so strong that he authored, as Chauvin, an ironic preface distancing himself from the positions of "Pierre Duval", the alleged author of *Nos Pouvoirs Inconnus* (1963). His co-author, Jean Mayer, used the pseudonym Evelyne Montredon, which was the name of Chauvin's grandmother.

Chauvin has also contributed in a more indirect way to the development of parapsychology in France. He has advised and supported many students who wanted to work in parapsychology, such as Janin and René Peoc'h. When he learned that psychology students formed a group at the University of Paris X–Nanterre, a group that would become the Groupe d'Études et de Recherches en Parapsychologie (Evrard, 2010), he simply moved to a professorship of biology at that campus of the university. He remained there only one year because, after the social movement of May 1968, students started to publicly challenge their teachers. Chauvin, headstrong, had to give a course, although all the students in the auditorium turned their backs to him (Lignon, 2010).

From the mid-1970s on, Chauvin defended parapsychology publicly. He did this in the media, he wrote the preface to many books, and above all he wrote many popular books about parapsychology. After fully examining the case of Rhinean parapsychology and its critics (Duval, 1963), he encouraged readers to go beyond this paradigm (Chauvin, 1980a, translated into English in 1985; see Chauvin, 1985), and then focused on applications of psi (Chauvin, 1981). These books have had a significant impact as a trigger for the vocations of many researchers in the field. For all this activity, he was the first Frenchman to be awarded the Outstanding Career Award from the Parapsychological Association, in 2002.

### Contributions to Related Areas

Chauvin was more an anomalist than a parapsychologist: His curiosity was not limited to controlled laboratory phenomena, but extended to all those phenomena that we can study through science. With the development of the movement of “fantastic realism”, including the book *Le Matin des Magiciens* (Pauwels & Bergier, 1960) and the journal *Planète*, Chauvin became part of an invisible college of researchers, along with Jacques Vallée, Aimé Michel, Olivier Costa de Beauregard, and others. He participated in UFO studies (but he said he did not go beyond a literature review in his book *Le Retour des Magiciens*, Chauvin, 2002), in studies of mysterious history (Chauvin, 1980b), of instrumental transcommunication (Brune & Chauvin, 1993), and in a pioneering survey on highly gifted people (surdoués) (Chauvin, 1968b).

No idea was too extraordinary for him. However, his real motivation was to rebel against the dogmatic tendency of his contemporaries. He said that he started each day after having thrown away a misconception (Chauvin, 2002). Also, he strongly opposed scientific ideologies that acted as parasites to the practice of science itself, considering for example that the so-called Darwinians were neither Darwinians nor scientists because of their abuse of unverified or untestable hypotheses (Chauvin, 1997). He often said: “Scientism leaves the field open to charlatans” (Lignon, 2010). Science was for him the way to reveal the unknown behind appearances. A scientist embodying such a rigorous practice of subversion could only be an explorer, an anomalist.

This approach disturbed some of his fellow parapsychologists, who did not follow all of his arguments. When he supported the idea that communication with the Beyond was proven through instrumental transcommunication, he confessed that it was because of a weakness for needing proof, because although he was a scientist he had a deep faith in the Christian God. However, he expressed a naturalist compromise with this sentence: “If God and Satan exist, they use the laws of nature that I study” (Lignon, 2010). Intellectually free, modest, and a humanist, he became a standard bearer for half a century of exploratory science.

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