

# Pulsation



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*From Wilhem Reich to  
Neurodynamic Psychotherapy*

Seán Haldane

PARMENIDES 

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## INTRODUCTION

This book collects essays and notes written over a long period, between 1977 and 2013, as I returned in different contexts to this book's core subject, pulsation. The work of Wilhelm Reich has been essential in my study of pulsation, since he first made it definitive of life, and my initial training as a psychotherapist was in Reich's methods. My thinking since 1985 or so when I undertook a deliberate re-evaluation of Reich's work has been based in my own view of pulsation.

In another book, *Time / No Time*, I explore the paradox of time and timelessness in poetry and physics. I suggest that our sense of time in a timeless universe is intrinsic to our experience as pulsating organisms in a universe of pulse-waves. (Several pages in Chapter 3 of this book which discuss the distinction of 'unequal phase' pulsation from 'equal phase' pulse-waves are common to both books.) My theme is the everyday presence of pulsation as evidence of life in a universe which is mainly un-alive.

A focus on pulsation can, and I think should, guide any psychotherapy. But more specifically, with a neuropsychiatrist colleague José Ignacio Xavier I have in recent years formulated an approach to 'neurodynamic psychotherapy' such as was first proposed by the grandfather of neuropsychology, Alexander Luria, in 1925 but never realised. This is partly a pulsation therapy. It takes into account current 'affective neuroscience' as well as the work of Reich and his successors in 'orgone therapy', and our own work.

The neuropsychologist Jaak Panksepp in *Affective Neuroscience* and *The Archeology of the Emotions* has brought neuroscience forward from its original emphasis, by Luria and others, on the brain, to a science of the neural network of the whole body. We are not just brains on sticks. The neural network, and for that matter the 'volume transmission' throughout the body of what Candace Pert has called the 'molecules of the emotions', involve not only the Central Nervous System of voluntary action and control, but the Autonomic Nervous System of involuntary action and

reaction, in a dynamic system. Modern neuroscience is a science of the body as much as the brain. Neurodynamic Psychotherapy is inevitably 'body-oriented'. And since dynamics itself has in modern physics been established as intrinsically relational – that is a dynamics of interaction in the here and now rather than of historical cause and effect – Neurodynamic Psychotherapy is relational too.

I am sceptical about any model of psychotherapy in which one person is the therapist and the other the patient (or client, or customer). There are brilliant and sensitive psychotherapists, but they are rare, and still more rare are those among them who know how to work with pulsation and the 'character armour' (to use Reich's term) that impedes it. Since the 1980s when I wrote *Emotional First Aid* and *Couple Dynamics* I have favoured a Do It Yourself / DIY approach in which a person can be his or her own therapist, or people in couples can work therapeutically with each other. But this is difficult to put in practice without some guidance, and the human need remains to confide with a specialist (whether, as originally, a shaman or priest, or more recently a psychotherapist) when stuck in an emotional impasse or feeling unable to live fully. A 'supported DIY' therapy for healthy people with a clinical specialist in private practice is feasible. And at the level of public 'mental health' services, at least in the NHS in the UK, there is now a movement towards 'body-oriented psychotherapy' in groups and individually which includes what are in effect Reichian and neurodynamic methods. Unfortunately this knowledge is rare in physical medicine, where an understanding of pulsation and blocks to it may be vital across a wide range of chronic conditions – what Reich called the 'biopathies', meaning illnesses where the person's whole life has in a sense become ill, and biological pulsation is impeded.

Here is a 'thought experiment':

Imagine you are looking out onto a field. Two spherical objects come drifting down through the air and hover above the ground. UFOs? Cosmic jellyfish? They are identical in size and in colour.

The one on the left is repeatedly expanding in size then contracting by about a third, in a steady rhythm of equal phases: 10 seconds to expand, 10 seconds to contract.

The one on the right is also repeatedly expanding in size then contracting by about a third, in a steady rhythm of unequal phases: 5 seconds to expand, 10 seconds to contract.

Which one of them looks alive?

If you look at a baby or a cat sleeping, you can see the pulsation of the breathing as an unequal phase expansion and contraction – shorter in-breath and longer out-breath. If you see a jellyfish in an aquarium pulsating as it moves along, you can note the same unequal phase. It's right in front of you! And in you: just pause for a minute and pay attention to your breathing.

This book aims to place pulsation where it belongs, as definitive of life. Understanding our human pulsation has huge implications in understanding issues of health and illness, pleasure and pain, happiness and despair. But understanding how pulsation functions in the context of a non-pulsating universe, and how its presence distinguishes the living from the non-living, also has huge implications in understanding nature at large. I would like to think that this book belongs with what used to be called 'natural history'. It proposes a distinction between pulsation in the living, and 'pulse waves' in the non-living.

This book will discuss Reich's theory of 'life energy', which he called 'orgone energy' – insofar as it is related to pulsation – and offer reasons for rejecting it, while respecting possible evidence of biological and atmospheric 'fields' which suggests that even if the 'orgone' is not life energy, and not life itself, it describes what used to be called the 'aether' in physics and which may, after all, exist as the 'cosmic ocean' of the universe. I support Reich's theory of the function of the orgasm, but I believe this is better expressed in terms of pulsation than in terms of the discharge of 'life energy' or of mechanical tension – what Reich, unnervingly at least to me, called 'sex economy.' Reich thought of calling his body-oriented psychotherapy 'orgasm therapy', but backed off – understandably, since it implied that the therapist might be giving the patient an orgasm. But even in the anything-goes world of 21st century sexuality (so far), in which every variety of sexual activity is open to experiment and discussion, there is a curious lack of focus on orgasm itself. Could it be that what Reich defined as 'orgasm anxiety' still exists?

I am not a biologist, I am a naïve observer – with my own eyes, occasionally supplemented by microscopes or telescopes or binoculars. My observations of people in the context of psychotherapy or in neuropsychology clinics are less naïve – and perhaps not naïve enough, in that I have had to work within accepted clinical frameworks. I can offer no authoritative analysis in biochemistry or biophysics, although I can in psychology and neuroscience. Insofar as I am capable of thinking for myself, this is not rooted in any academic discipline, but in my personal experience.

In the first chapters of this book the distinction between equal phase oscillation (non-life) and unequal phase pulsation (life) is explored on the microscopic level of observations of protozoa, on the macroscopic level of the aurora borealis, and on the human and animal levels somewhere in between. Pulsation cannot be defined without a discussion of what is *not* pulsation – what I distinguish as ‘pulse-waves’ whether in solutions containing pulsating micro-organisms, in the atmosphere surrounding us pulsating humans, or the cosmic ocean.

In later chapters the book turns to human pulsation, especially as experienced or blocked in orgasm, and to neurodynamic psychotherapy. I set out a framework for this therapy, and provide instructions for do-it-yourself work, for individuals and couples.

*Note: I invite the reader to feel free to read the chapters of this book in any order. For readers who are interested mainly in neurodynamic psychotherapy, chapters 1, 3, 7 and 8 will be of most interest. For readers interested mainly in the biophysics of pulsation, then chapters 2 to 6 will be of most interest.*

However the biophysics and the neurodynamic psychotherapy are related, in that an exploration of pulsation is common to both. We are the fish, as it were, in the cosmic ocean. We are alive, our environment is not. But we need to know where, as well as how, we live.