BOOK REVIEWS


Yes, I know we are all very busy; but you are just going to have to find the time to read this one. If it is any consolation, you have my permission to skip the review. For, quite frankly, before this book, I find myself a bit like Salieri in the graced presence of a Mozart symphony — awe-struck and slightly green.

Beyond any mere programmatic or theoretic advance, the undeniable strength of Ecology of the Body is in both the scope and depth of the descriptive insights and applications that it provides. In a word, this book delivers that toward which all our theoretic advances advance. The book is comparable to Jung’s Psychological Types in scope, to D. Shapiro’s Neurotic Styles in the self-evident truth of its insight into the varieties of human experience, and to both in its potential significance.

Lyons’ scholarship is unusual in its dedicated probing into all the nooks and crannies of our culture, well beyond the more typical main living room of phenomenological and human science literature. Ranging from Sidney Greenstreet’s Mr. Gutman to Caravaggio’s Bacchus, from Galileo to the Lascaux cave-drawings, from Freud’s theory of development to the recent Masson-instigated flap over that theory, from subtle experiential distinctions in the way we live cultural artifacts (such as the instrument, tool, and machine, or home, sidewalk, and street) to our different bodily relation to our native as against a second language and the pedagogical implications of that difference, the descriptive account consistently demonstrates a density and multifaceted synthesis realized only through years of a singleminded concern and its catholic application.

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From this reviewer’s point of view, the primary context of the work is the veritable onslaught of major publications on the body in the past few years, all of which share a sympathy with a phenomenologically based notion of the lived body.¹ Lyons’ project is to find this body in a traditional area of personality psychology, the study of individual differences. In particular, the book is a successful attempt to so enliven the typological theory of William Sheldon, which was based, as you recall, on different
physical body components. At first glance the selection of such a protagonist appears dry if not necrophilous — why not let Sheldon lie in his resting place in our personality texts with the other early, minor global personality theorists?

However, in a number of ways the endeavor is daring and provocative. Research in individual differences has capitalized on and occasioned the development of several sophisticated psychometric methods, such as factor analysis. Yet here is Lyons' text, the product of a qualitative, phenomenological, and hermeneutic approach — with nary a whit of concern with the measurement of differences. Literature about individual differences has also often eagerly and directly attached itself to the contemporary field of behavioral genetics. More generally, it has been most comfortable with the reduction of the individual variations in behavior and personal style to their presumed physiological causal bases.

But, while Lyons is interested in a certain dependence of psychology on biology (of which more below), he will neither countenance nor concern himself with the assertion or establishment of any simple causal relation between physical body type and behavior. Rather, his response to this presumption exemplifies what I will argue is his own highly developed style in this text: different individuals typically find different sorts of relations between two entities, here between body and behavior. The attribution of a causal relation is itself a reflection of style. The ecto, whose style dominates scientific thought, finds a causal relation; while the endo finds a relation of belonging, as parts belong to a whole, and the meso finds a relation of coexistence in a joint and mutually reinforcing "effort" (pp. 13–17). The style and substance of Lyons' rejoinder here is critical to any reception of the book, as I have found that a query as to the particulars of a presumed causal nexus is almost the universal initial response to my admittedly somewhat cocktail party descriptions of it — from the psychologist's "what's his evidence for the causal relation?" to the more naive "how many inches must you pinch before you're an endo?"

However, the focus of Lyons' inquiry is an exploration of the more general proposition that any and all human activities and psychological processes vary across individuals and that that variation becomes intelligible through a categorical or qualitative explication. The body of the book shows that variation within the trichotomy first described by Sheldon. Why a holy trinity rather than a Levi-Straussian bipolarity or Jungian perfect quadrangle or Heideggerian four-fold? Lyons offers mostly his own "preference . . . to lean toward the idea of a 'natural' tendency in humans . . . to trichotomize" (p. xiv). He clearly refuses to stake a claim for any determinative derivation of the three styles based,