

Book Review

C.W.M. Whitty and O.L. Zangwill *Amnesia* 1977 (2nd ed.) 306 pp, £9.50

What is the relationship between the brain and the mind? If psychiatry and psychology are now studying the phenomena of re-birthing and primal therapy, on what bases should the accompanying retrieval of memory be conceptualized? For those who seek to find their explanations of human behaviour through the empirical research of what is called the scientific approach, this new edition of a classic book on amnesia is essential reading.

Although its editors modestly concede that there have been no major advances since their first edition in 1966, they now include a psychoanalytical viewpoint as evidence of their wish to integrate psychodynamic theories of memory loss with those of their own disciplines. For Whitty, Consultant Neurologist at the Radcliffe Infirmary, and Zangwill, Psychologist to the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, represent the traditional viewpoint that memory is largely dependent on biological cerebral organization, and that its breakdown is a consequence of physiological impairment or defects. These may be caused by organic disease, transient global attacks as in cerebrovascular conditions, traumatic amnesia as following accidents, temporal lobe-amnesia as in epilepsy, etc. There are good detailed and highly technical chapters describing these varied amnesic conditions, each of which has its own qualitatively different variations, so that it is difficult, as the psychopathologist Percy maintains in an opening chapter, to find an adequate universal umbrella causal explanation.

Thus Feldman's chapter on Freud's work on the psychic determinism of the repressed unconscious, which condenses or distorts memory to defend the ego, suggests that this theory has a place in the multifactorial approach. However, he makes the interesting point that Freud showed that the repressed memory is generally unusually well *preserved*, rather than impaired!

In this connection, those readers interested in the effects of ECT on the obliteration of memory should have their attention drawn to chapters six and seven which conclude that unilateral (non-dominant) ECT affects memory far less, and that "there is no good evidence that the acquisition of new habits or the execution of those acquired in the more remote past are significantly affected, even by a prolonged course of ECT."

It is Professor Gittins, the forensic psychologist, and Professor Hall Williams, the criminologist, who raise the most socially important issues for humanistic psychology in their study of the "egalitarian implications of mens rea", case-law definitions of automatism and involuntary behaviour, and the professional ambivalence with which debates about amnesia as a defense are conducted. In any individual defendant, is the amnesia organic, hysterical or feigned? How should judge and jury conceive of responsibility, whether in minor offences of shoplifting or driving, or in major crimes of murder and assault? Who

should sentence? The authors, like many other penal reformers, now query recent radical opinion that professional experts are 'safer sentencers' than the judiciary. For not only do experts, particularly psychiatrists, disagree about diagnoses and prognoses, but "doctors cannot be expected to weigh up the risks which society should be prepared to take, in the same way as judges". It is significant that in Conrad & Dinitiz *In Fear of Each Other*, the American 1977 Report on their Dangerous Offender Project (Lexington Books), the same conclusion is reached, principally because the professionals have, in practice, so disliked the sentencing responsibility which attached itself to their therapeutic function: this led to psychiatrists, in particular, developing an obscurantist language so that no criminal labelling could be therefrom exactly derived, rather than giving helpful leads to lawyers about safe criteria for establishing the limits of loss of memory and consequent responsibility. Thus we still do not know the answers which the sympathetic heart seeks in judging the relationship of the brain to the mind in the vital areas of personal and social civil liberties. We can never be sure whether the villain is the victim. It is, therefore, perhaps encouraging that this, amongst an increasing number of books re-examining the empirical bases of their subjects, show how much more we have to learn about the intricacies of each *individual* mind and brain, before we dare endanger society with 'scientific theories' or 'general solutions.

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