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The MIT Press

Book Review

THE NEUROLOGICAL SIDE OF NEUROPSYCHOLOGY

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1996 The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Book Review

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Too often, it seems that textbooks are designed to give the distinct impression to readers that all data covered are carved in stone and that none are held in question or controversy. This approach not only makes for decidedly dull reading, but it also contributes to the culturally accepted notion that science is in the business of hammering out “reality,” and that its practitioners hold the corner on that market. This is perhaps nowhere more blatant than in the health professions, where students are required to digest multitudes of sometimes disjointed and meaningless jargon parading as facts for the credibly noble purpose of making myriad and diverse medical decisions.

Yet it is within the medical profession that the vulnerability of the scientific fortress of reality is most naturally revealed—by the unique cases, the

counterexamples, and the damned-near miracles, not to mention the simple demands of subjective experience and the artful address to each individual patient as a person with his or her own thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and, for lack of a better term, spirit. Nowhere in the medical profession is the precarious juxtaposition of scientific fact and human experience more keenly witnessed than in the neurosciences, and nowhere in recent memory has a text so clearly laid out what is known in these areas with so much respectful attention to the limits of that knowledge than in Cytowic’s new look at neuropsychology from a neurologist’s point of view.

As a neurologist, Cytowic has a unique scope, reflecting the knowledge of a curious and careful scholar of philosophy as well as history, which contributes tremendously to the broad range of the volume. Perhaps the most striking display of this scope is his inclusion of the controversy of mind and its relation to the brain, the various models and metaphors of these and related histories. He shows astounding gumption in his one-two punch to the artificial intelligence debate, his arguments cutting through tired and tedious issues with clarity and strength. The one criticism here would be that those on the cutting edge of this debate were not always fully represented (e.g., Searle, Dennett, and Dreyfus), leaving those with some background in

the area the sense that the total picture has not been revealed, even though his angle is welcome and refreshing. The absence of big players was also noted elsewhere (e.g., Kosslyn’s seminal work on visual imagery and Caplan’s on aphasia and language disorders), which detracts somewhat from the power the book deserves.

Despite this shadow, the most impressive quality of Cytowic’s approach is his organization and thoroughness in topic coverage. The book is carefully outlined into understandable and meaningful categories, providing a superb reference perhaps as helpful as the index, which is at least adequate. The text is also quite extensive, including sections on obscure pathologies such as metamorphopsia and difficult aspects of experience such as subjective awareness. There are also full chapters on epilepsy and the disconnection syndromes. The language chapter raises several interesting questions and includes a fascinating section on the oft-neglected topic of gesture, although it does not cover as much linguistic territory as one might hope. The chapters on actual neuropsychological assessment are also not explored in much depth, but he has not misled us in acknowledging his neurological bent. This is, after all, a survey text, and an excellent addition to the literature, both as a teaching text and a resource.

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