PHYLOANALYSIS AND GENERAL SEMANTICS

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PHYLOANALYSIS, of which the late Dr. Trigant Burrow was the leading exponent, is a body of psychological theory dealing with the internal universe of behavior, the basic reactions that motivate men’s feelings, thoughts, and actions. Burrow held that it was humanity’s acquisition of language as a tool which caused men to deviate from the biological norm and led them into their present pathological condition of habitual projection and an exacerbated self-consciousness. Each individual jealously cherishes his own prejudices, his own moral values, as absolute; each looks upon himself as supreme and absolute. In this psychopathological state, the human species has lost its original unitary purpose and its organismic pattern of behavior. No longer reacting organismically, men react in terms of such symbols as ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ invariably judging each issue in the light of personal preferences and judgments. Organismically, the human race is one; symbolically, however, in terms of ‘I’ and ‘thou,’ ‘we’ and ‘they,’ we are separate. Reliance on the separative symbol has prevented man from responding instinctively as a unified organism. Instincts, displaced from within the organism as a whole, are confined within the cerebral segment. Thus feelings, which have their physiological correlates, are perverted.

This, briefly and baldly summarized, is the heart of the phyloanalytic doctrine. It is clear at the start that, though the terminology is somewhat different, it has much in common with general semantics. And yet in his latest work, The Neurosis of Man, published not long before his death, Trigant Burrow emphatically disassociated himself from the teachings of general semantics. In fact, he went out of his way to stress the shortcomings and errors of the semanticists in their preoccupation with words. The passage is worth quoting in full:

It is not the word, then, but the flesh that calls for indictment in the matter of man’s disorder of behaviour. The semanticists, I believe, have laid undue stress upon the ineptitude of the word. They have failed to see

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that it is the organism as a whole whose reaction is involved, whose func-
tion is misplaced. They have failed to see that it is man's total identity as a
phylum that has been dislocated as a result of the systematization of affects
lying back of the symbol. In the final analysis it is neither the 'weakness'
or the 'unwillingness' of this or that one's flesh or spirit that has got us
into trouble. The difficulty is phylophysiological. For the function of the
flesh or organism is now autopathic and divided within man as a species,
and the 'spirit' or the organism's outer mental and verbal expressions are
necessarily autopathic and divided also.

I would not make all this ado about the wide disparity between the
methods of General Semantics and Phylobiology, were not Korzybski so
determined to proselytize me on the ground that 'we are saying the same
thing.' Perhaps we are. But do our organisms feel the same thing? For I
hold that the problem with Korzybski, as with myself, is not our mental
reconcilability with one another. Rather it is the common recognition of
our common social neurosis, of a disorder of feeling common to man,
and of the irreconcilability of every individual's affective insistence upon
the uncommon nature of his particular 'I'-persona. The 'I'-persona with its
fallacies of motivation will continue to prevail until man—man as a species,
and not merely a few behaviour specialists—assumes the burden of his own
behaviour-problem.¹

Yet the very disclaimer, so earnestly set forth, only serves to deepen the sus-
picion that phylobiology and general semantics have much in common, certainly
in relation to the pathogenic disturbances introduced by the projection of sym-
bols. It is not likely that Trigant Burrow could have read Science and Sanity
carefully if he accuses general semantics of laying undue stress upon the inepti-
tude of the word. The whole point of general semantics is to disclose how the
organism-as-a-whole is involved in the use of language, and how affective dis-
turbances distort our deployment of the symbol. Throughout his career Korzybski
sought to wean men away from verbal thinking and feeling, from enslavement
to stereotypes, preconceptions, dogmas, abstractions that have been uprooted from
the earth of experience. His aim is to liberate human energy, to enable man as
a time-binder to achieve greater predictability and control over his environment
and his actions and to establish sanity in the management of his life. The pur-
pose of the techniques described in Science and Sanity is to lead the student to
apply them empirically to his own life on the non-verbal level.

No greater mistake can be made than to charge general semantics with being
obsessed with purely verbal formulations when its aim is to overcome the habit
of verbal 'knowing,' 'intellectualized' apprehension. The extensional method of
general semantics is non-verbal as well as verbal, empirical as well as theoretical.
A student may master the whole technical vocabulary of general semantics, use
it with seeming precision and effectiveness, and yet be profoundly 'ignorant' in
a psychophysical sense. It is the living reactions of the organism that must be
changed. Both Korzybski and Burrow recognize how much of a help language

has been in the evolution of mankind; they are at one, too, in pointing out what a heavy price has had to be paid for the use of the symbol and how it has recoiled disastrously upon its inventor. Though the two may differ in the conclusions they draw and the remedies they suggest, these differences should not blind us to the striking and substantial similarities, and it is the similarities as well as the differences that must be analyzed if we are to effect a fruitful rapprochement between the two disciplines.

Like Korzybski, Burrow maintains that man's disturbances in his organismic behavior are both physiological and phylic, and that they cannot be cured by theoretical or verbal means. The conditioning to which man has been subjected for many centuries has modified his neural function, his internal behavior. The biological core must be reached if the egocentrism and absolutism of the individual and collective psyche are to be overcome. For Burrow, what represents a consistent biological norm of behavior is the solidarity of the individual with the species. Therefore, the phylobiologist must get beneath the superficial symptoms, beneath the deceptive facade, the mask of sanity, of the social neurosis. The neurology of behavior disorders must be treated, not their verbal manifestations.

Still, if man's solidarity with the species was broken by the distorting intervention of the symbol, is it not helpful to study the symbol as a revealing symptom, one among many, of the disorders of neural behavior? There is no reason why these symptoms should not enter into the total picture of what Burrow calls 'the madness' of the community. At any rate, what is important, fundamentally, is not an intellectual adjustment but a transformation of consciousness and sensibility. It is the life of feeling that must be renovated. So far there is little that Burrow has advanced which is in serious conflict with general semantics. Burrow has no intention of underestimating the value of the symbol, which has contributed immeasurably to man's adjustment. What he demanded is that it should not be abused. Integration is to be achieved by the elimination not only of false reasoning but spurious methods of feeling.

As far back as 1927, Burrow, breaking away from the Freudian camp, attempted, in The Social Basis of Consciousness, to formulate a societal psychology which would apply to the organic needs of human life. In this organic psychology, the term 'organismic' is used to refer to the feelings and reactions common to the social body as a coherent, integral organism. We have come to call 'normal' our unconsciousness of our deepest organismic feelings. Having lost touch with our deepest feelings, we are driven by spurious passions—inner conflicts and compulsive drives—which break out periodically in collective seizures such as panics, depressions, political debacles, racial persecution, and war.

Burrow is extremely close to the work of the general semanticist when he points out that though men may think logically, there is no warrant that they
will act logically—a point which Korzybski has documented with a wealth of illustrative detail. Burrow maintains that our knowledge of the world is weighed down by pathetic fallacies and by the assumption that the self is a center psychically detached and independent. Our systems are self-made, not organismically arrived at; our absolute is personal and arbitrary. Our very observations are often superficial and biased. Only by avoiding conceptual constructions can we adequately apprehend reality. As he says:

... our world of 'actuality' is not more real than the world of phantasy, our day not less self-reflective and unconscious than our night, our waking not less apparitional than our sleep. For both alike are motivated by the arbitrary reflection that is the inverted reflection of the will-to-self.2

Consciousness is essentially a species of self-consciousness. Our presumably objective judgments rest upon a process of subjective misconception. On these grounds our entire civilization is neurotic, that is, unconscious. The neuroses are sociological in character. Much of what Burrow has to say in this volume, however provocative and iconoclastic, is speculative, full of empirically unsubstantiated statements. What, for example, is the societal consciousness of man? What is meant by saying that individuals are but 'corpuscles in a homogeneous, societal tissue'? Was there ever a coordinated one-mindedness of primordial man, a racial solidarity of man's consciousness?

In *The Biology of Human Conflict* (1937), Burrow again agitated for the supersession of the superficial, cerebrated, symbolic form of existence and the establishment of an organic, body-and-mind form of living. His conclusions were supposed to be based on laboratory experimentation of an unusual sort; the laboratory was not isolated from the social world nor did it confine itself to the individual patient; it included a group and relied on group analysis, in which the analyst was himself included. Burrow wanted subjective man to learn to appreciate objectively his own subjective reactions. The pages of this book are full of valuable observations and challenging ideas. For example, he plunges boldly into the field of semantics, indicating how impracticable is the established practice of knowing and discussing things in terms of their names. We are at the mercy of abstractions with a high affective content. Names like 'money,' 'Communism,' 'democracy,' 'Jews,' 'freedom,' and 'success' are the counters we employ in attempting to understand the world of actuality, but these symbolic abstractions have become obsessions, vague in meaning but absolute in authority. Allowed to atrophy from want of use, the biological process is superseded by a dissociative process, and man loses contact with his environment.

**Basic to phyloanalysis** as to general semantics is the belief that the fundamental motivations of human behavior can be scientifically investigated. Unfortunately we regard our social environment and its moral, legal, political,

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and cultural superstructure as unquestionably right. Instead of reacting spontaneously to the world we live in, we respond to it in terms of abstract verbal theories with a high coefficient of affectivity. Though man has succeeded through the instrumentalities of science and technology in controlling his environment, his own subjective processes are left to guesswork, tradition, superstition, and folklore. We know a great deal about the external world, but little about ourselves. It is curious that Burrow, though he wishes to discard the accepted meanings on which community behavior is founded, at no time relies on the analytic tools general semantics has provided for understanding how the symbol and different levels of abstraction function in language and life. In the laboratory community he founded for the purpose of group-analysis, he sought to create 'an environment of sanity or of whole and healthy processes of feeling and thinking that should transcend the level of adaptation now naively accepted everywhere as fitting, desirable or normal.'

It is unfortunate that we are not given the precise techniques and methods whereby this transcendence was achieved. All we learn is that the laboratory community rejected the prevailing standard of normality and tried to formulate instead a definition of sanity that would rise above the basic presumptions of society at large. The members of this sanity-centered community were required to purge themselves of conventional habits of speech, thought, feeling, and manners everywhere prevalent, since it is not so much our thinking that requires overhauling as our instrument of thinking, our subjective apparatus. His work, Burrow asserts, cannot be properly criticized by a mentally detached observer. Instead he wants a reader who, like the members of his group, is ready to pass through a process of emphatic, physiological adjustment. That is 'the laboratory technique' required.

Reticent as he is in his account of what is involved in the work of his laboratory community, there is no reticence in Burrow's conclusions. What ordinary communities call 'normal' is simply an unconscious acceptance of a collective neurosis. Life in civilized society has lost its capacity for expressing naturally the intrinsic behavior of the organism. Man has been trapped by his symbols, which are not adequate to mediate between his feelings and their functions. All this has brought about a physiological dysfunction, a split in the personality. Since behavior affects the total organism, and not the mind alone, it cannot be mediated through cerebral symbols. What he would do is to strip aside encrusted ideas and habitual attitudes and return to the immediate feeling-content that produces them—away from the cerebral centers, back to the primordial fountains of feeling, to enable the organism to function as a whole.

In his last book, The Neurosis of Man, Burrow gave a comprehensive report on phyloanalysis. He had long ago rejected the notion of curing individuals to help them adjust to their environment, for the environment itself is pathic.

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His task was to cure the world. That was the purpose which animated the founders and workers at the Lifwynn Foundation at Westport, Connecticut. Every member of this group agreed to cooperate wholeheartedly in this coordinated effort at social analysis. No one was to cling to systematized beliefs, assumptions, 'truths,' or 'norms.' Research was to be intensive and unbiased; the behavior of man as a biological whole was to be the quarry. What Burrow wanted to establish was a science of feeling, and he was convinced that the task, though extremely difficult, could be accomplished. He felt that it was the snarled internal condition of man which created the dangerous crisis for civilization. Man had to learn to confront his own feelings and motivations, the feelings and motivations of the race as a whole.

In this last book, as in the earlier, despite explicit denials, the leading formulations are in agreement with those of general semantics. Burrow emphasizes the fundamental importance of speech and symbolism and the extent to which communication is influenced by current expressions, frozen stereotypes, rumor, hearsay. The trouble with our machinery of communication is that it operates on a purely verbal level and achieves only a pseudo-articulation. Burrow, like Korzybski before him, would try to achieve a deeper level of understanding and communication. 'We shall be interested not so much in man's acquired forms of verbal thought and interchange as in an internal communication among people based upon the continuity that primarily knits them into a common and unitary race or species' (p. 3).

This is the leitmotif of the book, but Burrow at no time makes clear the nature of this phylic continuity and how it knits people into a unitary species. He merely declares that we must restore a mode of behavior founded on biological patterns of reaction that are intrinsic to man, though he fails to explain what these patterns and reactions are or how they can be studied objectively. The only clue he offers is a negative one. Personal opinions and beliefs must be discarded; the only data available are furnished by means of introspection.

All this can be scientifically investigated and ways can be devised (we are not told how) of systematically eliminating subjective biases that deflect man's judgment. Like Korzybski, though without Korzybski's patient devotion to method, Burrow recognizes a basic disharmony between man's approach to objectively demonstrable and observable phenomena and processes, and his approach to the universe of his own reactions. The goal, then, is to develop a reliable scientific method in the study of human behavior, instead of being left at the mercy of guesswork, religious preaching, intuition, moral absolutes, and mystical skullduggery.

Indispensable as words are, language has today become a hindrance rather than a help to communication, a barrier to harmonious cooperation and understanding. Victims of traditional beliefs, popular slogans, and wrong education,
people adapt their behavior to what others expect of them. Hence, incapable of acting or thinking spontaneously, they suffer from countless frustrations and inhibitions. And these frustrations and inhibitions have a close resemblance to the symptoms observable in the neurotic. That is the conclusion at which Burrow arrives: the neurosis of man today is tied up with his social conditioning; subjectively man is moulded by influences which are part of the traditional heritage of his culture. The scientist, the sociologist, even the psychiatrist, are not exempt from these distorting pressures, since all operate within the same psychosocial pathological field. Burrow declares:

It is hoped that these pages will make clear that our many distortions in human behaviour are traceable to this habitual employment of the symbol to serve purely emotional outlets wholly irrelevant to the actual situation. The observation of this misuse of the symbol socially was the specific occasion of my withdrawal from the practice of psychiatry, as ordinarily understood, and of my effort to establish in the community no less than in the patient an objective attitude towards unclear, misdirected feelings and reactions (p. 16).

It is these unconscious, subjective feelings which distort the symbols of communication and create international as well as interpersonal areas of misunderstanding, tension, and conflict. Each one, if he is to comprehend what phyloanalysis is doing and trying to achieve, must proceed to analyze not only himself but also the community of which he is a part, casting off authoritative opinions and cherished beliefs, re-examining his basic feelings and attitudes. We must strive to restore the lost instinctive balance; we must become members of one another, merged in a primal, phylic unity, a community of purpose and work and living.

Burrow makes it diagnostically clear that our social life today is shot through with neurotic elements. Candidly studying their own behavior as a group, the members of the Lifwynn Foundation made a number of enlightening discoveries. First, normative standards by which men judge each other, far from being consistent, are variable and arbitrary and relative, changing swiftly and often unpredictably. Painstaking research revealed that beneath the facade of polite, artificial behavior with all its inconsistencies there was 'a monstrous social mood of systematized prejudice and absolutism' (p. 52). This sinister disease is spread throughout the race of man. All our social relations are determined, unfortunately, not by organismic reactions but by such arbitrary moral standards.

Further on Burrow makes partly clear what sort of cure phyloanalysis tries to effect:

The special distinction of phyloanalysis consists in the fact that verbal interchange per se has no part in it, that these symbolic expressions are epiphenomena that are implicitly discredited from the viewpoint of the organism's basic motivation. The sole aim of the phyloanalytic technique is to demarcate between habit-reactions that are detentive or falsely moti-
vated, and habit-reactions that are biologically integrated and organismic. Our inquiries into behaviour have to do with internal physiological processes affecting the organism of man as a species (p. 95).

Here, then, is an attempt to transcend the purely mental interpretation of behavior and to concentrate on the reactions of man as part of an organismic, phylic group. The underlying assumption is that in the organism of man there is to be found a primary motivation that is cohesive, based on cooperation. Burrow develops a number of analytic insights—in his chapter on 'The Anatomy of Prejudices,' for example—which are thoroughly in accord with the teaching of general semantics. He portrays how man as a species has become enslaved by a social system of symbolic stimuli. This process has gone so far that there is evidence of physiological behavior being modified by it. At this point Burrow could have made a tremendously valuable contribution if he had given us the evidence in detail, as well as a precise description of the experiments he conducted. All he tells us is that man, as the result of generations of training, not only responds to certain selected words or symbols, 'but the conditioned reflexes thus induced by these systems of stimuli have become socially consolidated into affectively conditioned systems of reaction' (p. 136). Moreover, there is little that is new in being told that there is a distinct parallel between the way an animal in a laboratory is conditioned and the way in which man is conditioned by environmental stimuli, or that conflicting systems of response induce confusion in the motivations and activities of man. 'Like the bell or the card presented to the experimental animal, these words or symbols presented to man call forth in him the physiological reactions originally appropriate only to the actual objects themselves' (p. 139). These reactions to verbal symbols, though definitely physiological, are neither spontaneous nor organic; they involve the substitution of secondary affect for primary feeling. The solution is to work for the regeneration of man as an organismic community.

This symbolic distortion induces a functional dislocation, and the organism's total reaction is thrown out of gear. Man reacts not to the stimulus as such but to the affective increments associated with the sign. We respond, in brief, to a system of substitutive stimuli that are peculiar to the neurotic. Despite all this, Burrow wants it understood that phylobiology is not to be confused with general semantics. Phylobiology is not interested in the way individuals are verbally conditioned. 'The interest of phylobiology lies in the social influence of the process of verbal conditioning as transmitted from organism to organism, and in the physiological effect of this phylic conditioning upon human reactions from generation to generation' (p. 145). This seems to be a case of hedging. Then, as if to leave no room for doubt, he declares emphatically:

The method of phylobiology does not make contact with the school of the semanticists at any point—nor, so far as I know, with any other school.
After all, where we are dealing with behaviour, it is primarily the method, and only the method, that is decisive in any school. It is not what it thinks, but what it does that defines a school of behaviour (p. 146).

Precisely, and if we examine what phylobiology does, its method of operation, it should be obvious to any objective observer familiar with general semantics that Burrow’s work is greatly indebted to, or at least closely resembles, the formulated method of general semantics. The indebtedness comes out most transparently when he is most vigorously engaged in denying it.

I have yet to see a psychiatrist, a semanticist, a representative of any school or system of behaviour subsisting within the framework of ‘normality’ whose principle rests upon the thesis that the identity, the central constant, the very substance of the organism’s motivation is decentered and its behaviour dissociated in all its interrelational processes, and who has devised a technique consistent with this thesis. . . . In the premises of phylobiology, it is our explicit position that the attempt to cope with neurosis by disparaging the symbols of language or any other item or manifestation is putting the cart before the horse. From the outset we have insisted upon the essentially veridical character of man’s verbal forms of interchange within the social setting in which they are employed. It is not the distorted meaning or symbol that is responsible for the incited affect; it is the incited affect that is responsible for the distorted meaning or symbol. Primarily it is the dislocation in the organism’s motivation as a whole that is responsible for conflict and ineptness in the organism’s interrelational reactions generally.

Far from concerning ourselves with the symbol or with this or that affect with which this or that symbol of language has become burdened, our attack has centred solely upon man’s affective (autopathic) identity. . . . Our procedure has nothing to do with improved ‘cortical control.’ It has to do with the inadvertent substitution in man of a basis of identity that is false because a process of social conditioning has replaced the organism’s primary principle of identity throughout the processes of man as a phylum. . . . We have regarded the verbal frames on which the community’s behaviour-distortions are hung as relatively quite innocuous epiphenomena, and have consistently emphasized the biophysiological basis of behaviour-disturbances. In our finding, it is not the letter but the spirit of the word that betrays the underlying pathology of its meaning—a spirit co-extensive with the decentering or dissociation in man of the organism’s central constant of motivation (pp. 146-147).

There can be no question but that in this summing up of general semantics, Burrow is manifestly unfair to Korzybski, who never accepted the dominant framework of ‘normality.’ In fact, the essence of the method Korzybski worked out was to discover techniques for achieving a sanity beyond the accepted definitions of sanity. It is also strange to find general semantics accused of operating solely upon an ‘ideational’ basis. Korzybski’s aim was not intellectual understanding but a semantic reorientation that would affect the organism-as-a-whole and profoundly transform behavior. It was not only our conceptual and linguistic
apparatus that was to be revolutionized but also our dynamics of behavior in all its complex ramifications. Korzybski wished to overthrow the law of identity and to make us feel at home in the actual world of four-dimensional processes. Our semantic reactions were to be trained so that they would not be perverted by laws of identity that are false to fact. Korzybski demonstrated to what an appalling extent semantic perversions underlay not only the conditioning of the child's mind but also the mythologies and social philosophies, the morality and ideals we regard as sacrosanct and true. Korzybski was eager to root out delusional factors, unconscious assumptions, which disturb our orientation to life. He showed, too, how 'intellectual' and 'emotional' elements are inextricably entwined. He insisted that we must do more than study events that are outside of us; we must also examine what takes place within the organism when it tries to translate and interpret these events. The human mind can be made more sane and efficient by the elimination of semantic confusion. The consciousness of abstracting, which Burrow ignores, can save us from a rigid, primitive linguistic compulsion.

Burrow's failure to understand consciousness of abstracting leads inevitably to a reiteration of the familiar charge that general semantics is merely concerned with words. Nevertheless, Burrow is convinced that all disorders arise from disorders of communication: that man, the only irrational animal, forms pictures of the world that are distorted by his diseased affects. Hence he insists that the reform of communication must take place 'at a deeper level than the customary affect-reactions involved in mental and verbal forms of interchange. It lies deeper than the mere exchange of ideas and affects through the symbol or language' (p. 291). Since general semanticists say very much the same thing, why does Burrow accuse general semantics of verbal fetishism and socially conditioned conformity while absolving phyloanalysis of guilt? Actually, the same stricture can be applied with equally damaging effects to Burrow's phyloanalysis, for he too must present his critique of the distortions produced by language in the medium of language. It is difficult to understand why he felt so strongly that reading a book on general semantics was a 'mere exchange of ideas and affects' while reading a book on phyloanalysis was not. Both disciplines attempt seriously to point beyond the words in which they are framed to non-verbal levels of re-orientation, and both appear to result, among serious students at least, in some kind of non-verbal self-training.

Burrow's experimental findings, reported in the latter part of The Neurosis of Man, indicate that one breathes more slowly when the organism is in tune with its environment, that there is a reduction in the number of eye-movements, that there is a characteristic alteration in the brain-wave pattern, and that there is a reduction in the degree of neuromuscular tension. All this is either stated or predicted in the literature of general semantics, in which a 'semantic state' is defined as psychosomatic, i.e. neither 'mental' alone nor 'physical' alone,
but neurosemantics. Burrow's unsupported indictment of general semantics makes clear that even the phyloanalyst may be guilty of disordered, false-to-fact judgments, and possibly distorted affects based on his reliance on the separative symbols of 'I' and 'thou,' 'my theories' and 'yours.'

The historical development of the concept of allergy carries it from a narrow offshoot of immunology to a basic physiological response of the organism to the world at large. The original concept was within the framework of the newly discovered antigen-antibody mechanism and evolved beyond those limits as scientific medical knowledge accrued. At any particular time the concept of allergy paralleled the scientific development of the day. The broader connotations of allergy in regard to the life process itself are only now being appreciated with the breaking down of the rigid departmentalization of medical knowledge. We are in an era of synthesis and are catching a glimpse of the totality of nature. We are beginning to realize that isolated fact is a semantic allusion and is true only in the mind of man. There is no self-contained or unrelated phenomenon in nature. The phenomena isolated and studied by man are part and parcel of a single, complex, dynamic unity. The artificial boundaries we have erected between physics and chemistry, between the psychological and physical, between the societal and the individual, between living and nonliving matter do not exist except in our minds. Scientific treatises have recently been published relating many of these apparently separate and distinct aspects of nature. Eventually a common denominator will be found. Some work has already been done which indicates that the common denominator is a special kind of energy and that variation in the basic energy pattern arrangement accounts for the apparent specificity of different aspects of nature. The difference between the so-called allergic and non-allergic may be explained on just such a basis. Although at this moment such a definition is not entirely meaningful, still it points a direction and can be broadly conceived. The theory of variation in basic energy pattern is certainly more satisfactory than defining the difference between allergic and non-allergic with such words as 'heredity,' 'altered reactivity,' and 'hypersensitivity.' All of these words are walls behind which we hide and beyond which we cannot see. HARRY SWARTZ, M.D., Allergy, Rutgers University Press, 1949.