

Norbert Andersch (2014): Symbolische Form und psychische Erkrankung. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann. 237 Seiten. € 36.00, ISBN 978-3-8260-5304-7.

Over my professional lifetime as an English psychiatrist I have been frustrated by the banal and low-key attitude of my colleagues to anything that smacks of intellectual endeavour, never mind philosophical expertise. Their slavish acceptance of each new version of DSM is all too apparent. Even the 20th Century history of psychiatry, particularly the German contributions in the Inter-War years, passes them by.

I immersed myself in psychology, normal and abnormal, for ten years in the 1970s, believing, at that time, that it could provide an answer to psychopathology's conundrums. I moved on to neuropsychology in the 1980s with the same assumptions. Finally, in the 1990s, and I can almost date my eureka movement, I realized that only a philosophical approach to psychopathology could do justice to our subject.

Norbert Andersch's book on symbolic forms and psychiatric illness is precisely the sort of book that now appeals to me. His central theme is that one philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, who lived between 1874 and 1945, in Germany, then England, then Sweden, then America, set out a corpus of philosophical work which should inform our theoretical psychiatric perspective. Along the way Andersch introduces us to a number of psychiatrists and psychologists who have been squeezed out of both mainstream psychiatry and psychology, but who deserve to be re-assessed.

I regard the book as a glorious attempt to turn the clock back about the history of 20th Century psychiatry, and to resurrect a trail that was obscured by the mainstream of biological psychiatry and cognitive psychology.

Three issues that pervade the book impress me.

First, Ernst Cassirer himself. He was a towering intellectual figure, a relative and correspondent of Kurt Goldstein, the neurologist and psychiatrist, and actually saw several of the latter's patients. There is a whole section in one of his volumes of Symbolic Forms about agnosia which is, in my view, more profound than

anything that any neurologist wrote about it. So Cassirer was a hands-on philosopher, as well as a great thinker. As a thinker, moreover, he was among the greats. The final volume of his Symbolic Forms on metaphysics is spell-binding. Any psychiatrist, as Andersch has actually done, who tries to apply Cassirer's thoughts to psychopathology is a hero in my eyes, and he, Andersch, has actually carried it off.

Secondly, Andersch's detailed accounts of the work of Gestalt psychologists, obviously well-known to any reader of this journal, are superb. Long before I read this book I had come to the conclusion that of all the psychological schools of thought during the 20th Century – others being psychoanalysis, behavioural psychology, social psychology and now cognitive psychology – Gestalt psychology gave the most accurate account of the human situation. Andersch traces the ups and downs of this admirably in this book.

Finally, I applaud his delving into all sorts of by-ways, long-forgotten psychiatrists and ignored concepts. The reader of this book is indebted to Andersch's acumen and knowledge in setting a different compass point for our theoretical attitude to psychiatry.

In summary, this is a book that sets out a case for philosophical psychopathology as the only realistic programme for our profession's future, shows how one scarcely acknowledged 'great' philosopher of the 20th Century had the knowledge and theoretical wherewithal about our subject to truly illuminate our problems, and, finally, traces the way in which a few hitherto regarded maverick psychiatrists and psychologists actually achieved the right note on all matters psychopathological.

John Cutting, London

John Cutting, born 1946 in Aberdeen, Scotland. He studied medicine and psychiatry in London and is still an honorary senior lecturer at the Institute of Psychiatry in London. He has published several books on psychopathology, the latest being *A Critique of Psychopathology*, Parados, Berlin.

Address: Mill Wood, Wall Hill, Forest Row, East Sussex RH18 5EG.

E-mail: jcutting@outlook.com