

Immunity and Individuality

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Every so often a book appears that addresses a wide range of contemporary issues succinctly and with authority. “Immunity and Individuality”, recently published by InterActions, authored by Dr. Thomas Hartmuth, and including a succinct foreword by Dr Michaela Glöckler (formerly leader of the Anthroposophical Medical Faculty at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland), is indeed one such book. For me personally it presents a powerful and coherent validation of my former anthroposophic medical practice as well as of my current aspirations in teaching an integrative approach to developmental psychology, mental health and psychosomatics. Some time ago I reviewed an earlier publication by the same author, addressing socio-economic and political aspects of medical practice (*Medicine in the Stranglehold of Profit*). This book addresses the scientific basis for integrative medical and therapeutic practice as such. Taken together, their combined scope is deeply impressive and radically transformative.

In her foreword, Dr Glöckler draws particular attention to the wealth of current research, as cited by the author, supporting his fundamental thesis that neurological and immunological development are mutually interdependent processes, each being governed by social relationships as well as by microbial interactions. Exposures and mutual interactions of both systems, environmental and social, are directly formative at a physiological level, especially in early childhood. They also retain a vital salutogenic influence [focusing on the origins and maintenance of bodily and mental health, rather than disease] throughout one’s entire life.

The percentage-ratio of this influence is striking. When considering life expectancy, the overall contribution of genetic factors has been shown to be only 5%, while lifestyle and specific medical interventions, when taken together, amount to 40%. The remaining 55% are to be attributed to supportive social relationships. Just imagine if this insight were to become formative in health policy, education and in regulating exposure to media in childhood as well as to supporting approaches to parenting in general!

The book cites the latest research indicating the overarching significance of the microbiome and its viral component, the virome, collectively comprising the intestinal flora, for both immunological and neurological maturation – i.e., the so-called “gut-brain axis”. Moreover, the author cites four levels of interaction between body and environment: sense perception, cognitive and emotional processing, immunological exposure and finally nutrition. These four levels are not only interactive and mutually supportive, but ultimately influence longer term genetic expression (via epigenetic – effects of behaviour and environment – processes). This picture, if grasped fully, is potentially game-changing, both

in its conception and application. It reveals the pathways through which spirit and matter may be understood as interactive and reciprocal processes within the human organism.

Former dualities and polarities become integrated. The currently dominant reductionist view of living organisms, including humans, when viewed merely as advanced machines is thereby revealed in its primitive and tragic absurdity, as if the nakedness of the proverbial emperor had suddenly been revealed, if not, at least in this instance, through the eyes of an innocent child, but rather through those of an erudite and eloquent medical doctor and free-lance writer on health issues.

The book's concise and highly readable text, encompassing front-line research (with references), also relates wider issues to practical approaches, potentially accessible to everyone, including utilising warmth, the positive effects of physical touch and, most significantly, the importance of empathy in human encounter, all essential elements in optimising immunity. I would venture to suggest that were the many messages contained in this book to be understood and translated into personal, professional and political guidelines, they would have the potential to become a template to guide our declining culture forward, enlivening medical science, including therapy, education, farming, parenting and, none the least, general mental health. Taken together, these areas go a long way towards encompassing the future survival of the earth and of humanity, as much at a spiritual level as in organic and ecological terms. For those familiar with Rudolf Steiner's worldview, the text also bears out its wisdom, at times even in details, but now transparently re-configured into contemporary language.

While a reviewer might be tempted to elaborate its content in greater detail, for example in relation to the effects of sexual abuse and chronic trauma on microbiome functioning, the book must, after all, be left to speak for itself. Its essential message expresses in outline the necessary perspectives for maintaining our future health in body, soul and spirit. In the literal sense, the book is as down to earth as it is enlightening in its erudition, combining a high level of spiritual insight with basic facts and the best science – in fact I would go as far as to suggest it as first-line reading for everyone, especially, but not only, for those in educational and therapeutic professions who realise the critical point that humanity has now reached and are seeking alternatives.

I see the relatively short length of this book as its virtue rather than as its limitation. It is a sad truth that longer books are rarely read by the general population these days, let alone assimilated. It has been rendered into very accessible and idiomatic English by Richard Brinton and in my opinion reveals the author's outstanding mastery of a broad range of material, psychological, medical, and psychosocial, relevant to all, irrespective of profession. It clearly deserves very wide marketing and distribution and my hope is that this review may contribute in a small way towards this end.

James Dyson, MD