

**The Human Brain and Its Universe. Volume 3 of The World of Philosophy.** Edited by Joachim Gerlach. (Pp 508; SFr297.) Basel, S Karger AG, 1982.

According to the frontispiece, the author of this book is around 86 years old and in the text he informs us of his own background in both medicine and philosophy. It represents one volume of a trilogy, the first edition of which was issued in 1957 as "Brain and Consciousness". The title, and length of the series, suggests a *magnum opus* tackling the fundamental problems of human existence, and in this volume, philosophical issues are presented. Although clearly the author's intention is for the whole work to be read consecutively, this book stands in its own right as a history of philosophy which rivals many of the standard works. Starting from a basic dissertation of what philosophy is, the bulk of the book takes philosophers from all times and places and parades their ideas for inspection in front of us. It is a pleasure to read many of the critical discussions, since so often what philosophers say is given to us as if their ideas were common sense and accepted by their generation. The author is harsh on many so called great thinkers from the past, such as Plato, Christ, Mohammed and Saul (the last-named he refers to as a "highly emotional complex psychopath"), or from the more present time, Russell, Eccles, and Eysenck. One of his own favourites is clearly Schopenhauer ("one of the most remarkable writers in German literature"), and throughout the book he alludes to the so called "brain paradox" which had a basis in Schopenhauer's repeated acknowledgement that the phenomenal world, the world of consciousness, is a brain phenomenon. The paradox presented arises because the brain itself is a brain phenomenon, ("the brain, although itself a percept, namely a perceptual object, generates all percepts including itself"), and while it is intrinsically insoluble, it does place our understanding of the brain as central to our understanding of all knowledge. ("Epistemology and therefore also philosophy are thus of necessity, based on neurobiology.")

So much is covered in this one volume that, if the other two are of equal size and complexity, it has to be concluded that the author is a polymath of great distinction. For any insular Englishman brought up on a diet of Christianity and empiricism, the book will cause indigestion. It is scattered with quotations in many languages, although mainly Latin, Greek and Ger-

man, without translation, which is irritating as the point the author tries to make is often lost, unless one has time and the use of several dictionaries. However, an English dictionary is also required to note the meaning of such words as "myrmecology", "axiology" and "dianoidology", and his own language often contains such complex statements as "the very title of this treatise . . . already represents a hysteron proteron or logical diallelon . . ."

After some 365 pages, in which the writings of so many others are discussed, and topics such as laughing, crying, suicide, sin, life and death and the purpose of the universe are skilfully presented, it is with some relief to read "further problems related to the extinction of the species, overpopulation and crowding, and to zero population growth need not be dealt with here".

This work, if the other two volumes are of the same stature, is an excellent reference text. It is also quite awe-inspiring in its completeness and the breadth of human experience it covers. Lesser mortals may find comfort in the knowledge that Confucius died a failure and that the last words of Socrates were:

‘ὦ Κρίτων τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἄλεκτρούνα· ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε.’  
“Crito, we owe a cock to Aesculapius. Pay it and do not forget it.”

MICHAEL TRIMBLE

**Brain Aging: Neuropathology and Neuropharmacology.** Edited by J Cervós-Navarro, HI Sarkander. New York. Raven Press, 1983, \$79.36.

**Aging Brain and Ergot Alkaloids.** Edited by A Agnoli, C Crepaldi, PF Spano, M Trabucchi. New York, Raven Press, 1983, \$55.80

The first book, volume 21 in a series on aging is almost entirely about pathology, whilst the second, volume 23, is mainly about hydergine and other ergot drugs. The first book is packed with facts, good illustrations and outstanding electron microscope photographs of young and old brains. Both the morphology and the high technology are of considerable interest. The morphology is simple to understand and well described, with many interesting findings, as, for example, that the total size of the frontal cortex slowly decreases with aging, but the orbital cortex does not shrink up to the normal retirement age of 65. In contrast, the high technology is sometimes difficult to follow, but reflects the startling advances in neurobiology of

the last ten years, as in the chapter by Sarkander which is all about age-dependent modification of neuronal initiation frequency and elongation velocity of neuronal RNA chain growth. There is a comprehensive account of brain pigmentation with age, and the possible use of centrophenoxine to reverse lipofuscin accumulation. The chapter on changes in motor activity with age is about rats, and not humans, surely a missed opportunity.

The second volume is not nearly so good. The disciplines of animal experiments, computer science, detailed histology, and neurobiology are hard to apply to one of the most difficult of all clinical problems to solve, the effect of drugs in demented people. There is little doubt that ergot drugs will cause some elevation in mood, as well as hypotension and sedation in old people, but any definite, sustained, non-toxic or valuable action in dementia is widely disbelieved. However, the authors of an Italian 40-centre trial remain enthusiastic despite the problems of such a project and the minefield of the differential diagnosis of vascular and degenerative dementias, on purely clinical grounds. Much of the data about the pharmacology and endocrine effects of ergot derivatives in this volume have already appeared elsewhere. The section on the psychosomatic aspects of aging, giving diagnostic charts for recognising the nine personality types with Rorschach indicants of aging measured to two decimal places is a classic of its genre. Despite the clear demonstration by positron tomography that chronic ischaemia is not a significant mechanism in the pathogenesis of vascular dementia, the assumption that cerebral vasodilators will somehow improve senile dementia persists. I remain unconvinced.

JD PARKES

**Aging of the Brain (Aging, Volume 22).** Edited by David Samuel, Sergio Algeri, Samuel Gershon, VE Grimm & Gino Toffano. (Pp 410; \$52.08.) New York: Raven Press, 1983.

Papers given at a conference held in March, 1982 are the subject matter of this book which has been rapidly reproduced from camera-ready copy; despite this the overall production and readability are excellent. The 34 papers represent the work of 98 contributors. The volume has a strong Italo-American flavour and only nine of the contributors come from other countries. The papers are concerned with