

OBITUARY NOTICE

ERNST KRETSCHMER

I first met Dr Ernst Kretschmer, Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology in Marburg, at the Maudsley Hospital, shortly after the Second World War. He was a short, dapper man, pyknic in body-build, and cyclothymic in character; well dressed, prosperous and looking more like a businessman than a professor. What struck me most, however, was that he was middle-aged; in my mind I had vaguely grouped him with Wundt and Kraepelin as among the early pioneers of psychology and psychiatry and had assumed that he too had handed over to the next generation. The error was perhaps permissible. *Körperbau und Charakter*, the book which brought Kretschmer world-wide fame, was published in 1921 when the author was just 33 years old and was Privatdocent and assistant to Gaupp in Tübingen. This, however, was not his first book; Kretschmer had been known in professional circles since 1918 when he brought out his book about *Sensitiven Beziehungswahn*. This early book contained a protest and a reaction against Kraepelin's typology and a plea for multi-dimensional types of diagnosis; it is ironic that his life's work thereafter was destined to derive from, and in turn buttress, a strict Kraepelinian typology.

Other books by Kretschmer in his 30's were his book on *Medizinische Psychologie* which appeared in 1922, and his *Hysterie* which appeared the year after. At the end of the 1920's he published his great work *Geniale Menschen* (1929) in which he applied his general typological theories to the problem of genius, grouping his chosen sample into cyclothymes and schizothymes, relating their performance to their body-build and generally attempting to demonstrate the detailed application of his principles to these highly gifted people.

As a psychiatrist and writer, Kretschmer had certain gifts which may account for the fact that for many years he was regarded as the foremost German medical psychologist. In the first place he was a great writer, clear, evocative and able to pin down the description of a character in a few supremely well-chosen words. This gift is of particular importance in classical German psychiatry, which lays great stress on case histories and description generally. The importance of this gift is even more apparent for a writer who tries to appeal not only to fellow psychiatrists and psychologists but who wants to interest the intelligent lay public in his work, as Kretschmer tried to do in his book on genius. You might disagree with what Kretschmer had to say, but you were never in doubt as to what it was that he was saying, and you would always enjoy his graceful way of saying it.

Kretschmer's second great quality was tolerance. When it was fashionable to decry Freud for reasons which had nothing to do with the truth or falsity of his notions, Kretschmer refused to take part in this denigration of new theories and hypotheses, instead incorporating what he considered true and valuable in his teaching. When clinical psychology began to appear on the scene, Kretschmer for a time was the only psychiatrist who allowed psychologists to work in his clinic and take part in his teaching rounds. These are only a few examples of what was an

outstanding feature of the man, and his great influence on German psychiatry was in large effect due to this ability to see good in many systems, to select contributions of substance from all sides and to refuse resolutely to wear blinkers and condemn unheard any school.

Psychologists of course are concerned in the main not with his psychiatric contributions but with his work as a typologist. The notion of 'type' was from the beginning a central one in Kretschmer's thinking. He considered it

the most important fundamental concept of all psychology. Nature . . . does not work with sharp contrasts and precise definitions, which derive from our own thought and our own need for comprehension. In nature, fluid transitions are the rule, but it would not be true to say that, in this infinite sea of fluid empirical forms, nothing clear and objective could be seen; quite on the contrary. In certain fields, groupings arise which we encounter again and again; when we study them objectively, we realize that we are dealing here with focal points of frequently occurring groups of characteristics, concentrations of correlated traits. . . . What is essential in biology, as in clinical medicine, is not a single correlation but groups of correlations; only those lead to the innermost connexions. . . . What we call, mathematically, focal points of statistical correlations, we call, in more descriptive prose, constitutional types. . . . A true type can be recognized by the fact, that it leads to ever more connexions of biological importance. . . .

Thus Kretschmer, and it will be clear that his point of view has nothing to do with the typical American textbook simplification which represents types as being 'either/or' principles of classification. Normal distributions are implicit in Kretschmer's thinking and when I asked him about his opinion on this point he emphatically agreed that there was nothing in his writing or thinking which could encourage any other belief. He was rather contemptuous, perhaps rightly so, of much American work that had been done to investigate his hypotheses; he said that the work might have been better done if the experimenters had first read his book!

In part, there is here perhaps a genuine misunderstanding. Kretschmer kept working at his theory throughout his life, and, as is the custom in Germany, incorporated more recent studies in the later editions of his book, which ran into over twenty editions by the time of his death. English-speaking writers and experimentalists usually relied on the English translation of a quite early edition which was by no means up-to-date and had not reflected a great deal of the work that was done by Kretschmer and his school. Nevertheless, this is little excuse for the manifest ignorance of many authors who wrote about Kretschmer without realizing the ways in which his teaching had grown and changed. Kretschmer became even more disenchanted with American psychology when Sheldon essentially took over his teaching, furbished it up with a few esoteric terms and improbable hypotheses and offered it as new and original to a profession which did not have the knowledge or the historical sense to see this substitution for what it was.

With all his superb gifts there was one that was lacking, and this lack probably proved fatal for Kretschmer as a genuine innovator in human typology. Kretschmer was 'literate' in C. P. Snow's phrase but he was not 'numerate'. In the quotation given above Kretschmer keeps talking about correlations but he never in fact calculated any correlations. He relied essentially on insight rather than on calculation and thus fell short of the essentials of scientific proof. Even in his studies of body-build he was suspicious of any index calculated in terms of body measurements, although sometimes contemptuously permitting lesser mortals to use such crutches.

When in later years critical experimental studies, such as those by Payne and Brengelmann, showed an absence of correlation where he had predicted substantial relationships, he was surprised and hurt. Yet there had been other clouds on the horizon which should have given him pause. There are obvious dangers in choosing schizophrenia and manic-depressive insanity as the extreme ends of a personality dimension supposed to encompass normal people as well, when genetic studies leave little doubt that these disorders are strongly determined by the action of probably single genes. Again the relationship between body-build and insanity predicted by Kretschmer does appear to be a reality but it is so tenuous as to be practically useless and incapable of supporting the type of experimental research encouraged by Kretschmer, which uses body-build as a kind of scaffolding or link.

This lack of ability to see things in a quantitative fashion is not perhaps surprising in one who was brought up in a climate of phenomenological psychology; it is all the more to be regretted, however, when it is realized that Kretschmer was not only a brilliant and intuitive psychiatrist but also a highly gifted experimentalist. He had the very rare ability to postulate psychological traits and then construct experimental tests embodying these traits; I know of no one in the personality field whose ideas in this connexion were superior to Kretschmer's. The later editions of *Körperbau und Charakter* are gold mines for Ph.D. students in search of a thesis; if only psychologists could be called away from their worship of the Rorschach to an investigation of the brilliant ideas pioneered by Kretschmer, how much more quickly would psychology advance!

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