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table of contents

Editorial	1
Medical Sciences	
Orgone Therapy	
<i>Esworth Baker, M.D.</i>	3
The Practice of Medical Orgone Therapy in Anti-Authoritarian Society	
<i>Charles Konia, M.D.</i>	20
Essential Hypertension	
Three Cases Discussed from an Orgonomic Perspective	
<i>Alberto Foglia, M.D.</i>	31
Medical Orgone Therapy with Children: Advantages and Obstacles	
<i>Salvatore Iacobello, M.D.</i>	37
Mechanistic Psychiatry at Its Worst	
<i>Howard Chavis, M.D.</i>	45
Social Sciences	
The Origins of Political Correctness	
<i>Bill Lind</i>	49
Bad Grades at School	
<i>Alberto Foglia, M.D.</i>	59
Notes from the Field	
Political Attitudes Vary with Physiological Traits	
<i>Virginia Whitener, Ph.D.</i>	62
Why are Jews Liberal?	
<i>Charles Konia, M.D.</i>	68
Book Review	70
Questions and Answers	73
In Memoriam: Kenneth Noland	
<i>Robert Harman, M.D.</i>	75
Communications and Notes	79
Contributing Authors	86
Index by Issue Volumes 42 & 43	87

Notes from the Field

Political Attitudes Vary with Physiological Traits: Political Thinking and the Biological Basis of Sociopolitical Character

Virginia Whitener, Ph.D.

There is the naïve and traditional assumption in our culture that decisions are made in the brain. Surely this would be true of political decisions—that we each wisely balance the facts, perhaps tangentially take into account “values” and an undefined “gut” reaction, but, in our political thinking, make considered, cognitive, conscious choices based on our intellectual, our brain power. This is not so.

Consider, first, that the brain is not an independent or ruling organ in the human organism and does not function purely consciously and on the basis of facts, but is, as Harman (2007) well describes, subordinate to the autonomic nervous system. Discussing this dynamic specifically in its relation to and significance in sleep, Harman states, “The autonomic nervous system is sometimes conceived of as a ‘primitive’ nervous system in contrast to the brain which is viewed as becoming more and more ‘advanced’ or ‘evolved’ with the appearance of ‘higher’ species. From the standpoint of overall structure and operation the exact opposite is the case.” (Harman 2007, page 33) Thinking, conscious or semi-conscious, then, including political thought, must be based on the autonomic nervous system and be a product of biological functioning including protoplasmic movement and bioenergetic pulsation.

Reich first identified the sociopolitical character. Baker developed this further, showing that sociopolitical thinking and behavior are related to the distribution and extent of armor, and Konio extended yet further our understanding of the biological basis of sociopolitical character structure. Armor limits and affects perception and the

person's beliefs, actions and choices in the social realm, including the political realm. Armor occurs as protoplasmic movement is restricted. Restriction may occur from the beginning of life, may stabilize and is passed on. The environment of the egg and sperm, the intrauterine environment, the birth environment, and the environment after birth may be hostile to, destructive to, not supportive of life or of certain aspects of the organism's life. The result, when the lively spontaneity, vigor and natural expression and needs of the organism are not respected, is the eventual inherent, abiding restriction in movement of the organism and proscribed, rigid ways of responding in the individual and social realms.

Konia states, "To accurately understand human social behavior, one must step outside the framework of current thinking. A functional energetic perspective and knowledge of sociopolitical characterology is essential. Every person has his or her *individual character structure* ...He or she also has an identifiable *sociopolitical character structure*, the manner in which the individual attempts to mold the environment and society to fit his or her own irrational needs. One of Elsworth F. Baker's major contributions to the understanding of sociopolitical character types was his identification of the pattern of an individual's armor in relation to sociopolitical character (Baker 1967, page 153). For the first time, the political Left and Right were defined in objective *biophysical* terms, *thus placing the origin of social pathology on a firm biological foundation.*" (Konia 2008, page 91)

The process of character development and the specific sociopolitical character types are described and discussed in Baker's and Konia's writings. (In particular, see *Man in the Trap* and *The Emotional Plague.*) Suffice it to say, in the present context, there is a character formation in the mature human organism that predetermines an individual to respond to social issues in certain ways. These responses are not conscious and are not "choices" in the usual sense of the word. The more extreme the armor the more pressured the individual feels to express him or herself in rigid ways consistent with the character, and the more "set" will be their sociopolitical

ideology and behavior—the ways they try to influence the social world around them and act toward others. The choice of political party (a more superficial function) is open to environmental influences and may change, but the basic sociopolitical approach to life is not and will manifest in many other ways.

In a recent issue of the *Journal of Ergonomics*, 41(1) 2007, a reader asked a question about a statement by Konia that “according to E.F. Baker, the individual’s sociopolitical character is inborn, biologically rooted, unchanging and, to a large extent, independent of environmental influences” (Konia 2007, page 109). Konia responds that Baker often stated that, “There must be something in the protoplasm’ that distinguishes the different sociopolitical character types” (ibid., page 110). So consistent throughout the individual’s repertoire and over time is the nature of their thought, behavior and emotional response in the social and political realms.

Now, in *Science* (2008) research is reported that addresses the issue and supports this understanding. The article refers to prior studies that show “the built-in almost ‘automated’ quality of many political responses” (Oxley et al. 2008, page 1667). The authors designed research to investigate this matter: “why some people seem primed to adopt certain political attitudes, whereas others appear primed to adopt quite different attitudes” (ibid.). The study targets physiological response to perceived threat. The authors state that they chose this measure because “appropriate response to environmental threat is necessary for long-term survival and... perceived threat produces a variety of reasonably well-mapped, physically instantiated responses” (ibid.). They describe the “defensive cascade of linked, rapid extensor-flexor movement [occurring] throughout the body within 30 to 50 ms” (ibid.) in response to abrupt threat and the less immediate signals that run from perception through the sensory cortex and ultimately the brain and activate the sympathetic nervous system. They note, “Though these basic response patterns apply in all people, individual sensitivity to perceived threat varies widely” (ibid.). The authors set out to test the hypothesis “that variations in physical sensitivity to

threat are associated with political beliefs” (ibid.). They gathered a random sample of people in Nebraska and gave them a survey instrument measuring political beliefs, personality traits and demographic characteristics. Two months later the subjects were attached to physiological equipment that measured skin conductance and orbicularis oculi startle blink electromyograph (EMG) response. Skin conductance was measured due to its “relatively direct and undiluted representation of sympathetic activity” (page 1668) and the orbicularis oculi startle blink response, an involuntary response to a startling noise, as it shows a heightened “fear state” in higher blink amplitudes (“harder blinks”). The subjects were shown three separate threatening images: “a very large spider on the face of a frightened person, a dazed individual with a bloody face, and an open wound with maggots in it” (ibid.) and three separate nonthreatening stimuli: a bunny, a bowl of fruit, and a happy child. These images were interspersed among a sequence of 33 images. The results showed a correlation between physiological response to threat and political attitudes: “Greater relative reaction to threatening stimuli correlates with more support for socially protective policies” (ibid.).

The study is fine research conducted in accordance with high scientific standards; groups were controlled for demographic factors and extraneous reaction variations; no judgment was made regarding the “correctness” or “incorrectness” of the political attitudes measured and identified; and statistical analysis was exacting and thorough. Most importantly, the authors do not confuse correlation with causation. They know that correlation does not determine causality, that the found correlation does not permit conclusions regarding causation. However, they go beyond simply avoiding the “a causes b” or “b causes a” fallacy often erroneously applied to correlations and engage in deeper reasoning regarding possible functions. The authors state, “Particular physiological response to threat could cause the adoption of certain political attitudes, or the holding of particular political attitudes could cause people to respond in a certain physiological way to environmental threats, but neither of these seems probable. More

likely is that physiological responses to generic threats and political attitudes on policies related to protecting the social order may both derive from a common source.” (page 1669) The authors go on to consider a few possible sources and conclude that “political attitudes and varying physiological responses to threat may both derive from neural activity patterns, perhaps those surrounding the amygdala... . Given that political and social attitudes are heritable and that amygdala activity also has been traced to genetics, genetic variation relevant to amygdala activity could affect both physiological responses to threat and political attitudes bearing on threats to the social order. Our findings suggest that political attitudes vary with physiological traits linked to divergent manners of experiencing and processing environmental threats. Consequently, our research provides one possible explanation for the lack of malleability in the beliefs of individual with strong political convictions and for the associate ubiquity of political conflict.” (ibid.)

The researchers partly use mechanistic thinking in their approach to bodily functioning and are not alert to the deeper bioenergetic factors of armor and pulsation. However, their research shows beyond a doubt that there is a biological basis to sociopolitical thought. In forming the subject groups, individuals were identified who consistently marked the questionnaire in a way that showed they held definite views on a number of subjects. Individuals at the extreme and opposite ends of the spectrum were selected to create the subjects, in effect creating two different study groups. Since individuals with *consistently* different political attitudes also showed *consistently* different physiological responses, the results of the study also confirms the biological basis of sociopolitical character *structure*, a set way of responding to social issues based on the individual’s character, a character formation that is rooted in biology.

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