BOOKS: PSYCHOLOGY

Acts of Living

Rom Harré

It has been about 30 years since the first rumblings of discontent with the state of academic psychology began to be heard. Then, as now, dissident voices were more audible in Europe than in the United States. It is a remarkable feature of mainstream academic psychology that, alone among the sciences, it should be almost wholly immune to critical appraisal as an enterprise. Methods that have long been shown to be ineffective or worse are still used on a routine basis by hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. Conceptual muddles long exposed to view are evident in almost every issue of standard psychology journals. This is a curious state of affairs. New pathways and more realistic paradigms of research have been proposed, demonstrated, and ignored. Karl Scheibe's entertaining book is a reaffirmation of one of the most powerful alternative ways of looking at human affairs: from the dramaturgical point of view.

The Drama of Everyday Life
by Karl E. Scheibe

Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000. 295 pp. $25.95, £15.50. ISBN 0-674-00231-8.

The natural sciences have achieved their enormous successes by the adoption of schemata through which the indeterminate world around us can be made to disclose some of its features. To achieve this task for human life, Scheibe (a professor at Wesleyan University and a psychotherapist) describes and makes use of an image of the world as a dramatic performance. The test of such an analytical schema is to ask how much more of what we do can be made sense of by adopting it rather than some other way of looking at things. Are the relations between the sexes, formal and informal, best treated by an analogy to cost-benefit analysis, or do we get a better grasp by looking on them as if they were lived out in accordance with the narrative conventions of a local culture? Is the inner pattern of marriage a drama or an actuarial calculation?

Scheibe's exposition of the dramaturgical standpoint is complicated by the way he runs together two senses of "the dramatic." In one sense, the idea of life as a drama draws on plays or films for analytical concepts. We look for staging, props, costumes, plots, an audience, the critics, the director, and so on. This was the methodology of Goffman's famous book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and most of his later work too. The same analytical technique was used in Elizabethan times by Ben Johnson as a device for commenting on the forms and management of social life. In our time, the parallel between theater and life was drawn by both Kenneth Burke and by Nicolas Evreinov. Scheibe intercuts this sense of the dramatic with another quite different notion: drama as life lived in an excited and highly lit up way. Here we have the person who dramatizes everything. In a number of discussions, Scheibe points to the importance of this highlighting in, for example, the roles of marriage ceremonies and of university graduation rituals. I initially thought this blending of the two senses was the result of muddled thinking, but it soon became clear that the fusion was carefully thought out through observation on how the dramas of life dramatize.

Watching the drama.

Throughout the book, Scheibe reminds us of the dynamic character of human life. Much psychology seems unrealistic because it freezes the moment in an attempt to extract some universal principle that, it is assumed, must underlie the phenomena in question. But what if there are no such principles, except at such a high order of abstraction that they have absolutely no explanatory value? Rituals and ceremonies, as staged by people of local cultures, are the means of transformation, the sites of change, and the instruments of the dynamics of everyday life. Seeing drama as both staging and highlighting enables the psychologists imbued with this vision to understand how real life unfolds.

Of course, at any moment a gap can open up between what a person thinks and what that person does unthinkingly. What was once "natural" comes to seem to be a performance. This raises the most fundamental question one can ask about the trope "life as theater." How is the seriousness of life to be understood in the light of the contrived and apparently nonserious character of the actual theater? Goffman called the shift from the playful to the serious a key change. The difference lies in attitude rather than in the conventions as to what is to be done. Once we have adopted a "frame," or as Scheibe calls it "a box," we are able to act in a determinate way and as insiders, seriously. But the possibility of the gap remains. There is a moral ambiguity about both life and theater. Too much self-consciousness in life can lead to manipulation, contrivance, and inauthenticity. Life is a moral matter. And if psychology is to pretend to be true to life, it cannot adopt the stance that the human being is a mechanism.

Throughout the book Scheibe uses the dramaturgical standpoint to offer some telling social criticism. For example, he points to the hollowness of ways of life driven almost wholly by the atavistic needs to achieve "enough" that have spilled over into excess. False piety thrives but so does the genuine respect for good.

The dramaturgical stance is closely allied to the fruitful idea of the social construction of psychological states and conditions—the appearance in some discourse of ways of classifying people that develop into seemingly solidly based empirical categories. Why are there now so few cases of schizophrenia? Not because the condition has ceased to be common, but because our definition of what counts as schizophrenia has changed. Schizophrenia was developed out the old dementia praecox, flourished for a while, and has now all but vanished; it joins demonic possession among the relics of classificatory schemes that seemed to offer not only robust categories but powerful explanations as well.

Toward the end of the book, Scheibe muses on the problem of getting psychology to realize how much benefit would accrue from adopting the dramaturgical standpoint. As one who has tried to accomplish the same task, but with a great deal less charm than *The Drama of Everyday Life* displays, I can reassure him. Psychologists won't listen because they are locked

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into their own little boxes. Like the apocryphal savants at Pisa who refused to look through Galileo's telescope, they will not read Scheibe's fascinating and subtle book. The loss is theirs.

A DAY OUT: ASTRONOMY

The Heavens in a Jewel Box

Jay M. Pasachoff

A major planetarium is a thing of beauty for the eye and for the mind. The most famous planetariums in the United States, including the Hayden in New York, the Adler in Chicago, and the Griffith in Los Angeles, were all built in the 1930s. They have since transported numerous children and adults into the world of space and inspired many of today's scientists.

The American Museum of Natural History in New York responded to the new millennium by ripping down the art deco Hayden Planetarium and building a 21st- (or perhaps 22nd-) century piece of architecture in its place. This structure, the Rose Center for Earth and Space, contains the new Hayden Planetarium. The project cost over $200 million, which came almost entirely from private parties. The *New Yorker*'s architecture critic, Paul Goldberger, called the result "a temple of serene geometries, perhaps the purest piece of monumental architecture built in the United States since the Washington Monument."

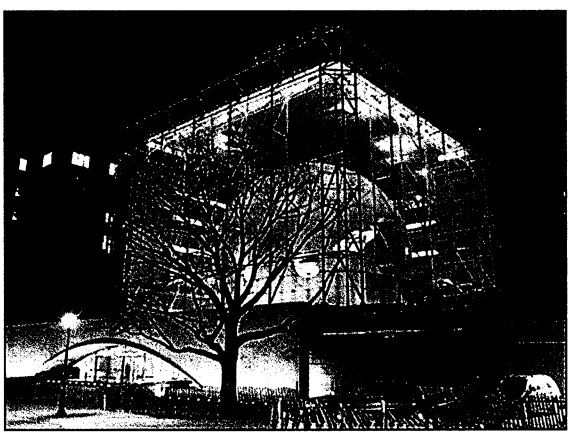
The architect, James Stewart Polshek, had the idea of extending the planetarium's hemispheric dome into a complete sphere, which now contains the new Zeiss IX projector above a simulation of the Big Bang. The Hayden Sphere, 87 feet in diameter, is visible through the two all-glass walls of the cube that surrounds it. The sphere rests on a ring stand much like those used to hold chemistry glassware above Bunsen burners. The space beneath the sphere houses exhibits on the universe, galaxies, stars, and planets. These include coverage of such topics as comparative planetology and planetary rings, and a whirling black-hole simulation. The 15.5-ton Willamette meteorite has a place of honor, as it did in the old planetarium.

The Rose Center is a hot ticket in New York; 22,000 people visited it on Easter Sunday alone. The management could improve the handling of crowds. They might start by clarifying the alternatives available to visitors and recommending paths through the exhibits. But the experience remains a memorable one, and it impressed the busload of students and friends from Williams College who joined me for a weekday visit.

Rose Center for Earth and Space
American Museum of Natural History
Central Park West at 81st Street, New York, NY 10024. www.amnh.org/rose/

We first went up to the second floor walkway that hugs the center's glass walls. It illustrates the relative scale of the cosmos, with objects at each successive station smaller by a factor of ten. The Hayden Sphere is used repeatedly as a reference scale. For example, models of the eight planets are scaled to the sphere as the sun. (Neil deGrasse Tyson, the director, has demoted Pluto and not included it.) A crowd piled up near the end of the walkway before we eventually entered, in groups, the lower part of the sphere. There, we gathered around a central cauldron for a 3-minute simulation of the Big Bang; we looked down at the explosion while lights flashed and sound thundered around us.

From this show, we proceeded down a timeline ramp that spirals around the sphere.



Sky box at night.

Here the 13-billion-year history of the universe is displayed with photographs that show objects of different "look-back times," arranged in order of decreasing redshift. An introductory plaque explains that the greatest redshifts correspond to the most distant objects. But I feel, as others have noted, that this important discussion should be larger, more prominent, and impossible to escape so each visitor will understand what is shown along the ramp. Dramatically, all of human history is represented by a hair's breadth at the bottom.

Next we waited more than a half-hour for our reserved-time admission to the Space Show—not just a demonstration of the stars overhead but a tour through space from different perspectives. The wait could have been a more pleasant and interesting experience. The information on overhead video screens about astronomy and observatories and the subsequent self-test did not add much, and the inadequate seating and lack of a schedule of actual entry times left the crowd restless. I also missed the orrery that was above the waiting area in the former planetarium.

Soon after we were ushered into the magnificent, 422-seat planetarium theater, the lights were dimmed. The old New York City skyline familiar to Hayden veterans is, unfortunately, gone, but we gloried in the nightfall and the rising and setting pinpoint images of stars. The new Zeiss system's fiber optics provide individual projection for each star, in an accurately graded series of brightness. Tyson later told my group that had we brought binoculars, we could have seen more detail on 82 deep-sky objects, such as the Andromeda galaxy.

In the theater's inaugural show, however, the stars appear as pinpoints for only the first two minutes. The rest of the 20-minute presentation uses the all-sky set of video projectors to explore the size and scale of the universe (the powers-of-ten theme again). Highlights are the journey through the colorful gas of the Orion Nebula and the final trip home through a black hole, during which transducers make the seats vibrate with the accompanying low-frequency sounds. The show is well done for what it is, but the IMAX movie *Cosmic Voyage* did powers of ten better. Although the overall impression is dazzling, the images are just too fuzzy after the fiber-optics stars. Tyson knows that these stars are too good to be so hidden. He plans to add an all-star show in a few months, when the system is further debugged; this might be presented a few times a week. He also promises that the second major space show, to be available next spring, will include more use of the Zeiss system.

Tyson is justly proud of the scientific orientation of the new Hayden Planetarium. A half-dozen research slots have been opened by making the astronomers part of the curatorial staff of the American Museum of Natural History, and some top-notch scientists have been hired. We can hope that Tyson, his staff, and the Rose Center will continue to inspire their visitors. Young people enthralled by visits here in 2001 may grow up to participate in and to support the science of the 21st century.

CREDIT: D. FINNIN/AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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