

## **Book Review**

# **UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE**

**by Trevor Butt**

Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004, 193 pages

reviewed by Phil Salmon

How, and in what terms are we to understand people? In this cogent and wide-ranging discussion, Trevor Butt argues for an existential-phenomenological psychology. Early chapters offer an unusually clear, wide-ranging and careful consideration of approaches in which personality has been a key concept. This includes theorists such as Eysenck, who, though highly influential in the 1950s and 1960s, seldom features in contemporary writing. It also covers object relations theory, where appropriate but seldom-made distinctions are drawn between diverse contributory theorists. A particular strength of this section is its consideration of the socio-historical context of the writers it features. In the analysis of this group of theorists as ultimately too a-social, critical judgements are made from a fundamentally fair, even sympathetic standpoint.

The book then turns to the explicitly social psychology of social constructionism. Here again, there is a lucid exposition of key concepts, and of the various takes on these by influential theorists. As with the more individualistic approaches considered earlier, Butt illustrates these ideas with a variety of clinical or everyday examples. It is in relation to the sense of self - foregrounded in probably the most powerful chapter – that social constructionism is found wanting. In its story of apparently non-agentic products of social determinism, this line of thought offers, in Butt's terms, only a mirage of persons.

Yet, so runs Butt's argument, any adequate understanding must concede the significance of social engagements and social discourses. It is here that an existential-phenomenological psychology, with its incorporation of Mead's ideas

and those of the hermeneutic philosophers, can potentially marry the social with the personal. This kind of understanding can also allow the existence of agency alongside that of social influence. With its emphasis on inner reflections and pre-reflective engagement, this psychology does not separate personal from social. And its focus on the human order recognises the significance of embodiment and living-in-time.

Writings on phenomenology and on existentialism have typically been abstruse. Not this book, which is consistently fresh, direct and lucid, abjuring technical language for even the most difficult concepts. Though theoretically weighty, it wears its learning lightly. There is one problem in this. The economy and fluency of the writing at times draw the reader along too easily, where the sheer density of ideas needs a lengthier exposition. For the same reason though, its accessibility makes it seem suited to any intelligent reader, although its substance probably demands at least a second year undergraduate audience. And certainly it is a book for academics: a read that is both enjoyable and deeply thought-provoking.

## **REFERENCE**

Salmon, P. (2004). Review of: Butt, T. (2004). *Understanding People*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 1, 21-27

(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp04/salmon-butt04.pdf>)

Received: 25 Jan 2004 - Accepted: 25 Jan 2004 - Published: 31 Jan 2004