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Letters

Biochemistry and behavior

In his letter (Jan. 1) critical of your article
"Childhood Autism Linked to Brain Allergy" (SN:
11/27/82, p. 340), Valentin Fikovsky expresses
fears that a biochemical approach to behavior
derives from "arbitrary" assumptions and
"casual reasoning."

To the contrary, a biochemical explanation of
psychiatric illness offers something that is tan-
gible — it can be seen, tested, repeated, and
probably changed. When were Freud's or any
other psychological theories ever subjected to
a double-blind crossover study? It has been dif-
ficult for psychology to pass such tests, because
its underlying assumption is one of psychogen-
esis (originating in the mind). It can never be
proved or disproved; one can only believe or
disbelieve. I would hardly be the first to venture
that the hundreds of psychological theories
that abound originated with limited basis in the
minds of therapists as well as patients. This
brings psychology dangerously close to an un-
provable belief system, otherwise known as re-
ligion. It's time we distinguished between what

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Cover: Cast in science fiction as vicious sea monsters, few giant
squid have been available for scientific study. This 450-pound
specimen, stranded in 1980, is now on display at the Smithsonian
Institution's Museum of Natural History. (Photograph by W.B. Coltin,
Newburyport Daily News)



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might be proved and what can only be guessed
at.

This is meant to neither deny psychological
causes or aspects of illness nor to deperson-
alize patients into nothing more than
biochemicals. We are as individual in
biochemistry as in personality, requiring the
same nutrients and biochemicals but in greatly
differing amounts. By recognizing and under-
standing the chemical nature of behavior, we
can treat many problems quickly instead of
futilely asking someone to talk out their pro-
blems for 20 years. Once the presence or absence
of a chemical problem has been determined,
that which has not been chemically induced
can be treated in a variety of ways. Let's not ex-
clude any single approach for another, regard-
less of how convinced we are of its virtue.

Jack Challem
Santa Fe, N.M.

Too good to be true

Your article on caffeine ("Good news for caf-
feine consumers," SN: 11/13/82, p. 311) was truly
"almost too good to be true." Caffeine certainly
can modify behavior, but not all of the changes

are for the good of the consumer. Significant al-
terations of sleep patterns have been reported
after consumption of only two or more cups of
regular instant coffee at bedtime (Karacan, et
al., *Pharmacol. Ther.*, 20: 682, 1976). It has been
linked to restless leg syndrome and chronic an-
xiety (Lutz, *J. Clin. Psychiatry*, 39: 693, 1978) and
to the delayed sleep phase syndrome ... by
other authors. Not all researchers are as en-
thusiastic about its use by the ton in this coun-
try as your report implies. Cancer is not the only
area of concern for the caffeine consumer. Get-
ting a good night's sleep on a regular basis can
be precluded by inappropriate caffeine con-
sumption. Your readers should be given a more
balanced report in this area.

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