

WHAT IS SOMATICS?

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The Distinction between Soma and Body

SOMATICS IS THE field which studies the soma: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception. When a human being is observed from the outside—i.e., from a third-person viewpoint—the phenomenon of a human body is perceived. But, when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human soma.

The two distinct viewpoints for observing a human being are built into the very nature of human observation which is equally capable of being internally self-aware as well as externally aware. The soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different but because the mode of viewpoint is different: It is immediate proprioception—a sensory mode that provides unique data.

It is fundamental to recognize that the same individual is categorically different when viewed from a first-person perception than is the case when he is viewed from a third-person perception. The sensory access is categorically different as are the resultant observations.

The categorical distinction between these two viewpoints establishes the ground rules for all studies of the human species. Failure to recognize the categorical difference between first-person observation and third-person observation leads to fundamental misunderstandings in physiology, psychology, and medicine.

Physiology, for example, takes a third-person view of the human being and sees a body. This body is an objective entity, observable, analyzable, and measurable in the same way as any other object. The universal laws of physics and chemistry are brought to bear on this body, because—as an observed body—it richly displays universal physical and chemical principles.

From a first-person viewpoint, however, quite different data are observed. The proprioceptive centers communicate and continually feed back a rich display of somatic information which is immediately self-observed as a process that is both unified and ongoing. Somatic data do not need, first, to be mediated and interpreted through a set of universal laws to become factual. First-person observation of the soma is immediately factual. Third-person observation, in contrast, can become factual only by mediation through a set of principles.

It should be understood that this difference in data is neither a difference in truthful accuracy nor of intrinsic value. The difference is that two separate modes of cognition are irreducible. Neither mode is less factual or inferior to the other: they are coequal.

Psychology, for example, takes a third-person view of the human being and sees a body of behavior. This bodily behavior is an objective datum that is observable, analyzable, and measurable—as is any other behavioral datum. The universal laws of cause and effect, stimulus and response, and adaptation are brought to bear on the behaving body, because—as an observed body—it richly displays these behavioral principles.

But, from a first-person viewpoint, quite different data are observed. The proprioceptive centers communicate and feed back immediate factual information on the process of the ongoing, unified soma—with the momentum of its past, along with the intentions and expectations of its future. These data are already unified; they have no need to be analyzed, interpreted, and later formulated into a unitary factual statement.

Medicine, for example, takes a third-person view of the human being and sees a patient (i.e., a clinical body) displaying various symptoms that—when observed, analyzed, and interpreted according to universally known clinical principles—can be diagnosed, treated, and prognosed.

But, from a first-person viewpoint, quite different data are observed. The proprioceptive centers communicate and feed back immediate factual information on the continuous and unified past of the soma and its expectations for the future. The somatic appreciation of how this past led to ill health and how the future may restore—or not restore—health is essential to the full clinical picture. Ignorance of the first-person viewpoint is ignorance of the somatic factor that permeates medicine: the placebo effect and the nocebo effect.

Thus, the human being is quite unlike a mineral or a chemical solution in providing, not one, but two irreducible viewpoints for observation. A third-person viewpoint can only observe a human body. A first-person viewpoint can only observe a human soma—one's own. Body and soma are coequal in reality and value, but they are categorically distinct as observed phenomena.

Somatics, then, is a field of study dealing with somatic phenomena: i.e., the human being as experienced by himself from the inside.