



Peter Heusser  
Anthroposophy and Science – an  
Introduction

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As recently as the mid 1990's words such as "alternative" or "holistic" were used by conventional medical practitioners mainly to alert their clients to what is "unscientific" or even "quack". Fast forward a couple of decades and we witness a tremendous expansion of every type of holistic and patient-centered forms of care. Responding to popular demands, economic incentives and prospects for new avenues of scientific research, departments of complementary medicine continue to spring up in academic medical centers across the country. To boot, public opinion polls show increasingly that patients turn to complementary medicine to find what is missing in conventional medicine and demand greater access to complementary forms of treatment.

As much as the focus in the complementary medical research so far has been in establishing scientific proof of effect and safety of various methods and substances, little work has been done in conceptual integration of complementary methods into the framework of the conventional model. In fact, a gaping chasm remains between the conventional medicine-based concepts arising from a genetic/molecular approach as the ultimate cause of pathological events, and some traditional medical systems such as in Ayurveda, Chinese medicine, and Homeopathy where imbalance in non-material causes such as "prana", "chi" and "astral forces" are considered to be the causative factors.

This conceptual chasm is the main theme of the book by Peter Heusser M.D., Professor and Head of the Institute of Integrative and Anthroposophic Medicine at Witten/Herdecke Medical School, Germany. The material presented in the book was in fact part of his PhD dissertation

originally published in German in 2010. It has since been expanded and is now available to the English readers in a masterful translation by Lynda Hepburn.

The author skillfully argues that attempts to explain complementary medical concepts and therapies in terms of conventional pathophysiological events - or the wish by some, that they will in due course be “assimilated” into the mainstream medicine - will invariably fail. Equally utopic are reductionist attempts by conventional science to explain the phenomenon of consciousness, with their specifically human mental, emotional and moral dimension, on the basis of molecular occurrences in the brain. The very fact that human beings in their inner experience believe themselves to be far more than the sum of physical and chemical processes as touted by reductionist science, draws the public to seeking alternative explanations.

According to philosopher John Locke the phenomenal world can be divided into *primary* qualities which can be attributed to objects and quantified, and *secondary* qualities (qualia) such as colors, hearing, smell and taste, effects that the outer world produces in us as a result of sensory experience. On the basis of this division Immanuel Kant, one of the fathers of the prevailing theory of knowledge maintained that, what is observed by the senses - the *percept*, and the idea of what is observed, or the *concept*, are equally necessary for cognition. However, the way these two *subjective* categories are combined to form “objective reality” is traditionally solved by arbitrarily assigning *objective* reality to what can be quantified (measured) in nature and/or in the human organism, whereas the psychological experiences such as feelings, intentions and sensations are considered *subjective*, and therefore only of secondary importance. The beneficial side of this dualistic development has been an unparalleled expansion in the analysis of material structures and molecular interactions in the living organisms. The downside of this paradigmatic choice, on the other hand, has been that the phenomena of life can only be viewed *externally*, i.e. mechanistically, even if considered at a molecular/atomic level. Thus the above mentioned “non-material” causal factors such as life, prana, chi, soul, spirit...cannot be treated as independently operative forces, as is the case in traditional medical systems, but are considered merely an *epiphenomenon* of physicochemical and molecular interaction, not amenable to scientific inquiry! This leads to “scientific reductionism” not only in the field of chemistry and physics, but also in biology and medicine.

What then is the prospect for bridging the chasm and bringing together these two rather different realms of human experience, the outer and the inner world, into an organically integrated anthropology and thus into a unified system of medicine? To answer this question, the author takes us to the root of scientific method – the science of knowing or epistemology. Notwithstanding the fact that historically, the impending “chasm” was recognized as a fundamental flaw in scientific method by great thinkers such as Hegel, Fichte, Schiller and others, they could not compete with the rapidly gaining reductionist Cartesian method. They nevertheless paved the way for a new direction in science ultimately developed by J. W. Goethe and set on sound epistemological basis by Rudolf Steiner. One of the core tenets of this phenomenological approach to science is that passive thinking, i.e. spontaneously appearing thoughts, are no different from perception, which is “a given”, similar to an image given by the eye, or a tone perceived by the ear. However, when active, this thinking can become an organ of perception for laws of nature, as is the case in mathematical or any scientific thinking. It is such active thinking, the “mind’s eye” (Goethe) or “intuitive thinking” (Steiner) which leads to

*objective empirical* knowledge. “What is crucial for this kind of empirical knowledge is not the theory, but its agreement with the actual experience, with manifest reality”, says Peter Heusser.

Steiner further maintained that apart from physical laws active in inorganic nature, there are additional classes of emergent laws which apply to living, psychological (soul related) and spiritual elements in nature and humanity. Unlike the more recently developed concept of self-organization which proposes the emergence of life and consciousness from matter, “from below”, Steiner’s concept of emergence encompasses lawfulness “from below” as well as “from above”. Applied to substances, for example, these laws are in agreement with views of modern physics and provide the key for understanding of homeopathic effects. These are the laws that were intuited by medical practitioners of ancient mystery traditions, but have been redefined in the language of contemporary western science.

Heusser points out that Steiner moreover described in detail the method by which the faculty of “intuitive thinking” can be developed for perception of these non-physical forces effective at four levels of organization: physical, life (etheric), soul (astral) and spiritual. This fourfold conception of the world and of the human being forms the basis for a new anthropology stemming from western scientific tradition by which health and illness result not merely from faulty molecular processes, but arise from a dynamic interaction of individual’s physical, living, soul and spiritual organizations at the level of a cell, organ, or entire organism. In this sense, evidence based on calculations of statistical probabilities used in ordinary research is at best an approximation of *outer* observable events but does not reveal the *inner lawfulness* of these connections. Thus from the epistemological point of view, the concept of “evidence-based medicine” needs to be revised and expanded to “cognition-based medicine”.

Only when taking into account the sum-total of these activities, says the author, will there be a true “holistic” or “integrative” approach to science and medicine. This new anthropology which arose from systematic work of the above-named thinkers is the foundation of anthroposophic medicine, a spiritual-scientific extension of natural scientific medicine.

According to Heusser, “human medicine is not simply a matter of physics, chemistry, biology...and in spite of similarity between humans and animals, not a matter of zoology either, but a matter of human anthropology.” The specifically human element which is repeatedly challenged, or has largely disappeared from conventional anthropology, finds its full validation in anthroposophic medicine. In addition to being the focal point of individual self-consciousness, the human spirit is the unconscious organizing principle, much like a concert master presiding over the physical, life and soul. It is also the bearer of specifically human traits such as the uprightness, speech and memory.

Since its founding in the 1920’s Anthroposophic medicine has become a world-wide movement with clinics in a number of countries and hospitals in Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. Opportunities for post-graduate medical, nursing and artistic therapy education exist. A vast amount of primary and secondary literature on Anthroposophic medicine and related sciences has been systematically reviewed in the book, but unfortunately, much of the material is available only in German.

In summary, this book offers an excellent review of historic development and constructive critique of the scientific method in biology and medicine. By providing a firm bridge between the physical and psychological, “Anthroposophy and Science” offers a unique starting point for a scientific debate at academic level, between complementary-holistic and conventional systems of medicine. It will serve as a valuable resource to all who are interested in epistemological and ethical questions in medicine and its organic development into the future.

Branko Furst, MD  
Associate Professor  
Dept. of Anesthesiology  
Albany Medical College  
Albany, NY, 12208

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