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Hahnemann's Concept of Rational Therapeutics: Principles and Problems

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ABSTRACT: Since homeopathy was conceptualized as rational therapeutics by its founder, Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), it is based not only on empiricism, but also on principles whose inner coherence has to be in accordance with logical rules. Accordingly, the rationality of Hahnemann's therapeutics cannot be proved by case studies alone, but by an attempt at reconstructing the leading principles of his concepts. In the reconstruction demonstrated below seven logical steps can be distinguished:

1. The starting-point of Hahnemann's endeavor to rational therapeutics
2. The criticism of former principles of therapeutics
3. The scientific approach and its limits in therapeutics
4. The extension of the approach in order to comprehend further experiences
5. The arguments for the fundamental possibility of rational therapeutics
6. The revelation of the Principle of Similars as a maxim to cure dynamic diseases
7. The elaboration of the homeopathic doctrine of healing dynamic diseases

The history of homeopathy shows that most of the points in dispute among homeopaths and allopaths came about because of the lack of knowledge of the principles and limits of their own respective concepts.

KEYWORDS: Hahnemann, Homeopathy, Rationalism, Empiricism, Philosophy, Principle of Similars, Scientific Approach.

Of all the systems of medical practice which emerged in the history of medicine towards the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, homeopathy is the only one which today can still look back on a continuous tradition of its practical-therapeutical application and which still has a wide following. In fact, here and now it has once again brought together colleagues from many countries and different continents. There may be more than one explanation as to why this is the case. However, apart from the countless cures which have been attributed to homeopathy, surely one of the most fundamental reasons must be its claim to rationality. If in fact homeopathy were nothing else but pure empiricism, on the one hand a conflict of principles between the experiences of homeopaths and those of allopaths could never have evolved (because then one observation would be just as good as another). On the other hand, the mere accumulation of empirical knowledge could scarcely amount to an independent branch of medical science, let alone a branch of medical science which distinguishes itself from others by virtue of its special

concepts and thus claims a place in its own right in the history of medicine.

Through its claim to rationality, homeopathy elevates itself from the field of pure empiricism (where every new observation relativises the one made previously) to the level of principle with an inner coherence which has to be based on certain logical rules. Since Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) founded homeopathy as a form of rational therapeutics, the cogent nature of his concept cannot be demonstrated simply by a presentation of causistic records, but rather only by attempting a rational reconstruction of its principles.

In contrast to strictly historical accounts of homeopathy, which usually do appraise the originality of its founder but not the cogency of his special concept as such, let us attempt here to sketch the main outline of the course of the logically reconstructible steps which brought Hahnemann to the conception of his rational therapeutics, the results of which he finally published in "Organon der Rationellen Heilkunde" in the year 1810.

1. The starting point of Hahnemann's efforts to establish rational therapeutics

a) During the Era of German Enlightenment, which influenced Hahnemann's convictions throughout his entire life, the arts and sciences took enormous steps forward whereby philosophy, literature, and the natural sciences in particular blossomed to what at the time seemed an unsurpassable degree. The motto of Immanuel Kant "Sapere aude" (Was ist Aufklärung? Berl. Wschr. 1784) aptly describes that general striving as never before to penetrate all realms of life with the human mind.

b) In the field of medicine this attitude also stimulated the development of individual theories and speculative explanations. Whilst various systems of medical practice and schools of thought came into fashion at this time, the actual treatment of diseases remained merely a "conjectural art." In view of this general pluralism of methods and the absence of any generally accepted principles there was a considerable degree of uncertainty at the sick man's bedside.

c) In Hahnemann's view it was perfectly in order that a doctor—as a "historian of Nature"—should also be very interested in theories, but in his capacity as a "healer" he should only be concerned with a clear concept for the treatment of actual existing patients. Also, in fields not directly related to medicine, Hahnemann himself only carried out research which, ultimately, could be related to therapeutic purposes, and indeed all his efforts in the context of medicine were directed towards the goal of establishing therapeutics by which diseases could be cured not only swiftly, gently, and permanently, but also reliably and rationally.

However, before he could proceed any further he first had to identify and overcome the obstacles which had hitherto blocked the path to certainty in therapeutics.

2. Criticism of the former principles of therapeutics

a) As far as the profound knowledge of the ingredients of the medicinal preparations used in his day was concerned, Hahnemann discussed their manufacture in detail in his "Pharmacists' Lexicon" and also went on to expose their adulterations at some length in another work. In doing so he pointed out the importance of clear definitions and an unambiguous

nomenclature as well as the non-interchangeability of individual medicinal herbs, which logically ruled out the possibility of surrogates. Mixtures of different medicinal drugs should never be used in therapeutic practice. One single remedy should always be applied. Further, the physician had to be sure that his patient was actually taking the prescribed drug if his own observations were to contribute something to reliable pharmaceuticals.

b) In Hahnemann's day the knowledge of the actual nature of diseases was extremely limited. Not surprisingly, therefore, there were often disagreements regarding their pathological classification. Hahnemann saw this as all the more reason for the need to define and differentiate cases of illness on as exact a basis as possible, and whilst doing so not to let himself be influenced by speculation regarding their cause, or by school dogmas or superstition.

c) Vaguer still, because even less comprehensible, were the reasons for the hitherto commonplace use of certain remedies in the treatment of certain morbid states. The obscure origins of general medical prescription uncovered by Hahnemann consisted at first either in sheer chance, in "parempirical" lay practice, in subjective beliefs—such as the doctrine of signatures, or later in speculations on the basis of natural philosophy concerning the intrinsic nature of diseases and medicines. But since a rational system of therapeutics could scarcely be based on chance or the undiscerning judgement of laymen, and since neither superstition nor unfounded theories could provide a solid basis for the human mind, Hahnemann rejected all these principles.

Instead, he turned to the scientific approach initiated by Francis Bacon (*Novum Organon*, 1620) which sought to uncover Nature's secrets through inductive conclusions arrived at on the basis of systematic experiments.

3. The scientific approach and its limits in curative medicine

a) Through the medium of chemistry, Hahnemann's favorite science, with a view to establishing facts about drugs, it was possible to analyse the constituent ingredients of the substances in question, to expose adulterations, and to refine dosing procedures. Only once they had been defined or standardized chemically could curative drugs be compared and contrasted scientifically in comparative

studies. However, Hahnemann found that the actual curative properties of the drugs could not be explained in terms of chemistry because these curative properties essentially only became apparent under the influence of the living organism, and, thus, ultimately chemistry was "outmatched by vitality."

b) Patients' symptoms could also sometimes be traced back to mechanical or chemical causes: gallstones, bladder calculus, accidentally swallowed acid, bone fractures, etc. Assuming corresponding homogeneity of the substrate in question, for the chemical or mechanical-surgical removal of these causes, absolutely comparable investigations could be carried out and would ultimately enable the optimization of these therapies. Yet, however much Hahnemann recognized the validity of this approach in the case of unmistakable causes of medical complaints, he found that most morbid states could not be reduced to mechanical or chemico-physical causes. Hahnemann used the term "dynamic" causes here to express the different nature of these morbid states.

c) As far as the relationship between mechanical or chemical causes of a morbid state and its therapy was concerned, Hahnemann saw that there was general agreement: removal of suppurating splinters or accidentally swallowed poison, cleaning of wounds, etc. If complaints were clearly attributable to one particular and recognizable cause, then these complaints should have ceased once the said cause had been removed. However, Hahnemann found that this did not apply in the case of the so-called dynamic diseases. Because such diseases could not be reduced to mechanical or chemical causes, the scientific approach could at best influence only partial moments of a complex dynamic process but could not cure diseases as such.

In order to develop a therapy for the successful control of dynamic diseases as well, the realm of the scientific approach first had to be realized as insufficient and a new horizon opened.

4. Extending of the scientific horizon to account for new experiences

a) After Hahnemann had perfected his method for the preparation of the *Mercurius solubilis Hahnemanni*, since named after him, he observed when using this substance to treat venereal disease in 1789 that even minute quantities were sufficient to bring about a cure—provided that a "mercurial fe-

ver" could be provoked in the patient. Since, in view of the minuteness of the dosage, the possibility of any chemical effect of the mercury on the venereal poison could be discounted, it was here apparently a matter of stimulating a feverlike reaction in the organism. Although the concept of irritability as a capacity of the organism to produce a dynamic response to specific stimuli was clearly beyond the realm of mere mechanism and chemism, it did provide the means for a conceptual understanding of the course of dynamic diseases.

b) With a concept of the human body as an organism which reacts to stimuli, symptoms of disease needed no longer to be regarded as simply the consequence of a machine's damage. Instead, now they could be seen as the product of a dynamic reaction on the part of an organism to the stimuli leading to disease. In the same way, the effects of drugs could be regarded as dynamic reactions on the part of the organism to the stimuli caused by the drugs. Considering the organism in this light implied both its entirety (and thus implied also that "local" diseases as such were a misconception) and its oneness (which meant that two stimulations could not prevail in the same organism simultaneously). If, however, one was to interpret the relationship between drug or disease stimuli on the one hand and the reaction on the part of the organism on the other in mechanistic terms only, everything therapeutically would have had to be infinitely varied, as in the case of Brownianism.

c) Opposed to this, cases of spontaneous cures could be noted from time to time during the observation of the course of diseases, and this virtually amounted to the recognition in principle of the existence of a self-healing tendency in Nature. But the healing of disease in this manner could not be accounted for satisfactorily either mechanically or in terms of simple stimulation physiology. Instead, the higher, regulative idea of teleology had to be called in. The recognition of the self-healing power of Nature furthermore implied the dimension of her self-activity, since Nature here was assumed to be the subject. Incidentally, the conceptual elevation above the level of pure mechanics and chemistry in order to provide an explanation for experiences which cannot be accounted for in these terms alone does not discount this level totally: Clearly chemical-mechanical categories can adequately describe various individual

subreactions of the body as a moment of its entirety. However, teleological categories must be resorted to in order to explain the overall coordination of the single causal sequences occurring during the process of healing a disease by the organism. Indeed, such notions as health, disease, healing, etc., can only be understood teleologically.

5. Establishing in principle the possibility of rational therapeutics

a) Since the concept of a teleological ruling of Nature was immediately questioned by the observation of diseases which were apparently incurable, the notion of a purely organic teleology of Nature proved to be untenable. However, the fact that the efforts of "crude Nature" were not always adequate to cure diseases did not appear to Hahnemann as any reason to abandon his teleological ideas as such. The existence of supposedly incurable diseases rather appeared to him to have the purpose of spurring on the human spirit and human love to develop rational therapeutics with which it would be possible to control even these diseases.

b) But could it not be the case that, despite every effort on the part of the human spirit and the application of all human love, some diseases will still remain incurable forever? In order to discount this purely hypothetical question Hahnemann had to resort in the end to theological argumentation: Inasmuch as God on the one hand is both love and wisdom as well as the most consequent being ever, but on the other hand has allowed mankind to suffer disease, He was also obliged to provide means by which these diseases could be healed reliably and rationally. Since, as already pointed out, dynamic diseases could in principle not be traced back to any one simple material cause, it had to be possible to heal these diseases also without necessarily having to identify such a cause. As far as Hahnemann was concerned, this was an inference from his conviction that God only made possible that which was really necessary (just as He made the useless impossible).

c) Once now the possibility of rational therapeutics was recognized in principle, it was only a question of human love and mental effort and the right path would be found and practiced. With great enthusiasm and considerable sacrifice, Hahnemann set off on this path. Whilst sceptics and atheists amongst doctors resigned their therapeutical efforts relatively

lightly when confronted with hopeless cases, Hahnemann's trust in God and the confidence which he derived from this trust proved to be an effective counterweight to mental and spiritual gravity and thus as highly sensible from the practical-moral point of view.

The foundation proper of homeopathy was laid against this teleological-practical background.

6. Discovery of the Principle of Similars as a maxim for the treatment of dynamic diseases

a) If one considered the effects of medicines not as chemical processes taking place at certain parts of the human body, but rather as the result of a reaction between the organism in its entirety and the stimulus of a certain medicine, then this result would have been more clearly perceptible if the organism was not being subjected to other stimuli at the same time. The methodological exclusion of other additional disease stimuli when researching the healing powers of drugs led to the practice of conducting such tests only on healthy people. As far as the purity of these results was concerned, much more importance than before was now attached to restricting such provings strictly to one remedy at a time.

b) Furthermore, if diseases were regarded not simply as derailments of an otherwise normally functioning machine but in principle as reactions on the part of the organism to disease stimuli, observations for which there had hitherto been no explanation in terms of mechanics could now be accounted for. For example, the fact that one disease could be cured or suspended by the contracting of another could be explained by the notion that the stimulus of the first disease was either destroyed or suppressed by that of the second. The reason why smallpox could only suspend measles, mumps, and German measles, but heal cowpox, seemed to be that the former were dissimilar while the latter were similar diseases.

c) Since the organism could be transferred to a state of illness by stimuli of drugs as well as by stimuli of diseases, and since certain diseases causing similar states of stimulation could erase each other or heal each other, the same could be attempted with selected stimulations induced by drugs. In this case, the resulting disorders in the organism could be controlled much more efficiently than when caused by diseases. The fact that the symptoms which a drug

was able to induce in a healthy organism could be very similar to those induced by a disease was already known to Hahnemann from tests which he conducted with Peruvian Bark on his own body in 1790. These and other observations which he interpreted in the same light finally strengthened Hahnemann's conviction that he had hit upon a new healing principle for dynamic diseases. When he first published the principle "Similia Similibus" in the year 1796, he restricted its indication to those diseases for which a clear cause was neither recognizable nor removable, because otherwise first priority had to be given to the removal of the same.

7. Development of the homeopathic treatment of dynamic diseases

a) In order now to treat diseases with the right drugs in accordance with the Principle of Similars, the first step was to gain an overview of the dynamic medicinal powers of the substances available. Since it was not possible to research the capacity of drugs to influence the state of health of a human being either within the fields of mechanics or chemistry or in experiments with animals, this could only be tested on healthy human beings. The materia medica which was obtained in this way was based strictly in keeping with experimental methods and accurate observations made under constant frame settings and could thus be regarded as "the pure language of questioned Nature"—in contrast to the usual scientific research, and this is the crucial point, of "living" Nature. Since it was often difficult to distinguish spontaneously occurring symptoms from the proving symptoms, Hahnemann went on to develop exact methodological instructions covering matters ranging from the avoidance of suggestive questions to the strict observance of diet.

b) Now the symptoms of the patient's disease were researched during the anamnestic examination just as carefully as the proving symptoms induced by the drugs. Since such general symptoms as nausea, headache, diarrhea, etc., could be caused by almost any drug, it was mainly the less common symptoms of the patient which permitted an exact selection of the right homeopathic remedy. Accordingly, Hahnemann increasingly specified the valence of individual disease symptoms. Initially it was the general resemblance between the symptoms induced by diseases and by drugs respectively which was

important to Hahnemann. Later on it was particularly the strongest and the most trying, and then finally the most uncommon, peculiar and characteristic signs and symptoms which were to become of greatest importance to him when selecting the homeopathic remedy.

c) Logically, the consequent prescribing of drugs which themselves could induce similar symptoms to those already produced by the disease had to result in an initial worsening of the disease during treatment. With the object of allowing this deterioration to go only as far as necessary, and to keep it as slight as possible, from the year 1797 onwards Hahnemann went over to the practice of increasingly diluting the dosages given. To his surprise he found that there was no limit to the extent to which he could dilute homeopathic remedies beyond which they would no longer have any curative effect. At a later date when ideas of natural philosophy were beginning to carry greater weight in medicine, in order to lend this phenomenon—which he admitted he "did not understand himself"—greater plausibility, he spoke of the "potentizing" of medicinal power during the diluting and shaking process. As an empirical chance find—in contrast to the actual fundamentals of homeopathy which have just been discussed—this discovery has in no way been constitutive of Hahnemann's concept of rational therapeutics.

During the course of this attempt which has just been made to reconstruct the principles of Samuel Hahnemann's rational therapeutics, a number of logical steps could be distinguished:

1. As a starting point, on the one hand: a) Hahnemann's enlightening mind, and on the other b) the uncertainty prevailing in medicine from which c) the dynamism of the endeavor for a reliable and rational therapeutics was generated.
2. Hahnemann's criticism of the former principles of healing regarding a) the drugs used, b) the classification of diseases, and c) the reasons for prescribing certain remedies for certain diseases.
3. The scientific approach in researching a) the drugs, b) the material or chemical causes of diseases, and c) the causal therapies of these diseases.
4. Extending the scope of the scientific approach through recognition of a) the irritability of the organism, b) the entirety and oneness of the organism, and c) the self-healing power of Nature.
5. The argumentation for the possibility of ratio-

nal therapeutics in principle by a) abandoning straight teleology of Nature in favor of a teleological notion of human striving, b) taking a theological resort to God as the guarantor for the possibility of rational therapeutics, and c) Hahnemann's own concrete efforts in establishing and developing rational therapeutics.

6. Discovery of the Principle of Similars through

a) the concept of the effects of drugs as reactions of the organism to the stimuli caused by the drugs, b) the concept of morbid states as the result of reactions on the part of the organism to disease stimuli and also the observation that certain diseases could be cured by other similar diseases, and c) the imitation of these natural healings through the administration of drugs operating in a similar mode.

7. The development of the doctrine of homeopathic therapeutics by

a) systematic provings of drugs on healthy persons, b) the development of the hierarchisation of patient symptoms, and c) the gradual dilution and shaking of medicines.

So much for the reconstruction of the principles which guided Hahnemann when founding his rational therapeutics. The history of homeopathy and also that of classical medicine record that this concept was at first scarcely heeded by academic medicine, and also that even later on, despite the discussion of homeopathy in detail in countless apologies and criticisms, it was never recognised for what it claimed to be. However, it could be demonstrated that most of the disputes between homeopaths and allopaths on the one hand and homeopaths and so-called semi-homeopaths on the other have arisen from misunderstandings regarding the ontological status of the principles represented in either case.

For example, allopaths and so-called scientific-critical homeopaths believed that by calculating the active ingredient concentration of high potencies and applying the Loschmidt number to this they could at least reduce high potency homeopathy to absurdity. While homeopaths sometimes regarded the Principle of Similars not as a procedural maxim, but rather as a natural law (comparable with the law of gravity), allopaths logically demanded scientific verifications not only of the drug provings in healthy people, but also of homeopathic cures in the form of clinical double-blind studies. However, the carrying out of these nearly always ran into virtually insuperable difficulties. Other homeopaths came to regard their

activities as a complete alternative to scientific medicine—this being quite in contrast to Hahnemann's basic attitude, which was not to abandon the scientific approach until one had fully explored its limits within therapeutics as a whole, and even then only with the object of treating dynamic diseases.

Much more could be said about the difficulties which arose from the uncertainty on the part of both allopaths as well as homeopaths about the status of homeopathy within medicine as a whole, but this would extend beyond the scope of the present paper. However, as will be readily apparent from the few examples considered here, it was usually simply a case of lack of knowledge regarding both the basic principles and the limitation of one's own particular position which was in the way of a fruitful development and examination of homeopathy.

A discussion of the most important arguments which have been decisive in the history of homeopathy from the earliest of times from the point of view not only of their historical originality and place in time, but also from that of their philosophical justification and cogency in principle would certainly be an interesting and momentous undertaking. For the time being, however, this present attempt at a rational penetration of the underlying concept of Hahnemann's homeopathy may have been sufficient to sketch out the fundamentals for such a purpose.

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