

The esoteric and exoteric view of homoeopathy

*Two sides of the same coin?**

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Abstract

The terms 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' are used in German idealistic philosophy for the view from the inside (of the thinking process) and from the outside (on the thoughts that result). They can also be used to present new perspectives of homoeopathy.

Homoeopathic literature generally explains homoeopathy esoterically, i.e. as seen through the eyes of devoted practitioners, in terms of faithful obedience to universal laws, eternal truth, divine revelation, etc.¹ In contrast to this, critical medical colleagues usually look at homoeopathy exoterically as a system based on speculation and dogmatism with no clear evidence of efficacy. The reaction to the critics' exoteric view has divided homoeopaths into those who adopt the critics' way of reasoning and try to prove their own claims scientifically, and those who ignore external criticism and just go on with their medical work. Both positions are one-sided and have severe shortcomings. Nevertheless, they have decisive practical impacts.

Faithful adherence to the doctrine of homoeopathy is likely to help physicians get a maximum effect out of it that would probably not be possible to achieve with a sceptical attitude towards its principles.

Limiting one's horizon to a strictly esoteric view, however, may also be detrimental to the patient, if not balanced by a realistic exoteric view of one's own limitations. A self-critical attitude may curtail otherwise possible clinical results, but in the long run a mixed position will be safer for patients, and is the only way of communicating and collaborating with mainstream medicine and legislators. Keeping the balance between an esoteric and an exoteric view of homoeopathy is an art, dependent on virtues and bound to ethics. Homoeopathy is therefore not merely a medical method. Its wise application also involves spiritual, artistic and ethical dimensions on the part of the practitioner.

Introduction

Most of you will probably agree that life, especially human life, is a great mystery. Who can really claim to know himself, to have solved the riddle of birth and death, or even to say what love is, or virtue, understanding, or indeed health, illness and healing?

At the same time we are all sure that the world has meaning and try to understand the things that are important to us by using reason, apart from anything else in the hope that this may make life easier for us. The whole of our civilization and culture, both science and reli-

gion, are outcome and evidence of what people have considered reasonable through the ages. Attempts to design a rational picture of the world and create an ordered cosmos for oneself have differed widely in different eras and on different continents. This is particularly true for the process of philosophical reasoning which during the period of German idealism developed an impressive, independent existence in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770–1831) system of the absolute spirit.^{1a}

Hegel overthrew the traditional view that human subjects are using their capacity for understanding more or less as an instrument for the perception of particular objects. Hegel made the spirit itself the subject which develops in the medium of human thinking and

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actions, and in this, ultimately finds itself. This concept made it possible to present all spheres of cultural life (from logic and aesthetics to the philosophy of right, of history and of nature and the history of philosophy (which was to have its culmination in the philosophical system which had now been achieved)) as necessary stages in the evolution of the world spirit.

The essential problem with any appraisal of Hegel, is that there are only two positions one may take. You either accept that there is nothing that can be thought outside the spirit (not even a 'thing in itself'). One then finds oneself right inside the system, with no possibility of looking at it critically. The other position is to criticize Hegel's approach as a whole. Esoterically speaking, however, this is simply proof that one has not yet understood that there can be no thinking (including critical analysis) outside the thinking process (of the absolute spirit). Hegel himself called this last position 'exoteric'—i.e. looking at thoughts from outside, as it were, judging them without having gone into them. On the other hand the esoteric view of god, of identity, of insight and of concepts he considered to be 'philosophy itself'.² In so far as it is possible with Hegel's system to grasp any thought, esoterically, as one's own and assign it a place in the great whole, the system may be, exoterically, called totalitarian, embracing practically everything, with nothing external to it.

A very similar structure, formally speaking, may be seen in monotheistic religions. Thus when Jehovah made a covenant with his chosen people in the Old Testament and forbade them to have any other gods (Exodus 20,3), everything that happened from then on could, and indeed must, esoterically, be seen and explained as due to the actions of this one god. Anyone who, exoterically, accepted the involvement of other gods in working out the plan of salvation would be considered a heretic.

The same rationale runs like a thread through the history of Western science and medicine. Compared to ancient China, for instance, where the logical contradiction of different medical methods practised at one and the same time was never considered a particular problem, it seems to be a characteristic feature of Western scientific tradition that every new system is making a claim to be universally valid. In the West, acceptance of one paradigm has always meant rejecting all others.

Homoeopathy holds a prominent position within this tradition. Like Paracelsus (1493–1541) before him, its founder saw himself as the Luther of medicine^{2a} and did indeed create a kind of schism among the medical profession into 'homoeopaths' and 'allopaths'. Although in his early years Hahnemann (1755–1843) took his new *similia* principle merely as a maxim, with its practical usefulness ultimately dependent on empirical findings, later he grew more and more convinced of having discovered, with the aid of divine providence, nature's only true law of healing. With successes considered entirely due to this basic principle, and failures ascribed only to its faulty application, homoeopathy had become a comprehensive self-sufficient system. The master would consider those who, esoterically, put their whole trust in it for their medical work, his faithful disciples. Anyone who, exoterically, would occasionally also use other methods was accused of 'bastard homoeopathy' or 'unhomoeopathic crimes'.

With this uncompromising line taken by the founder of the new school, later generations were in a position similar to that of scripture exegetes in that they could do nothing but apply the supposedly eternal truths to new observations and discoveries in changing situations, thus differentiating the doctrine further. The starting point and goal of such further developments was, however, always the law of similars. One might attempt to determine empirically, which changes in specific variables would increase the number of homoeopathic cures, and develop more precise preconditions and conditions in the field of methodology. Examples of both may be found in the works of James Tyler Kent (1849–1916).^{2b}

Kent's homoeopathic philosophy

Kent was convinced that the only true, i.e. scientific and curative, method of healing was homoeopathy as presented in the 5th edition of Hahnemann's *Organon* (1833). In 30 years of homoeopathic practice, Kent found again and again that deeper and more detailed study of Hahnemann's directions improved his clinical results. He also made his own contributions to the homoeopathic method. In the revised editions of both his *Repertory* and *Materia Medica*^{2c} he specified the great value of general, peculiar, and mind symptoms compared to the relatively low value of

common symptoms and pathological changes. He would particularly use high potencies, considering them more clear-cut in their actions, administering them in a rising sequence (30th, 200th, 1m, 10m, 50m, cm, dm, mm), and gave detailed rules for making a second prescription, depending on the reaction to the first, attaching considerable value to Constantine Hering's (1800–1880) suggested direction and sequence of improvement in symptoms, as healing progresses.

Kent had evolved these and other rules on the basis of practical experience, but his thinking also followed a philosophy inspired by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772)^{2d}, knowledge of which he considered essential if homoeopathy was to be properly understood, actively encouraging his students to take it up. Kent differentiated between the worlds of matter and spirit, the first consisting of crude substances that could be perceived with the senses and quantified, the second consisting of invisible 'simple substances' that differed only in quality. Examples of such 'simple' or 'primitive' substances, which he considered to be a fourth, invisible state of matter, were electricity, gravitation, cohesion, heat or energy, magnetism, also light, intelligence and god. Material bodies were considered to be dead, with life and order given to them only by different degrees of 'influx' of 'simple substances'. He saw the real human being to be not the physical body but 'the internal of man', above all his will and understanding.

Applying these metaphysical views to medicine, Hahnemann's 'vital force' as well as the causes of disease and potentized medicines became 'simple substances'. Kent thought that it was possible, essentially, to enhance their inner quality to an infinite degree by potentization. Every proved drug, he said, contains a particular image of man.³ Increased susceptibility to disease was considered to reflect an inner lack of order, that is, wrong will, thinking or actions. With general, peculiar, and mental symptoms, seen as part of the inner human being, a cure for the whole human being was achieved only with their disappearance rather than that of pathological symptoms.

Strict adherence to this philosophy meant, among other things, that a moralizing attitude developed, with illness considered to be due to sinfulness (psora to original sin, syphilis and sycois to immoral acts). Patients who practised contraception, for instance,⁴ or had no distinct individual symptoms,⁵ were considered

untreatable or incurable, and anyone not willing to keep a record of symptoms, was precluded from further treatment.⁶ Patients were not permitted to use palliative medication, even if symptoms were severe, and were asked instead to endure the aggravation of symptoms that might occur with homoeopathic treatment, etc. Physicians who were not prepared to demand these and other things of their patients were called 'simple-minded creatures' or 'grovellers in muck and mire',⁷ and told that to follow the law of homoeopathic cure was more important than the patient's life ('the death of a patient is nothing in comparison with violation of the law on the part of the doctor'⁸).

Some of his students clearly had problems in following him in every respect, and Kent therefore, also taught all the personal and philosophical premises he considered essential for his teachings to be fully understood. In the first place, he said, it needed self control 'in order to become a man' (worthy of respect),⁹ but also trust, faithfulness, humility, purity and innocence, as well as obedience to the truth and love of homoeopathy. He wrote that to assess a patient correctly, one must not only know one's *materia medica* and be a trained observer, but also have reached 'the highest that is of man' oneself, a level from which it is then possible 'to study all the gradations down to the lowest image of mankind'.¹⁰

Kent said that first of all, a student of homoeopathy must learn to fundamentally accept that the world is governed by laws which cannot be changed but at most be confirmed by experience,¹¹ that theology and homoeopathy 'cannot be divorced',¹² that divine providence must be recognized,¹³ with the word of God being accepted as historical,¹⁴ that 'there is absolutely but one way',¹⁵ that the law of similars has universal application,¹⁶ that homoeopathic doctrine has to be fully believed in as a fact¹⁷ and that homoeopathy is a perfect science.¹⁸ Kent equated freedom from prejudice with 'learning all the truths and all the doctrines of homoeopathy',¹⁹ and recognizing both its law and authority.²⁰ Anything that is not in accordance with the principle 'should not be admitted',²¹ particularly as 'one cannot afford to be liberal with principle'.²² To be able to resist the temptation to give non-homoeopathic medicines for symptomatic relief on occasion, it was considered to be necessary to let a new conscience grow up within oneself.²³

The keystone to this esoteric view of homoeopathy was Kent's circular definition of a homoeopathic remedy as the medicine that has truly cured the patient concerned,²⁴ so that (by definition) there cannot be homoeopathic remedies that do not cure.²⁵ If the hoped-for cure fails to arise, this is either due to the patient (indulging in vices, idiosyncrasy, etc.), the severity of the condition (terminal pathological stage, lack of reactivity, etc.), presumed allopathic treatment received earlier (suppression of symptoms, etc.), the incompetence of the homoeopath (choice of wrong medicine, wrong potency, too frequent repetition, etc.), impurity of the medicine (unreliable manufacturer, etc.), etc. etc. Whichever it may be, 'the law stands unimpeached'.²⁶

Criticism of Kent's approach

Kent's esoteric philosophy will seem utterly plausible to anyone who considers Hahnemann the greatest physician of all times, Kent a true Hahnemannian and the law of similars a God-given revelation. Taking a different view, however, say that of modern science, Kent's lack of regard for pathology, bacteriology, objective clinical symptoms and the pharmacology of crude, undiluted substances, his predilection for subjective and above all mental symptoms as criteria both for selecting the indicated medicine and assessing outcome, and the use of extremely high dilutions, would appear to be a withdrawal into a niche of medicine that allows no validation based on measurement. Exoterically speaking, key elements in Kent's approach would be, lack of objective assessment, of quantifiability, of reproducibility and of comparability with outcomes of other forms of treatment, all categories for which there is no room in Kent's esoteric philosophical cosmos. Instead of a continuous process of establishing scientific hypotheses and then verifying or falsifying them experimentally, Kent's approach, from the exoteric point of view, often begs the question, i.e. attempts to prove theses by means of other equally unproven theses (*petitio principii*). This does not come to notice much within the Kentian approach, as gaps in the logic are generally covered over with eloquent affirmative statements. It would also be possible to show, from the exoteric point of view, the naturalistic fallacy which arises when general metaphysical concepts (the world's conforming with natural laws, inner and outer aspect of

substances, etc.) are concatenated with concrete medical concepts and used as synonyms (law of similars as the upmost law of nature, general and peculiar symptoms representing the inner human being, etc.), a problem area which cannot even be perceived if the esoteric approach is taken.

Like Hegel, Kent might reply to his exoteric critics that they are simply in no position to understand the real active principles in life, and therefore incapable to penetrate his system adequately or follow it esoterically. Someone who had seen it to be true, would no longer criticize it, so that exoteric criticism always indicates lack of insight on the part of the critic. Apart from this logical immunization, Kent and his followers could, of course, esoterically speaking, refer to the many actual cures achieved through reliance on the law of similars. From the exoteric point of view, however, such cures may also be random, due to suggestion or to other (non homoeopathic) causes not yet known. Even the historical fact of the worldwide spread of homoeopathy, which varied enormously from continent to continent, can, on the one hand, esoterically, be seen as the result of fighting for recognition for the efficacy of homoeopathy, denied by the representatives of conventional medicine. On the other hand, exoterically, it can equally well be ascribed to widely differing political, social, economic, cultural, personal and national peculiarities in individual countries.

Both approaches are limited and biased, each clearly offering categories and arguments which the other does not include and cannot follow. Just as there is no position in space from which the whole of the earth can be seen at one glance, so, to use the analogy, assuming a particular standpoint gives one the opportunity to illuminate one specific aspect of an object, but also at the same time always obscures the other side of the coin. Every time we consider a particular point of view to be absolute, be it philosophical, political or medical, we inevitably lose the complementary reality.

Totalitarian systems present a glittering facade as long as everything conforms to the system, but a closer look reveals their shadow side when dealing with everything that lies outside the official frame-work. Data that cannot be integrated into a scientific system can generally be neutralised by ignoring, relativizing, reinterpreting, rationalizing or devaluing them, by denying, suppressing or

destroying them. Examples of this kind of defence mechanisms in medicine are the way the effects of homoeopathic remedies are attributed to placebo effects, but also Kent's statement that bacteria are not the cause but merely a product of disease, or the way he downplayed patients' suffering, however severe, if the absence of specific symptoms made it impossible to find a homoeopathic remedy.

Practical implications

Apart from these epistemological aspects, the relationship between the esoteric and exoteric approach to homoeopathy has also a practical dimension. Like in drug provings, individuals susceptible to particular views will also feel the effect of those views if they choose to follow them. Reading religious works and *belles lettres*, for instance, will calm the mind and have an elevating effect. Taking up the esoteric view of homoeopathy can have a similar effect, also engendering enthusiasm, confidence, perseverance, security, satisfaction, and pleasure in one's work. A homoeopathic practitioner with these attributes will show thoroughness in his study of *materia medica*, carefulness in visiting patients, concentration in assessing histories and prudence in prescribing. He will be less likely to give up in difficult cases, and will impress patients through his composure.

The more a physician is influenced by the exoteric view, however, the greater will be his potential for scepticism, mistrust, uncertainty, generalisation, lack of motivation and ultimately, often a superficial approach to history taking, analysis, and prescribing will result. Where no clear picture can be seen he will be more inclined to prescribe mixtures of homoeopathic medicines, often repeating them at short intervals or using conventional medication concurrently, and to change his regimen anxiously even in case of slightest aggravations.

From a theoretical point of view, the two approaches may seem harmless and equal in value, but they have considerable consequences for those who get caught up in them. Far from being neutral facts that may be looked up and compared in books found side by side on a shelf, they can be seen to be highly infectious germs, leading to a course of events which they are going to perpetuate, as keys that open new undreamt dimensions, or as a kind of vortex

that, the more it draws one in, the less it can be resisted. These images help us to see the problem of communication, let alone reconciliation between individuals who are each caught up in one particular approach. We have to resort to metaphors at this point because, categories for dealing adequately with dynamic phenomena of this kind cannot be found at the level of facticity and reproducibility.

The more we deviate from the narrow path as we walk a mountain ridge, the harder it will be to regain it. Minor deviations from the path will, of course, make it possible to study some of the nearby rock formations in more detail, but the best view of the whole is only gained whilst one is on the ridge, between the two abysses. Taking this as an analogy, how can we become aware of our own particular onesided view, discover the degrees of freedom enabling us to adopt different positions, experience opposing views, and ultimately find and reach the mountain peak from where we have a full view of both sides?

It usually needs training and a certain gift to acquire a technique. This presupposes a range of abilities (for example, capacities of concentration, understanding and differentiation) and virtues (for example, diligence, dedication, honesty). Each of these abilities and virtues can—of course—be trained individually. Their purposeful and skilled use and optimization of their relative proportions, however, is an art which is to serve only the set goal. In medicine, the aim of one's art, or skill, is to heal human beings. This implies an ethical dimension which requires the highest level of moral integrity on the part of the physician.

Thus, 'the physician's highest and only mission' is, and always will be, 'to restore the sick to health, to cure, as it is termed'.²⁷ If a reliable positive relationship existed between the esoteric view of homoeopathy and the cures achieved with it, it would also be his duty to make this view his own in the widest possible sense. If the only protection against an immodest encroachment of the esoteric approach that might be harmful to the patient, were to consist in balancing it with an exoteric view of homoeopathy, the physician would also be under an obligation to familiarize himself with this view. Critical review of one's own limitations, however, may dampen the optimism of a wholly esoteric approach, so that some of the healing powers connected with it may be reduced. Yet this more balanced approach

would still be the safest, considering that one might otherwise go beyond one's limits. In addition, homoeopathic physicians must be in a position to think and speak equally well in both esoteric and exoteric categories, if genuine communication is to be possible with academic medicine and the legislators, and homoeopathy is to be prevented from becoming a ghetto practice.

The greatest skill and art a physician can have, would ultimately be to maintain a balance between the esoteric and exoteric view of homoeopathy (both are important but dangerous if taken to excess). To be able to do this, physicians need a great number of abilities and virtues, including the courage to abandon the cosiness of indulging in an uncritical esoteric position and (for the sake of the patients) also consider exoterically its dark sides, limits, and inherent risks. Homoeopathy is thus not simply a method of practising medicine. Correct use of it clearly involves a whole sequence of spiritual, artistic and ethical dimensions on the part of the homoeopathic practitioner which should therefore be addressed and developed in homoeopathic training.

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- 2a See *The Lesser Writings of Samuel Hahnemann*. Coll. and transl. by RE Dudgeon. New York 1852. pp. 486 and 521.
- 2b See footnote 1.
- 2c Kent JT. *Repertory of the Homoeopathic Materia Medica*. Lancaster 1897–99, 2nd ed. 1908, 3rd ed. Chicago 1924, *Lectures on Homoeopathic Materia Medica*. Philadelphia 1905, 2nd ed. 1911, 3rd ed. 1923.
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- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
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- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 264.
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- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 385.
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- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
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- 24 Kent JT. *Lectures on Homoeopathic Philosophy*. Lancaster 1900. p. 236.
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