



Reflections

Sustainability as a challenge to therapeutics – The Hahnemannian and Gandhian approach

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability, i.e. the goal of maintaining a human-ecosystem equilibrium, is a comprehensive topic and suggestive ideal prompted by many current threats from and to humanity, such as climate change, environmental pollution, fatal drug reactions in modern medicine, and the like. Today, sustainable concepts are desperately needed, also in terms of medical treatment. Homeopathy offers an approach of rational and yet innocuous therapeutics, methodically not being reliant on prior animal testing and mass production of drugs, avoiding contamination of soil, air, or water, and toxic side-effects. It is based on a concept of specifically empowering the life-force of the patient to rid itself from pathogenic influences. Homeopathy, as outlined by its founder Samuel Hahnemann, may indeed be understood in a broader sense than just medicinal, and applied in a pedagogical, psychological, and political context as well. A similar methodically related approach may be found in Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of Satyagraha (holding onto truth) which also aims to specifically prompt and compel people to renounce their vices in a sustainable way. Both ways of healing in a moral sense, however, rest on premises whose plausibility has increasingly been questioned in the recent past. Thus, the waning appreciation of Hahnemann's and Gandhi's mindset is mirroring unsettling changes in the world's socioeconomic constitution rather than indicating its putative ineptitude to achieve sustainability on a global scale.

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Introduction

In the recent past, a popular joke has attained a macabre relevance: two planets meet each other, the one says to the other: what a sight you are, aren't you well? The other responds: I have *homo sapiens*! The first one replies: Oh, I know the feeling, I also had it. This too will pass! –

Joking and humor may indeed serve as liberating valves when sensitive and responsible-minded humans have to face, on a secular level, the issue of sustainability, a suggestive ideal and aspiring task whose current actuality is just mirroring the serious condition of the globe today. No doubt, sustainability is a vital and far-reaching topic.

Things have changed tremendously in the past decades, and the process of change is still accelerating. Parallel to expanding industries, markets, and mass consumption worldwide, everybody may experience a steady growth of inequality, precarity, and injustice in a socioeconomic respect; warfare, fraud, and populism in politics; cruelty, gluttony, and callousness, as in industrial animal husbandry, in ethical and cultural regard; and in terms of environmental pollution plastic, radioactive, and industrial waste, increase of greenhouse

gasses in the atmosphere, Ozone depletion, clearing of forests, genetic manipulation of food, soil and water contamination, etc.

Enlarging upon the issue of climate change, it may be recognized that we do have global warming, due to an anthropogenic greenhouse effect, and everybody may observe its sequels, such as the melting of glaciers and polar ice caps, rising of sea levels, decline in insects, species extinction, or the increase of extreme storms, rain-falls, floods, heat waves, and forest fires in the last years. Attempts to handle these devastating problems, for example, by emissions trading, climate engineering, or by one country or continent dumping its waste onto another may be unconvincing emergency solutions and carry the additional risk of finally proving to be counterproductive.

Proceeding to the issue of medicine, a similar critical reality may be revealed. Unquestionably, modern medicine has brought unprecedented benefits in some fields, such as public health, surgery, intensive care, or the like. However, with the expansion of pharmaceutical-technical industries, markets, and professional corporations, modern medicine increasingly has become a profitable part of Big Business, always at risk of being determined by economic interests rather than by its original medical task and mission. Hospitals may be run primarily as “for-profit” companies, drugs marketed irrespective of known adverse side-effects, clinical studies manipulated, doctors corrupted, new diseases invented, and new fears and desires created, etc.^{1–4} Meanwhile, the incidence of fatal adverse drug reactions has been assessed to be alarmingly high.^{5–11}

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As Peter Gøtzsche estimates, “in the United States and Europe, drugs are the third leading cause of death after heart diseases and cancer”.¹²

If sustainability is to be viewed as humanity's target goal for maintaining a human-ecosystem equilibrium (homeostasis) and of preserving nature's resources in the long run, the findings mentioned thus far may indicate that humankind has strayed off course and is obviously on the way to missing that goal. It seems as if the world is out of tune, as if the ruling classes of humanity have lost control or responsibility of what they are doing – in spite of all cultural achievements so far, such as rationality, science, economics, ethics, philosophy, religion, and the like.

In seemingly deadlocked situations like this, in search for alternatives, it may be advisable not to keep rushing forward even faster and stronger, but rather take a step back to gain a broader overview and widen one's horizon. In fact, the history of medicine as well as theory of medicine may comprise and point out medical systems that might, rather than the modern economy-based one, be better suited to meet the claims of sustainability.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy, for instance, the doctrine of treating patients on the basis of the Principle of Similars, is an approach towards human suffering that may be classified as holistic, rational, phenomenologic, semiotic, heuristic-hermeneutic, personal, and human.¹³ Methodologically, its main features are so-called provings of medicinal substances with voluntary human beings, a meticulous individualizing anamnesis (case-taking) of the patient, administration of tiny doses of one medicine at a time, and follow-up of the patient's reaction by careful watching and waiting. Contrary to conventional modern medicine, homeopathy as a healing system is methodically not depending on prior animal tests (original “drug provings” are carried out exclusively with healthy human volunteers, only when forced to verify its efficacy to external critics, it has to comply with standards of evidence-based medicine, including randomized clinical trials, laboratory studies with animals or plants etc.). It needs no large quantities of pharmaceutical substances, no big industry for mass production of drugs, it does not leave behind contamination of soil, air, or water, does not have to fear or hide toxic side effects, or the like.

In contrast to this, the reason why conventional medicine is so apt to being instrumentalized by Big Business, is the fact that its entire methodology stems from and rests upon economic and industrial categories. Measurability, quantifiability, reproducibility, standardisability, generalisability, comparability, testability, etc. are postulates that make perfect sense in factories with assembly lines for the serial production of material products. It has, however, never been proven epistemologically that this approach also makes sense in the medical treatment of individual human beings.

To understand from scratch, on what methodological premises homeopathy is based, one has to turn towards its founder, Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843). Two hundred years ago, he did not look upon his fellow human beings as if they were machines to be treated mechanically or by way of counteraction or substitution. As a real doctor in the best Hippocratic sense he rather started from his self-assurance to be a living being animated by a life-force (*Lebenskraft*). Since this was the kernel of life without which nothing might be achieved in terms of healing, it was crucial for Hahnemann that the physician has to get to know as many as well as only those symptoms that are connected with and thus influencable by the life-force. For Hahnemann the real and only actor in the healing process is the individual life-force which must, however, be addressed and stimulated in an intelligent way.

Hahnemann's theory

Although he firmly disliked and avoided speculation and theorizing, in a publication in 1838, Hahnemann gave a depiction of how he thought homeopathic healing might work. According to this theory, “through the

influence of the remedy on the life-force, the disease-enemy is being counterposed against the life-force, i.e. the image of the disease-enemy is magnified to the feeling of the life-force, hence the life-force is prompted and compelled to increase its energy to the degree that it can become much stronger than the original disease was, and again become self-ruler in the organism, holding and directing again the reins of governance of health” (my translation).^{14,15}

Considering other directions of Hahnemann as well, his idea may be summarized this way: The task of homeopathic treatment (by the remedy) is to confront the life-force with the disease-enemy, to impress the life-force with a magnified image of the disease-enemy, and thus to prompt and urge the life-force to increase its energy and regain its strength and sovereignty to control its healthy being. (Only in cases where the life-force is blocked, suppressed, or too weak to heal itself, like in emergencies, Hahnemann did allow for palliatives, mild electric convulsions, antidotes, etc.; see *Organon* § 67, in all editions, 1810–1842).

Hahnemann's seemingly paradoxical method of healing by homeopathic medicines thus consists in confronting patients with a very similar disease-enemy and prompt them towards their own salutary reaction against that enemy, rather than to spare them the trouble by antagonizing or eliminating the enemy by external means. This procedure arises as a practical consequence of the basic principle of homeopathy, the Principle of Similars, according to which the homeopath has to give the patient a remedy which has been proven to be capable of provoking symptoms in human beings similar to the ones from which the patient is suffering, i.e. to apply a means that directly addresses the present unhealthy state of the patient, which in turn may even be aggravated. Through this, so Hahnemann's theory and confidence, the ill-tuned life-force will be aroused and enabled to gather itself to get rid of the enemy through its own effort, thus ultimately reverting to its tuned healthy state (whenever it is able to, i.e. except in emergency cases, etc., see above).

In his main work, the “*Organon of the Art of Healing*”, besides his strict directions for proper application of the Principle of Similars in medical practice, Hahnemann illustrated its working by reference to several examples out of the lifeworld (1819–1842). According to one of these samples, “the German people for centuries had sunken into a state of spineless apathy and submissive slave mentality, until recently, and had to be trodden even deeper into the dust, till the stage of intolerance, by the tyrant and conqueror from the West [Napoleon]. Only thus, their self-disrespect was overtuned and superseded, their human dignity became perceptible to them again, and for the first time they raised their heads again as German men (my translation)”.^{16–22}

This quotation out of the “*Organon*” may show that Hahnemann did consider the Principle of Similars to be more than a heuristic pointer towards a helpful drug on a medicinal level, but rather a kind of universal law applicable in political, psychological, and other contexts, too.

Two years before the publication of the first edition of the “*Organon of Rational Therapeutics*”,²³ in a publication for a broader educated public (1808), Hahnemann had already included the field of pedagogy into the scope of application of the Principle of Similars. His point was that, like doctors, also paedagogues do not require “ontologic knowledge of the inner nature of the human soul”, but only need to know the practical aberrations of the human mind and heart in order to bring their protégés back to the path of virtue. By taking the example of Socrates, the educator of humans, and his pupil Aristodemus, Hahnemann summarized that Aristodemus' failure was to put the Deity last. In order to cure him, Socrates first explored the symptoms of this mental disorder, some prejudices on the part of Aristodemus which restrained him from religion. In the following confrontation and discussion Socrates could disabuse him from his misconceptions and from Aristodemus' admissions elicit the motives that forced him to turn back to the worship of God (my paraphrase).^{24,25}

Here again one may see the same fundamental idea underlying the Principle of Similars: Provided that there is a life-force, its detunements,

disturbances, or diseases may be dissolved and cured by confronting the life-force with a very similar detuner, disturber, or disease agent, similar to that which has caused the ill state – however, in a potentized, i.e. concentrated and augmented form. As a result, the life-force will gather and empower itself to finally eliminate the enemy. At the end, the life-force will again be well-tuned and the sovereign ruler of the organism.

If this principle of treating likes by likes has shown pedagogical, psychological, and political implications in the past, may it have any relevance as a means for solving or reducing the big ecologic problems in the world today? Are there more examples to be found in history and might there be instructive connection to the issue of sustainability?

Mahatma Gandhi

As in 2018 the Homeopathic World Congress took place in Cape Town, it may seem natural to call the community's attention to the work of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) who a hundred years ago had lived some twenty years in South Africa (1893–1914), till the age of fortyfive, when he went back to his native country India. Gandhi is known till this day as a person who had tremendous political and social impact, especially in fighting against the discrimination and repression of minorities, against injustice and violence, and for economic independence and autonomy of his people. His fight, however, was not the usual one in terms of violent opposition or use of physical force, as it would be suggested by the principle *Contraria Contrariis*, but was rather based on non-violence and spirituality, resembling much more the Hahnemannian approach *Similia Similibus*. What he tried was to “cure” his political adversaries by prompting and forcing them to get rid of their aberrations and vices by themselves.

Gandhi had developed the exact methodology of his striking and unheard-of approach in Johannesburg, in the year 1906, on “nine eleven” (11 September 1906), at a mass protest meeting of 3000 Indians against a new discriminatory racist Act by the Transvaal Government, compelling all Indians to register, be fingerprinted, and carry identity cards at all times. As this was found to be injustice, at this meeting it was resolved not to co-operate with the government and to refuse registration. In addition, almost every single attendant took a vow to abide by this self-commitment to passive resistance, even in the case of beating by police, monetary penalties, expropriation, prison, hunger, extreme heat or cold, forced labor, flagellation, torture, or death. This collective resoluteness of being “robust optimists” on the one hand, and being braced for the worst on the other, was surprising and unprecedented.

Its underlying principle was insistence or holding firmly onto truth for which Gandhi coined the Indian expression “Satyágraha”, from “satya” meaning “truth” or “being”, implying “love”, and “ágraha” meaning “firmness” which “engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force”.²⁶ In Gandhi's words, “Satyágraha” thus means “the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence”, i. e. “soul force pure and simple”.²⁷

According to Gandhi, the practice of Satyágraha or “pursuit of truth [does] not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and compassion”.²⁸ For instance, on the occasion of an assault against him, Gandhi supposed that if he had been killed and “the community had deliberately remained calm and unperturbed, and forgiven the offenders perceiving that according to their lights they could not behave other[wisely] than they did. Far from injuring the community, such a noble attitude would have greatly benefited them. All misunderstanding would have had their eyes opened to the error of their ways”.²⁹

Satyágraha, thus, aims to prompt or oblige wrongdoers to open their eyes to their errors or, as he put it in his book “Hind Swaraj” (Indian Rule) which he wrote in 1909 on the ship from South Africa to India, to “patiently” “remove” the “prejudice” of the other.³⁰

From a homeopathic point of view, this non-violent approach to causing somebody to change his mind resembles very much the examples which Hahnemann gave to clarify the Principle of Similars. The Satyágrahi's refusal of any violent reaction or active co-operation clearly destroys the customary and predictable relation between the offender and the potential victim and leaves the offender without any point of charge, since the potential victim is doing nothing wrong in an absolute sense of ethics. Instead of co-operating in the role of a rebellious victim, on the contrary, the Satyágrahi, with his or her steadfastness, authenticity, and suffering under unacceptable impositions, rather may adopt the function of a mirror.

From the perspective of the offenders, due to the absence of intended or expected effects such as obedience or riot, they might rather be challenged by the unforeseen counterproductive impact of their doing, i.e. the pure suffering imposed on the Satyágrahis in which, however, there is no avail for the aggressor. Thus, ultimately, the offenders' attention and awareness might be reflected (like in a mirror) back to the very cause of the visible bad result: their unjust intentions themselves.

The non-co-operating Satyágrahis, thus, confront the offenders with their own recklessness, cruelty, and other vices in the sense of a moral disease. According to homeopathic theory, such a confrontation with symptoms or features that would not fit in one's own self-perception as a good human being, i.e. a confrontation with symptoms of one's own (moral) disease, should prompt and force the subject to dissociate itself from them, avert them, and return to one's original sane and healthy state.

Limitations of Satyágraha

What is crucial here, however, are two things.

On the one hand, in order to act as a mirror or even amplifier of the moral imperfections of the offender, the Satyágrahis may have to be as impeccable and austere as possible. As soon as they do anything for which they can be blamed or sentenced, the picture reflected to the offender is a mixed one and may not have the therapeutic power of a pure and clear message that leaves no loophole for prevarications. In fact, for Gandhi, Satyágraha was part of an ascetic life that encompassed *karmayoga* (the path of unselfish action) and *brahmacharya* (conduct consistent with Brahma, the Absolute, implying chastity) as well as virtues such as non-violence (*ahimsa*), patience, integrity, lack of hypocrisy, self restraint and abstinence. Shortly before he founded Satyágraha as a method of political fighting in 1906, at the age of thirtysix, Gandhi vowed to abstain from sexual relations forever, because he considered sexual life as inconsistent with his spiritual goals. For Gandhi observing virtues such as chastity or “patience mean[t] self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself”.³¹

On the other hand, also the other part of the interaction, the opponents, have to fulfill basic requirements for a successful outcome of their involuntary “homeopathic” treatment. They should be open-minded, self-critical, and have at least some aspiration and confession to moral values. Accordingly, the Satyágrahi is required to “have faith in the inherent goodness of human nature which he expects to evoke by his truth and love expressed through his suffering”.³²

Gandhi's first attempt at applying the principle of Satyágraha was his protest against the compulsory registration as dictated by the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance of 1906. After being imprisoned, in the course of the ensuing Transvaal struggle, Gandhi's main counterpart for negotiations was the South African Colonial Secretary Jan Smuts (1870–1950), who – luckily – was impressed by the moral strength of the Gandhian campaigners. In addition, Smuts was under political pressure from England and India, after Lord Charles Hardinge (1858–1944), the British viceroy of India, had denounced the high-handed policies of the South African government. Between the

priorities of Smuts' pursuit of humanitarian principles and his regulatory ambitions in politics he may have seen the disparity of his applied means. So finally, in 1914, he signed the Gandhi-Smuts Agreement, which led to the passing of the Indian Relief Bill, which acceded to all the protesters' demands.

As critics have correctly noted, under different circumstances and predispositions, for example in dictatorial regimes, ruthless despotes "would not have shared the reluctance of Smuts to imprison a few thousand Indians or [later] Lord Halifax's reluctance to see Gandhi starve himself to death".³³ Gandhi's Satyágraha campaign, however, did not only challenge General Smuts, the minister for defense and native affairs in the South African administration, but also the British and Indian public. Although split into parties, across the political spectrum, in the civic society of the United Kingdom there was anti-imperialist sentiment, besides a notorious national identity of being devoted to Christian and democratic values. Without such a potential of good will on the part of his addressees, all Gandhi's political and spiritual tools, including public relations which he also mastered, would not have got a starting point to gradually prompt and force the intended response.

Hahnemann's premise

Strictly speaking, the plausibility of Hahnemann's Principle of Similars also depends on the premise that there must be a teleological life-force that, as long as its autocratic sovereignty is secured, will always be ready and willing to identify pathogenic agents, dissociate from them and eliminate them as soon and as far as possible. For Hahnemann and his medical colleagues, like Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762–1836), this basic assumption was self-evident, all the more as it was part of their own self-perception as honorable men. A world away from present-day pluralism and relativism of values, in Hahnemann's time for an erudite, righteous, and well-intentioned gentleman it was exactly clear what is good, virtuous, and just, and which vices, temptations, and threats one had to be wary about. The proof for the reality of a teleological well-intending life-force of that kind for these men, thus, was their own existence, character, and personality.

Tellingly, starting with the generation after Hahnemann, and continuing to the present day, this self-evidence of a teleological innocuous life-force has been questioned. In the "brave new world" of industrialization, financial capitalism, and commercial imperialism, it may have become more plausible to think and act in terms of Darwinism, materialism, and hedonism and, in case of doubt, mistrust everybody. This baleful trend which became overpowering shortly after Hahnemann's death, now leads the reflection back to the issue of sustainability.

To be sure, Hahnemann did believe in scientific, social, and economic progress, called – as a young man – "industry" "the pride of the happiest nations",³⁴ and contributed significantly to the advancement of chemistry, pharmacology, and medicine, including public health. But at the same time he and many of his contemporaries were still resting on and centered in a common sense of moral and spiritual values and noble character traits that prevented them from pleonexia, intemperance, and excessiveness. From this perspective, their way of keeping the balance between matter and spirit, or business and ethics, may today once more gain relevance as a model for sustainable development.

Times have changed

The shift of paradigm which separates people of today from the time and spirit of Hahnemann has its main reason in the history of economics. To be sure, also two centuries ago the system of financing by ill-covered credits had already (1694) been discovered and practised by the Bank of England, the agrarian and industrial revolution was already established in England, and industrial capitalism and stock markets were slowly spreading. However, Hahnemann, in

financial things, remained conservative, for example by just holding bonds with fixed interests.^{35,36}

Since that comparatively tranquil time, however, besides the revolution in transportation and communication, financial capitalism and monopoly capitalism had emerged and expanded tremendously, soon dominating the entire globe in virtually every respect. Political corollaries of the hegemony of money were an unprecedented era of global imperialism, colonialism, and chauvinism, from gunboat politics to open new markets in the nineteenth century, to the World Wars, stock market crashes, and the Great Depression in the twentieth century. Conventional modern medicine grew up and was exactly shaped in this new setting, always besieged by financial investors and shareholders whose main interest might be to make money by controlling and modeling the Health Care System and medical industry according to their needs.

Apparently, the process of progressive disregard, misuse, and exploitation of natural resources by the global players of Big Money may not be limited to medicine and the physician-patient relation, but apply to all businesses where boundless economic growth or individual profit is aimed for, irrespective of collateral damages of any kind. Insofar it seems increasingly difficult to imagine how under present circumstances sustainability may still be reached on a global scale.

The problem of transformation

The cause of the problem, however, might not be lack of knowledge or information, but rather lack of willingness of the people to perceive the horrible facts and data, let alone willingness to being transformed in a sustainable direction. In other words, humankind may not only need more studies, technologies, or self-reassurances, but principally a homeopathic cure in the Hahnemannian extended meaning or Gandhian sense of Satyágraha.

As it was pointed out, to that end, however, humans may have to fulfill two requirements. First, they may have to be open and honest, and have the courage to look at the world impartially. Nature and society may then act as a mirror, reflecting to the people all the harm they are causing, and through this confrontation prompt and force them to dissociate from their unsustainable habits and to get rid of them. Second, this process may only be enacted by vital life-forces in the good old Hahnemannian sense. They may have to have a good and noble character, be autocratic, authentic, righteous, fearless, fair, etc. – the equivalent to "soul-force pure and simple", as Gandhi has put it.

Eventually, this requisite may prove to be the bottleneck of the whole process, since the present world at large seems to be governed by the exact contrary. Backed by the prevailing fiction of a *homo oeconomicus*, today's investors are rather expected to be greedy, anxious, egoistic, ruthless, and unprincipled bad guys, to be successful. However, irrespective of whether the majority or a minority of people may live under such miserable ethical conditions, whether few economically powerful, yet morally decayed influencers may spoil the potentially benevolent masses, etc., Hahnemann as well as Gandhi would insist that there is no other way of cure or transformation than homeopathy or Satyágraha.

If it ought to be sustainable, the appropriate method of change or therapy might not be allopathic or palliative, but homeopathic and curative from the outset. The world may need a cultivation of good life-forces on the one hand, and a culture of bravely facing and feisty overcoming detuning pathogenic attitudes on the other. In this sense, homeopathy and Satyágraha might act into the same direction and be candidates for the great transformation of humanity, which may be necessary to barely achieve sustainability on a global scale. Despite its biological evolution and intellectual achievements on a physical and technical level, on a mental and spiritual plane humanity still seems to be in urgent need of wise and conflict-free concepts of guidance and orientation.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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