Rebellious Heretic and Exacting Pedant: Two Aspects of Samuel Hahnemann

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"*Non scholae sed vitae discimus.*" We learn, not from school, but from life. (Seneca)

Summary: Two contrasting characteristics of Hahnemann – the intolerant, exacting dogmatist and the rebellious, heretical experimenter – are discussed. Which was the more prominent quality is a matter of conjecture. The author settles on the pedant as the more likely.
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This essay explores a pattern in Hahnemann's behaviour and attitude throughout his life and hopefully also helps to solve a longstanding and baffling puzzle. The point of the essay is to examine his two main impulses, one reforming, radical and heretic and the other a severe dogmatist and fussy pedant, and how two such irreconcilably opposing impulses came to reside in the same person. They seem to become manifest at different times in his life, for different reasons and with wholly different results.

One aspect about Hahnemann is very clear: at the commencement of his career he was entirely orthodox. It was only after repeated failures that he began to question a method and look for something better. Eventually, as we know, a long series of such failures in practical medicine inspired him to abandon medical practice completely in disgust and frustration and to then devote himself solely to chemistry and translation work: "soon after his marriage in 1782, he totally refrained from practising medicine...so deep was his belief that the tools he had been given would do more harm than good." (Danciger, p.5) But what he also did in every sphere—in chemistry, translations and medicine—was to point out any errors he encountered, rather than keeping quiet, and to demand improvements from his colleagues.

For example, in all his translations he added new footnotes with comments and questions, corrected grammar and inserted revisions and improvements on every page, such that every translation he undertook was soon acknowledged as a better work than the original and was generally regarded as superior: "an improvement on the English original on account of the notes by the learned Dr Hahnemann;" (Haehl, vol 2, p.49) "the work is welcome, especially as the translation is an improvement on the English original on account of the notes by the learned Dr Hahnemann;" (Cook, pp.76-77) "in the year 1800 Hahnemann translated...a little English book by Dr E Home...he also adds his personal views and experiences in the form of annotations and footnotes...his superior translation of Home's work." (Haehl, Vol 2, pp.49-50)

This sort of unrelenting diligence and yen for improving things seems to have been innate to him. In his 1797 essay "On the Obstacles to Certainty and Simplicity in Medicine," published in Hufeland's journal, Hahnemann had announced his "proposed reform and perfecting of the materia medica," (Dudgeon, 179) but, to his surprise and disappointment, this request was "met with nothing but derision and contempt from his colleagues." (Dudgeon, 179) Not a single physician agreed with his analysis or offered to help him. When no improvements in medicine were forthcoming from colleagues, he then chose a new path of direct personal experimentation to find the truth for himself. He only became a deviant or heretic doctor—questioning, challenging and rejecting orthodoxy with increasing vigour—through being persistently denied sound methods and so having to strike out new paths of discovery for himself.

I would not call the early Hahnemann quite so much of a "vigorous champion of orthodoxy," but certainly a dogmatist. In his later period he also passionately endorsed what he saw as "the right way" to practise homeopathy and just as vociferously condemned "the wrong way." He was thus certainly dogmatic, dictatorial and authoritarian in trying to keep tight control of homeopathy the whole time as "his baby." Seeing that he was a dogmatist and that he never did anything in a half-hearted way, and seeing that he was always passionate about anything he undertook or believed, it therefore follows logically that he was a strong advocate of orthodoxy in his early years.

Therefore, I do believe he was initially an advocate of Galenic medicine as it then was; it had deviated some way

from the original, but was still basically Galenic medicine in the tools it used, though maybe not in its theories, and that persisted until the 1890s. So, to begin with, he was an advocate, maybe not an enthusiastic advocate, perhaps more of a reluctant or sceptical advocate. I think he did initially trust allopathy but admittedly not for very long. Why did he lose respect? Because the medicines didn't work—they didn't cure people; they killed them! So, he had good reason to lose respect. And that loss of faith inspired him to conduct his own experiments. Forthwith, "he collected histories of cases of poisoning. His purpose was to establish a physiological doctrine of medical remedies, free from all suppositions, and based solely on experiments." (Gumpert, 92) He "became disillusioned and dissatisfied with current medical practice..(and)...began experiments, later called 'provings', on himself and other healthy individuals." (Flinn, 425-7)

It is thus a matter of respect and trust. Hahnemann innately had great trust and respect for authorities and orthodoxy—at least, in the beginning. It was only when this trust and respect became severely compromised through repeated failures that he became more rebellious and struck out a new path of his own making. He was probably less innately rebellious than people imagine, and less than he has been depicted, but more insistent on having the truth and on using reliable methods. In fact, it was experience that taught him to become rebellious. His experience of medicine did not chime with what he had been taught and so he fell out of favour with the authorised version and tried seeking out new ideas of his own.

Though he did not have a full four years medical training like many at the time, yet his writings still make it very clear he was much better informed about medicine and its history than most of his contemporaries; therefore he was certainly an academic doctor. Indeed, it is not really an exaggeration to say that "Hahnemann was one of the most learned men of his time." (Peters & Snelling, p.103) It was "Easter 1775," (Bradford, 25; Cook, 32) that he went to Leipsic university, but then, "late in 1776," (Cook, 33) he moved to Vienna. He was thus in Vienna from December 1776 to October 1777, or roughly ten months. He resided "in Vienna of only three quarters of a year," (Dudgeon, xx) during which time Dr von Quarin "had not charged him any fees," (Cook, 34) and had "treated him like a son." (Dudgeon, xx) Hahnemann himself said, "I had his friendship, I could almost say his love. I was the only one allowed to accompany him to his private patients." (Cook, 34) In Vienna, Hahnemann had "obtained the friendship of the celebrated Quarin, physician to the emperor...Hahnemann was the only young physician whom Quarin took around with him in his private practice. He loved and instructed him as if he were the first and best of his scholars." (Peters & Snelling, p.81) It was "about the close of the year 1777," (Bradford, 27) that he left Vienna and went to Hermannstadt with von Brukenthal. Haehl (vol. 2, p.10) gives October 1777. It was "in the Spring of 1779," (Bradford, 28) that he moved to Erlangen to study for his MD degree which was conferred in August 1779. He was thus in Hermannstadt roughly eighteen months.

The time he spent in Vienna, 1776-7, at the side of Dr von Quarin, who was a leading doctor who admired Hahnemann enormously as the best student he had ever had, he never formally registered as a student at the university nor paid fees, yet he was at the right hand of von Quarin for ten months. He was then with Brukenthal for a further eighteen months. It is remarkable that such a poor, penniless young man could have made such very positive impressions on these great and influential people. They must clearly have seen considerable evidence of medical greatness in him to have devoted so much attention to him.

Hahnemann, swimming against the tide as usual, sought reliable information about single drugs used entirely on their own: "medicinal substances manifest the nature of their pathogenetic power...on the healthy human body...when each is given singly and uncombined." (*The Medicine of Experience*, 1805, Lesser Writings, 452) This was his first major deviation from the long-established medical practice of using mixed drugs based on contraries. The main components of homeopathy—single drugs, similars and provings—came together slowly.

However, he also had a habit of expressing his views in very strong language, often in a disputatious and rhetorical manner, which tended to alienate him from the very colleagues who might have helped him. A modest sample should suffice to give an accurate impression of the forcefulness of Hahnemann's use of strong language. In the second *Organon*, Hahnemann describes allopathy "as thoroughly wrong, condemnable, pernicious and dangerous to the community. He turned on this the whole force of the German language with a sacred and unswerving conviction. He felt himself a prophet of a new gospel." (Haehl, 1, 94) In another attack, "he emphasised the objectionable features of the old medical school, which were to be seen not only in the futility of multi-mixtures in prescriptions, but above all in the fact that by bloodshed, phlebotomy, leeches, cupping, by sudorifices, emetics and purgatives, etc., the sick body is denuded of its vigour and of its fluids. By this means, the power of life, which energy, together with the right medicine, can alone bring about a cure, is tremendously weakened." (Haehl, 1, 196) In an 1805 letter to his publisher he says, "You cannot conceive too miserable an impression of the faculty of healing, as practised even by the most celebrated physicians. I could have written in stronger terms and set forth more plainly the contradictions, the nonsense, and the fatal misdeeds committed in consequence." (Haehl, 1, p.73) Clearly, "whenever it was in his power, he poured forth a flood of invectives and abuse against the established system of medicine and its advocates," (Peters & Snelling, p.106) and "attacked the dominant school of medicine with increased acerbity and almost malignity." (Peters & Snelling, p.112)

Seeing that Hahnemann had "rejected the major part of the materials of all the physicians who preceded him," (Peters and Snelling, p.8) and thus striking out new paths, he

discovered for himself, through direct experimentation, all the key elements of the homeopathic system over a period of time using a few hints scattered throughout the literature and from the example of others, such as von Stoerck. It was Stoerck who, "in the late 1760s, suggested the treatment of diseases with poisons according to the principle of similars....since Hahnemann had studied medicine under Joseph von Quarin at Vienna, who in turn had studied under von Stoerck, one of the more proximate sources of Hahnemann's thinking is perhaps indicated here." (Nicholls, 1988, p.12) This is the truth about him. His angry statements might reflect his original devotion to orthodoxy and the bitterness he felt from having to abandon a practice he had originally believed in and trusted. Perhaps this anger was rooted in a sense of betrayal?

When the standard ideas and methods he had been given by others did not work, or failed to match up with his own direct experience, he set about doing fresh research into new methods so as to find something better, more effective and workable. Homeopathy arose exactly from such a legitimate process of tireless personal experimentation; it sprang really from no other source. But this whole issue about Hahnemann illuminates an important aspect of the man. His approach to such problems was mostly empirical and in keeping with the experimental tradition of good science established by such figures as Galileo. Whenever he encountered a discrepancy between what the authorities said and what he found from his own direct experience, he chose, like Galileo, the latter as the more reliable guide and on that basis he gradually learned to abandon orthodox views in favour of his new discoveries. "Many physicians have carried out a species of antagonism between theory and practice, and between reason and experience. The theorist may proceed according to logic, but the practitioner must be guided by experience." (Peters & Snelling, p.6)

It seems he did that reluctantly to start with but, gaining confidence, he did it with increasing boldness; hence his epithet: "aude sapere" or "dare to know." His life illustrates an issue we all have: do we follow what we have been taught by the orthodox opinion of the day, or do we follow what our own eyes and ears tell us is correct? If what we have been taught fails us in some way, then of course we have no option but to follow what our own experience tells us. It is actually an obligation of one's honesty and conscience. He was certainly a man of conscience. As Gumpert says, "he feared his conscience." (Gumpert, 104) His doubts "grew and grew (and) his conscience for those who entrusted themselves to his care was more and more troubled." (Haehl, 1, 267) He abandoned "the lucrative practice of medicine when his faith was shaken in it," (Dudgeon, xlvi) which is a testament to the strong ethical stance of his conscience. He said he loved "his fellow creatures and the repose of my conscience too much...(to revert) to any allopathic procedures to comply with the wishes of my patients." (Dudgeon, li)

The Fragmenta of 1805 also contained the germ, or inspiration for further research and experiments. Although much of the material was of secondary origin, it was not a theoretical project in essence, but more of a 'stepping stone' to the fuller provings. He built upon the work of earlier provers, such as von Stoerck. Yet all this early proving work had merely led medicine into a therapeutic cul-de-sac, because it took the early provers nowhere and led to nothing new. And yet, by contrast, it was the very making of Hahnemann, inspiring and paving the way for all his later work. "After his first discovery of the homeopathic therapeutic law, he contented himself for some years with making a collection of the morbid effects of various poisonous and medicial substances from the writings and observations of the more ancient and the modern toxicologists and experimenters. In this way he collected together a tolerable pathogenesis of many powerful substances, and on this basis he endeavoured to practise." (Dudgeon, xlvii)

It is often said that Hahnemann was an "exponent of the empirical...therapeutic method...in which symptoms and signs of the curative effort of the dynamis...must be interpreted as positive or beneficial phenomena." (van Haselen, 123) In his construction of homeopathy, Hahnemann himself gives "pure experiment, careful observation and accurate experience alone," (Gumpert, 144) as the sole determining factors, the sole forces that shaped his new system, that medicine should be rooted in "pure experience and observation...and not venture a single step beyond the sphere of pure, carefully observed experience and experiment." (Ameke, 134) Hahnemann was, "in all essentials, a flawless experimenter." (Introduction to the second *Organon*, xxiv) Hahnemann "was committed with all his mind to the observational method...he rejected in its entirety the clap-trap of medieval traditions and he made out an eloquent case for the pharmacological experimental method." (Cameron, 32) His views were "based only on accurate observation of nature, on careful experimentation and pure experience." (*Organon*, §52) However, as we shall soon see, there are some serious doubts about this viewpoint.

He was therefore left with little alternative but "to test the medicines and poisons accurately and systematically upon the healthy individual." (Dudgeon, xlvii) He therefore undertook careful and more detailed "experiments with different drugs on himself and various friends." (Dudgeon, 49) Hahnemann "cast tradition aside, and had recourse only to the medicines he had learned, tested and confirmed." (Gumpert, 67)

Homeopathy up until the fifth *Organon* (1833) consisted almost purely of observations and deductions, not theories; then, with the fifth, masses of speculations and metaphysics suddenly appear, such as miasms and vital powers. I tend to regard the *Organon* more as providing an underpinning rationale for his *Fragmenta* and *Materia Medica Pura*, but the latter was published chronologically a year after the *Organon*; it was also an expansion of his previous and brilliant essay, his proto-*Organon*, "The Medicine of Experience" of 1806. So, yes, it was theoretical to an extent, but it reveals that the underlying motivation in his theory work was always

practical; i.e., to give to the world a better medical method that works and works gently and holistically. He seemed to have had a foot in both camps—being both practical and theoretical, but more fundamentally I don't think he would have had that much interest in medical theory per se for its own sake—nor indeed in experiments—if the medicine he had been taught had actually worked, had cured people in a principled and predictable manner.

Thus, we might well conclude that his theoretical ramblings were always somewhat subordinate to, and ultimately deriving from, his therapeutics; as Dudgeon says: "All Hahnemann's views and doctrines were made subservient to his therapeutics." (Dudgeon, 243) As a physician he was grounded primarily in practical medicine; that is, in what cures sickness; his interest in theory, one might then say, primarily sprang from his desire to improve practical medicine and to render it more curative. Beyond that I would say his interest in theory was actually quite minimal.

After the rebellious phase of experimentation that led him to lay out the foundations of homeopathy—and which also firmly established his reputation as a deviant, medical heretic—he then seemed to encourage his new system to crystallise and harden into a rigid orthodoxy of its own, which he then began to dogmatise to others as a fussy pedantic master of it, insisting that his new followers must do exactly as he said or incur his wrath. His new system and his ego became too entangled and he dominated others excessively. For many years after the doctrine's first emergence he behaved in this authoritarian and dictatorial manner. It was only after he met Melanie and moved to Paris, that this hard-line and dogmatic approach finally began to soften and loosen up as he entered a broader and more experimental phase once again.

So, in his life we can discern these two aspects of the man, these two strong impulses which he indulged all his long life - first the fussy, prickly and exacting pedantic champion of rigid orthodoxy, and second, an empirical and experimental self always happy to explore new ideas and methods. The two are very much at variance with each other. He started out as a vigorous and enthusiastic dogmatist of orthodoxy, and then, after he had rejected orthodoxy, he became yet again an enthusiastic dogmatist - of his own system and made it into a new orthodoxy in its own right, which he espoused to others with increasing vigour and rigidity as time progressed.

Sandwiched in between these two periods of dogmatism was a freethinking period of empirical research and free exploration through experiments "a la von Stoerck" into single drugs and their uses. And after Melanie entered his life in 1835, he once again indulged a looser more experimental attitude, finally abandoning the rigid and authoritarian dogmatism that had consumed him for so long. So alternated the rigid dogmatism of the pedantic Greek and Latin scholar with the much more liberal freethinker and experimentalist. Both define the man, though neither defines him completely. They each reflect a different aspect of the same man, and each tendency came to the fore and was made use of at different times in his life, for different purposes and with differing results.

The experimental approach to his work did not last long and was probably too free, too open-ended and just not structured enough to satisfy the more dominant, fussy and pedantic side to his nature. Experiments are not very neat and tidy and tend to leave all sorts of mess and unresolved loose ends, which he would not like. Even his very neat handwriting reveals that the fussy and exacting side to his nature was much the more dominant and primary impulse of the man. Even his provings were not conducted in a random, carefree or open-ended, experimental manner; they were carefully conceived and tightly controlled and undertaken solely for a specific purpose. So again we are forced to conclude that in his deeper nature he was not so much of a rebel, heretic or iconoclast, but much more of a fussy pedant, and a disputatious control freak.

As a result of all the above deliberations, we are left to make a decision about which of these two impulses was the stronger, the more primary and which was merely a secondary feature; which was the deeper impulse and which more superficial. Because the traditional and conservative "dogmatic pedant" came first and lasted longest, and seems to have been more deeply entrenched in his psyche, I shall provisionally conclude that it was his primary psychological type while the experimental and liberal aspect was a secondary feature which he only temporarily indulged as a useful tool, as and when it suited his purposes, after which he always reverted back to his basic pedantic type. On the basis of the evidence, therefore, this seems to be a reasonable conclusion to draw. However, that does not mean that he was not a partial convert to the joys and frustrations of experimentation, for I believe he genuinely enjoyed empirical work even if he took to it with some difficulty in the beginning.

Regarding other aspects of his character, Dudgeon provides a very insightful profile of "the peculiar mental constitution of the man who originated," (Dudgeon, xl) homeopathy, and "his very remarkable character," (xl-xli) the most pertinent features of which I shall summarise here. Dudgeon lists his "indomitable perseverance...notwithstanding every difficulty and discouragement," (xli) and his being "undeterred for one instant by the hard necessities of poverty, or by the sneers and persecutions of...his professional brethren." (xlvi) He "did not swerve one jot from the line of conduct he had marked out for himself." (xlii) However, he was extremely intolerant of "those who differed from him," (xliii) and of "anything that did not chime exactly with his own standard;" (xliv) he was guilty of making very harsh "judgements on others," (xliv) and of being "suspicious and impatient of the opposition of others." (xliv) However, his "enforced intellectual solitude," (xlvi) must have greatly benefitted the development of the doctrine even if homeopathy did come "to bear too prominently the stamp of...(Hahnemann's) individuality." (xlvi) Dudgeon also lists Hahnemann's conscientiousness, his industry, his generosity and his religious leanings.

And, in conclusion, we can see that although Hahnemann began his life as a devoted and orthodox schoolman, a trend that, had it continued, would not doubt have eventuated in his remaining an orthodox physician, life experience taught him to question, challenge and reject much that he had been taught by the accepted authorities of the day and to seek out new paths for himself. By following this path he ventured into new and unfamiliar territory and assembled together the key elements of homeopathy, drawn mostly from his own experiments. In this respect he learned, just as Seneca had said, that we learn most not from school, but from life.

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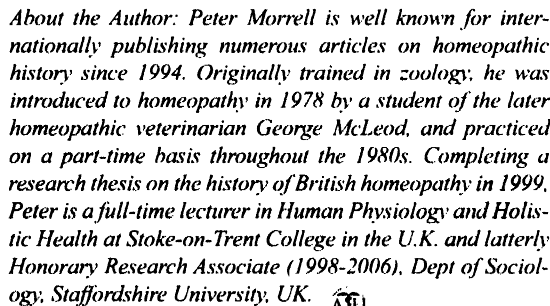

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