

The age of immunology — conceiving a future in an alienating world

by A. David Napier
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As Susan Sontag pointed out several years ago in her book *Illness and metaphor* (1978), Western medicine and its therapies have an affinity for military metaphors. Throughout the hygienic nineteenth century, metaphors for disease became more lurid, melodramatic and polemical, culminating in the use of the term “disease” itself as a synonym for “unnatural”. Fears of “decadence” and “degeneration” were intensified through biological metaphors, stigmatizing those who seemed to menace the social order all the more drastically. And while we are censorious about our predecessors’ linguistic exuberance (and moral disarray), it is not entirely clear that we are less deceived. People in power impose their metaphors, and metaphors themselves have the power to define what is to be done, being a series of entailments that draw attention to some aspects of reality while concealing others.

Part of the blame, genealogically speaking, would have to be laid at the origins of modern science itself, with Francis Bacon’s onslaught on nature: his highly wrought rhetoric of masculine possession, torture and slavery was to have a profound effect on how science would be conceived as an *imaginative* project, making it ever after impossible, as the philosopher Mary Midgley has remarked, to talk about attraction between objects in terms of love and sympathy (as did the Renaissance scholar Marsilio Ficino). Few of us, on the other hand, would blink at the use of anthropomorphic terms such as “*spite*”, “*cheat*”, “*selfish*” and “*grudging*” in biology, not to mention evolutionary psychology. Why does this matter? Because our reasoning is both liberated and constrained by our concepts, as was noted, most wittily, in 1802, by Joseph Joubert: “We speak to ourselves in metaphors. We are naturally led to it as a method of better understanding ourselves and of retaining our thoughts

more easily — which we then label in a kind of container.”

A. David Napier’s concern in *The age of immunology* is the immune response, specifically the attack–defence imagery now popularly identified with it, and the system thinking which began to develop in the 1970s around issues of self and non-self. Natural immunity is the body’s first line of defence, whereas acquired immunity, with its soluble and cellular elements, is an intricate apparatus for subduing the non-self. Cells become alerted, recruited, mobilized and committed; some of them are even scavengers and natural killers. Immunology’s gestalt so fits the times that immunologists themselves use terms suggesting that the militarism associated with Pasteur’s germ theory has simply acquired better “intelligence”, with total surveillance, search-and-destroy missions and smart weapons. And while there is much more to immunology than lurid imagery, immunology’s sense of the body bounded and beastly reinforces social atomism, the purportedly individualist strain in our culture that dates from Hobbes and is currently being talked-up as the proper state of affairs.

It is one thing to acknowledge that this mode of conceptualizing the immune system is determined by cultural antecedents; it is quite another to suggest that the phenomenology of immune processes enters into the construction of the real. This, essentially, is what Napier does in his sprawling, ambitious book that seeks, out of our “nucleic history”, to get a new take on cultural prejudices about identity. This is a procedure familiar enough from social constructivist views of science, and the implication promptly follows: the world would be a better place if what has been unmasked as construction were to be changed. Evolution, child psychology, politics and health care, he believes, all need rethinking, as they no doubt do. But the basic problem with his book is a more fundamental one: he uses the word “immunology” quite liberally. That is an understatement. Napier is not an immunologist but an anthropologist, which appears to be a licence to come up with ideas without having a sense for what might prove them wrong.

Veering from Dr Spock to systemic lupus erythematosus to logarithms, Napier assumes the immunological self is coextensive with the embodied self. Similarly, he talks about a Petri dish culture as if it offered patterns for study analogous to the social codes of a Navajo Indian settlement. Selfhood, as any philosopher will agree, is an extremely tricky term. It offers no simple definition. Self-defence suggests a body, whereas self-knowledge does not. Social practices, of which being a self is one, are not bodily processes; nor do “heroic narratives” code for “somatic stories”. Napier’s syncretism turns, in fact, on one of the tenets of German idealism, the meta-logic devised by J.G. Fichte to explain how self, having externalized itself as objective non-self (the alienation of the book’s title) in order to know the way of the determinate world, is levitated to a plane where subjective freedom is synonymous with objective fact. This self-sundering seems to be the transcendental journey towards “realization” that Napier has in mind for his immunological self too. Only the Czech poet and immunologist Miroslav Holub, not mentioned by Napier, ever got away with that kind of bravura overwriting, and, as he admitted in his essays, only when writing poems.

The age of immunology ends up making much of superficial resemblances while systematically ignoring deeper differences. If anything, the new biology has thrown off two distinct sets of imagery that actually make the bounded self look leaky. Increasingly, the medically proper body resembles a chimera made by symbiosis: eukaryotic cells are mutual societies harbouring many archaic prokaryotic metabolisms like those of the mitochondria, once autonomous respiring bacteria. The controversial Gaia hypothesis, with its central notion of the Earth regulating itself *physiologically* as a materially closed system, recalls the mediaeval concept of the mesocosmos (though the idea of a living planet harks back to Plato, and Ficino spoke of the Earth’s “hair, teeth and bones”). Neither grand analogy obviously abets Thomas Huxley’s view of the animal world as a “gladiator’s show”, or Herbert Spencer’s crude social Darwinism. It is a pity therefore that Napier misses his cue, since the role of

conceptual metaphors in science is a compelling topic. As Midgley says, “the visions that underlie [science] ought to get far more attention than they now do in discussions both of literature and of the physical sciences themselves.” After all, even a term like “the global burden of disease” may be zoocentrally loaded, if health in the truly global sense is more strictly a question of ecology (most life on earth is bacterial) than guarding the bounded self. Lumber has to be *shed* somewhere. ■

Iain Bamforth¹

Air pollution and health in rapidly developing countries

Editors: Gordon McGranahan and Frank Murray
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 1 85383 966 3, HB. Price: £50

In this publication from the Stockholm Environment Institute, academics, researchers and policy experts have collaborated to construct a comprehensive overview of air pollution and health in developing countries. Emphasizing the importance of linking action and research, they make the latest technical and scientific information accessible to a broad readership.

Placing air pollution within its historical context, the authors emphasize that low- and middle-income countries today need not follow directly in the footsteps of high-income countries. The problem is also presented within a risk transition framework, in which economic development can shift the scale of environmental risks from the household to the community level and then on to the regional and global environment. This helps policy-makers see the importance of tackling both short-term and long-term health effects of air pollution, ranging, for instance, from respiratory problems to climate change.

There is a useful summary of the studies on air pollution and health in industrialized countries. Fewer comparable data on developing ones exists. This underscores the need for more research. Case studies from Hong Kong suggest that air pollution there has a bigger impact on health than in other industrialized areas. This raises

the important question of the generalizability of research done in industrialized countries. The authors think that while policy should be based on the best available information, decisions should not be deferred on the grounds of uncertainty. A case study on Santiago, Chile, therefore uses local evidence in conjunction with information from North America and Europe to measure the health impacts of air pollution.

Tools for managing air pollution include international guidelines and local regulations. One approach, called URBAIR, uses air quality management systems to develop action plans in Asian cities. A chapter on rapid assessment techniques tries to show how decision-makers can set policies on the basis of limited information. The result, however, is more like a description of methods used in environmental health research: epidemiology, exposure assessment, and risk assessment, none of which are typically rapid. Finally, a case study on Johannesburg, South Africa, shows how inadequate transport infrastructure can result in a disproportionate burden of exposure for people living in informal urban settlements.

The book as a whole provides a well-organized, readable and valuable synthesis of existing knowledge on how air pollution affects health. Technical information is presented in a comprehensible and straightforward manner. Most importantly, the book shows that although low- and middle-income countries cannot always adopt the same policies as their richer counterparts, there are many things they can do without delay to control and reduce air pollution. In other words, they need not wait until they attain a certain level of economic development before bringing in policies for clean air. ■

Sumi Mehta²

In focus: health — an ecosystem approach

by Jean Lebel
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 (disponible en français)

Jean Lebel argues that it is impossible to exclude the growing global population from the ecological equation. The relations between people's health and the quality of the environment in which they live are widely recognized. These interactions are complex, however, and researchers need ways to encompass more than just biophysical parameters.

In recent years, calls for action in the areas of research and decision-making have supported a strategy that links health to the environment. During the last decade major meetings have reinforced this view; they include the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 and the Montreal International Forum on Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health in May 2003.

Lebel focuses on the research supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) on the ecosystem approach to human health — “ecohealth”. Since 1996, their programme has aimed at improving human health and well-being while maintaining a healthy environment. The idea is to look at ways to improve people's health by managing their local resources better, rather than focusing all efforts on the health services.

Analysing the practical implications of this approach, Lebel provides useful information and examples. One case he dwells on is Mexico's commitment to eliminating the use of DDT, which is a threat to the ecosystem although humans have depended on it to fight malaria. He describes how the research team worked successfully with the community in Oaxaca to find effective alternatives. The three methodological cornerstones of this research framework are emphasized in all the projects described: transdisciplinarity, community participation, and gender equity. Integrated research strategies include community participation in defining the problems. The process builds local capacity and makes good use of local knowledge.

However, these brief accounts often leave the reader hungry for more details. Fortunately, this book is part of IDRC's Ecohealth web site (www.idrc.ca/ecohealth) where more case studies,

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research reports and articles are available. Notwithstanding this virtual supplement, the publication would be more complete and satisfactory if it included such information.

Lebel writes in an informative and interesting way, which makes his book suitable for anyone involved in international public health, whether specialists or generalists. The richness of the book reflects IDRC's long and varied experience in sustainable and equitable development (70 projects in 30 countries). Although it argues for the ecohealth approach, it also discusses the difficulties the researchers faced. In general, it makes a valuable contribution to developing a vision and tools that decision-makers can use, in collaboration with communities, to formulate good health and environmental policies. ■

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Divine therapy: love, mysticism and psychoanalysis

by Janet Sayers

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The relationships between psychoanalysis, religion, mysticism and love have been debated throughout the history of the psychoanalytic movement. Sometimes this has been in relation to characteristics of the movement itself, for example its priestly hierarchy, untestable core beliefs, and attitude that only those who have been transformed (that is, converted by participation in its own rituals) can understand its truths. In other places, it is the ideas of psychoanalysis that have been taken up in religious or mystical terms: its first propagandists in England, for example, were members of the Society for Psychical Research; Freud was forced by the ministrations of some of his friends to engage head-on with (and against) religious experiences and doctrines in some of his writings; the Jungians and post-Jungians have indulged spectacularly in spiritualist imaginings; and, along the way, some profound theological work in Judaism and Christianity has drawn on psychoanalytic insights. Sometimes, it is the *practices* of psychoanalysis that

have been construed in religious terms. As Janet Sayers notes, spreading her net rather more broadly than psychoanalysis itself, "like religion, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy seek to animate or reanimate the psyche or soul of their recipients through the medium of the psychoanalyst's or psychotherapist's oneness with her or his patients. This entails the oneness that lies at the heart of mystical and religious experience, and also at the heart of falling in love, making love, and being in love." Or, at least, that is one way of looking at it.

Sayers tracks a number of strands in a rather zig-zag run through a set of writers and psychotherapists who have some kind of relationship (sometimes rather tenuous) with psychoanalysis and who show some hint of religious feeling in their work. She notes early on that there is some evidence that religious belief is good for mental health, but this is not a theme that is much developed in the book, although some of her protagonists seem to hold the same view. She draws parallels between the religious sense of oneness with God and the way in which love of another person can inspire one, showing rather convincingly that creative work is often governed by a very specific love relationship — and also that these relationships (as in the case of Jung and Sabina Spielrein) can be opportunistic and abusive, and not particularly creative at all.

In some well-known cases rehearsed in this book, especially those of Winnicott and Bion, the evidence here is both compelling and moving. Sayers also introduces an idea that the movement from more individualistic to more relational concerns in psychoanalysis is linked with an awareness of the importance of a relationship with otherness over and above that of union — an issue informing many current debates and intellectual pursuits, for example in relation to Lévinas's writings (which one might argue are rather more profound than some of those included in this book).

All this is handled in an accessible but flat, descriptive prose, which in many places restricts itself to summarizing the writings of the various authors Sayers selects as worthy of interest, loosely linking them with some thin biographical material to show how the more private

"love stories" are connected with the work. The result is that the reader is taken on an idiosyncratic journey through one twentieth century theme — the struggle with and for faith — in an unusual context with an unexpected cast (Simone Weil and Marion Milner are not often thought of together), showing some intriguing links and contrasts, but without much evocation of the remarkable imaginative reach of some of the writing, or of the depth of the personalities involved.

There is another problematic issue here, unusual for someone of Sayers's political sophistication. Religion is evoked almost entirely as an experience rather than as a set of practices and beliefs, with their own specific history and social context. It is as if there is a mystical stance towards the world — a religious impulse — upon which psychoanalysis and psychotherapy can feed, and which is utilized in the construction of psychotherapeutic systems as well as manifested in personal love relations. What this does, however, is to collapse some highly significant and specific differences and to treat certain kinds of feelings and responses as if they are products of a shared human history.

Thus, the specifically Jewish origins of the psychoanalytic movement are mentioned in the context of Freud's life, but their specific effects — not least in the disaster with the antisemitic, Christian/pagan Jung — are not explored at all. Yet, psychoanalysis is much more akin to a procedure of Talmudic exegesis than it is of mystical "oneness with the patient", at least in its Freudian form. Parenthetically, the non-Jewish analyst Lacan, not included in this selection, had much to say about "Jewish" and "Christian" psychoanalysis, as well as about love and its impossibility.

The lack of specificity in cultural and religious context haunts Sayers's writing throughout this book, reducing Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity to one impulse, itself somehow called "love", leaving one at times moved by individual lives, but puzzled: what exactly is the relationship between "psyche" and "soul", and in what terms, through what system, can these improbable concepts or experiences be understood? ■

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