

Hahnemann revisited – A new German edition of the Organon of Medicine

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Abstract

The sixth edition of Samuel Hahnemann's *Organon of Medicine* is usually considered as reference-book of the highest authority within the homeopathic community. Nevertheless, its status and relevance can be questioned with constructivistic and historicist objections. In fact, consenting e.g. to follow the instructions given by Hahnemann regarding homeopathic treatment does not necessarily oblige the homeopath to accept the philosophical ideas of Hahnemann's time as well. Generally speaking, in the *Organon* three levels of content may be distinguished:

1. practical directions and maxims,
2. theoretical explanations and hypotheses, and
3. conceptual foundations and premises.

Ideally, these levels should be considered (accepted or criticized) and also taught separately and gradually. Until recently, however, all existing editions of the *Organon of Medicine* contained the usual mixture of objective observations, practical recommendations, subjective polemics, sophistic rhetoric, ethical admonitions, and philosophical speculations, – inviting mainly two extreme attitudes towards its reception: (mostly) neglecting it as a whole or (rarely) accepting it as a whole. A longstanding lack of interest in the *Organon* on the part of the majority of homeopaths is also mirrored in the retarded history of its publication.

The new German edition of the *Organon*, published by the author in 2003, contains

- i) a complete version of Hahnemann's original manuscript, however, converted into modern German language and furnished with summarizing headlines and boxes,
- ii) another complete version of its contents, however, in a new arrangement of topics, consistently applying the scheme of three graduated levels (as indicated above) which on their part are structured according to the logical necessity of its contents, and
- iii) a glossary of some 400 problematic terms which are followed throughout the entire text, displaying their usage by Hahnemann in different contexts.

Although in Germany it took relatively long to bring about an authentic as well as practically useful edition of the *Organon of Medicine*, the new edition now seems to meet the demands from almost any perspective. Eventually, it may even serve as paradigm of a new type of *Organon* editions in other countries as well.

Keywords

Samuel Hahnemann, *Organon of Medicine*, sixth edition, new German edition, history of homeopathy

Introduction: the homeopathic consensus

In spite of numerous and considerable differences between traditional and modern schools of homeopathy there always was, is, and will be one big and unifying consensus among all competing parties: that it was Samuel Hahnemann who founded this specific system of therapeutics based on the principle of similars, that it was him who through his deviation from and criticism of the old allopathic approach inaugurated the new homeopathic school (and – as a corollary – a persistent schism within medicine), and that it is him who is considered by any homeopath in the world as the undisputed ancestor and ultimate authority of homeopathy at large. Since he had revealed and elaborated his literary legacy constituting homeopathic therapeutics in a most comprehensive and accurate way in his famous work “Organon of Medicine”, this book was at all times designated as the Bible of homeopathy. Hence, contrary to conventional scientific medicine where the reliability and validity of new theories and hypotheses have to be tested (ideally) by independent researchers in clinical studies or the like, in homeopathy a quotation from the Organon is still commonly accepted as one of the most powerful arguments. Consequently, even today almost every textbook on homeopathy – at least in chapters of justification and explanation of the homeopathic approach in general – refers to the Organon. Historically speaking, it had and usually still has the function of a kind of Holy Scripture of homeopathy, a kind of schibboleth (i.e. distinguishing criterion) between true and pseudo homeopaths, or at least a kind of constituting social contract of the homeopathic community.

The problem of the status and relevance of the Organon

This view of Hahnemann’s legacy as a divine revelation of eternal truths, analogous to religious reverence to sacred words of prophets, etc., can be challenged by the objection that Hahnemann – as any physician at any place at any time – definitely was a child of his time, i.e. that in his reasoning he was influenced and limited by the state of the art of contemporary science, philosophy, mentality, etc. Even if he transgressed and shifted paradigms: in order to communicate his alternative ideas he had to resort to the language and patterns of thinking his readers and listeners were conversant with. In fact, in order to make his points as clear and plausible as possible, in his Organon Hahnemann not only provided precise methodological directions for concrete therapeutic practice, but also to a considerable extent theoretical explanations and philosophical speculations. The theories and concepts he used for this purpose, however, were obviously entailed by his time. As such they were within the grasp of his pupils and patients, but today may be difficult or impossible to understand, and may therefore be questioned, supplemented, or even replaced by reflections in modern terms within current context.

Driven to its extreme, this argumentation towards deconstructing, relativizing, and ultimately dissolving Hahnemann’s system of rational therapeutics, however, may deprive the modern homeopath of his/her own roots and identity and expose him/her defenselessly to any kind of human rat-catchers (gurus). It may leave him/her in uneasy darkness – the same darkness Hahnemann had encountered before and struggled to defeat and illuminate through his conceptual work and therapeutic endeavour.

Clearly, to claim oneself being a true Hahnemannian or a classical homeopath would hardly make much sense without being familiar with the Organon and professing according to its practical rules and principles. But is it necessary to share Hahnemann’s metaphysical opinions as well? Pragmatically speaking, to secure a certain standard of practice within a group of therapists it should be sufficient to operationalize all basic steps of the procedure and oblige all participants to comply to a specific set of guidelines. Judged from practice, it should make no difference what

religious or philosophical background the single physician may have or according to what belief or “insight” he/she may be motivated to practice homeopathy: as long as he/she is following the same practical directions determined in an unambiguous way the collective results of treatment should be comparable to each other and he/she should be considered a full member of the respective community – disregarding national, cultural, spiritual, or personal idiosyncrasies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for being a real homeopath can therefore only be derived from compliance with a well defined set of practical rules. In any case, there is no point to demanding from modern people from different countries and continents to subscribe without need to medical historical concepts which were popular in Germany 200 years ago.

Nevertheless, to understand the genesis and development of homeopathy or to achieve a position from which one may be entitled to modify even some of Hahnemann’s practical directions, however, it is crucial to occupy oneself with Hahnemann’s time, problem, approach, etc. as well, i.e. studying his philosophy, too.

A graduated approach to the Organon of Medicine

According to different students’ or researchers’ purposes, ranging from concrete practical to abstract theoretical interests, in the Organon of Medicine three main levels of contents may be distinguished:

1. practical directions and maxims,
2. theoretical explanations and hypotheses, and
3. conceptual foundations and premises.

Naturally, the main body of homeopathic therapists may be interested almost exclusively in the first item and may be satisfied by having acquired a basic knowledge of it, while e.g. philosophers or historians of medicine may particularly rush at the second point or be concerned especially with the third one. However, since it is mandatory for virtually every homeopath to know about the professional instructions given by Hahnemann while it is rather optional for explorers and developers of homeopathy or the like to embrace also his reflections on the causes and implications of his practical tenets, from a didactic point of view, it seems recommendable to offer to students of homeopathy a graduated introduction and step-like access to the contents of the Organon.

Being primarily a book on practical therapeutics, the first and therapeutically most relevant step of becoming acquainted with Hahnemanns teaching should, of course, be a structured compilation of his directions on how to proceed in concrete practice: from taking the patient’s history, proving drugs on healthy volunteers, to prescribing the most similar remedy, considering different classes of diseases, following up chronic cases, etc. As long as – led by these instructions – everything works well in practice, apparently there is no need to go further. In case of curiosity or failure, however, the student may continue his/her study on a second level, the one of theories and reasons, in order to enable oneself to possibly discover an alleged weak point in theory which would eventually encourage some kind of modification in practice and thus open up new therapeutic possibilities. Finally, for those whose minds and hearts are not satisfied neither with technical instructions nor with rational explanations, on a third level of the doctrine Hahnemann’s metaphysical assumptions and conceptions should be explicated, like his idea of life force and dynamic influence, his notion of health, disease, healing, and action of remedies, but also his views on science, medicine, religion, ethics, etc.

Difficulties in the reception of the Organon

Until recently, however, the Organon of Medicine for most people had been, to be honest, a kind of book with seven seals. Due to its almost inextricable mixture in the presentation of objective observations, practical recommendations, subjective polemics, sophistic rhetoric, ethical admonitions, and philosophical speculations only two extreme attitudes towards its reception seemed to be possible: The majority of homeopaths refrained from taking it too serious, i.e. did not read it at all, resorting instead to secondary literature and thoughtless repetition of presumably correct lip-services, while a minority of zealots took every word of it faithfully and uncritically for immediate truth.

A longlasting lack of interest in the original writings of Hahnemann indeed was and is one of the main reasons why even today most members of the homeopathic community are unaware that only 80 years after Hahnemann had finished his manuscript of the sixth edition of the Organon (1842) the first English translation was published by William Boericke (1922), being followed by a new translation by Jost Kuenzli and others (1983) and a new translation by Steven Decker, edited by Wenda O'Reilly (1996).

Ironically, in Germany, the home land of homeopathy, it took even longer to achieve an authentic publication of Hahnemann's text. While Richard Haehl's first publication of the sixth edition of the Organon (1921) was still based on a handwritten transcript of Hahnemann's manuscript which had been provided under Hahnemann's widow Mélanie in 1865, it was only 150 years after Hahnemann's completion of his manuscript that the first text-critical edition of the real original was published (1992), being followed by the meanwhile prevailing German standard edition (1996).

Translations into other languages are up to now all based either on Boericke's English translation or on Haehl's German edition of the handwritten transcript of Hahnemann's original. In addition to these two, Spanish translations e.g. also used the French edition of the Organon which was itself a translation of the English translation and/or the German edition.

Are Germans now to be envied for being so lucky to possess the most authentic text in terms of reliability and identity with the primary source? Not really! Unlike e.g. the English, Spanish and other translations of the Organon which were all written in 20th century's language, in fact, the direct presentation of the German original text of 1842 today seems to cause more problems than advantages. Form and style of academic publications as well as educational background and social class of the scientific public have changed significantly in the last 160 years. Accordingly, modern consumers of fast facts are expecting from a medical text what they are used to getting in up-to-date books or journals, i.e. concise and clear-cut statements with a maximum size of a few lines each, rather than enjoying Hahnemann's demanding grammatical constructions playing with several layers of sentences with a length of up to nearly one page. Indeed, because of their difficulty in reading and understanding old-fashioned German medical texts more and more Germans with time preferred to study the Organon in English! In other words, in order to preserve the relevance of Hahnemann's unique work to the German speaking world, it was high time for a comprehensive revision of its appearance in terms of a courageous updating of its linguistic shape.

The new German edition of the Organon of Medicine

The new German edition of Hahnemann's Organon of Medicine which I published last year (2003) tries to meet all the (conflicting) demands outlined here and above. To accomplish this (seemingly impossible) task, however, the publication had to be organized into three parts: i) the basic text of

the Organon, ii) a new systematic arrangement of the contents of the Organon, iii) a glossary of its problematic terms.

i) The first part contains the complete original text of Hahnemann's manuscript, without omitting any sentence, annotation, or crucial word, – however, converted into modern German language, i.e. substituting historic terms with current expressions, breaking down long and complicated sentences into a couple of short and easy ones, reducing expletives and rhetorical or polemical phrases to a minimum, and adjusting orthography and punctuation to the standard of today.

This basic text comprises Hahnemann's preface, table of contents, introduction, and the 291 sections (§§, called "paragraphs"), all in their original order. To facilitate orientation, however, about 60 headlines and boxes with summaries were introduced at the beginning of each new chapter.

ii) The second part of the new edition is the answer to the didactical challenge indicated above to offer a graduated and easy to survey approach to the different levels of the Organon. Actually, this part is another complete version of the factual contents of the Organon, without suppressing any significant thought or argument, yet in modern language, etc. (see above), – however, in the form of a completely new arrangement of the topics, which finally rendered possible a considerable reduction of redundance. According to the scheme given above, Hahnemann's statements were consequently allotted to three categories: 1. practical directions and maxims; 2. theoretical explanations and hypotheses; 3. conceptual foundations and premises. Each category was in its turn structured according to the logical necessity of its contents.

The first two levels, i.e. the practical directions and theoretical explanations, were arranged in a quite parallel manner: starting from the physician's tasks which consist in prevention, dietetics and surgery on the one hand and treatment of internal diseases on the other, the latter may be distinguished into non-medicinal and medicinal treatment, and the latter again may be distinguished into treatment according to the principle of contraries and treatment according to the principle of similars. To all of these topics Hahnemann gave practical directions as well as theoretical explanations in the Organon, however, in scattered places, i.e. not very easy to survey in the original. The particular items of actual homeopathic practice were then structured approximately in the traditional way.

As a third level of contents of the Organon, firstly Hahnemann's specific concepts of homeopathy were listed, like his idea of a life force, dynamic influence, organism, health, disease, healing, and action of remedies, and finally his more general views on contemporary concepts, medicine, science, religion, philosophy and ethics, mirroring his historical and philosophical background. Also characteristic examples of rhetoric and polemics devoid of therapeutic value were collected and listed here.

The systematic survey now makes it possible to find out at first sight, e.g. what were Hahnemann's directions regarding potentization of remedies, what was his explanation for the working of the principle of similars, what were the properties he attributed to the life force, etc. In short: every thought of Hahnemann expressed in the Organon has been assigned its definite place in the arrangement. Since the listings of the single topics provided here are complete, i.e. comprise everything what Hahnemann wrote about that point in the Organon, they allow also for negative inferences (which otherwise would be impossible without reading the whole book completely): if e.g. under a certain topic only a few thoughts are listed, this means that the entire Organon really does not contain more respective statements. As a means to check the quotations or shift one's interest into the original, after every argument the appropriate section (§) is indicated.

iii) The third part of the new edition, finally, is a glossary which first of all explains the meaning of more than 400 problematical historical terms in modern language, but in addition also follows up these terms throughout the Organon, i.e. displays Hahnemann's usage of them in all the different contexts. On grounds of the completeness of these listings, again also negative inferences are possible.

Conclusion and outlook

In conclusion it may be stated that due to a series of particular difficulties in Germany it took a somewhat longer way to bring about an authentic as well as practically useful edition of Hahnemann's Organon of Medicine. Bigger challenges, however, in the long run frequently also provoke bigger responses. Finally, the new German edition of the Organon seems to meet virtually all demands from any possible perspective (warranting e.g. authenticity of contents as well as modernity of form, scientific accuracy as well as user-friendliness, etc.). Eventually, it may even serve as a paradigm or incentive for other countries to revise their Organon editions in a similar way.

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