

BOOK REVIEW

Humanising Science and Medicine: Critical Paradigmatic Conversations

by Richard House

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Reviewed by **Judy Barber**²

Humanising Science and Medicine is a series of 12 interviews conducted in writing in the last few years. The cover illustration is a painting by Raphael of Greek philosophers standing together in conversation, apposite for a book of deeply philosophical conversations. House reflects on each contributor's material, topics, trains of thought and paradigms, before asking further questions that elicit deeper responses.

This is a rich and complex book: it took me a while to catch up with some of the vocabulary, but what a treat it is to read science in a conversational style that isn't as dry and linear as discreet academic articles alone tend to be! Whilst I found affirmations of what I already sensed and knew, many doors were also opened in my own thinking when following these conversations about crucial topics of our time – not simply dishing out 'science' 'facts' without considering philosophy, psychology, society, politics and individual sentient people.

These interviews are already condensed from the life-work and evolved thinking of each contributor, so rather than condense them further for this review I have selected some of what stood out for me in the various chapters to offer a sense of what is in store.

The opening interview was conducted in 2021 during the Covid experience. In it House refers to Dr Martin Cohen writing of the "self-referential bubble of 'experts', merely following other 'experts'". They both saw dishonesty in this. Science can only really be understood if we see it in the context of its unfolding history, always with the shifting prisms of the beliefs and understandings of the time. Already the Covid panic can be seen with hindsight. Cohen writes of quickly shifting attitudes to mask-wearing and its likely efficacy, referencing the philosopher Thomas Kuhn in that "There is no cool, clinical science that sifts facts; rather there is this fetid swamp of bias and vested interest, which coalesces around certain viewpoints".

Barrie Condon wrote about the diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), over a series of editions, with regard to issues such as homosexuality and bereavement, where the DSM kept redefining the former as a 'condition', inventing new words for it. And these attempts were separating out homosexuals and as Condon points out, unhappy heterosexuals didn't have an "impressive new word to describe it. Why should homosexuals be so lucky?" He writes that we don't know where the mind comes from and have little or no evidence for how it arises from flesh and blood, with many psychiatrists doubting the organic existence of mental illnesses and seeing them as reactions to external events and environments.

Examining dissent itself is interesting. When Brian Martin was active in the environmental movement, he learned about cases of scholars who taught or did research on environmental issues coming under attack. He wrote a paper and in seeking comments was sent more stories. He became attuned to the signs of the suppression of dissent and that led him to studying academic disputes. With House he reflects on the motivations of those who suppress dissent, writing that, 'like nearly everyone', they have the best of intentions. They see themselves as defending against attack from dangerous views and damaging actions. He talks further about whistleblowers, when the focus is on the person speaking out rather than the suppressed topic. He writes about many scientific controversies including Covid, nuclear power, pesticides and fluoridation, in each finding evidence of suppression of dissent, saying that where there are powerful groups with a stake in the outcome, suppression is to be expected.

David Morris and House come from different angles in parts of this chapter about moving on from the rigidity and limits of modern Western medicine, but they are on the same page when, quoting Morris: "The medical literature regularly refers to 'mechanisms' of disease. I would rather see researchers assume that humans are organisms, not machines, and that human diseases involve processes, not mechanisms. Would this change assumptions and lead to better health care? If so, as I believe, then I am all for it... Evidence-based biomedicine mostly ignores or excludes solid evidence concerning affective, cognitive, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of human health and illness." It was refreshing to read how thoughtfully and thoroughly Morris responded to House's questions. Morris: "Any system of medicine is no better, in my view, than how it treats patients – by which I mean more than merely the medical treatments it offers – but rather depends on how it sees and how it values patients."

The Austrian philosopher, Paul Feyerabend's (1924-1994), thinking ranged beyond the confines of 'pure' science. It is fitting that a chapter of *Humanising Science and Medicine* is devoted to a conversation between House and Professor Ian James Kidd about this particular person with unique perspectives. Science can't be separated out from the human beings involved and their cultures. Perhaps this chapter is the most complex in the book because of that.

I resonated with Professor Kidd writing that "it's a false dilemma to choose between 'head and heart'. First, we usually need both; and secondly, any attempt to draw any stable distinction is likely to fail." Commenting on how this plays out in practice, he writes: "Close attention to the actual history and practice of science shows that there is no such thing as the scientific method, in the sense of fixed, singular and context-invariant methodological rules that apply whether one is studying sunflowers or supernovae." What we do find, argued Kidd, "is a messier, more complex assemblage of formal and informal methods, ad hoc adjustments, experimental fudges, creativity and imagination, and a fair bit of contingency and luck. This is clear to anyone who's actually performed scientific research."

With Chapter 6 it's interesting that it took an accountant and an engineer to research for ten years and write a book called *What Really Makes You Ill?*, one that questions basics such as germ theory. Dawn Lester and David Parker were amazed to discover it's never been proven that any bacterium or virus is the cause of any disease! "Our discovery led us to raise the inevitable question of why we are all so ill-informed about the true nature of illness, despite the efforts of many physicians and others who have written about the problems within the medical establishment." They discovered plenty of evidence for the causal factors of illness being inadequate nutrition, exposure to toxins, exposure to EMFs and excessive emotional stress. This flies in the face of so much in Western medicine, in which germ theory is embedded and pharmaceutical drugs predominate. They write that "modern medicine can only be described as appalling with respect to its ability to be a health-care system", and go so far as to say it's fortunate that it is "becoming obvious to ever-growing numbers of people that it's a failing system". They conclude that "we have all been indoctrinated into a false belief-system that claims that 'modern medicine' has all of the answers to our health problems". I appreciate that they don't pull any punches and have the wit and courage to express their views, including pointing to how those with certain vested interests want people to feel helpless and to look to authority. By describing the human body as "an amazing self-regulating and self-healing organism" Lester and Parker are indeed writing towards humanising science and medicine.

The next chapter finds Vincent Di Stephano sharing his extensive knowledge of 'natural medicine' and its fate, up to now. He reminds us that, rather than being merely "carriers of symptoms requiring remediation...there is the issue of what it is to be a whole being...more than our biology". He asserts that the "holistic sensibility also seeks to engage with the meaning of such notions as soul, spirit, mind as integral to understanding the whole person in their lived context".

House wants to know "... just how important deliberate attempts to obliterate complementary, natural and indigenous medicine have been in the course of the inexorable rise of biomedicine, in relation to other healing practices?", to which Stephano has much to say, writing about moves towards *integrative medicine* that "consciously operates out of a holistic paradigm, and returns the depth perspective to the clinical encounter", and of doctors "who accept the centrality of diet and life-style, and also the role of psychological, social and spiritual elements in the creation of both health and illness".

At one point, in response to House, Di Stephano writes: "What you seem to be pointing towards, Richard, is the notion of cultivating or activating a state of consciousness capable of discerning the hidden and opportunistic webs of influence that encourage conformity to norms of medical and social expectation. These webs include the vast bio-industrial-pharmaceutical-technological infrastructures through which immense amounts of money move, and by which people are kept in a state of perpetual vigilance regarding their health through attention to such things as cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and the next bowel, prostate, breast or pap screening test." He asks how are people able to wake up to these exploitative capacities and to become conscious of the value of taking responsibility for their own health. He is concerned about the "dominant cultural ethos that sanctions a collective somnambulism in virtually every dimension, extending from the state of the environment to our own bodies, and that offers reassurance that all is well and that we are being well looked after by 'the powers that be'".

All the book's contributors have fascinating biographies and Dr Bruce Scott's honesty about his life is ideal for this conversation. He writes about his own "dark night of the soul" struggles using the cognitive model of depression, concerned about becoming a "fly in a bottle" and looking for a "cure". Through a year of psychotherapy, he realised there was no formulaic cure but that the presence of the analyst witnessing and sharing her own fragility brought him to a moment of knowing there wasn't a cure for his human state. This was part of his liberation "from the medico-scientific-technological way of seeing mental distress". He compares that way of seeing and wanting to get rid of suffering, with religious-spiritual ideas/practices that instead use it as nourishment. This is an intense conversation as it is in Richard's home territory of psychology and counselling and was conducted during Covid. Dr Scott shares his own harrowing story in search of the way through his own struggles. He compares orthodox approaches wanting to get rid of suffering, with religious-spiritual ideas/practices that instead see suffering in a more profound way. The conversation is very wide ranging on political issues too.

House considers that the "biggest elephant in the room" is that we are "being cultured out of a religious/spiritual world view". However, Scott also reckons that this is "a most spiritually enlivening time to be alive. We are presented with the choice of standing by our principles of justice and on being on the side of the good, or selling out and siding with evil."

Dr Sami Timimi's story includes being failed for referencing R.D. Laing, the controversial British psychiatrist, in an essay. House responds by referencing Thomas Kuhn's work showing "all too clearly how an old paradigm will fight to the death to maintain its

hegemonic power and way of seeing the world”.

House wants to know whether psychiatry is still insulated in its old paradigm. Dr Timimi concurs: “the institutions of psychiatry... have failed to challenge the ‘dumbing down’ of the intricacies of the human condition and its troubles into simplistic (what I call ‘MacDonalised’) constructs that are amenable to being placed into discreet categories, with their particular corresponding technical interventions”. He also writes of organisations developing aspects of more humane, person- and community-centred services. House hopes that that kind of work will help to turn the tide towards a more humanistic psychiatry.

The anthroposophical doctor, Thomas Hardtmuth, avers that ‘Autonomy’ is understood in the salutogenic sense as “the ability to self-regulate and thus experience self-efficacy in one’s own life”. He explains that this ability to self-regulate on the spiritual/cultural level is called ‘resilience’ in the mental realm, and ‘immune function’ on the biological level. He asserts these levels can’t be separated, as in any human being there is always an essential self as the ‘organising architect’. House helpfully reiterates this, and by reinforcing the three elements as an inseparable holistic human phenomenon is well placed to ask whether it follows that it is not appropriate to treat just one of these three levels “without addressing the other two levels as well”. Hardtmuth agrees, saying that the disease process cannot be reduced purely to the biological level and that doing so creates room for fatal error, including the error of seeing viruses in terms of a battle with the body, without taking into account the conditions in which particular viruses flourish. The scientific revolution they agree needs to come is a medical science of living connections with uniqueness and individuality at its core.

Peter Taylor is an analytical scientist. His work on climate change (he also wrote the book *Chill: A Reassessment of Global Warming Theory*) makes so much sense as it would be small-minded to consider humans alone affect the planet when climates have changed so often in the past. He has a strong academic background (all these folk have), has advised government at all levels, local, national, European Commission and UN, and has worked on a government project on renewable energy. When they didn’t act on his findings he became an activist with Greenpeace. When he wrote his book *Chill* his former environmental movement allies turned against him and, as they couldn’t fault his science, made personal attacks. Taylor says there is now a network of scientists who have concluded that about 75 per cent of current global warming is due to natural cycles and are concerned to correct the bias of the institutions and the United Nations – but his former allies won’t acknowledge or invite discussion on environmental issues! Taylor writes: “This phenomenon of vested interest works both ways – science becomes hooked on the ‘gravy train’ of publicly approved climate finance, and the funding bodies tend to fund research that supports prior commitment to computerised projections. The rot includes science journals conspiring to block or retract offending papers, and universities sacking scientists with dissident views.”

And so to Chapter 12, where we learn that Dr Katherine Buchanan’s biography towards becoming an independent evolutionary biologist, ecologist, mentor and tutor is fascinating and outstanding. Her doctoral research involved camping every summer in the French Alps while studying the evolution and population genetics of two species of grasshopper. From months of phenomenological observation, she got to know the landscape, grasshoppers and associated ecology very well, to the point where she could intuit aspects of her research questions. This was already Goethean science, blending careful observation with an inner experience of the living character of nature, Goethe’s “delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object”. However, her supervisors insisted she stuck to standard scientific ecological methods. She did, to get her Ph.D., but the grasshoppers deepened her observational skills and understanding of ‘interfluence’ and inter-species communication, teaching her the importance of bringing qualitative and artistic approaches to her work, what Goethean science calls ‘imagination, inspiration and intuition’ long before she discovered, studied and worked with it in such important ways.

Goethe asked, “Can a mechanistic, materialistic approach that focuses only on many individual structures ... ever explain living organisms, or the life of Nature as a whole?” He thought not. Buchanan writes that “we cannot and would not wish to abandon science, nor indeed did Goethe or Steiner wish to do so. They were both scientists (as well as artists). They wished to re-envision science or at least to complement it, or to evolve it – not to abandon it.”

It is fitting that Buchanan’s is the final chapter in *Humanising Science and Medicine* because it places the human fairly and squarely in the centre of science and medicine, and because it describes a healthy approach for the future of science, one that is already available. There is hope!

‘A Working Manifesto for Humanising Science and Medicine’ is the title of the conclusion to this rewarding book, very well written by House as a ten-point summary. I chose to pick out point 7, ‘Specifying the proper place of science and medicine in society’. House writes that: “For Rudolf Steiner, both medicine and science belong in the free cultural sphere of society, and both are substantially distorted and harmed if contaminated by either the political or the economic sphere... thus, the pharmaceutical industry would not be able to unduly influence the work of scientists or university departments; and governments would not be able to censor research findings to suit their partisan interests and narratives.” That’s what I would vote for!

In his postscript Dr Andrew Wakefield has the final word. Back in the eighties this previously well-respected doctor was vilified for presenting his concerns, and those of about a dozen other doctors, about a possible connection between the MMR combination vaccine and autism. Hounded out of Britain, he was able to continue his research in America. From reading *Humanising Science and Medicine* he writes: “But for me, the discussion here is not about who was right and who was wrong. It’s about how, in the real world, the System deals with scientific dissent – the lifeblood of unfettered science. This book should be an essential part of the training of future scientists.”

Having read it, I could not agree more; and I hope many non-scientists will read it too!

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