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978-1-107-63245-5 - From Witchcraft to Chemotherapy: The Linaere Lecture 1941

Sir Walter Langdon-Brown

Excerpt

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CHEMOTHERAPY

IT is my pleasing duty in the first place to express my sincere thanks to the Master and Fellows of St John's College for the honour they have conferred on me by the invitation to deliver a lecture of such ancient tradition. They could have chosen others more worthy, but no one who could appreciate that distinction more. Thereby they have added still further to the great debt I owe the College. It is a responsible task which falls to my lot, that of carrying on a tradition despite all the alarums and excursions that beset us to-day. Jung must have been prophetically inspired when at Vienna in 1932 (note the date) he said: 'Once tradition has been sufficiently lopped off by . . . revolutionary unhistorical and therefore uneducated inclinations . . . leadership is the more fanatically defended the more unsuitable it is.' I think the

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twentieth century was born with a desire to cast aside the traditions of the nineteenth; every poet, sculptor, painter and musician loudly proclaimed that creed. Yet the results do not appear to have been particularly encouraging. The difficulty has always been to distinguish between a living tradition which can be modified to meet changing conditions and a dead one which cumpers the ground, obstructing growth. It is part of my purpose to-day to discuss the influence of some of the conflicts concerning traditions on thought and conduct.

The Influence of Tradition

Here at the very outset St John's College provides me with an illustration. The mediaeval universities as we know were not founded but just grew out of a sudden passionate desire for learning that was born with the twelfth century. Now it happened that the Hospital of St John had been founded in 1135 for a community of Augustinian Canons before university, hostel or college was in existence. Later Hugh de Balsham, who had become Bishop of

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Ely in 1257, introduced into this hospital a certain number of the scholars who since the invitation of Henry III had been flocking to the University. Here he hoped they would be better cared for, but unfortunately the brethren and the scholars quarrelled incessantly. The original versions of Aristotle set free from Constantinople in 1204 were exciting profound interest everywhere and had given impetus to a new form of learning; the old and the new were incompatible, and, as has happened repeatedly, the old won. Balsham founded Peterhouse instead and the quarrelsome monks lost for my first college the distinction of being the oldest. The hospital clinging to the old tradition deteriorated so much that it was finally dissolved in 1510, only to arise again phoenix-like a year later as St John's College.

Another and more serious consequence of the conflict between old and new ideas is also associated with this College and this Lectureship, when Thomas Linacre, who had stimulated Henry VIII to found the Royal College of Physicians in 1518, himself founded lecture-

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ships, both here and at Oxford, in 1526. In 1540 this was followed by the establishment of the Regius Professorships. With these advantages it is disappointing to find how little was achieved. My distinguished predecessor in this lectureship, Professor Topley, had no hesitation in explaining this. He must have startled his audience when he said the only reason Linacre did no more harm than he did as a physician was because the times were too much for him, that his was the high tragedy of the wrong thing supremely well done, 'for he believed that the resurrection of the Greek physician in his pristine purity would put medicine on the right road again'. This is to be wise after the event, but it is true that Linacre was not interested in new observations; for him the *re-naissance* was literally to be a rebirth of the old culture. His whole outlook was authoritarian. The letter had been rediscovered but the spirit continued to elude him. Hence the comparative sterility of his benefactions for many years. Caius seems to me to have imbibed more of the new spirit from Padua than did

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Linacre, and he introduced the practice of dissection at his College, where Harvey's interest in the subject of anatomy was presumably first aroused. He also initiated a new tradition by his treatise on the sweating sickness; a work based on direct clinical observation and not a mere quoting of authorities. Later in life, however, Caius became alarmed at the excesses which followed the exhilarating intoxication of the Renaissance and he began to wonder whether he had not done harm in encouraging the movement by his benefactions. In spite of his great services to medicine he seems to have died a disillusioned old man.

Linacre and Caius each founded institutions which have survived them to this day, yet they stand for two different reactions to the Renaissance; the former's robust belief in the mere restoration of the old seriously interfered with the efficacy of his gifts; the latter welcomed the new until its kaleidoscopic effect on religion and morals made him withdraw into his shell. But is this not the history of all new births? The excesses and terrors of the French Revolu-

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tion made Edmund Burke aghast, while they changed Wordsworth from a revolutionary into a reactionary. When the crisis comes men fall into two groups, some look back and like Lot's wife become pillars of salt, the symbol of unavailing tears, while others look forward, determined that, at whatever cost, a new and better order shall arise out of chaos. Never was that faith more needed than to-day and, surely, never was it more difficult to cling to it.

This is to anticipate however, and we must return to the dawn of the seventeenth century, which saw the introduction of the method of experiment. Here for the third time St John's College comes into my story when John Gilbert, the third Johnian in direct succession to become President of the Royal College of Physicians, published his great treatise on the magnet and terrestrial magnetism, in 1600, the first book on physics with a modern outlook. Sir William Hale-White makes out a good case for the influence of this work on William Harvey, whose experiments had such far-reaching consequences.

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Harvey's scientific attitude was not confined to the circulation or to embryology for, though it is perhaps less known, he applied it to his investigations on witchcraft, which were marked by humanity tempered by scepticism. And thus I reach my main topic—the origin of witchcraft from primitive religion and the part it played in the evolution of remedies through the magical phase to empirical success aided by laboratory investigation. Indeed the Greek word φαρμακεία originally meant a form of witchcraft; medicated drugs magically despatched to procure the death of disliked persons.

Religion and Magic

We realize now that myths and legends are not merely idle tales. Study of primitive people and especially Freud's technique for exploring the unconscious mind have taught us that legends represent history distorted by imagination, while myths embody men's hopes and fears, particularly fears. And so we are more prepared to listen to old wives' tales and try to assess their significance.

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To do this we must go a long way back. Primaeval man found himself in a world that was hard to understand. Some things were predictable: the sequence of day and night, the phases of the moon, the succession of the seasons. But some things were not predictable, such as thunderstorms, floods and death. He felt himself at the mercy of unseen powers, and he desired to placate them. It is a testimony to the antiquity of the medical profession that the first individual to raise his head above the common herd was the medicine-man, who claimed and indeed acquired superior knowledge. As he frequently professed to justify the ways of God to man, his functions were generally blended with those of the priest. Among primitive people all disease is regarded as coming from without by evil influences, human or divine. Therefore it seemed to them that effective remedies could only be provided by magic. Now magic assumed three main forms—sympathetic magic which reappeared in semi-scientific form in the homœopathic dictum ‘like cures like’, contagious magic, the

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forerunner of plasters and poultices, and incantations of which hypnosis may be regarded as the modern equivalent. It is not surprising that since magic was relied upon for so many centuries, there is still a craving for magical cures. Is not the highest praise we can give to a remedy that it worked like magic? And how many of you can lay your hand on your heart and swear that you never touch wood to avert disaster, never throw spilled salt over your left shoulder, never bow to the new moon or try to avoid the number 13?

Primitive man was animistic, endowing everything with a spirit. Beside the great gods there were innumerable local spirits—every stream and fountain had its nymph, every tree its dryad, every hillside its oread. As tribes began to mingle, their myths began to fuse. It was recognized that the fertility of the land depended on two things, the sun's rays and the nymph-haunted waters. There was only one sun, and many rivers. Therefore when the local myths fused, the fertile land had one father but many mothers. Hence Jupiter was saddled

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with a highly polygamous character, and one which has unfairly stuck to him.

We shall find these gods of the soil, chthonic deities as they were called, are of great importance to our present subject, for from them sprang the idea of herbal magic. When man began to settle down to cultivate the soil, he became impressed with the importance of private ownership. He set up boundary stones—and ‘cursed be he who removeth his neighbour’s landmark’. These stones thus acquired special sanctity. When Jacob and Laban quarrelled about their property they set up a boundary pillar, calling it Mizpah as a witness to their pact against aggression into the other’s territory; not quite the same idea that impels lovers to have Mizpah engraved inside an engagement ring! Thus the boundary stone becomes a god, and before long a face is carved upon it—the terminal figure with which it is still customary to decorate gardens as if to guard them against marauders.

Such crude conceptions of deity could not continue to satisfy man’s feelings. Thus in

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