

# Aiming at the Unprejudiced Observer

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## Abstract

The homeopath's utmost concern is to find the healing remedy for his/her patient. Observational skills being crucial for fulfilling this task, Hahnemann has introduced the 'unprejudiced observer'. He describes the needed skills and gives suggestions for practice comprising exercises to improve thinking, sensory perception, accurate naming, self-experience in homeopathic provings and the claim to desist from oneself and to focus completely on the patient. However, Hahnemann's syllabus needs some completion regarding non-sensory perceptible phenomena. Modern homeopaths realize the total extent of required skills. They are challenged to recognize the experienced reality of the patient's illness and at the same time to desist from subjective bias. Moreover, bias is induced by heuristics applied because of situational constraints. Phenomenology is an approach suitable for homeopathy, as it embraces subjective experiences. An inherent bias must be admitted though, because phenomenology depends on subjective interpretation of the perceived appearances. Overcoming this problem, *Steiner* has introduced objective idealism. This approach goes beyond phenomenology by respecting the 'organising idea' in appearances. Reality is seen as the unification of a perceptible object with its constituent organising idea. The objective of anthroposophic schooling, epistemologically based on objective idealism, is to develop skills for recognizing the organising idea of inanimated and living objects, aiming at unbiased perception. Suggestions are made in this article how anthroposophic schooling can be integrated in homeopathic practice to replace prejudice by sound judgement, leading to effective prescription.

## Keywords

- ▶ homeopathic consultation
- ▶ unprejudiced observer
- ▶ bias
- ▶ anthroposophy
- ▶ steiner

## Introduction

The clue to success in homeopathy is the correct application of the law of similars. The homeopath is challenged to achieve the greatest possible similarity in the characteristics of the patient's disease to the characteristics of the chosen remedy. Thereby, not only objective observable symptoms but also in particular individually experienced sufferings must be respected. Obviously, the evidence needed for decision making in homeopathy cannot be provided by outcomes of statistical trials. Special skills are necessary to provide an evidence base derived from personal observation, minimising personal bias.

To meet these requirements, Hahnemann<sup>1</sup> (§ 6) calls for the 'unprejudiced observer'. In his essay on the 'medical observer', Hahnemann<sup>2</sup> stresses the need for regular practice to achieve the goal and provides several exercises.

The objective of this article is to evaluate Hahnemann's recommendations, complemented by modern approaches, to improve accurateness in observation and prescription.

## The 'Unprejudiced Observer'

Hahnemann's description of the 'unprejudiced observer' (Hahnemann,<sup>1</sup> § 6) is a summary of his understanding of impartiality, at the same time reflecting his understanding of

disease. By 'unprejudiced', Hahnemann means to desist from theorisation, relying only on what is perceptible to the senses. He enumerates subjective symptoms, objective symptoms and incidental symptoms that are observable by the patient or by others, as the only representatives of the disease.

According to Hahnemann,<sup>2</sup> observational skills are not innate, but must be acquired by practice. His recommendations are as follows:

- Drawing from nature for developing exact sensory perception.
- Familiarising with mathematics and texts by ancient Greek and Romans for schooling of thinking and accurate naming.
- Strengthening willpower to desist from oneself, focusing one's attention on the patient.
- Acquiring self-experience by proving homeopathic remedies.
- Above all, Hahnemann claims constant awareness of one's limited apprehension.

I acknowledge Hahnemann's request to omit unprovable theories and to develop cognitive skills. In particular, I appreciate his suggestion to acquire a personal knowledge base by self-experience in provings. Especially, since provings provide the evidence base for homeopathic materia medica, I regard observational skills to be crucial in homeopathy. I acknowledge Hahnemann's exercises to improve accurateness in observing sensory perceivable objects. However, a categorical completion of his syllabus is needed.

According to Hahnemann<sup>1</sup> (§90, annotation), each sign that reveals itself at least partly to the senses, for example a weepy attitude, must be respected. Hence, the medical observer should be able to assess facial expression, body language and mental state of the patient too. In addition, the homeopath must be able to assess the reliability of the patient's record (Hahnemann,<sup>1</sup> §§ 96–98). Also, the homeopath must name the observed phenomena as accurately as possible and recognize what is outstanding, distinguishing, extraordinary and specific (Hahnemann,<sup>1</sup> §153). Finally, symptoms must be evaluated with respect to Hahnemann's ideal of health: the individual's freedom to employ the organism to reach his/her higher destiny (Hahnemann,<sup>1</sup> §9).

These evaluations require more than realizing what is before one's eyes. Obviously, the evidence base for decision making in homeopathy depends on the homeopath's understanding of health and his/her cognitive skills. These aspects inevitably produce bias in observation. A profound investigation on bias is given by Souter.

## Heuristics and Bias

Souter<sup>3</sup> contrasts Hahnemann's claim of the 'unprejudiced observer' with findings of *behavioral decision research*, and argues: in complex situations, people have always been found to apply heuristics in decision making. A heuristic is a rule-of-thumb derived from experience. Souter specifies

six heuristics associated with bias in homeopathic consultation:

1. Representative heuristic relying on the extent of existing knowledge.
2. Availability heuristic relying on the ease to remember.
3. Anchoring and adjustment heuristic relying on adjustment of results in favor of personal values.
4. Affect heuristic relying on emotional judgement.
5. Elimination heuristic relying on the need of selection criteria because of existent constraints
6. Finally, recognition heuristic relying on decisions made on a single good reason.

Souter concludes that Hahnemann's claim is impossible to fulfil, and that homeopaths must always be aware of bias.

## Subjective Reality and Phenomenology

Although, appreciating subjective reality, Swayne<sup>4</sup> underlines the importance of the patient's experiences in illness, which deserve detailed attention, and approves Whitmarsh's idea of applying phenomenology in case taking (Whitmarsh).<sup>5</sup> Swayne values phenomenology as a method for recording personal experiences, judging what is before one's eyes and omitting predefined assumptions, thus erasing prejudices. Whitmarsh argues as follows: He describes Husserl's phenomenology as a method to observe the contents (phenomena) appearing in one's consciousness. The observer must 'bracket' all his/her concepts and personal opinions to recognize an object in an unbiased way. Whitmarsh discovers Hahnemann's requirements on the unprejudiced observer in Husserl's claims and states that it is exactly what homeopaths do. Levy<sup>6</sup> criticizes both Swayne and Whitmarsh. He argues that phenomenology cannot be seen as purely descriptive. The influence of interpretation must be taken into account. He prefers Heidegger's interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology. In their reply, both Whitmarsh<sup>7</sup> and Swayne<sup>8</sup> admit that interpretation is always present in medical encounter.

Given these viewpoints, phenomenology will be discussed more deeply.

Husserl (as cited in *Blume*<sup>9</sup>) tries to eliminate bias in observation by not applying interpretation, respecting only the present content of the observer's consciousness. However, how can one recognize anything without concepts? Without having appropriated concepts by his/her mother tongue, the world remains meaningless to the observer. Heidegger (as cited in *Graetzel*<sup>10</sup>) argues in a similar way. He denies the possibility to abrogate interpretation and gives this famous example: a lectern would be recognized in a different way by a western academic, a simple-minded German peasant or a native Senegalese, dependent on the observer's personal background. Hence, Heidegger and his pupil *Gadamer* (as cited in *Malpas*<sup>11</sup>) developed hermeneutic phenomenology. Thereby, understanding is accomplished by the 'hermeneutic circle': starting from a prior understanding, the object is investigated repeatedly, gathering new information and scrutinising one's assumptions with each circle. Objective of the circle is laying-bare the assumed pre-

existent unconscious subjective understanding of the object. Hence, understanding cannot reach the truth, but only a widening of the observer's mental horizon, and phenomenology ends with its inherent source of bias.

## Reality beyond Bias

Aiming at a fundamental reduction of prejudices, I suggest Steiner's approach of objective idealism, which provides methods to extinguish subjective bias in principle. In objective idealism, cognition is viewed as co-action of sensory and mental perception (Steiner).<sup>12</sup> Mental perception is achieved by concentrated thinking, thus providing an organ for perceiving ideas, similar to the eye perceiving sunlight. For example, proving the angular sum in a triangle is always 180 degrees. The result, the idea itself, is a reality independent of the observer. Only its appearance depends on his/her mental activity.

Mental perception in observing sensory-perceivable objects aims at recognizing the organising law of the object. In artificial man-made objects like Heidegger's 'lectern', this idea can be understood easily, enabling one to create new, totally different looking lecterns. Thus, in recognizing a visible 'lectern', the word 'lectern' expresses the unbiased reality, which consists of the organising idea of the lectern actualising itself in the visible object. The peasant and the Senegalese in Heidegger's example can only 'paraphrase' the appearing object, as long as the concept 'lectern' and its related organising idea is unknown to them.

In observing natural objects, we are in a comparable situation as the Senegalese in front of the lectern. Without recognizing the organising idea, the word 'tulip' can only denote a class of objects with common features, expressing a subjective concept. However, to recognize the reality of living, or even human beings, suitable instruments of perception can be developed by practice. Constitutive for this project is the fact that Steiner<sup>12</sup> discovers mental activity among the contents (phenomena) of one's consciousness. Schooling this activity by practice can lead to recognizing reality beyond descriptive interpretation as introduced by Heidegger or Gadamer.

## Anthroposophic Practice

Important in observing life phenomena is the fact that laws of physics apply to inanimate matter alone (Kuenne).<sup>13</sup> Life phenomena are 'emergent' (Heusser).<sup>14</sup> 'Emergent' denotes a meaningful structure that cannot be derived from its constituents. Life is subject to its own organising ideas that actualise themselves in visible matter.

Practice for recognizing the organising law of organisms comprises the following aspects (Kuenne<sup>13</sup>):

- *First*: practising pure sensory perception (e.g., of a tulip), omitting mental concepts.
- *Second*: mimic the temporal development of the tulip by imagination.

Practising these two steps repeatedly allows the tulip to reveal its organising idea to the adjusted flexible thinking of the practised observer.

- As a result of regular practice, in the third step, the idea can be perceived together with sensory perception, giving rise to the spirited concept 'tulip', that expresses the complete reality of the tulip.

In summary, according to the principle 'like recognizes like' (*Empedocles*, as cited in *Kamtekar*)<sup>15</sup> temporally evolving thinking can recognize temporally evolving life.

Observing animated beings requires advanced practice, as soul phenomena are emergent with respect to life phenomena. They obey their own laws (Heusser).<sup>14</sup> According to the principle 'like recognizes like', feeling must be schooled. Emotions must be transformed to 'cognitive feeling' of others. Learning about the invisible inner of an object can be accomplished by knocking. Similarly, cognitive feeling relies on resonance as experienced by an inner witnessing instance that accompanies sense-perception, emotions and thinking.

Kühlewind<sup>16</sup> describes the proceeding:

- In pure sense perception, omitting mental concepts, it is the witnessing instance, accompanying the observation that helps reproduce the appearance in mind. By schooling this instance, a feeling of 'style' can be developed that helps distinguish, for example, tulips from sunflowers. Schooling cognitive feeling in style perception enables one to differentiate gestures of will in self-expression.
- Emotions deflect our outward-directed attention to ourselves, prohibiting to recognize other's feelings. However, the inner witness can be invoked by dissociating from one's emotions and observing them. Thereby the witness learns how emotions feel and can recognize them by touching resonance, especially if the attention is redirected toward others. Schooling cognitive feeling in overcoming one's emotions helps recognize the emotional condition of others.
- In thinking, the witnessing instance can be experienced by intensive concentration on a mental topic. It is the witnessing instance that accompanies the thinking-process, revealing the meaningful idea of the topic. Cognitive feeling, accomplished by the inner witness, enables us to recognize that something is logical. It is especially applied in mathematical reasoning. Schooling of cognitive feeling in thinking enables one to realize meaning.

In summary, by practising cognitive feeling, soul activities unfolding in visible gestures of will, expression of emotions and oral utterances, can be recognized and understood as a meaningful wholeness. The meaning is the organising idea that actualises itself in the 3-fold activities of the soul.

Finally, the 'I' is emergent with respect to the subordinated body and soul. It is the origin of the individual's freedom (Heusser).<sup>14</sup> Recognizing an individual's 'I' can only be an act of mutually volitional revelation.

### Critical Appraisal of Anthroposophic Practice

An academic evaluation of anthroposophic practice has only been given recently by *Clement*.<sup>17</sup> Clement appreciates its epistemological foundation in objective idealism, though he raises three questions: the question of dependence on the 'master'; the question of suggestibility and the question of differences in verbal and written recommendations for practice. Let me give my view from own experience.

In learning, I always depend on a teacher. However, Steiner<sup>18</sup> emphasizes the difference of anthroposophic practice from former esoteric schooling. No obedience but conscious decision is requested. The 'master' should be seen comparable to a teacher of geometry: he/she explains the laws, aiming to enable the pupil to recognize the truth independently. Hence, basic practice can be conveyed by books. Regarding suggestibility, it is again Steiner<sup>18</sup> who alerts us. For example, the schooling comprises exercises in imagination, which must not be confused with reality. However, it is tempting to take these images for own insights in a final reality by subjective interpretation. Regular schooling has to overcome this temptation. The same is true for reading descriptions of 'higher worlds' by others, including Steiner. Correct practice aims at recognizing the truth by discovering the origin of perceived images. It furthermore aims at revealing our (often volitional) part in producing the appearance. Improving self-knowledge is a main issue of anthroposophic practice and seen as necessary for gaining knowledge of others. Regarding contradictions in verbal and written advice: Steiner's documented speech has usually been addressed to individuals in specific situations, whereas his written work addresses everybody. As homeopaths, we can understand Steiner's differing procedures. However, the beginner should stick to the written work.

Nevertheless, a great difficulty in anthroposophic practice is the huge variety of exercises. The pupil is challenged to design his/her syllabus on his/her own responsibility. In fact, this is a consequence of appreciating individual freedom. From my own experience, I can say: crucial is one's motivation, one's confidence to rely on own decisions and one's initiative. If someone finds anthroposophic practice useful, he/she will soon get the feeling of being 'on the right track', and this will guide him/her further. Anthroposophic practice is an individual path, but it should not be a lonely path. Communication with peers and experts is advisable if one is moving beyond the first steps. Information can be found on the homepage of the 'Goetheanum, School of Spiritual Science':

<https://www.goetheanum.org/School-of-Spiritual-Science.300.0.html?&L=1>.

Finally, what are the benefits of anthroposophic practice for the medical observer?

### Improving Accuracy in Homeopathic Observation

Anthroposophic exercises can complement Hahnemann's suggestions for schooling of sense-perception and thinking, in particular regarding non-sensory perceivable phenomena.

Cognitive feeling helps assess the patient's mental and emotional state as well as his/her reliability. By fostering style perception it also helps carve out characteristics in appearances as requested by Hahnemann<sup>1</sup> (§153). Furthermore, practicing mental reproduction of life gestures helps understand temporally developing disease processes.

Benefits of anthroposophic practice can be improved further if combined with self-experience in provings. Homeopathic remedies are respectively characterized by their unique gestalt of mutually related physical, vital, emotional and mental symptoms ('Gestalt' is a reasonably structured wholeness). By attending provings, the anthroposophically trained homeopath can acquire meaningful animated concepts that are available in consultation, promoting accurate naming. In moments of high attentiveness, he might even realize the organising idea of the remedy that actualises itself in the gestalt of the symptoms.

The requested ability to desist from oneself and to focus one's attention in observation is developed by each of the suggested exercises. It should be adopted as an attitude in consultation, accompanied by respecting the patient's individual freedom.

Eventually, aiming at Hahnemann's ideal of health (Hahnemann,<sup>1</sup> §9), the homeopath discovers the patient's symptoms by the obstacles that prevent him/her from freely employing his/her organism. Remarkably, Hahnemann's ideal of health is congenial with the anthroposophic view of man, which aims at freedom as the utmost realization of the 'I' in body and soul (Steiner)<sup>19</sup> Hence, assessing symptoms in homeopathy is supported by anthroposophy.

For integrating anthroposophic practice in homeopathy, the suggested exercises should be done as a personal training, separated carefully from consultation. About 10 minutes each day can be sufficient in the beginning.

Finally, following Hahnemann's admonition to distrust our apprehension, the suggested studies can be complemented by awareness of remaining bias caused by heuristic proceeding as stated by Souter.

### Conclusion

Homeopaths are challenged to evaluate subjective experienced symptoms with the least personal prejudice. To acquire the necessary skills, Hahnemann's tutorial for the medical observer is advisable. However, it needs completion regarding non-sensory perceptible aspects.

Anthroposophic practice, based on objective idealism, can fill the gap. Thereby, physical, vital, psychological and individual aspects are, respectively, regarded as being emergent. According to the principle 'like recognizes like', feeling and thinking are schooled as organs of perception for each emergent level separately. Bias is reduced by systematically converting subjective judgement into cognitive skills. Moreover, specific nonmaterialistic concepts are acquired for the phenomena of life and soul. Thus, combining anthroposophic practice with self-experience in provings can endow the homeopath with true-to-life concepts for case taking.

Finally, obeying Hahnemann's admonition to distrust our limited apprehension, awareness of applying heuristics because of remaining personal and situational constraints, as known from behavioral decision research, can underpin sound judgement.

In addition, because the idea of man in anthroposophy is congenial with Hahnemann's ideal of health and the related assessment of symptoms, anthroposophic practice can help improve the evidence needed in homeopathy and to reach a new level of accuracy in prescription.

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