

A Trip to Stonesville: Andrew Weil, the Boom in Alternative Medicine, and the Retreat from Science

[In this issue of CBE ReViews, I have chosen to abridge a long review written by Arnold Relman for *The New Republic*. The review covers Andrew Weil's books *Ask Dr. Weil*; *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*; *Spontaneous Healing*; *Natural Health, Natural Medicine*; *Health and Healing*; *From Chocolate to Morphine* (with Winifred Rosen); *The Marriage of the Sun and Moon*; and *The Natural Mind*, published over the last 15 years. The review is published with permission of *The New Republic* from the 14 December 1998 issue of the magazine.—Ed.]

I.

Andrew Weil, M.D., is variously described on the covers on his best-selling books as “the guru of alternative medicine,” “one of the most skilled, articulate, and important leaders in the field of health and healing,” “a pioneer in the medicine of the future,” and “an extraordinary phenomenon.” On his website, which records over two and a half million hits a month, he is called “America’s most trusted medical expert.” A recent cover of *Time*, which featured the familiar picture of his bald head and bewhiskered cherubic countenance, announced that “medicine man Dr. Andrew Weil has made New Age remedies popular.” In the accompanying story, *Time* tells us that “millions of Americans swear by” his medical advice.

Not all of this is hype. Weil is arguably the best known and most influential of the many physician-writers now in the vanguard of the alternative medicine movement. He is also one of the most prolific. Since 1972 he has written eight books. The first three were mostly about the effects of natural drugs on consciousness, but the remaining five, all published in the past fifteen years, are about health and healing. Read together with one remarkable chapter in his first book, these more recent works provide a comprehensive description of alternative medicine, as seen through the eyes of its most serious and

systematic advocate.

Until now, alternative medicine has generally been rejected by medical scientists and educators, and by most practicing physicians. The reasons are many, but the most important reason is the difference in mentality between the alternative practitioners and the medical establishment. The leaders of the establishment believe in the scientific method, and in the rule of evidence, and in the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology upon which the modern view of nature is based. Alternative practitioners either do not seem to care about science or explicitly reject its premises. One might have expected such thinking to alienate most people in a technologically advanced society such as ours; but the alternative medicine movement, and the popularity of gurus such as Weil, are growing rapidly.

In 1971 he [Weil] began to write *The Natural Mind*, which became a best-seller and launched his career as a writer.

The Natural Mind (1972) is mainly a criticism of American drug policy and an exposition of Weil's views on the interaction of psychedelic drugs with the mind. It also expounds his general philosophy of mind-body relations upon which much of his later writings on health and healing is based. The seventh chapter, entitled “A Trip to Stonesville,” should be required reading for all who would understand the origins of Weil's belief in the healing power of the mind.

According to Weil, many of his basic insights about the causes of disease and the nature of healing come from what he calls “stoned thinking,” that is, thoughts experienced while under the influence of psychedelic agents or during other states of “altered consciousness” induced by trances, ritual magic, hypnosis, meditation, and the like. He cites some of the characteristics of “stoned thinking” that give it advantages over “straight” thinking; these include a greater reliance on “intuition” and an “acceptance of the ambivalent nature of

things,” by which he means a tolerance for “the coexistence of opposites that appear to be mutually antagonistic.” In Weil's view, intellect, logic, and inductive reasoning from observed fact are the limited instruments of “straight” thinking, and should be subservient to guidance by the intuitive insights that are gained during states of altered consciousness and “stoned” thinking.

There is more of this kind of thing in the remainder of his “Stonesville” chapter, much of which defies rational belief or is just plain wrong about the facts. Weil states, for example, that “stoned” thinking enables us to gain control of our autonomic, or involuntary, nervous system, and that the practical application of this thinking in the form of “autonomic feedback control” enables patients to control high blood pressure more effectively and safely than by the use of antihypertensive drugs. He claims that allopathic physicians “have no effective drug for high blood pressure.” Now, even in 1972, when *The Natural Mind* was first published, this statement was dubious, to say the least; and it was certainly false in 1985 when the book was republished and supposedly updated. Weil tells us that patients can be taught to lower their blood pressure by a form of training called “feedback control.” The fact is that “feedback control” (or “the relaxation response,” as it is called by Dr. Herbert Benson, its chief advocate and another well-known guru of alternative medicine) produces at most only small and usually transient reductions in blood pressure. Feedback control has never been shown to be as effective in the long-term control of moderate to severe hypertension as any of a variety of pharmacological agents prescribed for this purpose.

II.

The Natural Mind was followed by two more popular books about consciousness and mind-altering drugs—*The Marriage of the Sun and Moon: A Quest for Unity*

in *Consciousness* (1980); and, with Winifred Rosen, *From Chocolate to Morphine: Everything You Need to Know About Mind-Altering Drugs* (1983). Neither book dealt directly with alternative medicine. His next book on medicine was *Health and Healing* (1983, republished in 1998). By then Weil had established himself in Tucson as a general medical practitioner and was on the part-time clinical faculty of the College of Medicine of the University of Arizona, where he gave an elective course of lectures about alternative medicine.

Consider Weil's strange discussion in this book of sickness and health. "Sickness is the manifestation of evil in the body," he proclaims, "just as health is the manifestation of holiness. Sickness and health are not simply physical states. . . . They are rooted in the deepest and most mysterious strata of Being"

Lest we despair of ever knowing in our heart what health is, Weil unveils the mystery: "Health is wholeness—wholeness in its most profound sense, with nothing left out and everything in just the right order to manifest the mystery of balance. Far from being simply the absence of disease, health is a dynamic and harmonious equilibrium of all the elements and forces making up and surrounding a human being." Health, it seems, is a mystery explained by another mysterious principle. This is the "mystery of balance."

Then there is Weil's typically ambiguous assessment of conventional, or allopathic, medicine. First he concedes that it is not all bad, and that "regular medicine is the most effective system I know for dealing with many common and serious problems," among them acute medical and surgical emergencies. But then he adds that "regular medicine is on very shaky ground" in dealing with other common problems. "I would look elsewhere than conventional medicine for help if I contracted a severe viral disease like hepatitis or polio, or a metabolic disease like diabetes. I would not seek allopathic treatment for cancer, except for a few varieties, or of such chronic ail-

ments as arthritis, asthma, hypertension (high blood pressure), multiple sclerosis, or for many other chronic diseases. . . ." This is a startling list of major diseases to be ruled off-limits for conventional medicine. One wonders which of the remaining chronic diseases Weil is willing to concede to the allopaths, and how he knows where to draw the line.

III.

One of Weil's central themes in *Health and Healing*, and in his subsequent work, is his criticism of mainstream medicine's reliance on pharmaceuticals instead of herbal medicines. The latter are presently enjoying a great resurgence in popularity, due largely to the endorsement of prominent advocates such as Weil, and to the promotional activities of a "natural products" industry that received a big boost in 1994, when Congress gave the industry permission to market herbal preparations with less rigorous oversight by the FDA than the agency exercises over drugs. Manufacturers of herbal preparations can avoid many of the customary rigors of FDA drug regulation simply by labeling these products "dietary supplements." In 1997, the herbal medicine market had sales of nearly \$4 billion, and a stroll down the aisles of almost any supermarket or chain drugstore will confirm that business is booming.

Weil doesn't like the modern pharmaceutical industry and he wants us to return to our former dependence on herbs. His arguments are on balance unconvincing, but they are not without some reason. Weil has an arguable case, I think, when he criticizes the pharmaceutical industry for promoting expensive new drugs that have little or no advantage over older and less expensive drugs, and for sometimes being insufficiently attentive to their risks. I also have some sympathy with his criticism of the excessive prescribing of potent pharmaceuticals by physicians, and the common practice of prescribing many drugs simultaneously without sufficient attention to their toxic or interactive effects. There

is no doubt that improper use of pharmaceuticals, including mistakes in dosage and even inadvertent administration of the wrong drug, causes many serious mishaps in hospital and office practice. Even the proper use of drugs can sometimes cause fatal reactions. Misuse of antibiotics can cause the development of drug-resistant strains of bacteria.

Still, the fact remains that pharmaceuticals are an essential part of medical practice. Without them there would be no effective treatment or palliation of many serious diseases. On balance, the good done by modern pharmaceuticals far outweighs the harm, though zealous advocates of "natural" remedies (Weil among them) insist otherwise.

Weil next considers the healing power of the placebo effect, by which he means the faith of the patient and the practitioner in the therapeutic value of whatever treatment is being used. He says that all treatments depend more or less on this faith, and that is why any treatment, real or imaginary, may be able to cure any disease in certain patients by helping them to mobilize their innate healing powers. Sometimes the result is mainly due to the direct physical action of the treatment, and sometimes it is mainly due to the patient's own belief in the treatment, and sometimes it appears to be a combination of effects. Weil probably believes that herbal remedies, diet, physical exercise, and other lifestyle changes belong mainly in the first category. Faith healing, therapeutic touch, magnetism, and most of the other more esoteric alternative healing methods would probably be placed in the second category. Meditation, breathing exercises, biofeedback, acupuncture, musculoskeletal manipulations, and yoga would probably be placed in the third category.

That people usually "get better," that most relatively minor diseases heal spontaneously or seem to improve with simple common remedies, is hardly news. Every physician, indeed every grandmother, knows that. Yet before we accept Weil's contention that serious illnesses such as

“bone cancer,” “Parkinson’s disease,” or “scleroderma” are similarly curable, or respond to alternative healing methods, we need at least to have some convincing medical evidence that the patients whom he reports in these testimonials did indeed suffer from these diseases, and that they were really improved or healed. The perplexity is not that Weil is using “anecdotes” as proof, but that we don’t know whether the anecdotes are true.

IV.

Surely almost all scientists would agree . . . that, regardless of what theory of nature we wish to espouse, we cannot escape the obligation to support our claims with objective evidence. All theories must conform to the facts or be discarded. So, if Weil cannot produce credible evidence to validate the miraculous cures that he claims for the healing powers of the mind, and if he does not support with objective data the claims he and others make for the effectiveness of alternative healing methods, he cannot presume to wear the mantle of science.

V.

Health and Healing, published in 1983, was the last of Weil’s comprehensive and broadly conceived commentaries on health and disease. Beginning in 1995, with *Natural Health*, *Natural Medicine*, he produced a series of three “how-to” manuals on wellness and self-care, which established his current reputation as the people’s doctor and “America’s most trusted medical expert.” The next was *Spontaneous Healing*, and the third *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*.

The alternative medicine movement has been around for a long time, but it was eclipsed during most of this century by the success of medical science. Now there is growing public disenchantment with the cost and the impersonality of modern medical care, as well as concern about medical mistakes and the complications and side effects of pharmaceuticals and other forms of medical treatment. For their part, physicians have allowed the public to

perceive them as uninterested in personal problems, as inaccessible to their patients except when carrying out technical procedures and surgical operations. The “doctor knows best” attitude, which dominated patient-doctor relations during most of the century, has in recent decades given way to a more activist, consumer-oriented view of the patient’s role. Moreover, many other licensed health-care professionals, such as nurse-practitioners, psychotherapists, pharmacists, and chiropractors, are providing services once exclusively reserved to allopathic physicians.

The net result of all these developments has been a weakening of the hegemony that allopathic medicine once exercised over the health care system, and a growing interest by the public in exploring other healing approaches. The authority of allopathic medicine is also being challenged by a swelling current of mysticism and anti-scientism that runs deep through our culture. Even as the number and the complexity of urgent technological and scientific issues facing contemporary society increase, there seems to be a growing public distrust of the scientific outlook and a re-awakening of interest in mysticism and spiritualism.

All this obscurantism has given powerful impetus to the alternative medicine movement, with its emphasis on the power of mind over matter. And so consumer demand for alternative remedies is rising, as is public and private financial support for their study and clinical use. It is no wonder that practicing physicians, the academic medical establishment, and the National Institutes of Health are all finding reasons to pay more attention to the alternative medicine movement. Indeed, it is becoming politically incorrect for the movement’s critics to express their skepticism too strongly in public.

As Weil clearly points out in his earlier books, alternative healing is based on a conception of nature and a theory of learning the truth about nature that is fundamentally at odds with the “straight,” evidence-based thinking of mainstream medicine. As defined by Weil, and by most of the other

gurus of alternative medicine, alternative and mainstream medicine are not simply different methods of treating illness. They are basically incompatible views of reality and how the material world works, and they cannot easily be combined into any rational and coherent “integrated” curriculum.

There is no doubt that modern medicine as it is now practiced needs to improve its relations with patients, and that some of the criticisms leveled against it by people such as Weil—and by many more within the medical establishment itself—are valid. There also can be no doubt that a few of the “natural” medicines and healing methods now being used by practitioners of alternative medicine will prove, after testing, to be safe and effective. This, after all, has been the way in which many important therapeutic agents and treatments have found their way into standard medical practice in the past. Mainstream medicine should continue to be open to the testing of selected unconventional treatments. In keeping an open mind, however, the medical establishment in this country must not lose its scientific compass or weaken its commitment to rational thought and the rule of evidence.

There are not two kinds of medicine, one conventional and the other unconventional, that can be practiced jointly in a new kind of “integrative medicine.” Nor, as Andrew Weil and his friends also would have us believe, are there two kinds of thinking, or two ways to find out which treatments work and which do not. In the best kind of medical practice, all proposed treatments must be tested objectively. In the end, there will only be treatments that pass that test and those that do not, those that are proven worthwhile and those that are not. Can there be any reasonable “alternative”?

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