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CHINA, “QI,” AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

ABSTRACT

This essay is a meditation on the challenges of living a life of engaged scholarship. Everett Mendelsohn's commitment to this kind of life in his own career is the occasion for some reflections on the variety of types of engagement in which an historian and cultural critic of science may become involved, and the different kinds of dialectics between activism and analysis they may entail. The essay then offers a series of vignettes and choice moments associated with a particular project that posed new challenges to the author's sense of how to maintain a knife-edge balance between engagement and detachment in her own work. The events in question here begin with some research associated with an historical-ethnographic book project about the making of Western mind-body medicine; and then evolve into new project concerned with bringing Chinese meditative and medical *qigong* practices into cross-cultural dialogue with Western laboratory science.

VARIETIES OF ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Over the course of some 20 years – beginning when he was my undergraduate teacher at Harvard – Everett Mendelsohn has embodied for me an inspiring commitment to the possibility of living a dialectic between analysis of the past and engagement in the present, between scholarly rigor and activist passion. Throughout his career, he has taught and analyzed fraught issues at the interface of science and society; and he has also been a player in the effort to make a difference to the outcome of that interface: whether through his anti-nuclear activism, or his engagement with Soviet scientists on questions of disarmament, or through public forums in which he has explored problematic aspects of emerging genetic technologies. In short, it has never been enough for Everett to function simply as part of the “Greek chorus” in the crucial plays of our times. He has always also been an engaged actor in those plays.

My own ethical and intellectual passions have evolved in ways quite different

from those of Everett, but the dialectic he has lived has emerged as one of the challenges of my own scholarly life as well. As an undergraduate, I was drawn to the sciences of the human mind and brain for the insights I thought they would give me into this complex, fraught experience we call “being human” – and very quickly came up short against the apparent incoherences and gaps I found there. With a strong previous background in literature and the humanities, it was clear to me that narratives of existential passion and ethical choice offered one kind of truth about my being; the causal necessities of neurons and biochemistry offered me another kind of truth. So far as I could tell, both kinds of truths made real claims on me, both had to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the whole for me added up to an unintegrated picture, a recipe for a kind of epistemological vertigo. I began to suspect that there were profound issues to be clarified here about the relationship between our experienced humanness, and the logic of our ways of knowing, particularly the ways of knowing given to us by science.

The historian’s trade attracted me at this point, not initially because I had ambitions to master the past on its own terms, but because I concluded that mastering the past of science would help me to understand the logic of its choices and authority in the present. The challenges and the tensions here seemed to promise both intellectual adventure and an opportunity to exercise moral and existential passion. If the job of the historian of science was to clarify how science and its truths functioned within the human world, then there might be a way also to parlay that understanding into an insistence that both science and its truths be held accountable to values we consider to be humane.¹ If the work of historical analysis began by insisting that we feel the “strangeness” of our current ways of thinking and acting, then there might be a way also to ask whether other ways of thinking and acting are conceivable within our present world, and could even be persuasive. In short, I went back to study the past because deep down I was passionate to contribute to the effort to “get things right” in the present.

So I began my own career, and I began it with the human brain. I was interested in its status as that part of ourselves that defines us most clearly and triumphantly as human, while demanding no less insistently that we reckon with all the ways in which we are lowly material organisms (however cunningly constructed), products of “mere” physiological process. In this sense, our understandings of the brain seemed to me to be an arena where our fractured understandings of ourselves could not help but meet and jostle together uneasily.

When I looked at the progress of the brain sciences from the vantage point of the present, certainly it seemed impressive on many fronts. And yet, as early as my first book, *Medicine, Mind and the Double Brain*,² I had already begun to wonder whether in fact things were so simple; whether there was not more slippage and inconsistency in the results of brain science than a lot of the celebratory rhetoric might lead one to think.

The problematic of *Medicine, Mind and the Double Brain*, for example, had its origins in two apparently rather simple anatomical and physiological

observations that had become clear by the middle of the nineteenth century: (1) the observation that the human brain is bilaterally organized into two hemispheres, and (2) the observation (derived mostly from clinical evidence) that the two hemispheres work differently; most notably, the left hemisphere seems to be particularly involved in language production. A simple enough set of observations, but the book then tracked a process whereby some of the most deeply engrained binary oppositions of Western culture were discovered to reside in the dual structure of the cerebrum: reason versus madness, intelligence versus emotion, civilization versus primitiveness, maleness versus femaleness. The book then explored the way in which – in an era marked by the growing pains of secularization, the anxieties of colonial rule and class unrest – this literature also betrayed a telling preoccupation with the instability of the relationship between the “brute half” and the “rational half” of our brain. In intellectual arenas ranging from criminology to psychiatry to spiritualism to anthropology, we see version after version of the idea that the brain’s hemispheres may sometimes achieve independence from each other; that “two minds” may struggle for control within a single skull. In seeing through this project, I began to appreciate something that still occupies me to this day: the extent to which objects of science can function as material and metaphoric resources that at the same time can work to advance questions of the laboratory and the clinic, while simultaneously participating in the cultural and moral work of a society.³

I worked on *Medicine, Mind and the Double Brain* during a time when much of contemporary behavioral and brain science was caught up in the provocative agendas of so-called “split-brain” and brain laterality research. In 1981, neuroscientist Roger Sperry had been awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine “for his discoveries concerning the functional specialization of the cerebral hemispheres”.⁴ In the years since, in fields ranging from philosophy to medicine to education to New Age philosophy, questions were buzzing about the implications of these discovered difference between our right hemisphere (seen now as “holistic”, “imagistic” and “emotional”) and our left hemispheres (seen now as “sequential”, “verbal”, and “calculating”), and the extent to which they did or did not integrate what people supposed to be their distinct “ways of knowing”.

I had an idea that the nineteenth century story of the double brain, that was basically unknown at the time, should be part of the consciousness of the contemporary scene. Here, a bit of luck intervened, when a mentor facilitated an introduction to the editor of a behavioral sciences journal with an unusual format: it not only published articles, but it also published extensive “peer commentary” on each of the articles it published, with an “author’s response”. So it came that, in 1985, some 17 brain and behavioral scientists had an opportunity to comment in print on my argument that the past was not a foreign country: that similar metaphorical/material elisions to the ones I had seen in the nineteenth century were at work in contemporary laterality and split-brain research.⁵

This was a certain kind of engaged historical scholarship. In the late 1980s, however, I felt the call of a different kind – more ethical, more self-reflective – when I became involved in a new project concerned with early twentieth century German “holistic” mind and life science: a project that ultimately saw closure in a 1996 book entitled *Reenchanted Science*.⁶ Holistic life and mind science was a movement that claimed to be all about reforming the declared inadequacies of the mechanistic sciences of the time. It was committed to developing new, more sophisticated understandings of life and mind that appreciated both in their “wholeness”. Gestalt psychology, systems theory, new directions in ethology, clinical neurology, and developmental biology all found inspiration in this movement. However, like the sciences of the double brain in the nineteenth century, I found that holism turned out to be a movement that swelled with multiple meanings. *More than a machine!* was now the new clarion call in the clinic and the lab, but also no less in the culture at large. The impulse to “overcome” mechanism, and to instate a new vision of “wholeness” contained within itself not only concerns about how best to do the work of the laboratory and the clinic; in the German-speaking countries of Central Europe, it also mediated concerns about the costs of living in a too-rapidly urbanizing environment, the causes of the national devastation of a lost world war; the price of lost faith and lost values in a modern world. Architects of the holistic mind and brain sciences both fed off the energy generated by these larger concerns, and contributed authoritatively to them. By the end of the 1920s, much of this process of mutual resonance was becoming more and more politicized, and one of the most salient political arenas in which it began to play out was National Socialism.

Tracking this story across time did not leave me unmoved. I realized, with some initial dismay, that I could resonate to many of the discontents of the 1920s, and I was pretty sure that many of my generation could as well. The rejection of the “machine”, the call to “wholeness” still worked on the imagination of the 1990s no less than on the imagination of the 1920s. Against the background of that conclusion, I felt called to develop a perspective on the implications of the German holistic project for our own time; to get some clarity on the question of what kind of responsibility we may have to be aware of the partially bad consciences of projects and ideals that may attract our own energy and allegiances.⁷ In the course of this second-order reflecting on an historical project, I found myself involved in a series of sometimes difficult conversations with people ranging from scientist colleagues, to writers for New Age “holistic” journals, to family members of one or another now-deceased scientist, whose legacy I was accused of clouding. Sometimes those conversations led to published reflections by my conversation partners in their own right.⁸

MIND-BODY MEDICINE AND “QI”: NEW FORAYS IN ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

My early work on the brain sciences provided an opportunity for using historical understandings as a platform for engagement with the logic of

contemporary science. My later work on German holistic science provided an opportunity for engagement with the ambiguous ethical and political potential I saw in certain past and current intellectual projects. A still-ongoing project on the making of contemporary mind-body medicine has added to the portfolio of the “varieties of engagement” I seem to be prepared to take on board as a scholar, and raised new questions for me about ways of doing this style of work with intellectual integrity.

The origins of this newest project is relevant to understanding why it has taken the shape it has. In 1994, I was invited to join an interdisciplinary network of research scientists, sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation, that had been set up to develop strategies and models for elucidating the processes and mechanisms underlying the so-called “mind-body” interactions associated with changes in health and illness. As the only non-laboratory scientist in the group, my task was to find ways to bring the traditional concerns of the humanistic social sciences – concerns about culture, context, and meaning – into the framework of the group’s thinking and research. This was critical-conceptual work from inside the frame of science, rather than from outside; and it slowly had an effect on my sense of my identity as a scholar. In the course of my work with the Mind-Body Network, I came to two conclusions: (1) that culture is not simply the stage on which bodies run their internal scripts, but rather is something that is itself constitutive of somatic experience, literally gets “under the skin;” and (2) that narrative, scripts, or stories are at once the patterning mechanisms that organize human activity into meaningful units, and the primary means by which meaning gets “under the skin” and influences somatic functioning.

Stories under the Skin is my tentative name for a new book project that will attempt to develop this argument. As it does so, it will also attempt to embed it in a more conventional historical-cultural analysis of the way in which the sciences of mind-body medicine participate, no less than any other cultural activity, in those acts of story-telling that organize human experience, both outside and under the skin. The book’s argument takes its starting point from the claim that, over the past century, both the moral and the somatic experiences of healing and health have been shaped and infused by a range of stories we had learned to tell about the effects of our minds on our bodies. These stories—whether they are about “the power of belief” to cure our cancer; about how our sister’s asthma “really” reflects the fact that she is “suffocating” inside an unhappy marriage; or about how the “stress” of modern life may kill us all – are intellectually persuasive in no small part because they appear to be grounded in the authority of science. At the same time, they *matter* with an existential, almost religious urgency because they appear to have something to tell us about how we might enhance our wellbeing, what meaning there might be in our suffering, and what kind of control we may be able to gain over our own mortality.

How to do the research on a project like this for which, arguably, some of the most important insights lay in the realm, not of text and words, but of bodily experience? My answer was that, to do this project well, I would have to engage

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