

Words from the Library

Book Review

By Dr. Bryan Stansfield



Block, Daniel M. *The Revolution of Naturopathic Medicine : Remaining True to Our Philosophy*. Montreal : Collective Co-op, 2003. ISBN: 0973140623. iv, 163 p. pbk.

The book by Daniel M. Block, N.D., *The Revolution of Naturopathic Medicine*, is a thought-provoking, interesting, and important book for the development and practice of naturopathy. Dr. Block's deep personal commitment and his thoughtful dedication to the advancement of naturopathy shines through on every page. Naturopathic physicians, educators, and others closely affiliated with this field will find Dr. Block's many practical comments stimulating and helpful for naturopathic practice, and, upon reflection, probably they will find themselves often in agreement with Dr. Block's ideas about the directions naturopathy should take in the coming years ahead.

To begin, on the first page, Dr. Block cites in full the *Naturopathic Physician's Oath*, and it is from this most central of all naturopathic documents that he argues, and to which he generally refers as "the naturopathic philosophy." Noticeably, however, not quite everything he argues from fits onto this neat little table of the six main points of naturopathy. For example, he says that he would like to add two more points, and he goes on from there to explain. Also, looking at this very critically and from a strictly philosophical point of view, there is really no mention anywhere of a *philosophy of Nature in general*, but this, rather, is only assumed throughout his presentation. For example, on page 91 he says, "The body is just a reflection of the mind, mirroring it, copying what goes on in the mental realm." Now this is a large metaphysical point of view (with which, no doubt, many naturopaths would agree), that Mind is primary and originally came first, and then matter, as derivative and subordinate. This viewpoint was developed most notably in our history by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, and it is a point of view that professional philosophers today call *idealism*, as distinct from its opposite number, *materialism* or materialism's near (and slightly more polite) philosophical cousin known as *naturalism*, which posits the opposite metaphysical situation, emphasizing matter as primary, and it is often implicitly assumed by modern science. Our point is that some philosophies of Nature are obviously much more congenial to naturopathy and its positive development than are others, and that something about this logically belongs in this kind of discussion, as an important philosophical groundwork, so that all of the ideas come out up front and on the table, whereas without them his argument as a whole seems unnecessarily truncated. For example in his arguments supporting naturopathy's traditional mind-body, treat-the-cause, and treat-the-whole-person approach to treatment, Dr. Block *assumes* this underlying philosophy of Nature, which is something of a leap from the *Naturopathic Physician's Oath*. In reality the *Oath* sets forth an interrelated constellation of values, viewpoints, and methods, which do not, as yet, amount to a full-blown, explicit, or fully developed *naturopathic philosophy*. The questions are, then, which basic *values, principles, and viewpoints* do virtually all naturopaths agree upon that are not spelled out in the *Oath*, and are they included in this book's discussion?

Dr. Block does bring a philosophical clarity to his main subject, the *integrity and credibility of*

naturopathy as a profession. For example, on page 1 we see already the main issues he will discuss, and we get an overview of his argument, as follows:

The dilemma we face within our profession is the challenge of identity: Can we be successful remaining true to our identity by practicing our medicine hand in hand with our philosophy, or must we seek recognition and credibility by emulating the way of established medicine? The answer to this question is very simple: Naturopathic medicine will bring better health to the world and gain recognition from the public and the medical establishment when our medicine is practiced as it was conceived—in harmony with Nature and with the principles of our philosophy. Any attempts to gain recognition by emulating the ways of other medicines can only weaken our profession.

Now of course, whenever anyone says something like this, we begin to wonder immediately, “Is it really all that simple?” and, “What has he left out or discounted?” Also, “Is his last statement true, or is he overstating his case?” Also, whenever we learn something important and exciting that puts us into a small minority of “more enlightened people,” shall we say [!], for our information to become socially useful, this must be, really, a two-part learning process: First we learn something, truly important (as a student), and then, for the best-possible, practical results, we must also learn how to adjust and relate this knowledge (as a teacher) to others who continue on that lower level of our previous understanding, and this is for the simple reason, as the poet John Donne said, “No man is an island.” Still, as Dr. Block continues, he does become at least *more* convincing.

He is sometimes amusing--and very much to the point--as, for example, he says, “To ensure that naturopaths feel comfortable practicing the pure form of our medicine freely in the world, we do require a certain detachment from political correctness that has gone slightly overboard.” Immediately we stop to wonder, “How does a person go ‘slightly overboard’ (and is it habit-forming)? Is it not like justice, where ‘more justice’ is not necessarily better justice, but rather either you have it or you don’t?” and, “What does he mean, anyway, by ‘politically correct’? But Dr. Block goes on in the same amusing vein to explain:

If there were events in the Olympics for athletes to demonstrate their prowess in political correctness, naturopathic medicine would get the gold. The prize-winning team would consist of naturopathic doctors and students highly skilled in political correctness. More than any other profession, naturopathic medicine is politically correct. With its ranks filled with healers, activists, New Agers and people of all sexual orientations, it is on the cutting edge of non-judgmentalness and PC [political correctness] (p. 59).

At other times, on the other hand, his writing can be moving, as in this example:

When we get sick, a messenger comes from a beautiful place to tap us on the shoulder and say, ‘There is something that you are not willing to see.’ We often get sick with minor colds and flues when we do not listen to our body’s need to rest and move at a pace that is more suited for our balance. Chronic disease is a manifestation of illness that has come about to teach us a life lesson, demonstrating the ways in which we have chosen to live in opposition to Mother Nature and with all of creation. In approaching illness with this philosophy, it becomes a sacred realm where kernels of truth await us. It becomes an opportunity for us to learn, grow, and reconnect with the beauty of life all around us, in healing ourselves at the root of chronic illness, in the whole of who we are, and we become healthy and aware in a way that far surpasses our state of

being as we were before we got sick. The allopathic approach does not respect this process. (p. 55).

Indeed, the whole idea of holistic wellness is very alien to conventional medicine—there is no money in it. Dr. Block speaks here from his own personal experience, having been diagnosed with Myasthenia gravis, and his points about the ancient saying, “Physician Heal Thyself” are well-taken—as is very much of what he says.

As part of his discussion about the supposedly competing and apparently opposite values of the integrity and the credibility of naturopathy—and this could be an either-or logical fallacy—one of his main points has to do with the fact that some natural therapies are now beginning to be generally accepted, at last, into the world of conventional medicine. This is good, he says, but he sees there also a danger, because the naturopathic approach, values, and viewpoints—the “philosophy” --behind those methods do not usually accompany these treatments, as supplied by most MD’s, as he goes on to explain: “Any one of the modalities that we use (herbal medicine, homeopathy, acupuncture, nutrition, etc.) can be applied holistically to treat the whole person or applied allopathically to treat symptoms and disease. Even counseling can be used allopathically, simply by telling the copatients what they need to do” (p. 83).

To clarify further he says, “It is the *intention*, not the modality itself, which dictates whether we employ the use of our medicine in an allopathic fashion or in a way that is [truly] aligned with naturopathic medicine” (p. 83) So then, if we follow the *Naturopathic Physician’s Oath*, which is at the heart of the profession, naturopathic medicine is more complex than just being familiar, in a formulaic, allopathic kind of way, with natural remedies such as homeopathy, diet therapy, and botanical treatments or the use of supplements. Dr. Block also stresses the regular usefulness of intuitive, right-brained methods of practice—as opposed to left-brained methods of current naturopathic education—and, finally, the central importance of truly listening to and caring about patients, whom he regularly insists upon calling “our copatients.” Maybe what he calls “Love” is really the *Justice-Love* naturally built into the universe, with its natural order, harmony, and balance, to which he alludes and to which we must regularly, intuitively attune ourselves—but that is indeed a much larger matter.

Dr. Block’s conclusion is apt:

We are Nature doctors. That means that the guidance and expression of our medicine comes from Nature. The way this should therefore express itself is quite different from many other professions that have their foundations in science and that only step into the places on the map where science has trodden. Keep in mind also when making decisions, establishing rules and regulations, and seeking accreditation, that we should not self-regulate in ways that compromise the heart and soul of our medicine (p. 162) .

By way of agreement, and recognizing the great importance of science to our civilization, we might point out that no matter how much science learns and advances, it will always have an infinite number of new things to learn, and that even the simplest one-celled organism seems to be much more complex than the most complex of our current computers.

Still, on the other hand, to argue that certain things must remain undefined, as he does, and that in this way they will remain “protected” so the intuitive can operate freely seems questionable, and with communication, as with communication science, to argue that since communication can

never be absolutely perfect, all of our attempts to communicate with each other about these kinds of disagreements are bound to fail is certainly fallacious and defeatist. Learning to talk over the tops of high walls, although sometimes greatly trying to our patience, can also occasionally greatly benefit our neighbors, and it is a healing and peacemaking skill of which humanity stands greatly in need.

To conclude, then: The *Revolution of Naturopathic Medicine* is an interesting and important book for naturopathy, and in my judgment it deserves a careful, thoughtful reading by all naturopaths and others, too, like myself, who are closely aligned with the profession. Truly, it is a fine book for “insiders,” and it is one that should continue to stimulate professional thought and discussion. Indeed, Dr. Block brings focus, clarity, passion, and some original ideas to our most central concerns. He calls us to a greater professional integrity and a higher standard—which we ourselves must devise and continually improve upon as a theoretical operational base and for better mutual understanding. As for the other matter of how this young, exciting, and ever-developing profession can and should relate most effectively to the medical establishment and its contrary medical paradigms is a complex and difficult but always-necessary question that has been--so far--less well addressed.

Note by the author: This is a slightly-corrected, reformatted version of the lengthy review that appeared in full in The Insider, the SCNM Newsletter, for February, 2006.