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EDITORIAL

Die Spanwydte van Insig

Hegel en Kant, Aristoteles en selfs Plato met sy byderwetse tegniek van vraag en antwoord, en al die ander grofgeskut onder die filosowe deur die eeu heen, het mank gegaan aan dieselfde beperking — 'n knelter wat vandag steeds die geestelike beweegruimte van die denkers aan bande lê. Ongeag hoe briljant die wysgeer ookal is, hy bly steeds tydsgebonden, en kan die mens in al sy fasette net benader vanuit die gesigspunt van sy eie tydvak. Indien dit moontlik sou gewees het vir groot geeste soos Sokrates of Goethe om uit hul eie tydmilieu uit te styg en 'n oorsigsblik te bekom, sou ons ongetwyfeld insigte en denkrigings geërf het wat ons vandag nog sou kon aanvaar as hoogtepunte in menslike vernuf. Selfs sonder hierdie wensdroomvermoë het die grotes onder die filosowe reeds daarin geslaag om tydllose waarhede te boek te stel, en as mens hul geskrifte lees, is dit duidelik dat die geniale aard van hul werke grotendeels daarin lê dat hulle, meer as andere, daarin kon slaag om ver na voor en na agter te kyk, en wat hulle sien te verwerk.

Hoe groter die gees, hoe wyer is die gesigshoek en hoe verder kan die geestesblik weerskante toe geprojekteer word. Dié gedagte is al verskeie kere in verskillende gedaantes in ons beskawing opgedis. Die een haal aan uit ou geskrifte wat die jeug uitkryt vir alles wat sleg is, en gebruik dit as bewys dat die moderne jongeling darem nie so verderflik is nie. Die kwinkslag bestaan gewoonlik daarin dat die datum van die aangehaalde stelling eers heel teen die end verklap word. Die ander, soos ook ons eie President Paul Kruger, maan hul mense om die goeie uit die verlede te benut vir die bou van

die toekoms. Waar dit op neerkom is 'n halfbewustheid dat as mens buite jou eie tydvak kon uitstyg en sien wat in die verskiet, voor en agter, op die keper beskou die benadering was of sal wees, kan dit slegs tot groter denkvermoë lei.

Ons verwys nie na die werksaamhede van die geskiedkundige nie. Hy samel feite in oor die verlede, en as hy 'n deskundige van wêreldformaat is, soek hy ook na die oorsaak en gevolg. Maar hy word nie intellektueel deel van sy studieveld nie, hoe diep hy hom ookal in sy werk probeer inleef. Die grootste kenner van die Spartane bly miskien steeds 'n gemaksugtige, en die deskundige op die gebied van die Elisabethaanse periode kan hom dikwels nie met die morele losheid van 'n Tom Jones-era vereenselwig nie. Hulle is nie van daardie tyd nie, hierdie geleerde geskiedkundiges, hulle is en bly deel van hul eie tydvak. Ons verwys ook nie na die waarsêers of na die sieners wat die toekoms probeer voorspel nie. Al is hul bespiegelinge ook hoe akkuraat weens intelligente beoordeling van tendense, bly hulle steeds tydsgebonden in dat hulle nie in staat is om in hul eie gees 'n ongestremde permissiwiteit of 'n George Orwell-totalisme te verwerk nie.

Maar die inleidingsartikel loop ten einde en ons moet nou die geneeskunde êrens insleep. Die geneesheer het presies dieselfde beperking as die filosoof. Hy kan ontdekings maak en navorsing doen, en as genie bo sy makkers uitstyg, maar as sy nuwe tegnieke en medisynes té ver buite die raamwerk van sy geestelike tydsgebondenheid val, gaan sy werk óf negeer word óf op stofbelaaide biblioteek-

rakke lê om eendag weer herontdek te word wanneer die tyd ryp is. Hippokrates, met sy diepe insig, sou die moderne biochemie kon aanleer, maar hy sou dit nie kon verwerk nie. En ons vandag? Iedere praktiserende geneesheer skryf daagliks medisyne voor wat hy uit monde van sy kennis voor sy siel

weet feitlik onaktief is, maar sy geestestydvak laat hom nog nie toe om sulke prulmiddels te laat gaan nie. Hy merk sy voorskrifte met die teken van Horus en skuil agter die waan dat die R met die strepie 'n Latynse simbool is en dus wetenskaplik aanvaar kan word.

Killing Bugs

From the time that Pasteur and Koch proved that micro-organisms are responsible for infection, the mandate to the researcher was clear and concise: find something that will kill the bug and spare the host. The killing can take place outside the body, before the organism has had a chance to take refuge in the tissues of his unwilling host, the patient, or it can be done inside the host's body. An attempt can also be made to rid the environment of these noisome little creatures. These three approaches to the same problem gave us our words 'antisepsis' 'chemotherapy' and 'sterility'. Having given the processes names so that they can be classified and taught to bored students in an orderly manner, we patted ourselves on the back and awaited the results.

Killing the little blighters outside the body was the easiest. One merely has to pour some or other biting fluid over them and they obligingly curl up and die. Our ancestors pulled no punches in this regard. Carbolic acid smelled right and had a nice, no-nonsense sting to it. Lister pumped it into theatres and probably hoped that the lung tissues of his colleagues were more resistant than the bugs he was getting at. But soon we became more sophisticated and a host of bacteria-killing agents were developed. Some are dissolved in alcohol or similar volatile vehicles and sting like mad on tender areas of the skin, while others are pronounced non-irritating when used externally. Some are coloured with dyes so that their presence can be admired by the bacteria-conscious world. Any child with a red or orange splash across his forehead is walking proof of his mother's or teacher's diligence in stepping into the fray and killing bugs.

The backroom boys had a field day. Pour the stuff on a Petri dish full of germs and if they are

knocked out, only a few more tests will suffice before the agent is bottled and marketed, for after all, it states clearly on the label that the stuff should not be taken internally. But we were wrong, and we have already lost two of our most popular and important antiseptics and general bug killers. It was belatedly discovered that such preparations were not as innocent as was at first believed, and we are becoming more and more aware of the dangers of toxicity. The bugs are laughing their heads off.

Killing bacteria inside the body is much more difficult, for the host has a tendency to die with the bugs unless one is very, very careful. But we triumphed. At first we discovered the sulphonamides and later penicillin and the other antibiotics, and again we were slaughtering germs by the shovelful. The patients at first felt a bit under the weather, but as our preparations improved they remained chirpy, except for an occasional diarrhoea or an itchy anus. There were a few spoilsport germs that refused to die when told to, but on the whole the battle seemed to have been won. And then some silly child developed messy teeth and another stopped manufacturing blood cells. We have made another important and very disturbing discovery, and that is that tampering with the body metabolism while killing bugs can have serious long-term effects. While the germs expire the DNA spiral takes a severe knock, and we are in danger of breeding a twisted race as a result of our passion for ridding ourselves of germs.

We now have Boards safeguarding the public and we scrutinise our preparations with the utmost diligence, but the mandate to the scientist remains the same as it was the morning after the discovery of the true cause of infection: kill the bug and spare the patient.