

The age of immunology — conceiving a future in an alienating world

by A. David Napier
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As Susan Sontag pointed out several years ago in her book *Illness and metaphor* (1978), Western medicine and its therapies have an affinity for military metaphors. Throughout the hygienic nineteenth century, metaphors for disease became more lurid, melodramatic and polemical, culminating in the use of the term “disease” itself as a synonym for “unnatural”. Fears of “decadence” and “degeneration” were intensified through biological metaphors, stigmatizing those who seemed to menace the social order all the more drastically. And while we are censorious about our predecessors’ linguistic exuberance (and moral disarray), it is not entirely clear that we are less deceived. People in power impose their metaphors, and metaphors themselves have the power to define what is to be done, being a series of entailments that draw attention to some aspects of reality while concealing others.

Part of the blame, genealogically speaking, would have to be laid at the origins of modern science itself, with Francis Bacon’s onslaught on nature: his highly wrought rhetoric of masculine possession, torture and slavery was to have a profound effect on how science would be conceived as an *imaginative* project, making it ever after impossible, as the philosopher Mary Midgley has remarked, to talk about attraction between objects in terms of love and sympathy (as did the Renaissance scholar Marsilio Ficino). Few of us, on the other hand, would blink at the use of anthropomorphic terms such as “*spite*”, “*cheat*”, “*selfish*” and “*grudging*” in biology, not to mention evolutionary psychology. Why does this matter? Because our reasoning is both liberated and constrained by our concepts, as was noted, most wittily, in 1802, by Joseph Joubert: “We speak to ourselves in metaphors. We are naturally led to it as a method of better understanding ourselves and of retaining our thoughts

more easily — which we then label in a kind of container.”

A. David Napier’s concern in *The age of immunology* is the immune response, specifically the attack–defence imagery now popularly identified with it, and the system thinking which began to develop in the 1970s around issues of self and non-self. Natural immunity is the body’s first line of defence, whereas acquired immunity, with its soluble and cellular elements, is an intricate apparatus for subduing the non-self. Cells become alerted, recruited, mobilized and committed; some of them are even scavengers and natural killers. Immunology’s gestalt so fits the times that immunologists themselves use terms suggesting that the militarism associated with Pasteur’s germ theory has simply acquired better “intelligence”, with total surveillance, search-and-destroy missions and smart weapons. And while there is much more to immunology than lurid imagery, immunology’s sense of the body bounded and beastly reinforces social atomism, the purportedly individualist strain in our culture that dates from Hobbes and is currently being talked-up as the proper state of affairs.

It is one thing to acknowledge that this mode of conceptualizing the immune system is determined by cultural antecedents; it is quite another to suggest that the phenomenology of immune processes enters into the construction of the real. This, essentially, is what Napier does in his sprawling, ambitious book that seeks, out of our “nucleic history”, to get a new take on cultural prejudices about identity. This is a procedure familiar enough from social constructivist views of science, and the implication promptly follows: the world would be a better place if what has been unmasked as construction were to be changed. Evolution, child psychology, politics and health care, he believes, all need rethinking, as they no doubt do. But the basic problem with his book is a more fundamental one: he uses the word “immunology” quite liberally. That is an understatement. Napier is not an immunologist but an anthropologist, which appears to be a licence to come up with ideas without having a sense for what might prove them wrong.

Veering from Dr Spock to systemic lupus erythematosus to logarithms, Napier assumes the immunological self is coextensive with the embodied self. Similarly, he talks about a Petri dish culture as if it offered patterns for study analogous to the social codes of a Navajo Indian settlement. Selfhood, as any philosopher will agree, is an extremely tricky term. It offers no simple definition. Self-defence suggests a body, whereas self-knowledge does not. Social practices, of which being a self is one, are not bodily processes; nor do “heroic narratives” code for “somatic stories”. Napier’s syncretism turns, in fact, on one of the tenets of German idealism, the meta-logic devised by J.G. Fichte to explain how self, having externalized itself as objective non-self (the alienation of the book’s title) in order to know the way of the determinate world, is levitated to a plane where subjective freedom is synonymous with objective fact. This self-sundering seems to be the transcendental journey towards “realization” that Napier has in mind for his immunological self too. Only the Czech poet and immunologist Miroslav Holub, not mentioned by Napier, ever got away with that kind of bravura overwriting, and, as he admitted in his essays, only when writing poems.

The age of immunology ends up making much of superficial resemblances while systematically ignoring deeper differences. If anything, the new biology has thrown off two distinct sets of imagery that actually make the bounded self look leaky. Increasingly, the medically proper body resembles a chimera made by symbiosis: eukaryotic cells are mutual societies harbouring many archaic prokaryotic metabolisms like those of the mitochondria, once autonomous respiring bacteria. The controversial Gaia hypothesis, with its central notion of the Earth regulating itself *physiologically* as a materially closed system, recalls the mediaeval concept of the mesocosmos (though the idea of a living planet harks back to Plato, and Ficino spoke of the Earth’s “hair, teeth and bones”). Neither grand analogy obviously abets Thomas Huxley’s view of the animal world as a “gladiator’s show”, or Herbert Spencer’s crude social Darwinism. It is a pity therefore that Napier misses his cue, since the role of

conceptual metaphors in science is a compelling topic. As Midgley says, “the visions that underlie [science] ought to get far more attention than they now do in discussions both of literature and of the physical sciences themselves.” After all, even a term like “the global burden of disease” may be zoocentrically loaded, if health in the truly global sense is more strictly a question of ecology (most life on earth is bacterial) than guarding the bounded self. Lumber has to be *shed* somewhere. ■

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