The ENIGMA *of* HEALTH

HANS-GEORG GADAMER

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The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age

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Preface

It has always been a particular occasion that has prompted me to speak about problems of health care and the art of medicine. The results are gathered together in this small volume. It should not be a cause for surprise if a philosopher who is neither a doctor nor feels himself to be a patient nevertheless wishes to participate in the discussion concerning the broad range of problems which arise in the field of health in the scientific and technological age. Nowhere else do the advances of modern research enter so directly into the sociopolitical arena of our time as they do in this area. The physics of our century has taught us that there are limits to what we can measure. And in my opinion this fact alone merits strong hermeneutical interest. This is even more the case when we are concerned not just with the quantifiability of nature but with living human beings. The limits of what can be measured and, above all, of what can be effected through human intervention reach deep into the realm of health care. Health is not something that can simply be made or produced. But what then is health itself? Can it become an object for scientific investigation in the same way that it becomes an object for the individual when the balance of health is disturbed? For the ultimate aim after all must be to regain one's health and thereby to forget that one is healthy.

At the same time, the domain of science constantly extends into the realm of life itself. When it is a question of applying scientific knowledge to our own health, it is clear that we cannot be treated solely from the perspective of science. Here everyone has their own experiences and expectations. This is particularly true for all those disputed marginal areas of medical science such as pyschosomatic medicine, homoeopathy, so-called natural healing methods, hygienics, the pharmaceutical industry and all the ecological aspects involved. And this is also true for the care of the chronically ill and the old in the community. The ever growing costs involved here effectively demand that health care once again be acknowledged and recognized by the entire population as their shared responsibility.

The contributions offered here are not simply addressed to doctors, although most of them were originally presented to them as lectures, or again solely to patients, but rather to each and every one of us who must take care of our own health through the way in which we lead our lives. This particular responsibility which each person bears expands into a much broader dimension of responsibility in our highly complex civilization. Everywhere we find ourselves in possession of intensified human technical capacities which are as astounding as they are disturbing and the task is to integrate these new capacities into the social and political order as a whole. For centuries our entire culture has neglected to face up to these new demands. We have only to recall the humanitarian optimism which animated the eighteenth century and compare that with the general mood at the close of the twentieth century in this our age of mass civilization. We might think here of the immense increase in weapons technology and the destructive potential it harbours; or of the dangers posed to the conditions of human life by the technological progress from which we all benefit; and then again of the arms trade, which is as difficult to control as the drugs trade; and not least of the deluge of information which threatens to engulf our human faculty of judgement.

The enigma of health is just one small example from the range of problems which confront us. Everywhere it is a question of

finding the right balance between our technical capacities and the need for responsible actions and choices. Within this whole area the problem of cultivating and caring for health represents something which directly concerns everyone. Thus we are forced to recognize that there are limits to what we can do, limits which are taught to us by illness and death. Care for our own health is an original manifestation of human existence.

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1

Theory, Technology, Praxis

The Change in the Meaning of Theory

'There is no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience.' This famous beginning of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* surely holds too for the knowledge we possess of human beings. To begin with this includes the sum total of the ever progressing results of natural scientific research, which we call 'Science'. But then there is the empirical knowledge of so-called practice that everyone accumulates in the midst of life – the doctor, cleric, educator, judge, soldier, politician, worker, employee, official. Not only in the professional sphere but also in everyone's private and personal existence the experience that people develop out of the encounter with themselves and their fellow human beings continually grows. Beyond the domain of this experience, furthermore, there is that vast wealth of knowledge which flows towards each and every human being in the transmission of human culture – poetry, the arts as a whole, philosophy, historiography and the other historical sciences. To be sure, such knowledge is 'subjective', that is, largely unverifiable and unstable. It is, nevertheless, knowledge that science cannot ignore. As such, a rich tradition of this knowledge exists from time immemorial, from the days of Aristotle's 'practical philosophy' to the Romantic and post-Romantic age of the so-called

Geisteswissenschaften or human sciences. In contrast to the natural sciences, however, all these other sources of experience have a common quality: what we learn from them becomes experience only when actually integrated into the practical consciousness of acting human beings.

In this regard scientific experience possesses a unique status. The experience that can be validated as certain by the scientific method has the distinction of being in principle absolutely independent of any situation of action and of every integration into the context of action. This 'objectivity' conversely implies that it is able to serve every such possible context. It is precisely this 'objectivity' which was so quintessentially realized in modern science and which transformed broad expanses of the face of the earth into an artificial human environment. Now the experience which has been reworked by the sciences has, indeed, the merit of being verifiable and acquirable by everyone. But then, in addition, it raises the claim that on the basis of its methodological procedure it is the only certain experience, hence the only mode of knowing in which each and every experience is rendered truly legitimate. What we know from practical experience and the 'extra-scientific' domain must not only be subjected to scientific verification but also, should it hold its ground against this demand, belongs by this very fact to the domain of scientific research. There is in principle nothing which could not be subordinated in this manner to the competence of science.

That science not only arises from experience but according to its own methodology can be called 'experiential' or, more familiarly, 'experimental science' – an expression applicable to science only since the seventeenth century – was also articulated as a principle of modern philosophy. In the nineteenth century it led to the general conviction that people had entered into the age of 'positive' science and had left metaphysics behind. This conforms manifestly to philosophical 'positivism' in all its varieties, which rejects conceptual construction and pure speculation. But it also applies to those philosophical theories such as the Kantian which expressly point to the a priori elements in all experience. The philosophy of neo-Kantianism thus developed into a systematic

theory of experience. The concept of the thing-in-itself, this 'realistic' element in the Kantian theory, was rejected by neo-Kantianism – as it was by Fichte and Hegel – as dogmatic, and reinterpreted as a concept marking the limit of the understanding. According to this theory, the object of the understanding poses an 'endless task' for definition.[1] An endless task: that is the only epistemologically tenable meaning of givenness and object. This theory has the decided merit of demonstrating the hidden dogmatism of the sensualist foundation of knowledge. The so-called givenness of perception is not given at all but presents knowledge with its task. The only 'fact' that merits this name is the fact of science.

There were, to be sure, extratheoretical spheres of validity, such as the aesthetic, which demanded recognition and thus brought forth within the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge the theme of the irrational. But that made for no change in the systematic restriction of all empirical knowledge to scientific experience. Nothing which is capable of being experienced can remain withdrawn from the competence of science. If we encounter anything unpredictable, accidental, contrary to expectations, the claim of the universality of science remains uncontestable for these things as well. What seems to be something irrational is, in the eyes of the scientist, a phenomenon on the frontier of science; this is how phenomena appear on that border where science finds applications to practice. What occurs in practice as the unexpected and mostly undesirable consequences of the application of science is seen as something altogether different from the irreducible irrationality of chance. According to the essential character of science, this presents nothing more than a task for further research. The progress of science is sustained by its continual self-correction. And practice which is based on the application of science likewise requires that science further and further improve, by continual self-correction, the reliability of the expectations placed upon it.

But what does practice in the above sense mean? Is the application of science as such practice? Is all practice the application of science? Even if the application of science enters into all practice, the two are still not identical. For practice means not only the making of whatever one can make; it is also choice and

decision between possibilities. Practice always has a relationship to a person's 'being'. This is reflected in the figurative expression, *Was machst Du denn?*, which does not ask, literally, what are you *doing* but, rather, how *are* you? From this point of view an irreducible opposition between science and practice becomes evident. Science is essentially incomplete; whereas practice requires instant decisions. The incompleteness of all experimental science thus means that it not only raises a legitimate claim of universality, by virtue of its readiness to process new experience, but also is not wholly able to make good this claim. Practice requires knowledge, which means that it is obliged to treat the knowledge available at the time as complete and certain. The knowledge known from science, however, is not of this sort. There is thus a fundamental difference between modern science and the premodern aggregate of knowledge, which under the name 'philosophy' comprehended all human knowledge. This difference is precisely that what we know from 'science' is incomplete and, therefore, can no longer be called a 'doctrine'. It consists of nothing other than the current state of 'research'.

One must make clear the full significance of the innovation which came into the world with the experimental sciences and their underlying idea of method. If one contrasts 'science' with the whole of that knowledge of former times derived from the heritage of antiquity and which was still dominant throughout the high Middle Ages, it is apparent that the conceptions both of theory and of practice have fundamentally changed. Naturally there was always application of knowledge to practice, as indicated by the very terms 'sciences' and 'arts' (*epistemai* and *technai*). 'Science' was after all but the highest intensification of the knowledge that guided practice. It understood itself, however, as pure *theoria*, that is, as knowledge sought for its own sake and not for its practical significance. It was in the Greek idea of science that the relation between theory in this precise sense and practice first came to a critical point as a problem. While the mathematical knowledge of the Egyptian geometricians or the Babylonian astronomers was nothing other than a store of knowledge that had accumulated out of practice and for practice,

the Greeks transformed this know-how and knowledge into a knowledge of principles and thus into demonstrable knowledge which one became aware of to enjoy for its own sake out of, so to speak, a primary curiosity about the world. Out of this spirit arose Greek science and mathematics, as well as the enlightenment of Greek natural philosophy and, despite its essential relation to practice, Greek medicine as well. Here for the first time science and its application, theory and practice, parted ways.

Yet this divergence can hardly be compared to the modern relation between theory and practice, which was formed by the seventeenth-century idea of science. For science is no longer the totality of the knowledge of the world and of humankind, which Greek philosophy, whether as philosophy of nature or as practical philosophy, had elaborated and articulated in the communicative form of language. The foundation of modern science is experience in a wholly new sense. With the idea of the unitary method of the understanding, as formulated by Descartes in his *Rules*, the ideal of certainty became the standard for all understanding. Only that which could be verified could have validity as experience. In the seventeenth century, experience thus ceased to be a source or starting point of knowledge but became, in the sense of 'experiment', a tribunal of verification before which the validity of mathematically projected laws could be confirmed or refuted. Galileo did not happen to acquire the laws of free-falling objects from experience but, as he himself says, they came from conceptual projection: 'mente concipio,' that is, 'I conceive' – or, more precisely, 'I project in my mind.' What Galileo thus 'projected' in the idea of a free-falling object was certainly no object of experience: a vacuum does not exist in nature. What he understood, however, precisely by this abstraction were laws within the skein of causal relationships, which are intertwined and cannot be disentangled in concrete experience. The mind isolates the individual relationships and by measuring and weighing determines the exact contribution of each; it thereby opens up the possibility of intentionally bringing out factors of a causal kind. It is thus not altogether wrong to say that modern natural science – without detracting from the purely theoretical interest that animates

it – means not so much knowledge as know-how. This means that it is practice.[2] It would appear to me more correct, however, to say that science makes possible knowledge directed to the power of making, a knowing mastery of nature. This is technology. And this is precisely what practice is not. For the former is not knowledge which, as steadily increasing experience, is acquired from practice, the life situation, and the circumstances of action. On the contrary, it is a kind of knowledge which for the first time makes possible a novel relation to practice, namely, that of constructive projection and application. It is of the essence of its procedure to achieve in all spheres the abstraction which isolates individual causal relationships. This is the unavoidable particularity of its competence which it has to accept as part of the bargain. What in fact emerged, however, was 'science', with its new notion of theory as well as practice. This is a true event in the history of humankind, which conferred a new social and political accent on science.

The Impact of Technology on Modern Man

It is thus not for nothing that one calls our present age an age of the sciences. There are above all two grounds on which to justify this assertion. First, the scientific-technical mastery of nature has at this moment acquired proportions which qualitatively differentiate our century from earlier centuries. Science, obviously, has become today the primary productive factor of the human economy. But beyond this its practical application has created what is in principle a new situation. No longer is it limited to the premodern implications of *techne*, namely, to filling out the possibilities of further development left open by nature (Aristotle). It has moved upward to the level of an artificial counterpart to reality. Formerly, the modification of our environment was due more or less to natural causes, for example, change in climate (the Ice Age), the influence of the weather (erosion, sedimentation, etc.), droughts, formation of swamps and the like. Only occasionally was it due to the intervention of human beings. Such

interventions were perhaps the deforestation of woods, which turned into barren lands as a consequence, the extinction of animal species through hunting, the exhaustion of soils through cultivation, the drying up of the resources in the ground as the result of exploitation. These were always more or less irreversible modifications. In such cases, however, mankind either saved itself by finding new places to live or learned to prevent the consequences in due time. As for the rest, the contribution of human labour, of the gatherer, the hunter, or the farmer, brought about no real disturbance to the equilibrium of nature.

Today, however, the technical exploitation of natural resources and the artificial transformation of our environment has become so carefully planned and extensive that its consequences endanger the natural cycle of things and bring about irreversible developments on a large scale. The problem of the protection of the environment is the visible expression of this totalization of technical civilization. Obviously, more significant tasks fall upon the shoulders of science, and it must plead in their behalf before that public consciousness which the effects of our technical civilization are beginning to reach. On the one hand this leads to the emotional blindness with which a mass critique of culture reacts to these phenomena, and it is necessary to avert in time the iconoclasm which threatens from this quarter. On the other hand there is the superstitious faith in science which strengthens the technocratic unscrupulousness with which technical know-how spreads without restraint. In both respects science must carry on a kind of demythologization of itself and indeed by its very own means: critical information and methodical discipline. Issues such as the city, the environment, population growth, the world food supply, problems of the aged, etc., thus justly acquire a privileged place among the scientific themes of our knowledge of man. The atom bomb proves itself more and more to be only a special case of the self-endangering of human beings and their life on this planet to which science has led, and which it has to do its utmost to avert.

Within science itself, however, there is also the threat of a similar danger of self-destruction which arises directly out of the