

# The End of Modern Medicine

Biomedical Science  
Under a Microscope

*Laurence Foss*

THE END  
————— of —————  
MODERN MEDICINE

*SUNY Series in  
Constructive Postmodern Thought*  
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MODERN MEDICINE

*Biomedical Science Under a Microscope*

LAURENCE FOSS

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# *Foreword*

Modern medicine has not paid much attention to philosophy. When our efforts are as fruitful as they have been in the past century, why be concerned if someone questions our assumptions, or points out our logical inconsistencies? Science began to separate itself from philosophy in the seventeenth century. Natural philosophy split eventually into natural science and the non-empirical discipline of philosophy. In making the break, science rejected what it viewed as the speculations of philosophers and became firmly empirical. The notion of hypothesis changed, from the medieval one of an explanation of phenomena that need not fit the facts, to the modern one of an explanation that must be rejected if contradicted by the facts. Crookshank<sup>1</sup> marks the end of the nineteenth century as the time when medicine and philosophy became completely dissociated. Physicians began to see themselves as practitioners of a science solidly based on observed facts, without a need for inquiry into the mental processes by which the facts were obtained. Metaphysics, logic, and philosophy disappeared from the medical curriculum. Physicians believed themselves to be freed at last from metaphysics, even while unconsciously maintaining a belief in the theory of knowledge known as physical realism.

Much the same could be said of the natural sciences. Acceptance of Descartes's separation of *res extensa* from *res cogitans* enabled biology to make great progress on the assumption that the human body is a machine. Joseph Needham,<sup>2</sup> the biochemist and historian of Chinese science, believed that Descartes deserves our chief respect because he first saw clearly that the human body is a machine governed not by a vital force but by the nonmaterial mind. Vitalism has ever since been in retreat. But this is only half the story. The problems left unsolved by Descartes have been gnawing away at the conceptual foundations of science and medicine: what is the relationship between the mind of the observer and the world of phenomena; and how can a nonmaterial mind act on a material substance? E.A. Burt<sup>3</sup> concluded his classic study by saying that "An adequate cosmology will only begin to be written when an adequate philosophy of mind has appeared. . . ."

As L.J. Rather<sup>4</sup> observes, Western medicine has always acted on the assumption that mental (nonmaterial) events could produce changes in the body, even though in Cartesian terms this is a contradiction. In defining medicine as a science, however, the attention physicians paid to these mental events was regarded as a matter of art, not science. When a nonmaterial event could be shown to affect a person's health, the mechanist's response was to seek the physicochemical substrate of the experience, thus identifying the "cause" and opening the way for an effective remedy. Ultimately, say the mechanists, all psychological influences on health will be reduced to their physicochemical causes. Reduction undoubtedly confers benefits by reducing the number of explanatory principles for otherwise disparate phenomena. As Foss points out, however, reduction can become generalized into reductionism, a belief in the universal applicability of upward causation. There is every reason to be skeptical of this belief. Reduction necessitates a translation from the language of human communication to the language of physics and chemistry. In any translation there is loss of information. If a patient experiences fear, there will probably be specific changes in the brain scan image and in the secretion of neurotransmitters. It is very unlikely, however, that these changes will distinguish between fear of open spaces and fear of spiders. Moreover, the therapeutic advantages of reduction come with some disadvantages. The lower the level at which therapy is applied, the wider and less specific the range of response, and the greater the likelihood of undesirable effects.

As empirical research continues to produce results that are anomalies in the dominant mechanistic paradigm, the time of a change in paradigm—in the Khunian<sup>5</sup> sense—draws nearer. Eventually, it will become intolerable to have a theory of medicine that cannot accommodate the evidence for the effect on health of the meaning of experience, expectations, beliefs, intentionality, and relationships.

The publication of a book can be a turning point for a paradigm change in science. I believe *The End of Modern Medicine* will be such a book. Dr. Foss is a philosopher of science who was drawn by a personal experience to the controversies that have raged in modern medicine. Dr. George Engel wrote the foreword to his first book, *The Second Medical Revolution*, written with Kenneth Rothenberg. In *The End of Modern Medicine*, Foss continues the work of elaborating a successor theory of medicine. The new paradigm rests on two foundations. First, the view of the human body as a machine is replaced by the view of the body as a self-organizing system. The body has some machine-like features, and medicine can still make progress by working at this level. However, an adaptive, information-processing system, mindfully as well as autonomously interacting with its physical, social and cultural environments, has

properties possessed by no machine, including those of self-organization and the capacity for self-transcendence.

The second foundation is the separation of energy from information, each with its own causal mechanism. To maintain its state of organization in a changing environment, an organism requires a constant flow of information. The meaning of the information is interpreted by the organism's receptors in terms of its "program" or language. Information flows between all levels of the organism, each level "translating" the messages into its own language. Information transfer is as decisive an agent of change as energy transfer, but the causal process in the two cases is different. Energy transfer produces change by action on a passive object, as when a moving billiard ball hits a stationary one. Information transfer produces change by releasing a process that is already a potential of the system. In the case of the human subject, this potential has a life, and mind, of its own. The resulting change, the physiological response, reflects this life and mind. Hence, in a medical context, health and disease are not biological but psychobiological phenomena.

In the successor "infomedical" paradigm which Foss proposes, the bio-mechanistic model becomes a limited case of a psycho-biomedical model, thus better accounting for the experimental findings that show an association between psychological and social variables and disease vulnerability. Now we are in position to explain the above-mentioned anomalies—the evidence for the effect on health of the meaning of experience, expectations, beliefs, intentionality, and relationships.

In his Foreword to *The Second Medical Revolution*, Engel acknowledges the shortcomings of the term *biopsychosocial* and welcomes Foss and Rothenberg's term *infomedical*. The term *biopsychosocial* emphasizes structural boundaries rather than integration. A physician could interpret its meaning as "I look after the biomedical aspects of the illness, and the psychologist and social worker look after the other aspects." In introducing information as the integrating term, Foss's *infomedical* is psychophysically neutral. As information, a word and a neurotransmitter have equal status.

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn observed that paradigm change in a discipline usually comes from its margins, rather than from its center. It is often at the margins that the anomalies are first perceived. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the critique of the biomedical model has come from outside medicine itself, and from primary care disciplines like family medicine, which have encountered the anomalies at first hand in their encounter with undifferentiated illness.

As in all moves to a new level of understanding, the new paradigm both embraces and transcends the old. In Kuhn's words, the field of medicine is

reconstructed from new fundamentals. The facts do not change, but the explanatory power of medical theory is greatly increased. In one sense, modern medicine has tacitly acknowledged the power of meaning by incorporating placebo controls in clinical trials: but this acknowledgement goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of a science of mind-body medicine. How much longer can medicine live with this paradox? The result of Foss's analysis is to replace biomedical science with psychobiomedical science. Putting modern medicine "under a microscope," he demonstrates the relevance for today's medicine of the sciences of complexity.

Complex adaptive systems, patients are capable of self-normalizing and even self-transcending behavior: they can influence their own physical processes. At the biological level we know this as homeostasis, which Walter Cannon called "the wisdom of the body." At the psychological level, human systems can self-regulate not only autonomically, but deliberately, a process Foss calls homeodynamics. The subject elects to modify his or her beliefs or expectations. This poses a dilemma for conventional medical theory. Use of the prefix "self" in the foregoing sentences introduces the notion of downward causation and seems to violate energy conservation laws. The human patient can be moved not only by external agents such as microorganisms, and by internal biophysical processes like cancer (both instances of upward causation), but can also move himself or herself, an instance of downward causation. By altering their beliefs, emotions or intentions, patients can measurably alter their biology. Patients' subjective states can be either health enhancing or disease-inducing, therapeutic or pathogenic, the counterpart of the drugs and toxins of biomedical theory. As Foss reminds us, when Walter Cannon heard of Pavlov's work on conditioned reflexes, he said: these are "psychic secretions."

Acceptance of Foss's argument will have important consequences for medical science and medical practice. Classical empiricism recognizes only one kind of knowledge as valid: the knowledge gained from the direct evidence of our senses, or at least recorded on our instruments. Since the meaning of experience, beliefs, emotions and intentions cannot be seen, heard, touched or recorded on our instruments, this whole category of understanding is not granted the status of validated knowledge. Since mental processes have bodily correlations, reduction to the respective correlates is regarded as the only way to make a knowledge of these processes trustworthy.

There is no biological test for the meaning of experience, but there is, in the hermeneutic method, a rigorous discipline for gaining this knowledge. The method is intersubjective, person to person. It has its own canons of validity, necessarily different from those of conventional medical research, but equally rigorous. As Foss so convincingly demonstrates, this knowledge is scientific.

A person's ideas, beliefs and feelings can be validly ascertained, and they have measurable consequences for the person's health. To ignore these consequences is to be unscientific.

An adequate diagnostics and therapeutics must integrate the patient's "subjective" psychology with his or her "objective" biology. Subjectivity is written into the health-disease equation, and the post-modern sciences of complexity provide a scientific vocabulary for describing it. A clinical practice that does not operationalize such an integration is unscientific, and a medical theory that cannot rationalize it is inadequate. *The End of Modern Medicine* provides us with the prospect of something that reductionist science had taught us was a contradiction: a medicine that is at the same time human and scientific. Foss's case is timely and compelling.

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*Introduction to  
SUNY Series in  
Constructive  
Postmodern Thought\**

The rapid spread of the term *postmodern* in recent years witnesses to a growing dissatisfaction with modernity and to an increasing sense that the modern age not only had a beginning but can have an end as well. Whereas the word *modern* was almost always used until quite recently as a word of praise and as a synonym for *contemporary*, a growing sense is now evidenced that we can and should leave modernity behind—in fact, that we must if we are to avoid destroying ourselves and most of the life on our planet.

*Modernity*, rather than being regarded as the norm for human society toward which all history has been aiming and into which all societies should be ushered—forcibly if necessary—is instead increasingly seen as an aberration. A new respect for the wisdom of traditional societies is growing as we realize that they have endured for thousands of years and that, by contrast, the existence of modern civilization for even another century seems doubtful. Likewise, *modernism* as a worldview is less and less seen as The Final Truth, in comparison with which all divergent worldviews are automatically regarded as “superstitious.” The modern worldview is increasingly relativized to the status of one among many, useful for some purposes, inadequate for others.

Although there have been antimodern movements before, beginning perhaps near the outset of the nineteenth century with the Romanticists and the Luddites, the rapidity with which the term *postmodern* has become widespread

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\* The present version of this introduction is slightly different from the first version, which was contained in the volumes that appeared prior to 2000. My thanks to Catherine Keller and Edward Carlos Munn for helpful suggestions.

in our time suggests that the antimodern sentiment is more extensive and intense than before, and also that it includes the sense that modernity can be successfully overcome only by going beyond it, not by attempting to return to a premodern form of existence. Insofar as a common element is found in the various ways in which the term is used, *postmodernism* refers to a diffuse sentiment rather than to any common set of doctrines—the sentiment that humanity can and must go beyond the modern.

Beyond connoting this sentiment, the term *postmodern* is used in a confusing variety of ways, some of them contradictory to others. In artistic and literary circles, for example, postmodernism shares in this general sentiment but also involves a specific reaction against “modernism” in the narrow sense of a movement in artistic-literary circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Postmodern architecture is very different from postmodern literary criticism. In some circles, the term *postmodern* is used in reference to that potpourri of ideas and systems sometimes called *new age metaphysics*, although many of these ideas and systems are more premodern than postmodern. Even in philosophical and theological circles, the term *postmodern* refers to two quite different positions, one of which is reflected in this series. Each position seeks to transcend both *modernism*, in the sense of the worldview that has developed out of the seventeenth-century Galilean-Cartesian-Baconian-Newtonian science, and *modernity*, in the sense of the world order that both conditioned and was conditioned by this worldview. But the two positions seek to transcend the modern in different ways.

Closely related to literary-artistic postmodernism is a philosophical postmodernism inspired variously by physicalism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, a cluster of French thinkers—including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Julia Kristeva—and certain features of American pragmatism.\* By the use of terms that arise out of particular segments of this movement, it can be called *deconstructive*, *relativistic*, or *eliminative* postmodernism. It overcomes the modern worldview through an antiworldview,

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\* The fact that the thinkers and movements named here are said to have inspired the deconstructive type of postmodernism should not be taken, of course, to imply that they have nothing in common with constructive postmodernists. For example, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze share many points and concerns with Alfred North Whitehead, the chief inspiration behind the present series. Furthermore, the actual positions of the founders of pragmatism, especially William James and Charles Peirce, are much closer to Whitehead’s philosophical position—see the volume in this series entitled *The Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy: Peirce, James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne*—than they are to Richard Rorty’s so-called neopragmatism, which reflects many ideas from Rorty’s explicitly physicalistic period.

deconstructing or even entirely eliminating various concepts that have generally been thought necessary for a worldview, such as self, purpose, meaning, a real world, givenness, reason, truth as correspondence, universally valid norms, and divinity. While motivated by ethical and emancipatory concerns, this type of postmodern thought tends to issue in relativism. Indeed, it seems to many thinkers to imply nihilism.\* It could, paradoxically, also be called *ultramodernism*, in that its eliminations result from carrying certain modern premises—such as the sensationist doctrine of perception, the mechanistic doctrine of nature, and the resulting denial of divine presence in the world—to their logical conclusions. Some critics see its deconstructions or eliminations as leading to self-referential inconsistencies, such as “performative self-contradictions” between what is said and what is presupposed in the saying.

The postmodernism of this series can, by contrast, be called *revisionary*, *constructive*, or—perhaps best—*reconstructive*. It seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews (or “metanarratives”) as such, but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts in the light of inescapable presuppositions of our various modes of practice. That is, it agrees with deconstructive postmodernists that a massive deconstruction of many received concepts is needed. But its deconstructive moment, carried out for the sake of the presuppositions of practice, does not result in self-referential inconsistency. It also is not so totalizing as to prevent reconstruction. The reconstruction carried out by this type of postmodernism involves a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions (whereas poststructuralists tend to reject all such unitive projects as “totalizing modern metanarratives”). While critical of many ideas often associated with modern science, it rejects not science as such but only that *scientism* in which only the data of the modern natural sciences are allowed to contribute to the construction of our public worldview.

The reconstructive activity of this type of postmodern thought is not limited to a revised worldview. It is equally concerned with a postmodern

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\* As Peter Dews points out, although Derrida’s early work was “driven by profound ethical impulses,” its insistence that no concepts were immune to deconstruction “drove its own ethical presuppositions into a penumbra of inarticulacy” (*The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Culture* [London: New York: Verso, 1995], 5). In his more recent thought, Derrida has declared an “emancipatory promise” and an “idea of justice” to be “irreducible to any deconstruction.” Although this “ethical turn” in deconstruction implies its pulling back from a completely disenchanting universe, it also, Dews points out (6–7), implies the need to renounce “the unconditionality of its own earlier dismantling of the unconditional.”

*world* that will both support and be supported by the new worldview. A postmodern world will involve postmodern persons, with a postmodern spirituality, on the one hand, and a postmodern society, ultimately a postmodern global order, on the other. Going beyond the modern world will involve transcending its individualism, anthropocentrism, patriarchy, economism, consumerism, nationalism, and militarism. Reconstructive postmodern thought provides support for the ethnic, ecological, feminist, peace, and other emancipatory movements of our time, while stressing that the inclusive emancipation must be from the destructive features of modernity itself. However, the term *postmodern*, by contrast with *premodern*, is here meant to emphasize that the modern world has produced unparalleled advances, as Critical Theorists have emphasized, which must not be devalued in a general revulsion against modernity's negative features.

From the point of view of deconstructive postmodernists, this reconstructive postmodernism will seem hopelessly wedded to outdated concepts, because it wishes to salvage a positive meaning not only for the notions of selfhood, historical meaning, reason, and truth as correspondence, which were central to modernity, but also for notions of divinity, cosmic meaning, and an enchanted nature, which were central to premodern modes of thought. From the point of view of its advocates, however, this revisionary postmodernism is not only more adequate to our experience but also more genuinely postmodern. It does not simply carry the premises of modernity through to their logical conclusions, but criticizes and revises those premises. By virtue of its return to organicism and its acceptance of nonsensory perception, it opens itself to the recovery of truths and values from various forms of premodern thought and practice that had been dogmatically rejected, or at least restricted to "practice," by modern thought. This reconstructive postmodernism involves a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths and values.

This series does not seek to create a movement so much as to help shape and support an already existing movement convinced that modernity can and must be transcended. But in light of the fact that those antimodern movements that arose in the past failed to deflect or even retard the onslaught of modernity, what reasons are there for expecting the current movement to be more successful? First, the previous antimodern movements were primarily calls to return to a premodern form of life and thought rather than calls to advance, and the human spirit does not rally to calls to turn back. Second, the previous antimodern movements either rejected modern science, reduced it to a description of mere appearances, or assumed its adequacy in principle. They could, therefore, base their calls only on the negative social and spiritual effects of modernity. The current movement draws on natural science itself as a witness against

the adequacy of the modern worldview. In the third place, the present movement has even more evidence than did previous movements of the ways in which modernity and its worldview *are* socially and spiritually destructive. The fourth and probably most decisive difference is that the present movement is based on the awareness that *the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet*. This awareness, combined with the growing knowledge of the interdependence of the modern worldview with the militarism, nuclearism, patriarchy, global apartheid, and ecological devastation of the modern world, is providing an unprecedented impetus for people to see the evidence for a postmodern worldview and to envisage postmodern ways of relating to each other, the rest of nature, and the cosmos as a whole. For these reasons, the failure of the previous antimodern movements says little about the possible success of the current movement.

Advocates of this movement do not hold the naively utopian belief that the success of this movement would bring about a global society of universal and lasting peace, harmony and happiness, in which all spiritual problems, social conflicts, ecological destruction, and hard choices would vanish. There is, after all, surely a deep truth in the testimony of the world's religions to the presence of a transcultural proclivity to evil deep within the human heart, which no new paradigm, combined with a new economic order, new child-rearing practices, or any other social arrangements, will suddenly eliminate. Furthermore, it has correctly been said that "life is robbery": A strong element of competition is inherent within finite existence, which no social-political-economic-ecological order can overcome. These two truths, especially when contemplated together, should caution us against unrealistic hopes.

No such appeal to "universal constants," however, should reconcile us to the present order, as if it were thereby uniquely legitimated. The human proclivity to evil in general, and to conflictual competition and ecological destruction in particular, can be greatly exacerbated or greatly mitigated by a world order and its worldview. Modernity exacerbates it about as much as imaginable. We can therefore envision, without being naively utopian, a far better world order, with a far less dangerous trajectory, than the one we now have.

This series, making no pretense of neutrality, is dedicated to the success of this movement toward a postmodern world.

David Ray Griffin  
Series Editor