

## Summer Book Review

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*Trick Or Treatment* by Simon Singh and Edzard Ernst (Bantam Press, 2008)

*Illness* by Havi Carel (Acumen, 2008)

Enlightenment principles continue to need forthright champions, and in Edzard Ernst they have a bulldog. His chosen field of study is complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). His tools are the clinical trial, and the meta-analysis of clinical trials. *Trick Or Treatment* is a status report on his investigations into the realms of the alternative. Ernst provides an overview of available evidence for the most established therapies - acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractic and herbal medicine. These are not only established but encroaching on the establishment, for Prince Charles is a strident advocate. Ernst explains the history of CAM in relation to mainstream medicine, and meditates on science, truth, hope, fear and unabashed medievalism. As you might expect, his work could prove a problem if you flog Hopi ear candles for a living.

The layman's view that there must be something in, for example, homeopathy would seem to be borne out by the National Health Service spending half a billion pounds annually on provision of homeopathic medicine. The sheer scale of the economics of CAM is staggering. A conservative estimate puts the British public's annual investment in CAM at nearly five billion pounds. With this trough of cash comes vested interest, and Ernst's targets include the profiteers and scoundrels among the CAM fellowship. The majority of the book, however, is a measured debate with the honest practitioners of therapies that have global reach and endless supporting anecdotal reports. It is the hollowness of anecdote when confronted by meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials that is the book's fundamental message. That, and the rapacious ability of conventional medicine to assimilate any therapies that do

prove to have measurable benefit, therefore implying a definition of CAM as 'therapy that doesn't work'. Nonetheless, CAM has got a hold on the public consciousness. Ernst and Singh dissect this effect, and look for ways to educate patients and practitioners away from its misleading blandishments. Whether their conclusions will achieve critical mass, and gain universal acceptance, remains to be seen. The tone of the writing is occasionally exasperated, and accepts that people respond to wish fulfilment as well as to hard fact. The book should succeed despite this, and deserves an influential future. Ernst has zeal to dispel myth, and he has the might of evidence on his side.

Havi Carel was a sporty thirty five year old academic, a teacher of philosophy at Bristol University, when she was diagnosed with sporadic lymphangiomyomatosis. She had noticed that her exercise tolerance was becoming limited, and had sought medical attention. 'The unexamined life is not worth living' is the Socratic rallying cry for all philosophers. As she submitted to yet more tests and examinations at the hands of her respiratory physicians, she must have yearned for an unexamined fortnight. Carel's initial response to the terminal diagnosis was terror and impotent fury. By degrading her physical capacity, the disease devalued her continuing existence. Slowly, this resentment was modified by her intellectual engagement with the crisis. The painful introspection and growing understanding she experienced are recorded in her eloquent essay-memoir, *Illness*.

Disease is very corrosive to complacency. It metastasises into every aspect of an individual's life. Bodily functions, social interactions, fundamental concepts of identity and belief - all are infiltrated and corrupted. Modern healthcare systems are predicated around engaging with the first of these aspects, the

'biological'. Scientific medicine has produced innumerable leaps in understanding and treatment of disease. Incurable conditions, however, are an unwelcome reproach to the whole project. Samuel Butler's novel *Erewhon*, written in 1872, satirised this effect. In the country of Erewhon, "ill luck of any kind, or even ill treatment at the hands of others, is considered an offence against society, inasmuch as it makes people uncomfortable to hear of it." A man who "fails bodily in any way before he is seventy years old" is tried and sentenced. Carel confirms that the targets of Butler's satire are still in rude health. She suggests that society at large takes its cue from the scientific establishment. The "impoverished language used in the medical world" reflects the "impoverished concept of illness" it supports. The lack of rational understanding of a disorder leads to the stigmatisation of the individual suffering the disease. There is a socially sanctioned failure of empathy.

Her proposed remedy is a reworking of our understanding of disease, one founded on phenomenological principles. This approach "privileges the first-person experience", and aims to refocus attention on the particularities of the patient. Carel has an agenda: in her experience, medics and nurses have been encouraged by their training to become inured to suffering.

They also become blasé about the minor indignities of illness – the infantilizing power of a hospital gown; the dismantling effect of insomnia; the endless waiting for information, for sympathy, for certainty. The ill person is locked into a role. Carel asks only that the carers should acknowledge this, and give a commitment to honest engagement with the patient. She would agree with Edzard Ernst, who recommends that doctor-patient relationships be therapeutic relationships, where increased consultation times are matched by an increase in patient satisfaction. The attractions of alternative medicine may look less enticing if the medical establishment could only pay a little more attention to the individual. This is humane philosophy, and very succinctly voiced. The overall impression given by *Illness* is of a writer awakening to the limitations and potentials of human fragility. Carel is not a wallower, and makes play of her naivety and negative emotions. The "abundant enthusiasm" in the face of hardship she finds in the works of philosophers, along with her unpitying self-examination, makes this a profound and rewarding memoir.