

# Hahnemann's Idea of the Vital Force: Fiction, Construct or Reality?

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## Abstract

In this article the soundness of Hahnemann's idea of the vital force is investigated under the aspect of present-day science and philosophy. Hahnemann's concept is compared with modern models of self-regulation. Complexity theory, as well as empirical findings by genetics and their interpretation, is discussed. Difficulties in applying the materialistic paradigm in interpretation are shown, and an alternative approach as given by Steiner's objective idealism is introduced. The discussion shows that Hahnemann's idea of the vital force can be judged at least as a reasonable construct. The most critical point in Hahnemann's reasoning is the invisibility of the vital force along with perceivable symptoms that represent the entire disease. Inconsistencies in Hahnemann's concept of chronic diseases are related to this problem. To overcome difficulties arising from Hahnemann's assumptions, the goetheanistic practice based on Steiner's objective idealism is proposed. The benefits of this method for the homeopathic practitioner and for further research on the vital force are shown.

## Keywords

- ▶ vital force
- ▶ self-organisation
- ▶ objective idealism
- ▶ goetheanism

## Introduction

The idea of the vital force is a central concept in homeopathy, developed by Hahnemann.

Being a most competent scientist, he elaborated his concepts based on thorough objective observations. He refused abstract theories as being of no use for the purpose of healing. Hahnemann adopted the motto of enlightenment 'Aude sapere' ('dare to know') for his *Organon of the Healing Art*.

But science undergoes changes: the idea of a special vital force has been disdained by scientists and philosophers after Hahnemann. However, science of the 20th century has shown the limits of the materialistic paradigm and brought up completely new approaches (nonclassic physics, genetics, philosophies embracing wholeness).

On the background of these developments of science and philosophy, a critical analysis will be made of Hahnemann's idea, asking if it can be called a fiction, a construct or a reality. The focus is on Hahnemann's special concept of the vital force. It will not be equated with vitalism in advance. Effects of disease agents or remedies are not considered. The gap between rhetoric and reality of Hahnemann's idea, as well as its implications on homeopathic treatment, is discussed.

## Starting Point for Discussion

Even in his first publications on the Law of Similars, Hahnemann outlined his understanding of the invisible inner nature of the disease and the totality of symptoms as its outer image (Schmidt<sup>1</sup>). However, he introduced his idea of the vital force only by the 4th edition of the *Organon*, in temporal relationship with his research on chronic diseases and in close relation to this concept (Schmidt<sup>1</sup>). From the 4th to the final 6th edition of the *Organon*, the principles of Hahnemann's idea of the vital force remained the same (Luft and Wischner<sup>2</sup>; Schmidt<sup>1</sup>). Thus, we can rely on the 6th edition of the *Organon* as a knowledge base, containing Hahnemann's established definition.

Hahnemann's assumptions about the vital force that are relevant to my question are the following:

- Life must be judged by its own rule, because physical laws acting alone lead to disintegration of the body (Hahnemann,<sup>3</sup> §10, annotation).
- In the state of health, it is the vital force that maintains harmony and healthy functioning of the organism. The vital force is spirit-like. (Hahnemann,<sup>3</sup> §9).
- The living organism is not conceivable without the vital force, only the animated unit exists (Hahnemann,<sup>3</sup> §15).

- In the state of disease, the vital force produces symptoms perceivable by the senses. The vital force itself is unobservable (Hahnemann,<sup>3</sup> §11).
- The totality of perceivable symptoms represents the entire disease (Hahnemann,<sup>3</sup> §6).
- Knowledge about the invisible vital force is not necessary for cure; knowing the perceivable symptoms suffices (Hahnemann,<sup>3</sup> §17).

### Impact on Practice Beliefs

Being aware of the limits of the materialistic paradigm as a physicist, the idea of a vital force appears acceptable to me. However, I disagree with Hahnemann about two aspects:

1. Patients with no symptoms perceivable by human senses can be afflicted by a severe disease, as modern investigative medicine demonstrates.
2. If something cannot be observed in principle, I would not call it a reality.

Thus, I kept seeking for opportunities to observe the vital force. Besides, I talk about the vital force in explaining the patient's disease and cure to him/her. Thereby he/she can imagine an instance that is intimately related to him/herself and that might be experienced by him/her. I have found that counselling as part of the healing process is supported by doing so.

On the other hand, because of the unobservable part of the disease, I might recommend the patient undergo an examination by technical means.

In fact, the idea of the vital force has been a most controversial item in discussing homeopathy. Critics have called it obsolete, being a prescientific fantasy of vitalists. On this background, some homeopaths look upon Hahnemann's vital force as a 'black box,' that should be displaced by scientific concepts (Teut<sup>4</sup>). To understand life on a scientific level, concepts of 'self-regulation' have been developed to explain conservation of integrity and form and purposeful organisation of organisms. These approaches shall be examined.

## Understanding Self-Regulation

### Mathematical Models

A milestone has been introducing system theory for open systems in 1932 (Bertalanffy, as cited in Teut<sup>4</sup>). Open systems can exchange matter and energy with their environment. By this, system theory can overcome the thermodynamic law of increasing entropy (disorder) that dominates the unanimated world. It allows conservation of form and integrity of organisms by regarding them to be in dynamic equilibrium, supplied with energy from the environment (Teut<sup>4</sup>).

Thirty years later, self-regulation in open systems could be described mathematically (Prigogine, as cited in Teut<sup>4</sup>). Thereby, organisation is brought up by 'distributed control' of constituents. For example, traffic lights can mutually exchange information about actual traffic circulation. They control one another in a complex feedback system. The resultant most effective signal pattern is called 'emergent'

(Ivanovas<sup>5</sup>). (A state is called *emergent* if it has a meaningful ordered structure that cannot be derived from its constituents.)

A typical trait of organisms, dynamicity (evolution in time in dynamical response to the changing environment) could be calculated too by system theory (Bellavite<sup>6</sup>).

The complexity of organisms and their sensitivity to small influences could be taken into account by developing cybernetics and chaos theory: Cybernetic models calculate feedback in regulatory circuits (Wiener, as cited in Teut<sup>4</sup>). Recursive functions for these feedback mechanisms reveal 'nonlinearity' (the outcome of a process is not proportional to the input) (Ivanovas<sup>5</sup>). This effect is well known on the impact of remedies in homeopathic treatment. Chaos theory, developed by Poincare, Lorenz, Mandelbrot and Feigenbaum, describes complex open nonlinear systems with underlying deterministic equations that are extremely sensitive to initial conditions (Bellavite<sup>6</sup>). (Remember the popular story of the butterfly's wing causing an earthquake on the opposite side of the world.) Sensitivity to initial conditions is also a typical feature of organisms. For example, the impact of a remedy on a patient depends on his/her state of health.

In general: For complex systems the outcome is generated by an adaptive process of the system to environmental influences, resulting in an emergent state.

Relying on these models, Bellavite<sup>6</sup> suggests adopting complexity theory for the explanation of self-regulation in homeopathy: Typical effects, as the impact of small doses, dynamicity of reaction and self-regulation, could be explained by regarding the human body as a complex system. But most importantly, Bellavite is aware that the mathematical model must not be confused with observed phenomena. He writes, 'we need [...] to develop empirical tests in order to test a number of hypotheses that have been developed in this field', (Bellavite,<sup>6</sup> p. 204).

### Empirical Research

Empirically based theories to explain purposeful organisation and building of organic forms have been developed by genetics. However, the early claim of genetics, that information for development of the organism is completely included in the DNA (Crick and Watson, as cited in Holdrege<sup>7</sup>), had to be abandoned: Heusser<sup>8</sup> states that it is quantitatively impossible to generate the information needed for the complexity of the human organism by DNA-variations. He adds that DNA only provides the structure for the primary protein (pre-mRNA) in the process of protein formation and that it does not offer rules for fat, or carbohydrates, or superior structures such as cells, organs and the organism as a whole. He indicates that enzymes select parts of the pre-mRNA to form the mRNA which includes the information for the final protein (called 'splicing'), and he asks: where do the criteria for choice come from? Heusser finally argues that the protein must be 'folded' to become functional. Folding is the process by which the protein is brought to its final three-dimensional structure. Information for this three-dimensional structure is needed, but the protein owns the material ingredients only. For example, under different conditions isomer proteins that

are proteins with different spatial structure and identical ingredients are built.

By experimental evidence, Fischer (as cited in Heusser,<sup>8</sup> pp.72–73) concludes that folding depends on the primary structure of the protein and environmental conditions, according to a 'law of conformation'. This is called a *process of self-organisation*. By this, the folded structure must be called emergent; it cannot be explained by its constituents. This self-organising process is goal-oriented, the goal being realisation of a structural law under concrete conditions (Heusser<sup>8</sup>).

The priority of DNA in forming organisms is further questioned: DNA is not only giving but also receiving information (Wirz, as cited in Heusser,<sup>8</sup> p. 76). The stability of the DNA in reproduction is the result of enzymes acting on the DNA in a 'highly orchestrated dynamic process' (Fox-Keller, as cited in Heusser,<sup>8</sup> p. 79).

The aspects highlighted previously provide strong evidence that the forming of organic structures cannot be explained by information contained in chemical structures only. A goal-oriented process, dependent on a structural law, should be assumed. This process can be understood as self-organisation. However, we should look for the origin of the self-regulating process.

### Where Is the 'Self' in Regulation?

Mathematical models and genetic theories of self-regulation end in describing regulating procedures in organisms, generating emergent structures in contact with their environment. The question remains: where is the regulating 'self'?

The standard view: There are material constituents sharing information by mutual interaction, ending up in a purposeful adapted state (Teut<sup>4</sup>; Ivanovas<sup>5</sup>). However, this is an unjustified assumption, implying material substances and physical laws to be the origin of everything. Actually, until now each claim of having found the material origin of life had to be corrected because of findings showing that the assumed material origin is itself the product of a regulating process. Even the Nobel-prize awarded explanation of the morphogenesis (forming process) of drosophila by passive physical-chemical processes had to be withdrawn. Gregor et al (as cited in Heusser,<sup>8</sup> p. 88) could show that the organising structure (the 'morphogen-gradient', a structure consisting of a decline in concentration of molecules) is itself dependent on the organising activity of the whole organism.

In fact, despite growing and ever more complicated efforts, the organising idea appears to have already been there. It is like Grimm's story of 'The hare and the hedgehog'.

### Beyond the Materialistic Paradigm

Taking the lasting preexistence of an organising idea seriously, alternative interpretations of the empirical findings in genetics can be given:

Steiner<sup>9</sup> has introduced objective idealism in his inaugural dissertation. By this approach ideas are taken as observable realities. Its main statements are: The mental activity of thinking can be regarded as an organ of perception of ideas, comparable to the eye that perceives light; the appearance of the idea in the mind of the observer depends on his/her

activity, but the idea itself is independent of subjective conditions (e.g., the sum of angles in a triangle); reality comprises the idea in the appearance that is perceived together with the appearance.

Steiner<sup>10</sup> also applied objective idealism to Goethe's view of organisms, showing that the organising idea in organisms, the Goethean 'typus', can be found objectively by mental activity in sensory perception. For the organic world the typus takes over the role that natural laws fulfil for the unanimated world.

Heusser<sup>8</sup> applies objective idealism for understanding the findings of life sciences. He argues that the cause (the 'self') of regulation in organisms is the organising idea itself. It comprises the totality of its spatial and temporal structure, genotype (genetic constitution) as well as phenotype (actual appearance). He regards the genotype as a special phenotype, and calls the organising idea an 'ideotype'. Unlike the idea of functioning in a machine, which exists apart from the machine in the mind of its designer, the idea of an organism is a constituent of the organism itself, which affects its development; idea and acting force coincide in organisms (Heusser<sup>8</sup>). Important to notice: the idea in objective idealism is not a fixed concept, it is flexible in itself, enabling metamorphoses and evolution in time.

van der Bie<sup>11</sup> has illustrated the following steps for observing the organising idea in plants according to Goethe's and Steiner's specifications (→ Fig. 1 and 2):

1. Full sensory awareness of the concrete organism without applying mental concepts
2. Re-creation of the perception in mind, comparing the result with the original
3. Repeating steps 1 and 2 with the result of improving objectivity



Fig. 1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832).



**Fig. 2** Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925)

4. Extension of observation to successive phases in time: re-creation of the sensual perceptions in mind, letting the phases emanate from one another by concentration

In step 4 the practised observer perceives the law of formation of the organism in his/her mind together with its sensual appearance. Now the idea is no longer preexistent, because the observer keeps pace with it in his/her mind.

It is one idea (the 'self' in regulation) that brings about the organism and that appears in the mind of the observer. Therefore the idea can be looked upon as a reality independent of the observer. On the background of these results, Hahnemann's idea can be reexamined.

### Rhetoric and Reality in Hahnemann's Vital Force

Asking if a gap exists between rhetoric and reality needs some differentiation.

In contrast to naive vitalists like Mesmer, Hahnemann developed a comprehensible system based on systematic empiric observation and the Law of Similars. Thus, he was able to choose a remedy in advance, according to well-known reasons, relying on the results of provings. His concept is well-founded in the science of his time, based on the philosophy of his contemporary, Kant.

Kant was one of the first to introduce the idea of 'self-regulation' in organisms (Fox Keller<sup>12</sup>). He states, '[...] every part is reciprocally both end and means, [...] nothing is in vain, without an end, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism'. He emphasises this special causality in organisms, which differs from the interaction of constituents and is absent in inanimate matter. He states that only the internal dynamics of the being itself is responsible for its organisation (Kant, as cited in Fox Keller,<sup>12</sup> p.107). Kant furthermore claims the unobservability of the 'thing in itself', the origin of perceivable phenomena (Kant, as cited in Fräntzki<sup>13</sup>).

Thus, Hahnemann's assumptions that life must be judged by its own rule, that there is an organising dynamic in

organisms (the vital force), that the organism is an animated unit, not composed of material and spiritual parts and that the vital force is unobservable are underpinned by Kant.

Until today, attempts at proving the material origin of life have failed, as shown previously. Hence, Hahnemann's assumption that phenomena of life cannot be deduced from material laws can still be regarded as reasonable. Modern physicists underpin this assumption: The famous Nobel prize winner Bohr<sup>14</sup> argued that life must be taken as an elementary phenomenon in itself, comparable to the quantum of action in physics. The existence of regulating principles maintaining harmony and healthy functioning in organisms is accepted by modern life sciences. Hahnemann's idea is confirmed further by Steiner's approach: By this conception, the organism is seen as an animated unit presenting an observable idea to the human mind. The observable idea is the origin and organising law of the organism's functioning. The idea is spirit-like, thus confirming Hahnemann's claim on the nature of the vital force.

Therefore, Hahnemann's view of the organism as an animated unit, ruled by an inherent organising spirit-like principle, the vital force, appears to be acceptable also from the viewpoint of present-day science and philosophy.

Nevertheless, modern science requests the specification of an observable origin of a force. Hahnemann fails to do so. Hahnemann also fails in providing evidence for the assumed reality of the vital force. Hahnemann's claim of the unobservability of the vital force can be refuted, due to the possibilities provided by Steiner's method based on objective idealism. Hahnemann's claim that perceivable symptoms represent the entire disease and knowledge about the invisible is not relevant must be refuted too, due to the possibilities of modern investigative medicine.

In addition, Hahnemann's insisting on the visibility of symptoms in a disease, brought up by the untuned vital force, might have misled him in his research on chronic diseases. His idea of chronic diseases is based on the detection of visible eczema indicating the presence of 'psora', the asserted origin of most chronic diseases (Hahnemann<sup>15</sup>). Nonetheless, this theory can be doubted, due to unjustified assumptions. For example, Hahnemann argues that a person suffering from a nonvenereal chronic disease must have had an itching skin eruption once in his/her life, even if nobody can report on it (Hahnemann<sup>15</sup>).

However, by introducing chronicity, Hahnemann was a pioneer, enabling consideration of temporal development and metamorphoses (changing appearance in time) of diseases. Unfortunately, he did not realise the method of his contemporary Goethe to observe the organising idea in organisms, its characteristic being lawful temporal development. If Hahnemann had been able to observe the spirit-like vital force, would that have led to a consistent understanding of the relationship between the vital force, disease symptoms and the origin of chronic diseases?

### Impact of Results on Practice

Research on homeopathy based on complexity theory and genetics provides an atmosphere of acknowledgement for homeopathy in the public, but it does not satisfy me in

treating my patients. Therefore, I adopted the observational practice based on Steiner's method of objective idealism for improving my understanding of patients and remedies. (See the previously listed steps 1–4.) These are the benefits (van der Bie<sup>11</sup>):

- Removing mental concepts from the act of perception helps become an 'unbiased observer', as Hahnemann postulated. (Step 1)
- Being a participating practice, the method helps improve empathy and communication with patients. (Step 2–3)
- It enables the practitioner to perceive the law of temporal processes like the development of diseases. (Step 4).

These three aspects account for improving diagnostic skills that cannot be substituted by technical devices. Finally, this method disposes the practitioner to perceive the 'vital force' in the human organism, which Hahnemann had called *invisible*.

## Conclusion

Returning to the initial questions: Should Hahnemann's vital force be called a fiction?

Modern science, especially the findings of physics and genetics, provides good reasons, that life can only be judged by its own rules. There are no compulsory reasons for calling Hahnemann's idea a fiction.

Should Hahnemann's vital force be called a construct?

Hahnemann's concept is indeed a 'black box', designed to explain his observations. Thus, it might be looked upon as a construct at least in its original form, which denies the possibility of observation.

Should Hahnemann's vital force be called a reality?

From the viewpoint of objective idealism, a vital force that maintains harmony of the organism can be called a reality, observable by Goethe's method as elaborated by Steiner. The properties Hahnemann has ascribed to the healthy vital force can be confirmed thereby. Besides, application of Steiner's methodical goetheanism is of high value for homeopathic practitioners, because it helps improve understanding of patients, of diseases and of the healing process. Advancing this method might be helpful in doing further research on the untuned vital force and on chronic diseases, which Hahnemann has left as an insufficiently solved question.

### Vita

March 23, 1954 Born in Lüdenscheid, Germany.

January 1979 Degree: Diplom-Physikerin (MSc), Bonn University. Thesis: Research on elementary particle physics at CERN (Centre Europeenne pour la Recherche Nucleaire).

Afterwards: Part-time engaged as a physicist in industry, besides: part-time learning on alternative medicine at private schools.

November 1989: Admission to cure (Heilpraktikererlaubnis).

Afterwards: Studying classic homeopathy at different schools (Homöopathie-Forum, Heilpraktiker-Institut Nürnberg etc.).

Since August 1992: Own practice for classic homeopathy in Nürnberg, Germany.

September 2004: Certified classic homeopath (SHZ).

December 2007: Certified teacher and supervisor for classic homeopathy (SHZ).

Since 2004: Own research and study groups on understanding homeopathy by anthroposophical spiritual science.

September 2005 to May 2014: Chairwoman of the professional group of anthroposophic Heilpraktiker in Germany (AGAHP) and representative of the international professional group of anthroposophical nonmedical practitioners at the medical section of the 'school of spiritual science' (goetheanum).

Since September 2013: Mentor for classic homeopaths who attend the IPMT (International Postgraduate Training) in India aiming at certification as anthroposophical physician.

Since September 2014: Student of MSc Homeopathy at UCLAN (University of Central Lancashire, UK), (part-time, postgraduate, e-learning).

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