

**George Bernard Shaw**  
(1856–1950)

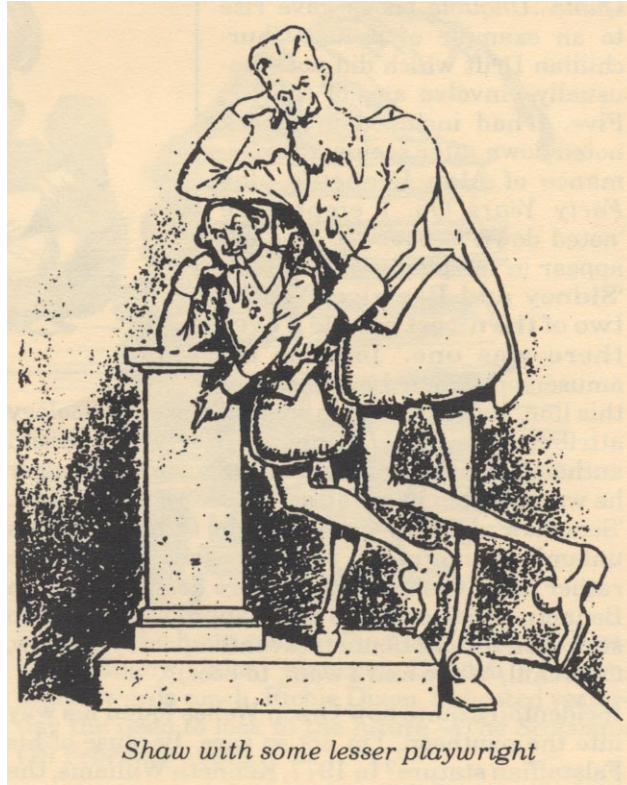
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## THE CURE FOR BERNARD SHAW

**Anthony Daniels**

**T**he first writer whose prose style I ever admired was Bernard Shaw. I was between eleven and twelve years old at the time, and did not arrive at my judgment independently. I was under the influence of my English teacher, the first intellectual I had ever met (other than a second cousin who had published a few verses in the small and evanescent English-language literary journals of Paris in the 1950s), and I and my friends admired him to the point of hero-worship. If he had told us that the greatest novelists who ever

lived were Marie Corelli and E. Phillips Oppenheim, we should have defended his opinion to the death, citing his arguments, and the fact that he advanced them, as proof incontrovertible of its truth.



In fact, his attitude to Shaw was little short of ours to him, namely idolatry. He told us that Shaw was the greatest playwright in the English language since Shakespeare, which I thought a far greater accolade then than I think it now, bearing in mind the quality of the drama in English since Shakespeare, even were it true. Shaw, our teacher gave us to understand, was right about everything, from his championship of Wagner to his vegetarianism; uniquely among playwrights, he was a true philosopher. Our teacher was so charismatic that we believed him without demur; later, long after he had ceased to influence my ideas, he became a professor of literature.

In truth, Shaw did have a vigorous prose style, but as I subsequently learned, it was more suited to meretricious argumentation and paradox-mongering than to serious exploration of reality. As such, it was bound to appeal to the adolescent mind, to all those who thought that the provocation of their elders was the beginning, and pretty well the end, of wisdom. The biographer Michael Holroyd draws attention to Shaw's lifelong clowning, but I think naughtiness is more the word. Shaw was like a precocious child, brought

from the nursery to shock and delight the assembled grown-ups. Unfortunately, he was often mistaken for a serious man.

Between the time when I thought that Shaw's prose had all the virtues—concision, wit, irony, logic, euphony, pace—and my disillusionment with him, I thought of Shaw hardly at all. I saw one or two of his plays and thought them rather stilted, more or less dramatized tracts, postscripts to the famous prefaces rather than autonomous works in their own right. Then, having qualified as a doctor, I re-read *The Doctor's Dilemma* and its preface, and realized that Shaw was what Chekhov called Tolstoy (with whom Shaw shared many characteristics), an ignoramus, who was more concerned with cutting a figure in the world than with the dull business of truth.

Shaw was in fact a crank of the first water, who had the sophist's ability to present his publicity-generating eccentricities as the choices of a rational man. He was drawn to odd causes like a fly to ordure, provided they gave him a platform. One of these causes was anti-vaccination.

This is a subject which I hesitate to mention, because immunization against infectious diseases still arouses passions unequalled by any other medical procedure, and even commentary en passant is bound to bring a crop of responses in which vituperation of an astonishing virulence is made to stand for argument. There remains to be written a history of the opposition to immunization down the ages by a historian with a good grasp of psychology, to explain the almost fanatical adherence that this cause inspires.

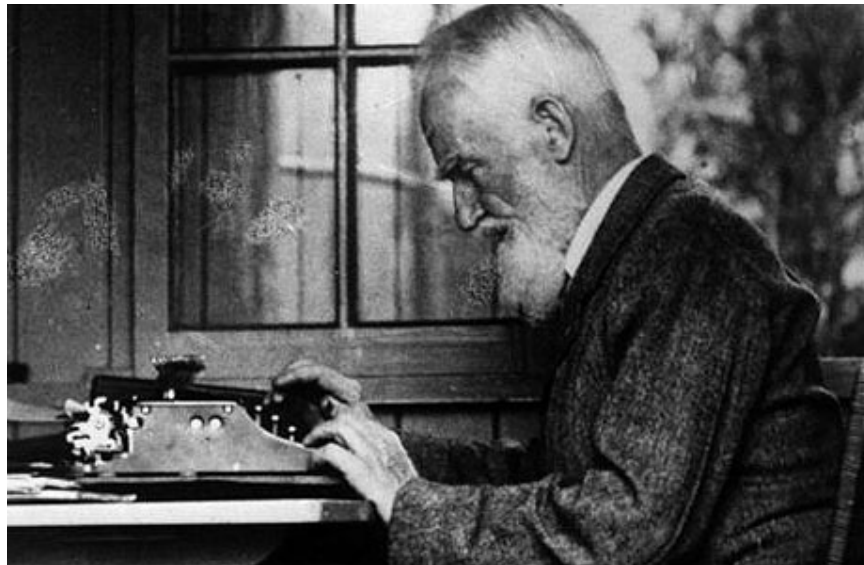
From the very start, Jenner's vaccination aroused derision and opposition, from the famous print by Gillray in which the vaccinated grew horns and turned into cows, to the more serious theological objections, for example that of the Reverend Dr. Rowley, who wrote:

“Small-pox is a visitation from God, and originates in man; but the cow-pox is produced by presumptuous, impious man. The former, heaven ordained; the latter is perhaps a daring and profane violation of our holy religion.”

Shaw was in apostolic succession to Dr. Rowley, though he probably neither realized it nor would have thanked anyone for pointing it out.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a great outpouring of antivaccination literature by men with names that seem curiously, almost onomatopoeically, suited to cranks, such as W. Scott Tebb and H. Valentine Knaggs, author (apart from his work on vaccination) of *The Healthy Life Beverage Book* and *Onions and Cress*. These authors not only believed that vaccination failed to protect against smallpox, but believed that it spread syphilis and leprosy. The fact that the late Victorian age was a more leisured one than our own is demonstrated in the fact that W. Scott Tebb subtitled his closely printed, 408-page treatise *The Recrudescence of Leprosy and Its Causation* “A Popular Treatise.” Shaw took this vast literature and boiled it down into aphoristic prose, in both the preface to *The Doctor’s Dilemma* (1906) and his collection of articles about medical matters, published in 1932, and never repudiated by him, entitled *Doctors’ Delusions*. He even took on its “technical” language, calling vaccination “cow syphilis.”

Shaw accused the medical profession of complete ignorance of scientific method and statistical reasoning, without the slightest understanding of what had already been achieved and the immense intellectual labor that it had entailed.



He wrote as if no one had ever thought of anything until he arrived on the scene. Shaw was thus one of the progenitors of the immensely destructive attitude, now almost universal among intellectuals, of excoriating the present and its problems, without any appreciation of the efforts of the past to make the progress whose fruits we enjoy but take for granted, or of the immense cultural legacy we have inherited. His was the cultural anthropology of a consummate solipsist, to whom socialism appealed not because it

offered all men equality, but because it offered George Bernard Shaw a platform from which to pontificate.

His own method of argumentation did not partake of the statistical or methodological rectitude which he advocated. On the very first page of his preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma*, he wrote:

I cannot knock my shins severely without forcing on some surgeon the difficult question, "Could I not make a better use of a pocketful of guineas than this man is making of his leg? Could he not write as well—or even better—on one leg than on two? And the guineas would make all the difference in the world to me just now. My wife—my pretty ones—the leg may mortify—it is always safer to operate—he will be well in a fortnight—artificial legs are now so well made that they are really better than natural ones—evolution is towards motors and leglessness, &c., &c., &c."

This is witty, funny, and very well-written, and contains an element of the truth, but the element is elevated by Shaw into the whole truth, and for him the motivation of doctors in general, and surgeons in particular, is settled once and for all and without further ado. And the motivation having been proved to his own satisfaction, he does not hesitate to ascribe mercenary motives to the doctors who partake of what he calls "an amazing empirical stunt," namely vaccination.

Shaw's scant interest in the truth of the matter of vaccination, except as a means of self-aggrandizement, is illustrated by his fathomlessly frivolous remark in a newspaper:

"When people ask me whether they should get vaccinated or not, I reply that if they have to choose between getting smallpox from the calf and from their neighbors, they had better get it from the calf; but a more excellent way is not to get it at all."

Shaw used his anti-vaccination stance as a means of propagandizing socialism, arguing that sanitation was the answer to the spread of smallpox, as if sanitation and immunization were logical contraries.

Like many another crank, Shaw was interested in dress reform as a way to undermine the status quo and thereby regenerate mankind. The quality of his scientific thinking can perhaps best be gauged by his adoption and lifelong loyalty to the Jaeger woolen system.

Dr. Jaeger was a German doctor who believed that all human illnesses were caused by the reabsorption of body poisons secreted through the skin, this reabsorption being forced upon the skin by cloths such as linen, cotton, and silk. The only cloth that did not have this disastrous effect was wool (though Jaeger also approved of feathers).

Dr. Jaeger himself had been restored to health by wearing wool. In his preface to the revised edition of his great work, Dr. Jaeger's Health Culture, he tells us that:

In my youth I was an active, vigorous athlete, but before I was thirty an injury to the leg, accompanied by blood poisoning and followed by varicose veins, rendered all strenuous exertion painful, and condemned me to an ever-increasing degree to a sedentary life. As a consequence I grew fat and scant of breath; my digestion was disturbed; I suffered from hemorrhoids, and was troubled with a tendency to chill diseases.

Dr. Jaeger and his hemorrhoids were cured by wool. In his sanitary woolen system, all human garments and bodily appurtenances were to be of wool, including the sanitary woolen handkerchief and the ladies' sanitary woolen corset. Dr. Jaeger says:

The Sanitary Woollen System does not develop its full effect at once, but requires time. In the case of sickly adult persons crises often set in at the commencement, which must not be allowed to mislead... . The experience hitherto obtained justifies the assurance that disturbances to health are much less frequent, and when such take place, although at first violent, they pass much more rapidly, and very seldom merge into chronic illness.

By this, Shaw was instantaneously converted (conversion being the proper term); he bought a suit of Jaeger clothes and Jaeger woolen sheets to sleep in, and never changed his opinion or saw any reason to doubt it. His conversion was not based upon scientific method or statistics, for Jaeger offered only anecdote and conviction based upon a very primitive notion of pathophysiology, of the kind such as my grandmother, who believed that the bowels should be scoured once a week with a good dose of castor oil, would have agreed with.

Of course, one bêtise doesn't make a complete fool, and the great Bishop Berkeley, after all, believed in tar water as a universal pan-

acea. Indeed, he wrote a book to prove it: *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar Water*. Like Dr. Jaeger, the good bishop attests to the efficacy of his system:

To suppose that all distempers arising from very different, and, it may be, from contrary causes, can be cured by one and the same medicine must seem chimerical. But it may with truth be affirmed, that the virtue of tar-water extends to a surprising variety of cases very distant and unlike. This I have experienced in my neighbours, my family, and myself.

Bishop Berkeley had at least the excuse that he lived at a time when the cause of almost no disease was known; Shaw, by contrast, lived through one of the most exciting times in all medical history, when the germ theory of disease was elaborated. Shaw rejected it completely, and continued to do so all the rest of his life, never retracting his crude errors. In 1918, at a time when military surgery had made unprecedented advances, Shaw saw fit to denigrate the memories of Joseph Lister and Louis Pasteur (he was also nasty about Sir Victor Horsley, virtually the founder of modern neurosurgery):

“Lister’s theory of antiseptic surgery was so shallow and stupid in its conception, and so disastrous in its practice, that the only excuse for his rash acceptance of it was that at first it seemed to produce good results.”

Shaw tells us that asepsis is as bogus as antisepsis; what is needed is simply a good wash with saline. He tells us that different germs do not cause different diseases, that it is absurd to try to distinguish between typhoid and typhus, that there is no difference between typhoid and paratyphoid, and that Bruce’s discovery of the cause of Malta fever was nonsense. He compares giving public health doctors certain powers to giving “tyrannous power to Dr. Crippen to exercise just as he pleases.” He tells us that vivisection is merely from sadism, and that nothing whatever can be learnt from their experiments, though he lived through the period when the cause of diabetes was discovered by vivisection, to give but just one example.

In fact, there is almost no end to Shaw’s idiocy, so that perhaps it is hardly surprising that he did not see through Mussolini, Hitler, or Stalin: it would have required a degree of common sense and some preference for truth over self-advertisement to do so. Shaw hated Lister and Pasteur—he wrote of them with real venom—for

the same reason that Tolstoy hated Shakespeare, namely that Lister and Pasteur were greater, better men than Shaw, as Shakespeare was a greater writer than Tolstoy.

If vaccination had been forbidden instead of being promoted by the medical profession, it is a fair bet that Shaw would have argued in its favor, and campaigned for mandatory immunization, because he wanted notice above all else. Even he was quite intelligent enough to see the absurdity of Dr. Jaeger's system; he adopted it because it gave him a pretext to dress differently from the great majority of the men in his society, and therefore to attract notice and excite comment.

It is with relief that one turns to his much more intelligent, honest, decent, and sincere contemporary, Sir Henry Rider Haggard, author of such adventure stories as *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*. When Allan Quartermain tells us in the former that he has known rich white men who were not gentlemen, and native Africans who were, one knows that he is speaking with real feeling, not with the abstract and simulated outrage of Shaw, who would decimate a countryside (to use one of his own expressions concerning doctors) for a relatively bon mot.

Rider Haggard was a widely traveled man who had seen first hand, in Mexico and Southern Africa, the ravages of a smallpox epidemic in unimmunized populations. In 1898, he published a pro-vaccination novel entitled *Doctor Therne* (1898), which commentators on his work usually call his "only novel with a purpose," that is to say with a consciously propagated message (entertainment and money-making not being purposes worthy of recognition as such).

The occasion of the novel was an act of parliament allowing parents to object to the vaccination of their children on conscientious grounds. From 1853, the vaccination of children had been, nominally at least, compulsory in Britain, but had increasingly been the object of abolitionist agitation. So popular was the anti-vaccination cause that there was a mass-market monthly publication devoted to that single subject alone that survived for seventy years, perhaps the strongest literary evidence of man's capacity for monomania that has ever been brought forth; and it was true, of course, that vaccination did occasionally cause harm, for reasons ill-understood at the time. The anti-vaccination lobby was able to make as emotional use of the cases as any class action lawyer of today. As a medical student, I saw a hospitalized patient with generalized vaccinia, and horrible it was too. For some reason to do with the ca-



preciousness of memory, and the dramatic nature of the case, I remember the class of drug that was given to the patient, one of the first anti-viral drugs ever to be tested, a thio-semi-carbazone. It didn't work.

Bernard Shaw would have decried even the attempt to find such a drug, using the failure as a reason to sneer, just as he was dismissive of the theory that smallpox was a transmissible disease because no one had ever seen the organism that transmitted it. Even had someone done so, however, Shaw would have argued that the organism was present because of the disease and not the other way round, as he argued in the case of all bacterial diseases. Rider Haggard was of quite another mindset.

Dr. Therne's father, a doctor in the town of Dunchester like his own father before him, dies of the sequelae of smallpox while his son is still young. Growing up in poverty, Dr. Therne—the narrator of the novel—nevertheless manages to attend medical school, where he is a brilliant student. Having qualified, he undertakes a journey to Mexico, where he meets his wife, an American, and witnesses, as Rider Haggard witnessed, the ravages of a smallpox epidemic.

Returning to England, Dr. Therne tries to establish himself in practice in Dunchester, in opposition to the principal practitioner already established there, with whom he eventually becomes embroiled in a ruinous lawsuit after the death in childbirth by puerperal fever, which the established practitioner accuses him of carelessly spreading, of his own wife and the wife of the local banker. He is rescued from complete ruin by a man called Stephen Strong, a very rich self-made man of the town who, as an outsider made good, is a supporter of the Radical Party and an avid anti-vaccinationist, his wife being an ardent supporter of the theory that the British are the lost tribe of Israel. (Rider Haggard gets the connection between anti-vaccinationism, crankery in general, and radical politics exactly right).

Stephen Strong then asks Dr. Therne to stand for parliament as a Radical, offering to pay for his campaign. The condition, of course, is that he support the anti-vaccinationist cause, in which Dr. Therne does not at all believe. Dr. Therne reflects, in a way in which surely all political candidates reflect, that this is but a small compromise:

After all, although the thought of it shocked me at first, the price I was asked to pay was not so very heavy, merely one

of the usual election platform formulas, whereby the candidate binds himself to support all sorts of things in which he has little or no belief... . One crank more added to the great army of British enthusiasts could make little difference in the scheme of things.

But Dr. Therne, having made his pact in the interest of his ambition, soon finds himself so deeply steeped if not like Macbeth in blood, then at least in bogus arguments, that he has to propound them with ever greater passion, and ever less truth. And, contrary to his inner conviction, he fails to have his only daughter, Jane, vaccinated, because to have done so would have ruined his career.

Stephen Strong, his benefactor and his Mephistopheles, dies a happy man at the very moment of Dr. Therne's election; his widow, being childless, eventually leaves Dr. Therne her large fortune, making him an independent man.

But then disaster strikes. The anti-vaccination campaign having been only too successful, a smallpox epidemic breaks out in Dunchester. His own daughter, who hero-worships her father and believes in his wisdom on all subjects, catches the disease and dies of it. Before doing so, however, she catches sight of her father vaccinating himself in order to save his own life. Already ill with smallpox, and knowing that she will most likely die, she confronts her father:


Have you no word to comfort me before I go? How is it that you have prevented thousands from doing this very thing yet do it yourself secretly and at the dead of night? If you think it safer to vaccinate yourself, why was I, your child, left unvaccinated, and taught that it is a wicked superstition? Father, father, for God's sake, answer me, or I shall go mad.

Dr. Therne's troubles are not yet over. It so happens that the smallpox epidemic coincides with an election, and at a public meeting Jane's fiancé, a Dr. Merchison, who believes in vaccination, asks Dr. Therne to expose his left arm to the view of the public. Dr. Therne having refused to do so, Dr. Merchison acts:

with his right hand suddenly ... caught me by the throat, with his left he gripped my linen and my garments, and at one wrench ripped them from my body, leaving my left breast and shoulder naked. And there, patent on the arm where every eye might read them, were those proofs of my infamy... .

I swooned away, and, as I sank into oblivion, there leapt from the lips of the thousands I had betrayed that awful roar of scorn and fury which has hunted me from my home... .

My story is done. There is nothing more to tell.

Dr. Thorne is a cleverly plotted melodrama, compulsively readable and written by a consummate story-teller. But it is more: it is a parable of the dangers of political ambition and of a willingness to abandon truth for expedience. Finally, it is much clearer-sighted and more intelligent on technical matters than anything George Bernard Shaw, the archetypal intellectual of his age, ever wrote. If Shaw had had his way, smallpox would still be with us, a fitting epitaph indeed. 

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