PRESS & MEDIA

## *Reporter, Heal Thyself*

"Coverage by the News Media of the Benefits and Risks of Medications" by Ray Moynihan, Lisa Bero, Dennis Ross-Degnan, David Henry, Kirby Lee, Judy Watkins, Connie Mah, and Stephen B. Soumerai, in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (June 1, 2000), 10 Shattuck St., Boston, Mass. 02115–6094.

Medical breakthroughs and promising new treatments are a staple of health and science news coverage. But after studying a sample of 180 newspaper stories and 27 TV reports that appeared between 1994 and 1998, Moynihan, an Australian journalist, and his co-authors from Harvard Medical School and other institutions, conclude that reporters need to be more skeptical.

The researchers studied news coverage of the benefits and risks of three drugs: alendronate, used for the treatment and prevention of osteoporosis; pravastatin, a cholesterol-lowering drug used to prevent cardiovascular disease; and aspirin, also used to prevent cardiovascular disease. They found that only 124 of the news reports gave any quantitative assessments of the benefits of the drug, and 83 percent of those offered only the relative benefits, not the absolute figures (which might provide less reason to cheer). For example, in reporting the results of a study on osteoperosis treatment in 1996, three major TV networks all said that the new drug could cut the incidence of hip fracture in half, a benefit that one reporter declared "absolutely miraculous." Unreported was the fact that the incidence of hip fracture was very low in the first place—only two percent among patients who did not receive the drug.

Also left out of many news stories were the potential downsides of new treatments. More than half the reports failed to mention possible adverse side effects of the drugs, and 70 percent ignored the matter of cost.

Moynihan and his colleagues also implicitly suggest that reporters should be more skeptical of the motives of the scientists and other experts who wax enthusiastic about the latest treatments or supposed breakthroughs. Half the news reports cited experts or studies with known financial ties to manufacturers of the drug, yet 39 percent of those stories failed to mention the connection.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## *The Mystery of Aztec Sacrifice*

"Aztec Human Sacrifice as Expiation" by Michel Graulich, in *History of Religions* (May 2000), Univ. of Chicago Press, 5720 S. Woodlawn, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

In the centuries before the Spanish conquest in the early 1500s, the Aztecs of Mexico ritually sacrificed at least 20,000 people a year. What was their intent? The usual explanations given by scholars are that the Aztecs wanted to propitiate their gods, to nourish them with the victims' hearts, or to revitalize these deities by symbolically killing them. Graulich, director of religious studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, in Paris, suggests that the Aztecs had a complex theology in which sacrifice had one basic—and what some might deem more exalted—purpose: atonement.

The primary purpose of sacrifice, Graulich maintains, was "expiation of sins or transgressions in order to deserve a worthy afterlife." Whose sins were erased? First, those of the victims, nearly all of whom came from "guilty" classes: prisoners of war, slaves, and, in a more limited way, criminals. The author notes that Aztec texts such as the myth of Quetzalcoatl's victory at Mixcoatepec "present prototypical victims of human sacrifice as transgressors."

The Aztecs killed their victims in various ways: excising their hearts, cutting their throats, beheading them, drowning them, burning

them, flaying them, or burying them alive. "Sacrifice was castigation, but also expiation, and it opened the way to a better hereafter," says Graulich. Some victims, according to Spanish testimonies from 1520, rejoiced at the prospect of being immolated, and some even volunteered to die.

But sacrifice, writes Graulich, also afforded atonement to the Aztec sacrificer. By identifying with his victim, he died symbolically through him and was thus purified.

Sacrifice as an act of atonement is "not uncommon in the history of religions," the author points out. Catholic missionaries in Mexico saw "striking similarities between Aztec religion and Christianity, including the salvation aspect." While some specialists deny that the Aztecs had a "religion of salvation" comparable to—if "morally less exacting" than—Christianity or Islam, Graulich believes that they did, to some extent. The Aztecs, in his view, were either moving toward a full-fledged religion of salvation—or perhaps moving away from one, having lost some of its original meaning.

***This mid-16th century depiction of Aztec human sacrifice was drawn by an Aztec at the request of an unknown Spanish cleric.***

# *The Pragmatist's Faith*

"'Loyal to a Dream Country': Republicanism and the Pragmatism of William James and Richard Rorty" by Daniel S. Malachuk, in *Journal of American Studies* (Apr. 2000), Cambridge Univ. Press, Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Rd., Cambridge, CB2 2RU, England.

When they turn to politics, pragmatists from William James to Richard Rorty consistently embrace republicanism, an outlook that, with its emphasis on polis-centered civic virtue, harks back to Jefferson, Machiavelli, and Aristotle. Is there any basis for this preference? Malachuk, a professor of humanities at Daniel Webster College in New Hampshire, suggests there is: the pragmatist's underlying "religious" faith that "the universe is . . . one of contingency rather than order."

Most pragmatists, being antifoundationlists who claim that truths are made ("socially constructed") rather than found, would reject the idea that their republicanism has any such foundation, notes Malachuk. Logically, they would admit, they could as easily adopt the vocabulary of Nazism as of republicanism. In the American context, they would contend, "republicanism is simply the vocabulary that works best."

But republicanism is, for pragmatists, more than just another vocabulary, Malachuk argues. Contemporary pragmatists, he says, have forgotten the stance taken by William James nearly a century ago. In *Pragmatism* (1906), the philosopher articulated a bedrock belief in what he termed the "unfinished" nature of the universe. Malachuk calls this outlook a "religious pragmatism," resting on a faith in the world's contingency. "This vision of an unfinished universe," Malachuk writes, "is sacred to pragmatists—the one foundational belief that they will not surrender." And this vision, he says, accords with the essential republican value of civic action as the best way to deal with the contingency of history—which is why pragmatists invariably espouse republican ideas.