

Epistemology, Social Change, and the Reorganization of Knowledge

BETWEEN THE 1820s and the 1850s American physicians held steadfast to their belief in the necessity of therapeutic activism and in the value in principle of traditional remedies. Yet far from being static, this was a period of signal change in therapeutics. Although they retained their faith in such established therapies as bloodletting, alcohol, and opium, practitioners began to use these treatments with frequencies and intensities that deviated sharply from earlier conventions. More fundamentally they increasingly questioned the sources and character of their therapeutic knowledge. How could the practitioner assess the worth of therapeutic practices, and how was therapeutic progress to be effected and judged? The answers rationalistic systems of practice provided made physicians more and more uneasy. Their mounting attack on such systems and their concomitant celebration of empiricism pervaded the medical literature. This transition in epistemological thinking was among the most important and revealing transformations of medical therapeutics in nineteenth-century America.

From the 1820s on, many American physicians began to see a reorientation from rationalism to empiricism in therapeutic knowledge as crucial to the clinical and social success of their profession. It is in some respects surprising that epistemological issues mattered so much to them. After all, American physicians saw themselves as preeminently practical men who valued practice over theory, as active therapists more than as truth-seeking scientists. Their intense concern with the epistemological foundations of therapeutic knowledge sug-