

marked, that an amount of attention has been directed towards it second to that bestowed on no other article of the *Materia Medica*. Yet we are told by your highest authority that—

“Of the *modus operandi* of mercury we know nothing, except that it probably acts through the medium of the circulation, and that it possesses a peculiar alterative power over the vital functions, which enables it in many cases to subvert diseased action, by substituting its own in their stead. This alterative power is sometimes exerted, without being attended by any other vital phenomena than the removal of the disease; while at other times, it is attended with certain obvious effects, indicative of the agency of a potent stimulus.”—(*Dispensatory of the U. S. of A., by Wood and Bache.*)

So, too, the very definition of an alterative (in the same work,) is—“that which changes, in some inexplicable and insensible manner, certain morbid actions of the system;” and Pereira says of alteratives—“this class includes nearly the whole of the articles of our *materia medica*.” Your definitions of a tonic, a narcotic, and a deobstruent—what are these meant to be, but statements of general facts? It is usually thought that we are at utter variance with you in this matter, but perhaps the difference is one in appearance only. These definitions, if not made to include theories, we can accept, and transfer to our own remedies. We could hardly desire a better one than that you now give of an alterative. We may be in error in our doses, but this is quite another matter. If we must differ, let us see clearly what it is about. If medicines act in a manner which is at once “inexplicable and insensible,” we can perceive little ground for quarreling over their *modus operandi*; and if so, there has been wrong done between us, which we should hasten to set right.

You know, as well as we, that much of the difficulty which has arisen on this, as on other subjects, is owing to the ambiguity of language. The name which you give to a disease is sometimes used by you merely to express its phenomena,—at other times, it is made to include speculations as to its nature. So, too, the generic names you give to medicines (as tonic, narcotic, &c.) are at times meant only to group their ascertained powers,—at other times, they are used to express your opinions as to the operation of those powers. When chafed by controversy with such poor heretics as we, you sometimes lose sight of these distinctions, and get yourselves and us confused by these equivocal terms. It requires an effort on both sides to avoid mistakes. When such an effort is made, it will perhaps appear that the distance between us, as to disease and medicinal action, is less than we have supposed.

Some physicians, indeed, seem to think that they understand the intimate nature of disease, and that they can explain the action of medicines. We make no such claim. We should as soon think of explaining the law of gravitation. What we undertake to do is to collect facts. These we arrange into two classes. They are,

- 1st. From the healthy standard wrought by disease.
 - 2d. The changes in the healthy organism produced by medicines.
- The perfecting our knowledge of these two classes of phenomena, is