

Medicine versus philosophy

Mirela Radu¹

Abstract: *The ancient Greek medicine was based on the principle that philosophy influences all natural sciences as a whole. The doctor had, first of all, a humanistic formation followed by study of applied sciences specific to medicine. If humanism is purely theoretical, medicine is an applied science and the two-philosophy and medical knowledge, despite the apparent antinomy are able to create a union to the benefit of humanity. Medicine is the art of treating patients, identifying diseases and malady prevention. In its endeavor, medicine is based on the findings of numerous other fields such as physics, chemistry, anatomy, physiology, etc. Philosophy, on the other hand, can be defined as an attempt to understand human life as a whole. It is inevitable that the two ways of dealing with human beings to have influenced each other and the history of mankind. Both forms of knowledge have a major impact and influence on the world. Philosophy, understood in its older meaning, urged towards the prophylaxis and treatment of diseases of the soul whereas medicine, relying on philosophical teachings is aimed at healing the body and study its psychosomatic features.*

Keywords: *medicine, physician, philosophy, methodology, metaphysics*

Medicine and philosophy have influenced each other along mankind's history.

The present article aims and present the way in which renowned physicians have blended the strict knowledge of medical science with the more humanistic philosophical approach.

Attempts of demonstrating how philosophy clout over medicine have existed since Ancient times. Our paper is just a glimpse in the outstanding synthesis between the two apparently incongruent areas of

knowledge.

Claudius Galenus of Pergamum (129-216) is one of the first physicians who sensed the need of a philosophical foundation of clinical practice. The beginnings of his scientific training originate in studying Aristotle's texts. Galen, who stated that a good physician should first of all be a philosopher, is the one who realized the necessity of associating medicine with the philosophy in order to achieve better results in human treatment. Personal physician for Marcus Aurelius, Galen received his medical expertise in a gladiators' school. His name links to the first cataract surgeries, our knowledge of the spinal cord and the functioning of the kidneys. He divided the intercellular fluid into humors: blood, bile, lymph and spleen.

What brought Galen brought new during his times was an experimentalist approach. But he abandoned his original humanist-philosopher formation, after

¹ Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest

having a dream, for the practical practice of medicine, "intensively dealing with philosophy yet, confident peripatetic, he is still a syncretistic, which is better seen in his logic." [1]

During a great fire large part of his writings were destroyed yet his *Institutio Logica* was kept. His contribution to philosophy consists in demarcation made between logic and philosophy by postulating the theory of equivalence and by introducing of the fourth figure in syllogism.

Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya' al-Razi (865-925), known in the western world as Rhazes, was of Persian origin and promoted experimental medicine bringing significant contributions in pediatrics, neurosurgery, nephrology and ophthalmology. In his early life, Al-Razi was more interested in studying music and alchemy. Rhazes, physician at the court and a hospital director in Baghdad, was prolific in the scientific field through the books he wrote. Some of the most important papers signed by the Arab scientist include *Medicine Treaty for Mansur* (dedicated to the governor of Rayy containing ten chapters for diseases which was to be translated in Latin, by scholar Gerard of Cremona, under the name *Liber ad Almansoris*), the study *Smallpox and measles*, works on applied medicine (About surgery), books meant to popularize medicine (*The book to one who cannot reach the doctor*), as well as doctors' guide aimed at his fellow physicians (*The guide of the nomad physician and Royal medicine*).

Al-Razi believed that in serious cases of leprosy and cancer, the doctor cannot be blamed or kept responsible for the inability of curing the patient. Furthermore, the physician-philosopher wrote extensively about medical ethics. His area of interest included medical chemistry, in which he made experiments with mercury, sulfuric acid, alcohol, and paraffin. In the field of pharmacy, Al-Razi made his mark by introducing devices such as mortar, vials and spatula.

Neither the field of metaphysics and philosophy were foreign to him as his papers in these fields recommend him as an inborn scholar. Relying on Aristotelian system and Plato's philosophical thinking, Al-Razi wrote an ambitious paper ambitious in nine

volumes, *Virtuous life*, book in which he accused Galen of not supporting his medical findings on too many case studies. Another important work with great impact, this time on the general public, *The book to one who cannot reach the doctor*, has the merit of explaining some diseases and associated treatments on the simple men's understanding. The book talks about some of the most encountered afflictions such as headaches, colds, coughing, piles, diabetes, and other gastric ailments such as dysentery, ophthalmic and ear conditions, which were associated to medical treatments in order to be healed. He was the first physician who associated allergic rhinitis to the scent of flowers.

Al-Razi believed that a physician cannot really be a good practitioner unless he was a philosopher. The Persian doctor was a follower of the Euclidean theory of the space considered homogeneous and isotropic, regardless of the spatial distribution of matter. For al-Razi, to this absolute space and mechanical time corresponds the world to which man is reported. Also, Democritus' theory, that the world is composed of atoms structured into matter and vacuum was adopted by the philosopher of Arab origin. His metaphysical system is based on the belief that the soul is intelligent and that the three-dimensional reality consists of time, space and matter. Al-Razi believed in afterlife.

In order to overcome the fear of nothingness, people, in his opinion, should instruct in areas such as religion and esotericism. Among his works on the border between medicine, philosophy and religion we can mention *Spiritual medicine*, *Philosophical approach*, *Metaphysics*, *Small treatise on deism*, *Modern philosophy*, etc.

Avicenna (980-1037), philosopher, physician and writer of Persian origin, in his paper *Canon Medicinae* (1025) set out methods of understanding, differentiation and variability of phenomena, considered methodology, which currently is regarded as vital in inductive logic and scientific methodology. In another treatise, *Sanatio* (1027), the Persian thinker brought criticism to the Aristotelian methods of inference, because they had, according to him, an

absolute value. As such, the Arab polymath developed a complex of examination and testing methods meant to meet scientific challenges.

Francis Bacon (1561- 1626) has influenced science, in general and medicine, in particular. Renowned writer, philosopher and scientist he was the originator of empiricism as a way to test all the scientific achievements. He initiates controlled experiments. In his *New Organon*, Bacon stances diametrically opposed to the deductive, Aristotelian thinking. For Bacon induction is one that takes precedence as it is meant to “substitute once for all idealistic Scolastico-medieval one based on syllogistic deduction (..).” [2] Bacon talked about mind and soul as tantamount notions. Efficacious treatment of the body in medicine, according to the English thinker, implies a thorough study of the organism.

If practitioners of medicine fail in achieving their goals is due to lack of visionary perspective: the body is a complex mechanism which cannot be treated on parts, rather as a whole. In order to learn as much as possible about the human body implies clinical observation, along with the analogy of different bodies, vivisections and careful scrutiny of pathological changes. The physician has a double role: to reestablish the well-being of the diseased as well as to reduce suffering of those who are terminally-ill. What Bacon brought new to the field of medicine is the larger perspective of this field. He made no distinction between medical area and natural sciences. Philosophy of medicine is just a particular type of the more general knowledge of philosophy.

Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793) was born in Boudry, nowadays Switzerland, but played an important role during the French Revolution. During his teenage period, he left home searching for fame and to build a stable financial situation. Marat studied medicine in Paris but failed to obtain a diploma in this area. However, he published a study about the way he treated his friends for gonorrhea, which propelled him in the medical world. In 1773, Marat published a paper entitled *Essay on human philosophy*. This work has the ambition to present, as scientifically as

possible, the relationship between the human body and the soul and the way in which the two are interrelated. Thus, Marat believed that the soul and body were separate entities, which could, however, affect each other through the liquid within the nervous system. Marat, in this essay, analyzed the way in which, physiologically, the body can respond to emotional experiences through the excitement of the cardiac plexus.

Marat's work has the merit to connect the two planes – physiological and spiritual – into a unitary whole. The author analyzes, through his knowledge of human anatomy and physiology, how the body folds onto affects. The bodies can influence, in the physician-philosopher's opinion, the mode of existence of the soul. Thus, there are what we call qualities such as wisdom, stupidity, prudence, reason, imagination, memory, delicacy, sagacity and genius. The influence of his medical studies can be seen by how Marat relates and, therefore, builds his philosophical edifice on diseases such as spina bifida and microcephaly. The essay remarks itself by references the author made to areas of knowledge such as history, literature and botany.

In 1775, Marat obtained from the University St. Andrews references necessary to work effectively as a physician which would bring him, two years later, his appointment as the guard physician for Count d'Artois, who would become Charles X. In London, Marat published a paper dedicated to eye diseases and their way of treating: *Enquiry into the Nature, Cause, and Cure of a Singular Disease of the Eye*. His reputation grows and the financial situation is improving. With the money earned, he established a laboratory marquise l'Aubespine's house.

His experiments would end in his work Marat's findings related to fire, electricity and light (1779). Based on experiments, his scientific work continues. A year later, in 1780, he published *About the physics of fire*. Unfortunately, the Academy of Sciences did not approve his work since Marat had had the courage to call into doubt some of Newton's conclusions about refraction. His growing influence increase within scientific circles and personalities in the field recognized his value. They include Benjamin

Franklin and Goethe. In 1788 he published another work based on experimental method: Research on the physics of light. Fascinated by the subject, meanwhile, the French philosopher published essays related to electricity and medical applications of optics *Memories on medical electricity* (1783) and *Basic optical notions* (1784).

But his exuberant personality did not keep him away from politics. Enlightened spirit and with an incisive tone, Marat advocated equality of men. His political beliefs had to find a place in the newspaper *The people's friend*, originally named *Publiciste parisien*, which he edited beginning with 1789. In 1782, due to his radical views, inspired by Rousseau and Cesare Beccaria, Marat was publishing *Public plan in criminal legislation* that supported the idea that the death penalty should apply regardless of social status, advocating the idea of an ombudsman institution. Member of the Jacobin movement, which played an important role during the reign of terror Marat would end assassinated by stabbing, in his bath by Charlotte Corday Marie-Anne d'Armont.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), German philosopher who would influence numerous other philosophers such as Nietzsche, Freud, Bergson, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Cioran, had a great impact on the literature of psychological character, writers such as Tolstoy, Eminescu, Proust and Thomas Mann. One of his main works was *The world as will and representation* (1818). Initially, in 1809 he entered the Medicine University of Göttingen which he would abandon in favor of philosophy, becoming a doctor with a thesis on the fundamental principles of thinking: *The quadruple root of the principle of sufficient reason* (1813). The reason for which the philosopher had as first option the study of medicine was that he wanted to know the world objectively, scientifically before starting his theoretical speculation.

Incidentally, later, Schopenhauer concludes that absolute knowledge can only take place in the presence of solid knowledge about natural sciences. The courses he attended as a medical student were extremely varied: physics, chemistry, mathematics,

botany, mineralogy, physiology, comparative anatomy, humanities as well as humanistic sciences such as linguistics, ethnography, history. The great biologist and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who connected the human being with the study of natural sciences and linked his name to identifying five human race, would play an important role in the shaping of the future philosopher.

Just that anatomist's love towards animals made Schopenhauer reluctant to vivisections and determined him to step towards more academic areas. During his medical studies period, Schopenhauer himself had a poodle with whom he used to take long walks. During the second half of the first year in medicine, the one who was to influence generations of philosophers discovered the writings of Plato, Kant, Schelling and Upanishads. During his second year of medicine Schopenhauer concluded that he needed to change his studies, by choosing philosophy.

His philosophical system, set up during his medical studies, is based on the principle that, the basis of reality, is suffering. The first argument is that happiness is an illusion, life being nothing but a permanent deception. Yet, reality may be dominated by will. The very basis of the will is a necessity. Schopenhauer considers individual goals to have no rational basis because everything is evanescent, the only certainty being only death. According to the German philosopher, there are two teleologies: an external one (human beings' goals) and internal (understanding the purpose of life) and the one that should be taken into consideration is non-existence.[3]

Although tempted to teach in the University of Berlin, Schopenhauer renounces to academic life aspirations. In 1839 he becomes member of the Norwegian Society of Sciences. His true recognition occurs following the publication of a volume of philosophical essays *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851).

Not being a religious spirit, the German philosopher feels attracted more towards oriental doctrines, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, the mystical practices and Theurgy than to Christianity. Although Freud

denied Schopenhauer's influence in his clinical work, there were others who stated a close correlation between hard practice and Freudian theories of Schopenhauer. It is about Freudian theories of repression and sexuality that coincide with the ideas of the German philosopher.[4]

Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883-1969) saw daylight in Lower Saxony, in Oldenburg. Although initially prepared to study law, Jaspers chose, in 1902, medical studies which he completed seven years later. His work in the hospital of Heidelberg as a psychiatrist brought him dissatisfaction with the state of psychiatry at the time, therefore, in 1913, when he had the chance, he would choose a teaching career at the University of Heidelberg. In time, Jaspers began to connect the knowledge acquired clinically with the study of philosophy. The work that propelled him in psychology was *Treaty of general psychopathology*.

In 1932, more and more concerned with the study of philosophy, Jaspers signed another reference work (*Philosophy*) that subscribes to the existentialist current. Like Schopenhauer, Jaspers felt more attracted to Eastern religions than to Western theological doctrines. *Consciousness of guilt* (1946) came to blame the indifference and even the moral guilt of the people whose citizen he was, representing a wake-up call "partly utopian toward self-analysis in order to overcome the chaos, a sense of guilt that seemed to be put under possession of souls Germans." [5] The guilt of the German population is

the complicity to the Nazi's genocide. In 1947 Jasper signed a book that seems to reveal the link between the scientific and the spiritual side of its author: *Philosophical logic*. Jaspers's influence in the medical field translates into identifying premises of psychopathology: descriptive principle, that of comprehension and of causality. Jaspers' methodology proposes a clear, clinical, study of mental pathologies such as psychosis and schizophrenia.

If in modern society the connection between medicine and psychology becomes a more profound by the fact that medical psychology brings together knowledge from various areas of science such as the fields of border such as sociology, anthropology, psychopathology, holistic, experiential and dynamic psychology, psychoanalysis, chronobiology, ethology and neurophysiology, in the past this connection almost did not exist. Psychology has made the junction between medicine and philosophy.

Medicine as a branch of scientific knowledge is a form of cognitive understanding while philosophy is a science although it has only partially cognitive aspiration to become an area of scientific knowledge. Psychology became the first bond between the two. Gradually, both medical science and philosophy have found in common their nomological value. And the merit of physicians is to succeed, and not in few cases, to make the junction between these areas so apparently opposing.

References:

1. Anton Dumitriu, *History of logics*; 1975, p. 264
2. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, translation by N. Petrescu and M. Florian, introductive study by Al. Posescu, 1957, p. 3
3. Wessel Stoker, *Is the quest for meaning a quest for God? The religious ascription of meaning in relation to the secular ascription of meaning. A theological study*. Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA, 1996, p. 123
4. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, New York, 1953-57, III
5. Nicoleta Dabija, *Karl Jaspers- Consciousness in a trial with history*, in *Romanian Life Magazine*, no. 5/2009.