PSYCHIATRY, IMAGE OF MAN, AND MEDICAL ETHICS

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Introduction

Reflecting on psychiatry and medical ethics presupposes that everybody has a clear view of the most important concepts used in both disciplines. Unfortunately, there is many a concept, the content of which is conceived in different ways. These points of difference can not be fully discussed in this brief report. I have no choice but to expound my own views only, especially on the core concepts of ethics. However, this exposition is meant as an invitation to further discussion.

Ethics

The expression "ethics" operates as a negative stimulus to many people. For them, it is associated with everything which was thrust upon a human being by parents and educators, superiors and society. When you know how ethical understanding develops, this is quite understandable. The system of norms which exists in a society or a family will sooner or later be imposed on children and youth. Slowly, when they grow up, they have in principle the possibility to take their own personal position in matters of ethics, i.e. concerning good and evil, human and inhuman norms and values. Looking at the etymology (the Greek word ἔθος = custom, or ἔθος = residence, disposition), ethics can be defined as a systematic reflection on human action, especially with a view of their typically human aspects.

From the various species of ethics (meta-ethics, descriptive, normative, deontological, and teleological ethics), I select that kind of ethical thinking, known as ethics of responsibility ("Verantwortungsethik"). The leading thought of this particular ethical
view is that man in different situations of life has relationships to things and fellow-man. In all these situations, life will always ask man questions which he must answer somehow.

For the answers he gives, man has to answer both to himself and to his fellow-man (and if religious, to his God), that is to say, justify them in a satisfactory way. Ethical thinking has to refer to the situation of life, in which the individual has to decide how to act. The fact is that these situations use to be highly complicated and use to imply several values, making an appeal for actualization together.

A responsible decision is not made up of the mere "application" of a supposedly universal norm. On the contrary, it requires the careful examination of the human values concerned, as well as the prudential determination which one outweighs the others in this particular situation. Choosing the lesser evil could be an ethically good decision in many complicated cases.

The method of ethical thinking is all-important. The approach of new problems in ethics from preconceived value judgments or absolute norms, is not scientifically allowed. Ethical deliberation starts by describing and analyzing the problematic situation, and the values and norms, operative in it. Next the pros and cons of different answers should be examined. Thirdly, it is necessary to study critically the images of man and society, disclosed in separate values and norms (e.g. which image of man can be disclosed when someone says that informed consent is necessary for scientific experiments in medicine?). Lastly, ethical thinking should criticize the disclosed image of man with a view to its specifically human characteristics. This is the most difficult stage in ethical inquiry. In some cases, this criticism is comparatively easy; in many other instances it is far from being easily done, and then we need help from professional knowledge, anthropology, experience of life, and philosophy of life.

This brings us to the essence of ethics: humanity or the ideally human is the pivot on which everything in ethics hinges. Our conception of man underlies our judgment of acts as ethically good or bad. In this report it is not possible to discuss all problems related to this image of man.

Here I can only state that the conception of man is the crux of ethical reflection. The essential part of this conception is the becoming human or self-actualisation in solidarity with your fellow-man; (for a more detailed account, see the bibliography). I shall come back to this image of man later. For the moment I would like to summarize this introductory exposition of ethics as follows: Ethics of responsibility is the systematic reflection on responsible action, i.e. on human action judged according to its real human aspects.