ABSTRACT. The development of the philosophy of medicine in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1945 is presented in a thematic form. The first two decades were characterized by the evolution of an anthropological school of thought that aimed at relating physician and patient in a more personal and existential form than had hitherto been the case. In the last years, this tendency to demand deeper psychic and broader social involvement with medical problems had increased. Somatic disorders were considered to be fundamentally caused by socially induced mental stress. After a brief period during which the theme of organisms in general and phenomenologically grasped living-body of human beings in particular were discussed, there followed since the mid-seventies an essential preoccupation with the methodology and epistemology of medicine. According to this trend, medicine is to be analyzed in terms of the theory of action, with its conceptual and strategic orientation towards practice and not, as generally believed, towards the standards of scientific truth. The concepts of disease, diagnosis and therapy are therefore relative and their validity is dependent on time, persons and circumstances involved. Thus, the highest criteria of utility for medical actions cannot but be the affected patient and society.

Key words: Anthropological medicine, Causality, Disease, Diagnosis, Therapeutics, Lived body, Person, Theory of action, Values, Methodology of medicine, Epistemology of medicine.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay intends to focus on the development of ideas concerned with the philosophy of medicine as they evolved in the Federal Republic of Germany since its foundation in 1945. Necessarily, some pre-war roots must be unearthed, for thought can only exist by continuing, eschewing or violently rejecting, but never by ignoring its past. In order to let the ideas that have played important roles in German metamedical thought develop freely, I have preferred a thematic approach with sufficient referencing to respect both the diachronic evolution and paternity of ideas. It has to be taken into account that this kind of treatment may well have been detrimental to a personal, historical and possibly more readable presentation of the subject.

Many publications must remain unregarded, not because they appeared in obscure journals, but because they, their authors or the ideas they conveyed did not find a lasting or influential place in the literature and cannot be considered seminal. Some omissions are, of course, involuntary and surely not all inclusions are well advised. Those publications which have been incorporated are presented — for the sake of impartiality — with few critical remarks except when misconceptions or contradictions seem too blatant to remain uncommented.
References to non-published material are mainly avoided. Seminars, workshops, lectures and other forms of direct concern with philosophy of medicine will not be presented. This exclusion should in no way be understood as being disparaging towards unpublished work.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

German philosophy of medicine was probably initiated by Paracelsus. He was the first physician to lecture and write in German, in addition to scholarly Latin, and some of his ideas have experienced recurring revivals up to contemporary medical thought (Marx 1959). His reductionist endeavours to see man as a microcosmos that reflects the order of astrologic macrocosmos survives in the so-called philosophy of nature (Naturphilosophie), which was intent on systematizing natural phenomena into distinct unities of function and levels of complexity (Rothschuh 1978). The most representative trends of the philosophy of nature ended up by debasing the body and extolling the spirit, giving currency to such concepts as Geist (spirit), Leib (lived body), Leben (life), intuition, will and many others. Although the real world was physically stronger and apparently more vital, it was the ideal world which was the healthy one. Disease was seen as predominance of the negative, while health was a balance between the positive and negative principles of life. The theme of disease as egotism, sin or abuse of free will was thus opened and has not disappeared up to the present.

The systematization and reification introduced by the philosophy of nature had made medicine a highly speculative endeavour where the ontological concept of disease led to the marked pre-eminence of theoretical nosological constructs, and to the detriment of physiology and pathology. Cartesian dualism, which many thinkers had sought to dissolve, was receiving new impulses, but at the same time it was heralding the advent, and eventually successful rebellion, of natural scientists (Naturwissenschaftler). The rebirth of scientific or empirical attitudes brought German medicine to flourish in the 19th century, especially in the areas of physiology (J. Müller), pathology (R. Virchow) and clinical medicine (J. L. Schönenlein) (cf. Jacob 1967).

Austere scienticism was to generate a new turn-about and lead to changes in the intellectual appraisal of biology and medicine. The concepts of Gestalt, environment, biological systems and organism were being developed or refined and clinicians began to claim attention for the patient as a human being who appears to modulate his/her disease according to individual valuations and life-forms (Koch 1923). Medicine was thus required to attend the human being as a whole, that is, as a person (Krehl 1932), to the point that a change in denomination from medicine to sycygiology (pathology of the person) was proposed.