LIFE AND THE SCIENTIFIC CONCEPT OF LIFE

ABSTRACT. A premise which seems to be preponderate in the philosophy of medical practice developed by Pellegrino and Thomasma is the medical prescription to save life whenever possible. This premise is confronted with a polemical vitalism and examined in the light of some reading principles derived from G. Canguilhem's philosophy of the life-sciences. It is argued that the primarity of life in the account given by Pellegrino and Thomasma of the foundations of medical practice is closely related to biological concepts of life. This relation is shown to be problematic. The biological concept results in an ontology of the living body as the condition of possibility of medical practice, thus linking up this practice with an uncritized biological value and finality.

Keywords: Philosophy in medicine, Epistemology of the life-sciences, Polemical vitalism, Relation of ethics and epistemology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In their effort to construct a philosophical basis of medical practice, Pellegrino and Thomasma base their argumentation on an ontology of the body. They state that life itself has to be considered as the ontologically prior realm from which arises both everyday and scientific purview. Hence, this notion is prior to the experience of life and the concept of life.1

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion regarding one of the original questions of the book, namely the problem of the relation between medicine as a fundamental human concern for life and the specific concept of life in medical science and practice. It seems like forcing an open door when it is said that medicine depends on life itself. If there is to be any meaning in this expression, the idea of life itself needs further differentiation. Our question to Pellegrino and Thomasma in this paper will be: Do they not lodge their question regarding the specificity of medicine in their answer, when they locate the fundamentals of medicine in life itself? To formulate this question is virtually the same as inquiry into the conceptual background of the notions of life which are active here.

Our contribution will consist of a discussion of two subjects. First we will focus on the complex notion of life itself. This notion indicates an intersection of The Philosophical Basis of Medical Practice and the philosophy of the life-sciences developed by Georges Canguilhem, proceding the epistemology of Gaston Bachelard. The second subject will consist of indicating the possibilities of a philosophical approach to medicine following from re-reading the ontology of the body on the basis of a polemical vitalism.
In the second decade of this century the French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard undertook to analyze what was happening at that time in natural science. In confrontation with microphysical science it became evident that the accepted interpretation of basic Newtonian categories was invalid. Bachelard derived from this scientific revolution, that Kantian transcendental epistemology had become untenable. Progress in science appeared not to be explicable as a deduction or extrapolation on the basis of some universal and everlasting principles for it became evident that there was no continuity between classical and contemporary physics. In turn, as it is generally accepted today, mathematical physics are logically prior to Newtonian concepts and theories. Bachelard’s effort to understand this epistemological rupture led him to a double conclusion. First, it appears out of the depths of micro-physics that nature can no longer be separated from our knowledge of nature. Contemporary scientists affirm this inference. Werner Heisenberg for instance, stresses the fundamental change in the roots of our existence brought about by modern physics, since today “for the first time in history, man on earth is confronted only with himself”. Today’s science illustrates a profound joining of techne and episteme and it seems justified to conclude that physical knowledge in a way results from an act of creation. In any case, man’s action at the bottom of the phenomena can no longer be neglected, but on the contrary, needs to be introduced in the meaning and applicability of scientific concepts. In the opinion of Bachelard, nature essentially proves to be the answer to our questions.

This first conclusion involves another consequence, applying to the relation of science and philosophy. As already indicated, what followed uncontestably out of this eminent discontinuous development of science, was the radical questioning of all perceived philosophical views of science. The history of science revealed the impossibility of every a priori philosophical account of scientific rationality and truth.

Both conclusions presented a challenge for philosophy to reconsider its task and its relation to science. There are two possible philosophical responses towards this challenge: One of the possible attitudes is to accept the two conclusions and recognize the prestige that scientific theory has acquired as a mode of knowledge in our society. In other words: The philosopher in a way “comes to terms” with scientific knowledge. He now tries to relate to science by posing another question, he searches for an understanding of science and its authoritative position, specified to the singularity of different scientific domains. The other response consists of