THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRADITION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MEDICINE

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ABSTRACT. The tradition of anthropological medicine in philosophy of medicine is analyzed in relation to the earlier interest in epistemological issues in medicine around the turn of the century as well as to the current interest in medical ethics. It is argued that there is a continuity between epistemological, anthropological and ethical approaches in philosophy of medicine. Three basic ideas of anthropologically-oriented medicine are discussed: the rejection of Cartesian dualism, the notion of medicine as science of the human person, and the necessity of a comprehensive understanding of disease. Next, it is discussed why the anthropological movement has been superseded by the increasing interest in medical ethics. It is concluded that the present-day moral issues cannot be interpreted and resolved without clarification of the underlying anthropological images.

Key words: anthropological medicine, doctor-patient relationship, FJJ Buytendijk, meaning of disease, medical ethics, philosophy of medicine, scientific method in medicine, V. von Weizsäcker

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent history of medical philosophy, examination of the anthropological basis of medicine has led to an anthropological tradition, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. This tradition has declined with the general and rapid growth of interest in moral issues over the last three decades. Recently, patients, philosophers and physicians are becoming more aware that many moral problems cannot be resolved without the clarification and interpretation of the images of persons that underlie ethical perplexities. Such awareness has led to a renewed interest in the writings and ideas of anthropologically-oriented scholars of the first half of this century. Since they try to change medical practice and theory "from within," connecting daily experiences with philosophical insights, and delineating a renovated science of the human person, they have in fact the same motivations and values as many scholars interested in medical ethics and medical philosophy today. This issue of Theoretical Medicine will reappraise and present the basic ideas of anthropological medicine. In this
contribution, we will analyze and briefly describe the tradition of anthropological medicine within the setting of the philosophy of medicine, as a continuous attempt over the last hundred years to understand medical activities more thoroughly.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF MEDICINE

In its history, medicine has maintained a long-standing dialectical relation with philosophy. To define the identity of medicine and to demarcate medicine as an autonomous discipline, authors of medical treatises used to dispute the contemporary speculations about the nature of the world. The philosophical conception of order in nature, for example, was useful to demarcate medicine from mythology and religion, postulating natural disease causation and regularity in the natural history of diseases. The confrontation with philosophy led these physicians to discover the relevance of experience and precise observation as regards the practise of medicine. The emancipation of medicine arose, therefore, not from a rupture with philosophy but from a philosophical reinterpretation of what is characteristic of medicine itself.

However, when medicine had become firmly established as a unified science of disease, using the methodology of the natural sciences as the basis for obtaining and applying knowledge, a fundamental change of the relationship with philosophy occurred. Philosophy is no longer in competition with medicine, itself trying to understand and explain the phenomena of illness, suffering, incapacity, and death, but philosophical reflection takes the medical approach of these phenomena as its object of analysis. This is an important shift in the level of reflection and study. Instead of operating at the same conceptual level as medicine and examining the same objects, philosophy has moved to a meta-level, analyzing medicine as its proper object.

In the emancipatory process of individual sciences a speculative, philosophical approach has existed alongside of empirico-experimental approaches for some time. Well-known examples are the medical systems propounded by idealist philosophers in nineteenth century Germany. These systems of philosophical medicine were felt to be competitive with the new ethos of medicine as a natural science. The long-standing and intimate bond between medicine and philosophy was therefore reinterpreted in the last century as an antagonistic relationship. Many clashes between the two disciplines arose. The conflict was solved by redefining the role and object of philosophy vis-à-vis medicine. Philosophy was relocated as a science