ABSTRACT. Several recent publications have suggested that hermeneutics, the method of literary criticism, might prove to be useful in medicine. In this essay I consider this thesis with particular attention to the claim that medicine "is hermeneutics all the way down". After examining an anti-positivist critique of positivist medicine and arguing that hermeneutic interpretation involves a more radical critique of modern medicine, I examine the supposed consequences of hermeneutical universalism: relativism, skepticism and antirealism which further evaluation reveals to be only potential consequences of hermeneutics. A brief discussion of phronesis and of the possible "texts" of medicine concludes the article.

Key words: hermeneutics, medicine, philosophy of medicine

1. INTRODUCTION

Can a method of literary criticism offer constructive comment on contemporary medicine? Hermeneutics, or the study of interpretation, has great methodologic interest within the humanities, but what might be its value in medicine? Several recent publications have discussed the methods of hermeneutics as applied to medicine and introduced various issues that are uncovered as a consequence of this "literary turn." Stephen Daniel, the first to propose a hermeneutic model for clinical medicine, borrowed from the medieval sense of exegesis of scripture and argued that medical practitioners inescapably practice the art of interpretation. Gatens-Robinson further defended an interpretive orientation for medical rationality in which medicine is seen as a practical human science in the manner of Gadamer's narrative interpretation. The application of hermeneutics to medicine was furthered by several authors. Gogel and Terry demonstrate the similarities between interpretation and a model of the clinical encounter; Leder argues that modern medicine can best be understood not as a purified science but as a hermeneutical enterprise; Poirer and Brauner apply the hermeneutical method to an actual medical record, while Lock constructs an argument for a dialectic between the scientific and clinical aspects of medicine using a hermeneutical approach and Bowman examines a hermeneutical perspective of alcoholism.

Yet, despite the apparent suitability of applying the methods of
hermeneutics to medicine, some questions remain. Pointing to the ever-
changing nature of the doctor-patient relationship, Baron reveals an inde-
terminacy that does not lend itself to the static textual metaphor of
interpretation. The result is a distraction from what medicine is really about:
doctor and patient working together. Other disharmonies of the thesis of
the interaction of medicine and hermeneutics are voiced by many of the
method's exponents. Daniel speaks of the "restoration of interpretation to
its rightful place in medicine," contrasting it with "scientific medicine."
Gatens-Robinson, while discovering the interpretative nature of rationality
in medicine, indicates that this approach contends with the more commonly
held model of hypothetical-deductivism. Gogel and Terry outline the use-
fulness of the growing trend for the methods of literary interpretation
in medicine, yet they acknowledge two potential conflicts which are:
medicine's firm orientation toward praxis and the risk of considering
patients as passive texts. Leder argues for the interpretive model of
medicine while admitting its conflict with the traditional model of the math-
ematical ideal of purified objectivity. Likewise, Lock, while demonstrating
the hermeneutic method of interpretation in medicine calls for a "reordering
[for] our training of physicians," implying that something in contem-
porary medical education is amiss. And finally, Bowmen asserts that an
enormous amount of information about alcoholism is overlooked by an
over-reliance on "objective data" as opposed to a hermeneutic perspective.

Thus, conflict is revealed in the interpretations of a hermeneutic
approach to medicine. The spectrum of the analysis extends from Baron
who asserts that medicine is not interpretation and the method offers no
useful analysis of medicine to Bowmen who insists that medicine actually
already is interpretation. In various places along this line stand Daniel
(medicine is not but ought to be), Gogel and Terry, Leder, and Lock (certain
aspects of medicine are and more ought to be), and Gatens and Robinson
(medicine ought to be).

In attempting to resolve these conflict:

(a) If one takes the stance that medicine is not hermeneutics, it would
appear one would have to bring forth successful arguments against most
of these authors.

(b) If one takes the position that most (or all) of medicine ought to be
hermeneutics, it would appear that a further analysis of these authors' argument
should be forthcoming and the difficult task of formulating a pre-
scription to attend to the putative ills of modern medicine will have to be
undertaken. Granted this would entail the necessity for a deeper exposi-
tion of the diagnosis of the ills of modern medicine, for this approach
concedes the need for a change or cure of what presently is.