ABSTRACT. To what extent can postmodern developments be observed in modern medicine and which theories of postmodern philosophy can we draw on with regard to medicine's theoretical problem? This article explores these questions with special emphasis on the epistemological status of medicine, the concept of disease, and the anthropological model. It is examined whether medicine's inherent duty to act can be questioned in the light of the plurality that characterizes postmodernity. It is concluded that, according to postmodern philosophy, medicine should be characterized by a justified variety of paradigms. Cooperation within the variety must continue to be guaranteed, always in favor of the constitutive moral duty of medicine.

Key words: Aesthetics, anthropology, disease, health, medical theory, postmodern philosophy, responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

If one dares to pose the extremely tricky question as to which is the “latest” philosophy, the philosophy “in keeping with our times,” the “current” philosophy, one will probably in the majority of cases be told: postmodern philosophy. This answer also corresponds to the way in which postmodern philosophy sees itself. It claims to be the philosophy of our times because it contains the maximum number of those elements which one should not sensibly be prepared to do without. So, if medicine were to occupy itself with postmodern philosophy it would at least have fulfilled its duty to take on the supposed Zeitgeist. In this spirit the article has two aims:

1. It will examine elements of existing medicine which can be termed “postmodern.” To what extent can the same tendencies be recognized in medicine as in those disciplines which speak openly of a postmodernity, such as architecture, literature, sociology? This part is – as far as possible – descriptive.

2. The article will examine elements which shape postmodern philosophy with regard to their possible fruitful application to medical theory. This part is normative and care is needed as one must first ask how far postmodern philosophy is at all useful to medical theory.
This article enters a new field since few medical-theoretical publications have been devoted to postmodernity. Only psychiatry and medical ethics comment on the subject, whereby in the latter case "postmodern" is usually associated with the plurality of values. Both these fields are not to be further examined here, rather medical-theoretical questions are to be confronted with postmodern philosophy.

2. POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHY

First, a short outline is to be given of the central elements of postmodern philosophy which are indispensable for the following medical-theoretical discourse. Characteristics of postmodern philosophy are (1) its approval of plurality, (2) its aesthetic thinking, (3) its antimetaphysical-pragmatic orientation, and (4) its ethical motivation.

2.1. Plurality

It cannot be denied that postmodernity is discussed in the fields of sociology, pedagogy, literature, architecture and other arts. For some it is the definitive decline of the western world, for others a welcome release from superfluous metaphysics and dogmatics and an emergence into a new era. Whether one complains about it or celebrates it - many current phenomena find at least a plausible explanation in postmodern philosophy. This is especially true for the plurality which can be observed in the disciplines mentioned and in many other areas of life. In this respect the term "postmodern" has at the very least the advantage of being an appropriate description of changes in daily life.

What does this plurality mean in a philosophical sense? It had already become clear in modernity that several types of understanding of the world justifiably exist side by side. "Through the social and technical developments of modernity a situation has long since been created where there are several equally justified answers to every question - and that not because of permissiveness or randomness, but for comprehensible reasons."\(^1\) One must consider this carefully: there are several ways of looking at one set of facts not because of shortcomings or because someone made a mistake in a process of thinking, but the different views, which exclude each other, are all right and justified in their own way, because a reduction of the different perspectives to a unity is not possible. Postmodern reality is therefore "not homogeneous but heterogeneous, not harmonious but dramatic, not unified but diversified."\(^2\)