The Religious Physician

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ABSTRACT: In order to understand what it means to be a physician, we must, according to Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, analyze four words that capture the essence of the medical enterprise: profession, patient, compassion, and consent. The resultant model provides a rational and secular basis upon which the Jewish or Christian physician can then build an understanding of medicine in its peculiarly religious form. This religious form is likewise characterized by four words: vocation, neighbor, love, and covenant. An analysis of these words provides a model of and for the religious physician.

Introduction

The healing or therapeutic relationship is a relatively common form of human interaction, one that has been examined and explored by physicians, philosophers, scientists, and artists of every age. Still, the nature or core of this interaction seems to escape reflection; we need to ask again what it is that makes a particular encounter medical or, more broadly, what it is that sets apart the healing relationship from the many others that constitute our social existence.

One possible avenue for approaching this question is to examine existing doctor-patient relationships. Such an approach should yield at least a general outline of the forms and structure of current medical care and should reveal at least some of its philosophical presuppositions and ideological foundations. But while this is no doubt a valuable exercise, certain important dimensions may be overlooked, either because our descriptive methodologies are inadequate or because the relationships examined may themselves be defective and in significant ways may fall short of the ideal otherwise shared—overtly or tacitly—by both practitioners and patients.

Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, president of The Catholic University of America and himself a practicing physician, has proposed an approach to this question that avoids many of the pitfalls of a purely descriptive and, therefore, essentially ahistorical, examination by rooting the analysis of the medical relationship in the very language we use to talk about it. Interestingly, however, his linguistic analysis avoids mere dictionary definitions and concentrates instead on the etymological development of the terms that intuitively set out the limits of medical practice.

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In particular, Dr. Pellegrino develops in a brilliant series of articles an analysis of four words which define what it means to be a physician and which by extension describe the correlative state of being a patient and the corresponding interaction of the two. This model is thoroughly secular and humanistic in a very positive sense: It is derived not from any religious revelation or philosophical ideal but from a consideration of the vocabulary of the medical enterprise itself. It is, therefore, a rational model that, theoretically at least, applies to all (Western) medicine. Nonetheless it is, as I hope to show, also a model that is open to a transcendent dimension and that can serve as a basis for any attempt we might make to understand what it means to be a religious physician within the context of Judaism or Christianity.

I propose, then, to offer four words that correspond to, build upon, and yet transcend the four analyzed by Pellegrino in describing the secular medical enterprise. The words are, I believe, at the root of any approach to medicine that would seek to place it within the framework of the Judeo-Christian tradition and to distinguish its religious from its secular forms.

**Pellegrino’s four words**

The four words Pellegrino analyzes are those presupposed in our current understanding of what it means to be a physician, an understanding formed by a shared cultural history whose subtle but continuing influence is most strikingly revealed in an examination of the linguistic roots of our current vocabulary. Such an examination results, in some sense, in a rehabilitation of our vocabulary, and this is not without effect. For, as Pellegrino points out: "...we do act in accordance with what we think words mean." Thus changing, or at least deepening, our understanding of certain words changes our mode of action in the world. Pellegrino proposes four common but critical medical terms in need of such rehabilitation. They are: profession, patient, compassion, and consent.

**Profession.** We tend generally to think of professions as prestigious occupations as opposed to, say, manual or nonskilled labor. Such an understanding, however, is but a nineteenth-century distortion of a richer and more ancient meaning. Derived from the Latin *profiteri*, meaning to declare aloud or to make a public avowal, the term profession historically has its roots in medieval Christianity, where it was used to describe the vows made by someone upon entering a religious order. Its use was later expanded to include the three practical disciplines that were central to the medieval university and to medieval life generally: theology, law, and medicine.

Two elements traditionally characterized the practitioners of these sciences as expressed in their oaths and in the codes of conduct that regulated their professional community. The first was the important promise and corresponding obligation to be competent; neither good intentions nor other pressing constraints could excuse the practitioner from the need to be both