

The slogan of care, medicine, and philosophy

La consigna del cuidado, medicina y filosofía

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The book in Italian, published in 2017 and reprinted five times, bears the number 111 of the collection of essays (Saggi) of the publishing house Raffaello Cortina Editore (Milan, Italy). The author, born in Verona in 1941, is professor emeritus of history of philosophy at the University of Padua. He has been interested in studying the relationship between philosophy and medicine. In his lectures on these topics, he emphasizes that philosophy must have a critical role (criticism in the Kantian sense, recognition of the possibilities and limits) in the confrontation with medicine. In his direct contacts with the reality of health care, he has been quite surprised by the ambiguities/contradictions that occur in relation to informed consensus. An instrument that should serve to strengthen patient autonomy has been transformed into a bureaucratic document that patients sign without understanding and that, evidently, contributes little to this

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autonomy. For a philosopher, a seeker of truth and coherence, this circumstance is too much to bear.

His reflections in this book, delving into the historical roots of the relationship between philosophy and medicine, are anchored in the concentrated wisdom of the ancient Greco-Roman myths. That explanatory mythology of the world that the ancients were accumulating to be able to give reason, somehow, of the complexity of man and reality.

The words on the back cover of the volume, taken from the introduction, perfectly summarize the content of the book:

At the center of the reflection are ‘le parole della cura’ (the words of the cure), that is, some key terms —medicine, therapy, drug, surgery— capable of delineating the context, the nature, the instruments, and the purposes of what has conventionally been called medical science. The exploration of this territory often goes back to the historical-conceptual origins of medicine, delving also into the mythological, literary, and philosophical repertoire of the classical world. With the conviction that, contrary to what one might superficially think, the history of medicine cannot be considered as an album containing illustrations of the most famous inventions. On the contrary, a first step to overcome a banal positivist conception of medicine can be taken on the one hand, by evaluating the historical path, the successes, and failures and, on the other, measuring itself without censorship with the big questions underlying the ‘words’ that define the field.

Four key words that appear already in the most ancient writings that tell us about medical art. The author delves into the original meaning of these terms to discover, through them, the essence of medicine and how it has been affected by successive historical and cultural changes.

The book is organized in four chapters, each dedicated to one of these words (Medicine, Therapy, Drug and Surgery). Each chapter starts from the mythological | ancestral roots of the terms, analyzes their various meanings, and offers interesting connections with related topics.

In the first chapter, dedicated to the term Medicine, we find the following parts: *Between myth and history* (about Asclepius and the centaur Chiron); *The blood o, Medusa* (history of the mythological character); *The birth o, Asclepius; Physician and Medicine* (about the etymology of the word Medicine); *Hippocratic medicine; The bases o, the medical art* (ancient medicine); *The qualities o, places* (one of the writings of the Hippocratic Corpus) and *The paradox o, medicine* (art and technique).

In the second chapter, dedicated to the word “therapy”, the author offers reflections on the following elements: Listening (meaning of the Greek word “therapeia”); *Caring and healing* (meaning of the Latin word “cura”); *Medicine as a procession* (evolution of the meanings of “therapeia” and “cure”); *The care o, the soul* (parallels between physical and psychological spiritual suffering); *Memory and catharsis* (psychological resources based on the management of memory and time); *The other medicine* (on alternative medicines) and *Patient?* (on the person of the sick person).

In the chapter dedicated to the Pharmaceutical we find the following reflections: *A remedy that poisons* (on the etymology of the term drug); *The day o, atonement* (reference to the book of Leviticus); *Pharmakos* (individual who comes expelled from the city carrying with him all the evils); *An incurable sore* (on the figure of Oedipus); *To cure by intoxicating* (also on the figure of Oedipus); *Medicine, rhetoric and music* (therapeutic value of art); *Writing as a drug* (reference to the Phaedrus, Plato’s dialogue that presents writing as a teacher of opinion and not of truth, comparable to empirical medicine, not scientific); *Nature and technique* (the best cure is the one that occurs naturally, without the intervention of medicines); *Those terrible last words* (connections between the drug and the hemlock in the death of Socrates) and *The gift to hope* (the drug and the myth of Prometheus).

The chapter dedicated to the term Surgery, presents the following division: *On the origins o, the ,unction o, the hand* (where the term surgery comes from); *A ,atal exchange* (the immortality of Prometheus and the death of the centaur Chiron, the limits of surgery); *The hands and the intellect* (on the words of the philosopher Anaxagoras: “Among

all animals, the most intelligent is man because he has hands”); *Medicine and surgery* (complementarity between intelligence and hands in medical practice); *Ygyeia* (on the myth of Igea and the concept of health); *Physis e techne* (surgery as a shaper of nature) and *The destiny of Surgery* (the risk of Promethean drift in the use of medicine).

Perhaps the main point of the book, which runs through all the chapters, is the concept of ambivalence. The author proposes that the “words of the cure” do not describe clear and precise realities, but rather ambivalent realities. The clearest example is the term drug (Medusa’s blood) which refers to both a remedy and a poison. The other three terms also designate ambivalent realities.

Medicine has been presented ambivalently, as an art and as a technique since ancient times. Currently, medicine is also presented with an ambivalent purpose: between restoring nature and modifying the body according to health models that change over time.

Therapy is born with the meaning of request, service, dedication. Its meaning changes, in our cultural context, to the study and concrete action of the means and methods to fight disease. Therapy no longer has any relation to its original meaning which referred to the therapist’s disposition of mind. In the context of therapy, ambivalence is also present in the term patient which, from a person in need of care, has come to mean client, assisted person, citizen..., so many things that imply attempts to disguise a real asymmetry, impossible to cancel, although the same author qualifies it as “not necessary and often also counterproductive”.

Surgery was born parallel to medicine. The centaur Chiron would have invented surgery and Asclepius medicine. The relationship between the two has been ambivalent throughout history, although since its origins they have been presented as two inseparable and complementary aspects of the same medical-surgical discipline.

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