COMING BACK TO PERSON – CENTERED MEDICINE AND EDUCATION

Gadamer and the Enigma of Health

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Abstract

The article analyses Gadamer's text, "On The Enigma Character of Health," in the context of modern society's penchant for seeing the patient as a case-study rather than a person. Although it may appear that this text is discontinuous with the rest of Gadamer's work, there are themes which are to be found in his Truth and Method, including the critique of the supremacy of the scientific method and the retrieval of the notion of nature and its correlation with the artful or non-technical. In this essay, Gadamer avoids the extreme of Luddism and technophilia but tries to recover the fundamental notions that have always underlined the art of medical care as a service of well-being for the patient. Biotechnology is one of the emerging technologies, together with robotics and nanotechnology that, together with information technology, pose a very serious threat to our humanness. These are ubiquitous technologies that are taking over many of the responsibilities that hitherto were the prerogative of the human condition. In the area of information technology we are approaching a situation where 'connecting' is becoming more important than 'communicating.' We should strive to prevent a similar situation in the area of medical care where 'dispensing' is taking priority over 'consulting.'

Introduction

A student of Heidegger's, Hans-Georg Gadamer has focused his attention on the way medical science is perceived by modern society, which has itself been transformed by modern science. In his view, which he shares with Martin Heidegger and Jürgen Habermas among others, modern society's outlook on the phenomena of sickness and health has been greatly influenced by man's incessant drive to objectify the world with the ultimate

aim of achieving complete technological mastery over nature.[1] The great advances in medical technology that have happened over the past couple of decades have changed the thinking behind the way medical treatment is administered to patients. The human body has come to be seen as "little more than physicality that is calculable, predictable, and thus programmable to some extent."[2] The same kind of thinking has reduced the human genome to a 'DNA repository' of around 3 billion chemical base pairs whose identification is believed to be capable of revealing the secret of our humanness, which will also become programmable in the future, through the marvels of biotechnological manipulation. This is a goal that, Gadamer remarks, contrasts sharply with the natural philosophy of antiquity that looked upon nature as a self-maintaining and self-restoring totality. Gadamer continually refers to Platos' *Phaedrus* with its holistic understanding of the human being as an essential part of the totality that is the world. In the dialogue, Socrates speaks of the need to 'know' the soul in order to 'heal' the body and the impossibility of healing the body and soul without knowing something about the 'unity of being itself' that can be interpreted as Heidegger's *Dasein*.[3] For Gadamer, the practice of medical science is closely connected to a person's being and sense of life, as it was with the Greeks, with the focus of the art of healing on the restoration and maintenance of health. As modern medicine is primarily geared towards the understanding of disease and fighting illness, we tend to forget that our ultimate goal always remains the restoration of health:

> But the healing arts involve not only the successful struggle against illness but also the process of reconvalescence and, ultimately, care for health in the broadest sense.[4]

But it is from the perspective of modern science that Gadamer chooses to look upon the phenomena of sickness and health. He begins

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[1] Fred Dallmayr, "The Enigma of Health: Hans-Georg Gadamer at 100," *The Review of Politics 62* (2000): 327-50, at 327.

[2] Hilde M. Zitzelsberger, "Concerning Technology: Thinking with Heidegger," *Nursing Philosophy 5.3* (2004): 242- 50.

[3] Dallmayr, "The Enigma of Health," 327-50.

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Enigma of Health: *The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 108.

by distinguishing between the field of scientific medicine that is concerned with the knowledge of things in general and the art of healing that demands the concrete application of the knowledge of scientific medicine to particular cases. For Gadamer, it is only the first kind of knowledge that can be taught and learnt whereas the art of healing is something that is not learnt from books but instead acquired through experience and the development of one's power of judgement.[5]

Michael Polanyi expressed similar views to Gadamer's on this issue when he spoke about "tacit knowledge" as the personal element involved in a doctor's responsibility towards his patient. Whereas the rules of scientific detachment require that we limit ourselves only to physical and chemical observations, such a stance does not allow us to get involved personally in the scientific endeavour.[6] Polanyi believes that any scientific research pursued in such a detached and impersonal and materialistic way isolates itself from a human's higher faculties and thereby restricts its power of discernment and understanding. On the other hand, a science which incorporates a personal component and which is open to other branches of knowing allows us not only to understand the true function of science but also our true function and purpose as persons.[7]

When a doctor is about to perform a patient's diagnosis, 'tacit knowledge' is that unaccountable and inarticulate component of knowledge that makes him seem to know more than he actually does![8] Like the child of ten, who is able to ride a bicycle without being able to express the physical rules governing turning, balance, speed and the angle of disequilibrium, tacit knowing is the fundamental power of the mind that not only creates and lends meaning to explicit knowing but also controls it. Gestalt psychology explains this phenomenon by demonstrating how we recognize a face by integrating its particulars impressed in our brain into a comprehensive entity.[9] While integration occurs as we shift our attention from the parts to the whole, the whole is not sim-

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[5] Ibid., 102-03.
[6] Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1969), 123.
[7] Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 24-25.
[8] Ibid., 4.
[9] Ibid., 6.

ply a sum of parts because the parts take on a different meaning in the whole. When we see a whole, we see the individual parts differently from the way we see them in isolation. There is an active shaping of experience that happens within us, that transforms the parts themselves even as it transforms the parts into a comprehensive entity. The same happens when we attend only subsidiarily to the two-dimensional words in a text in order to permit tacit integration and understand the multidimensional meanings that are conveyed through the text.[10] So tacit knowing is a dynamic process that grows increasingly meaningful with time and experience.

It is maybe for this reason, because a purely objective position does not allow a doctor to participate personally in his rapport with a patient, that it has proved necessary to coin the phrase 'quality of life' in the field of medical care.[11] This was done, Gadamer believes, with the purpose of ensuring that the patient's needs and desires remain at the heart of professional medical care and that he or she is not reduced to a machine requiring only technical assistance to resume its proper functions. And one of the skills acquired in the art of healing, through lived human experience, is the ability to judge the ways and means by which medical science can be made to contribute to a patient's 'quality of life.' This expression, for Gadamer, reveals,

> fundamental and immemorial human recognition that each of us has to 'lead' our own lives and that we must decide for ourselves how we are going to live.[12]

But the issue that Gadamer raises is whether medical science can be more appropriately defined as the 'science of illness' or the 'science of health.' On the one hand, it is illness that 'objectifies' itself, presenting itself as something opposed to us and forcing itself upon us. So when we are sick we talk of our illness as a 'case of illness.' Gadamer refers to the German word for 'case' that is *Fall* which is a word that originates from the game of dice and refers to the role which 'falls' to a noun within a sentence. Likewise, an illness is something that 'befalls'

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[10] Mark T. Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi* (Delaware: ISI Books, 2006), 73-74.
[11] Gadamer, *Enigma of Health*, 104.
[12] Ibid.

or 'falls' to us. The Greek word for 'symptom' has a very close meaning to the German word for 'fall' as it is used to refer to the conspicuous features that become manifest when an illness 'befalls' us.[13] On the other hand health, unlike illness, escapes objectification because it does not really actually present itself to us, argues Gadamer.[14] There is a real mystery in the hidden character of health that makes it absurd to ask someone, 'Are you healthy?' According to Gadamer, it is because health is a condition of inner accord and of harmony with oneself that it defies measurement and standardization.[15] He challenges the notion that health can be technically engineered or made, because it defies the project of mastery over nature that is the goal of modern medical science.[16]

For Gadamer, contrary to what medical science may aspire to achieve, health will never be the product of manipulation or forceful intervention as epitomized in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.[17] In his book, Huxley depicts human life seven centuries from now when with genetic manipulation, psychoactive drugs, hypnopaedia and high-tech amusements, disease is totally eliminated together with aggression, war, anxiety, suffering, guilt and grief.[18] *Brave New World* anticipates the biomedical project of medical science to preserve and prolong bodily life at the expense of stripping human life of much of its dignity. Aldous Huxley managed to portray in a brilliant way how progress can become tragedy when one individual, the 'Savage,' who is a human being bred by natural means, dares confront the 'Controller,' Mustapha Mond:

> 'But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin'.
> 'In fact', said the Savage defiantly, 'I'm claiming the right to be unhappy'.
> 'Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly, and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen to-

[13] Ibid., 107.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 107-8.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Flamingo, 1994).
[18] Leon R. Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defence of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 5.

> morrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind'.[19]

This is a confrontation between, on the one hand, the drug 'soma'[20] that is a single-chemical combination of many of today's drugs' effects and a symbol for the powerful influence of science and technology on society and, on the other hand, the humanness of the Savage that symbolizes Gadamer's understanding of health as something that each and every one of us must take care of through the way we choose to lead our lives:

> What is important is to recognize the other in their otherness, as opposed, for example, to the tendency towards standardization promoted by modern technology, the autocratic control of education by school authorities or the blind insistence on authority by a teacher or a father. Only by means of such recognition can we hope to provide genuine guidance which helps the other to find their own independent way. Treatment always involves also a certain granting of freedom.[21]

The confrontation is also between those who believe that biology alone can explain illness and health and those who believe that biology cannot ignore metaphysical considerations about life and reality. In a sense it is a confrontation between biotechnological humanism that rejects any form of human genomic metaphysics and transcendental humanism that looks upon the human genome as being the true essence of human nature with external influences considered to be mere accidental occasions. *Brave New World* is obviously a work of science fiction but the likeness between Huxley's fictional world and our own are frankly unnerving when we consider the great advances that have been made in the past years in the area of biotechnology[22] and its application to many of the external influences upon human nature rather than its true essential nature.

Biotechnological humanism is a product of modern technology and it will lead to human debasement rather than fulfilment. By reflecting

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[19] Huxley, *Brave New World*, 219.

[20] In Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, soma is a drug that provides an easy escape from the hassles of daily life and is used by the government as a method of control through pleasure.

[21] Gadamer, *Enigma of Health*, 109.

[22] Kass, *Defence of Dignity*, 6.

on the special role that the doctor has with his patient, Gadamer paves the way for a road that will put biotechnology at the service of compassionate humanness that will not allow the achievement of perfected bodies at the price of flattened souls.[23] He proceeds on this path by reflecting on that "inner proportion or inner correspondence that cannot be measured and yet must always be taken into account."[24]

First he explains that the role of the doctor that must be one of caring for the patient in such a manner that he can verify the patient's own subjective localization or experience of pain. He refers to the German word, *Behandeln,* which is equivalent to the Latin word *palpare*, meaning 'with the hand' or *palpus*.[25] He then proceeds to explain that the living use of the term *Behandeln* goes beyond the specific domain of medicine because everyone, irrespective of his profession in life, is called to treat others correctly by not forcing himself on them or compelling them to accept things or do things against their own will. According to Gadamer, such things will cease only when we choose to recognize "the other in their otherness."[26] In the doctor-patient relationship, the doctor will choose not to impose himself on his patient when he responsibly undertakes to use his medical expertise to help the patient recover from his illness, but at the same time recognizing in the patient the freedom to find his own, independent way. This requires that the doctor's skill to cure illness must not only prove effective in relieving the patient of the symptoms of his illness but, more importantly, must be accepted by the patient who is ill. So it is not a question of simply filling out a prescription and handing it to the patient, nor is it a question of "getting rid of it" as, comments Gadamer, surgeons are wont to say to a patient who is about to undergo surgery.[27] This way of talking tends to look upon the illness of a patient as having a separate existence from him and which the doctor must destroy. But this is not the real task of the doctor, according to Gadamer. To him, doctors should not really be expected to 'make' or 'do' anything—rather they should humbly contribute towards

[23] Ibid., 134.
[24] Gadamer, *Enigma of Health*, 108.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 109.
[27] Ibid., 110.

guiding health in a certain manner so as to help the patient get better.[28] Health, to Gadamer is a general feeling of well-being and,

> it shows itself above all where such a feeling of well-being means we are open to new things, ready to embark on new enterprises and, forgetful of ourselves, scarcely notice the demands and strains which are put on us.[29]

Given that the disruption of health that normally necessitates treatment of a patient by a doctor puts the patient in an unequal relationship with the doctor, it is vital that the patient is free to discuss his or her illness with the doctor. Dialogue and discussion serve to humanize the inequality of the doctor-patient relationship which, according to Gadamer, remains one of the most difficult challenges that confront human beings. The disruption of health brings with it a disturbance in one's equilibrium that must perforce be redressed by applying a counterforce which can easily cause a new loss of equilibrium. Medical treatment will act as this counterforce in the disruption of health but care must be taken so as not to induce a new imbalance through, for example, unnecessary prescriptions. Gadamer explains the delicate balance that must be maintained by the medical practitioner in dialogue with his patient by referring to the words of Rilke who in the *Duino Elegies* speaks of how, "The permanently too little springs over into the empty too much."[30] So every effort must be made for the doctor to discern exactly the right moment and the right dosage when treating a patient.[31] The same concerns have been expressed by Daniel Callahan, one of the founders of bioethics, who has argued in favour of a healthcare system that helps the patient cope with the failings of the body rather than one that is unilaterally focussed on the conquering of disease and the extension of life at all costs.[32]

And, according to Gadamer, here lies the enigmatic character of health for it is none other than "the rhythm of life, a permanent process

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[28] Ibid., 109.
[29] Ibid., 112.
[30] Ibid., 114.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Daniel Callahan, as quoted by Ronald M. Green in *Babies by Design*: *The Ethics of Genetic Choice* (New Haven: Yale University, 2007), 3-4.

in which equilibrium re-establishes itself." He speaks of the three processes of breathing, digesting and sleeping which are three rhythmic phenomena that help to produce vitality, refreshment and the restoration of energy.[33] Although these rhythmic functions are not under our control, they constitute an integral part of ourselves and, in fact, sustain us. But these phenomena have little to do with the consumption of medicines or the conscious effort to control them.[34]

Gadamer quoties a famous saying of Heraclitus: "the harmony which is hidden is always stronger than that which is revealed." He takes this to refer to the harmonious balance of the 'humours' in ancient medicine, explaining that,

> The harmony of health only displays its real strength where it does not leave us numbed and deadened, that disturbing effect revealed or produced by persisting pain or the debilitating rush of intoxication.[35]

To Gadamer, therefore, medical treatment must be related to the 'totality' of the human person and its methods and goals should be concerned with the hidden harmony that must be constantly recovered and in which is discovered both the miracle of reconvalescence and the mystery of health. Gadamer reminds us that we are part of nature and it is in fact this nature within us that, together with the self-sustaining organic defence mechanism of our bodies, is able to sustain our 'inner' equilibrium, which is what constitutes life. It follows that we should constantly remind ourselves that we can only oppose nature through being part of nature ourselves and through being sustained by nature, lest we forget that both the doctor and patient must together acknowledge the role of nature if successful recovery is to be accomplished.[36]

Medical practice must make definitive decisions about life and death based on current scientific knowledge that, by its very nature, remains incomplete and temporary. And modernity has systematically tended to restrict what counts as real knowledge to only that which can be known by scientific experiment. As a direct result of this reductive

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[33] Gadamer, *Enigma of Health*, 114.
[34] Ibid., 115.
[35] Ibid., 115-16.
[36] Ibid., 116.

approach to knowledge, medical practice is forced to treat current scientific knowledge as if it had the final word on everything.

Gadamer blames the metaphysical agnosticism of modernity for the current situation that insists on explaining illness and health in purely physiological or neurophysiologic terms. But according to Gadamer, metaphysics is essential for reflecting on the meaning of health and such a need is made manifest when doctors refuse to subsume their patients under general scientific schemata and persist in maintaining a 'special relationship' with their patients, believing, as the Greek physicians of antiquity did, that one cannot treat the body without concomitantly treating the soul. The *manner* in which doctors practice the art of healing today has changed significantly from the way it was practiced in classical times but the *matter* that concerns medical practice, namely the patient's whole being has not changed and medical science on its own is simply inadequate to deal with questions of life and reality that pertain more to metaphysics.

Gadamer's conclusion is that in order to understand the question of health, what is needed is metaphysics rather than biology. It is imperative that metaphysical considerations about life and reality are not ignored because they do not fit into the general schemata of medical science. Progress must not be achieved at the expense of flattened and soulless bodies that will result in human debasement rather than fulfilment. This is the challenge of modern bioethical thinking that it brings back into the field of biotechnology metaphysical considerations that are at the heart of our self-understanding as a species.