Romanticism and german medicine: a comment to Medizin In Romantik Und Idealismus (Dietrich von Engelhardt)

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Dietrich von Engelhardt and the history of medicine

Dietrich von Engelhardt (1941–) is a German scholar who has devoted his life to research and teaching in the history of medicine and the sciences, literature and medicine, and ethics in medical and scientific research. He studied philosophy, history, and slavistic at the universities of Tübingen, München and Heidelberg and received his doctorate from the last one with a thesis on Hegel and chemistry. From 1983 to 2007 he was Professor and Director of the Institute of Medical and Science History at the University of Liibeck, Germany. Member of the Academia Leopoldina in 1995, among many other distinctions, von Engelhardt has developed a strong research tradition in both Germany and many other countries, in part due to his exceptional knowledge of French, English, Italian Spanish and Russian languages.

His diversified academic production spans from the relationship of the Romantic philosophers with empirical sciences to the impact of medicine and medical practice on fiction and literature. His works demonstrate the dedication of the scholar and the enthusiasm of the discoverer. At the same time, they invariably set forth a series of questions and open areas for future research, thus inspiring academics and students.

Much of the work of von Engelhardt has been dedicated to the period between the end of the XVIIIth century and the middle of the XIXth century. He has also contributed relevant works on the relations between literature and medicine. As an example, the five-volume studies under the title Medizin in der Literatur der Neuzzeit, constitutes a profound analysis of the impact of medicine on literature of the Modern Age [1].

German romantic medicine

The book entitled “Medizin in Romantik und Idealismus” is a synthesis of studies from the past five decades. Four volumes packed with insight and information devoted mainly to German scholarship during the Romantic period, with appropriate references to the literature and the philosophy of that age [2]. Of course, when dealing with the intellectual production of that period, we refer to German-speaking territories since Germany was not a unified nation until 1871, when the German Empire began under the leadership of Prussia. Moreover, much of the earlier work analyzed, such as theses and academic addresses was still produced and published in Latin.

The Romantic period, spanning from the late 18th to the early 19th century, was a time of great intellectual and artistic exploration, marked by a profound shift in societal values, aesthetics, and philosophical ideals. In German-speaking countries, at the beginning of the XIXth Century, it adopted particular characteristics [3, 4]. Often associated with literature, poetry, and art, Romanticism also extended to the sciences and medicine, shaping practices, education, and the approach to patient care and healthcare institutions [5]. In Germany, England, and France, prominent centers of medical innovation during this era, the impact of Romanticism was important for its holistic perspective. There were differences between these countries, aptly observed and commented upon by Germaine de Staël (1766–1817), especially in his book De L’Allemagne based on numerous travels and personal exchanges with intellectuals of the period [6]. The pioneer role of each of these European traditions in shaping Romantic outlook and ideas is a matter of discussion.

In the history of German sciences, romantic medicine is an important topic. Before Romanticism, medical thought, less related to emotions and personal experiences or artistic manifestations, received the influence of the rationalism of the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism. The problems of depicting the Enlightenment as a unitary period dominated by reason (siècle des lumieres) are multiple, although it may be associated with the names of Voltaire (1694–1778) and René Descartes (1596–1650), the latter contributing important insights into the philosophical foundations of medicine [7] with his emphasis on a distinction between res cogitans and res extensa. Theoretical foundations were also provided by other philosophers, among them Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) with his idea of a pre-established harmony between Leib (animated body) and Seele (soul). Rothschuh provides a depiction of different “systems” of medical thought in this period [8].

During Romanticism, countless pamphlets, programs, tracts, handbooks, and programmatic statements on the future of medical science indicate a cross-fertilization between different areas of scholarship and art. It was a Counter-Enlightenment that tried to set a balance between reason and understanding, the Kantian distinction between Vernunft and Verstand (reason and understanding), the prominence of personal and lived experiences as integral components of scientific praxis, the discovery of the Ich (self-consciousness) by Johann Gottfried Fichte (1762–1814), his reformulation of Kantian philosophy with an idealistic accent, the notion that nature and humanity are inextricably linked to a common future and the acknowledgment of the unity between Nature and Geist (Spirit). It is true that the Naturphilosophie fell into excesses of mysticism or imagination and was opposed to Naturwissenschaft, the natural science that became more and more empirical with time [9]. An appropriate appraisal of this historical period should emphasize that Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) developed, among others, the concept of the unconscious mind, that humans should be responsible for what they do to Nature and that there is a unity between human beings and nature. This anticipates many of the eco-ethical disputes of later times [10, 11] and some of the insights developed by the Heidelberg School of anthropological medicine and relevant for bioethics as an interdisciplinary field encompassing medicine and biological sciences [12–14], not to mention the influence of Romantic thinking on later psychotherapists like Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961).

Development, influence, and legacy

When trying to summarize the main features of medicine and the sciences during this period, the clear-cut opposition to previous and later periods is difficult to maintain. The best way to judge the flourishing and later decay of the romantic and idealistic approach to medicine and the natural sciences is to examine the publications of the period. Dietrich von Engelhardt examines the Heidelbergerische Jahrbücher der Literatur (1808–1832) and the Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik (1827–1846). In both publications, from an initial blend between literature and speculative Naturphilosophie or empirical Naturwissenschaft, they drift into an era in which empirical

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analysis predominates over philosophical reflection measured by the number of contributions, book reviews, and essays. This empirical approach to changes in the Zeitgeist of historical periods is essential for formulating adequate hypotheses about the development of science and medicine. It is also interesting how von Engelhardt treats figures like Johannes Müller (1801–1858) and Jan Evangelista Purkinje (1787–1869) since both represent a transition from the philosophical/speculative era to the more empirical approach to physiology and medicine. Müller, for instance, one of the founders of the new physiological science in Germany [15], had a great respect for the idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) with whom he held friendly relationships. He represents a vivid example of the transition between a philosophical and speculative approach and the strictly empirical orientation of the Naturwissenschaften in the second half of the XIXth century, leading such great scientist as Émile Dubois-Reymond (1818–1896) to express that medicine should be Naturwissenschaft (in the empirical sense) or nothing [16].

Most of the relevant figures of the German Romantic period did not confine themselves to one field. Like in other countries like England and France, poets used scientific works to ignite their imagination and scientists used to write in poetic form. The association between personal experience and scientific work is frequent, as manifested in autobiographical accounts of scientific activity. The social role of the scientist did not differ from the more universal of intellectual or savant and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), for instance, one of the classics of German literature, devoted part of his time to scientific studies such as the theory of colors – opposed to Newton’s, the metamorphosis of plants or paleontological works. His influence upon the writers and scientists of the period was profound, although he remained skeptical about some of the excesses of speculation and philosophical reflection. The travels of von Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert (1780–1860) and Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) to the Orient and Italy show the association between autobiography and scientific activity, and Goethe provided an unforgettable example with his descriptions of Italy. The link between personal experience and illness is frequent. In no other period of history has personal experience permeated scientific writing in so profound a way. This feature allows a reflection on the doctor-patient dyad and the constitution of medicine as personal encounter; writers of the period were in a privileged position to judge the experiences of sick persons and the influence of personal life on scientific thinking and conceptions of Nature. The revision and critic of what later became the standard of scientific practice, separating personal experience from scientific work, was common. Several directions in contemporary medicine, like the so-called psychosomatic medicine [17], the anthropological medicine of the Heidelberg school [18], the biopsychosocial model [19], and many apparently novel approaches to personalized medicine are partial survivals of the integrative approach to science, medicine, and the realities of human life (birth, death, disease) characteristic of the Romantic and Idealistic period. The covert influence of Romanticism is responsible for the now current and somewhat trivial idea that medicine is both science and art and that medicine lacks a proper theory of its own, being applied scientific discourse, either from the biological or social sciences and the humanities. The notion that medicine is a science of actions or praxeology and not an object science is a fruitful one when considering issues such as patient satisfaction, salutary outcomes of interventions, design of healthcare institutions, and personal involvement with the practice of medicine [20].

Conclusions

The intellectual contribution of Dietrich von Engelhardt, in particular his seminal work on Medicine during the Romantic and Idealistic era provides a fundamental starting point to re-conceptualize the history of medicine and allied sciences. History is both permanence, change, and a continuous reconstruction of social practices, essential for a full understanding of current and future directions of scientific and medical practice. The emphasis on technological development, the permanent additions of tools and means for bettering understanding and intervention, when properly understood, are rooted in insights from the past. The main contribution of this lifetime work lies in its reflection upon the hidden paths of discovery and progress, the many unanswered questions about the future are meaningful only by reference to the wealth of intuitions and ideas in need of reappraisal and analysis.

References


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