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Philosophy as an Intellectual Immune System, and Its Role in the Service of Humane Medicine

Donald DeMarco

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In Book III of Plato's *Republic*, a discussion takes place concerning the practice of medicine. The point is made that while it is helpful for the physician not only to be familiar with sickly bodies, but also to have suffered a variety of sickness himself, the same principle does not apply to the mind. The physician, as Plato explains, does not treat the body by the body, for a diseased body would likely bring about more disease. A transfusion of bad blood would make a sick patient even sicker. Rather, the physician heals through the operations of his mind. It is essential, therefore, that the physician's mind not be infected with any form of evil. For the good physician, disease and evil are things that he *knows*, but does not *experience* as characteristic of his soul.

'So then,' said I, 'the good judge or juryman must be old, not young; he must have learned what injustice is, and not have perceived it as something of his own within his soul, but he must have had long practice in discerning what evil really is, as an alien thing in alien souls, by knowledge, not by experience of his own.'¹

Plato speaks of the mind as enjoying a certain independence from the condition of matter. If a body has sickness, it *is* sick. But the mind may have a sickness without being sick of the way it has that sickness is through knowledge. We can know evil without it infecting us. But if the mind has evil in the noncognitive sense of possessing it as a property of itself, the mind is thereby impaired.

This degree of independence from matter that the mind has may be understood as a certain kind of immunity. The very knowledge that

something is unhealthy—"an alien thing in alien souls"—serves as an effective defense against sickness.

Plato is not referring to what we would describe today as "mental illness". No doubt he would agree that someone who had recovered from a particular mental illness could very well be in a better position to treat others who suffer from the same malady. His point here is that a physician who has a mental illness would be impaired in his ability to treat others who suffer from the same disease as long as he is experiencing that mental illness himself.

Plato goes on to explain that when the mind is infected by evil one of the most serious impairments that results is precisely its inability to see that it is infected by evil. The infected mind does not know that it is infected. So too, a damaged eye cannot see that it is damaged. Likewise, a dishonest man cannot recognize an honest man, because he has no pattern of honesty in himself. A healthy mind, therefore, can know both health and sickness, good and evil. The mind that is infected by evil knows neither.

Vice cannot know virtue too, but a virtuous nature, educated in time, will acquire a knowledge both of virtue and vice: the virtuous, and not the vicious man has wisdom.²

For Plato, the healthy mind is able to heal the sick body. But if the mind itself is not healthy, how can it be healed? In order to provide an answer to this question, Plato alludes to Asclepius, the son of Apollo, who is the father of medicine. Because he is of godly origin, it is implausible to think of Asclepius as impaired in his soul. When the story is related that Asclepius once accepted gold as a bribe to attempt healing a man already at the point of death, Plato dismissed it as inconsistent with a being of divine lineage. "If he was the son of a god he was not avaricious," Plato insists, "and if he was greedy of gain he was not the son of a god."³

Aesclepius An Ideal, Inspiration

Asclepius, then, is both an ideal and in inspiration for mortal physicians. He represents the unblemished, unimpaired healer who stands to ordinary healers as the mind stands to the body. Plato's image of Asclepius is more philosophical than in accord with Greek mythology, for he understands the need for an ideal to represent the perfect physician to whom ordinary physicians look when they have doubts or when they need to be uplifted.

Plato believed, as did the poets Agathon and Aristophanes, that it was his skill in using love and concord to reconcile opposites which allowed Asclepius to found the science of medicine. In this regard, Asclepius is the humane practitioner of medicine *par excellence*.

Just before he died, Socrates remembered a debt. "I owe a cock to Asclepius," he said to Crito. "Will you remember to pay the debt?" These were the last words Socrates was to utter. The father of moral philosophy was referring to the Greek custom of propitiating the god of medicine following medical treatment. The cock is a poor man's offering. It is

believed that it was made in behalf of Plato who, being ill, was unable to be with his dearest friend when Socrates drew his final breath.

In Plato's hierarchic vision, the physician stands in the middle between the body which he endeavors to heal and an ideal which he seeks to imitate. The mind can heal the body because knowledge of sickness does not itself confer sickness. At the same time, the mind needs an ideal so that it can resist being infected with evil in such a way that the evil becomes a property of the soul.

What Asclepius is for the pagan Greek physician, Christ is for the Christian physician, and philosophy is for all physicians. In this regard, philosophy is the set of right ideas which, when put into practice, allows the physician to best serve his patients.

We may recast Plato's hierarchic vision in a modern setting by relating it to immunology. Plato, of course, knew nothing of the science of immunology. Nonetheless, he had a firm grasp of its fundamental dynamics. He knew that good ideas can keep bad ideas from infecting and corrupting the soul, just as health can offer resistance to disease. He knew that good ideas are superior to bad ideas, just as health is superior to sickness, in the sense that they belong to the subject as part of its perfection. He saw a parallel between the health of the body and the health of the soul. He saw the philosophical life as a constant struggle to establish a kind of intellectual immune system whose function is to install good (or right) ideas and keep out bad (or wrong) ones. Nature has its own immune system; man must establish his intellectual immune system by accepting philosophically sound or realistic ideas and rejecting ideas alien to his nature. The key to the practice of humane medicine is to employ the qualities of the whole human being, including his mind and the healthy thoughts that exist therein.

Socrates would never have thought of the need to propitiate the gods if he believed that medical healing resulted merely in the use of chemicals or medicinals. He was firmly convinced that there are spiritual factors involved in healing — factors that belong to what we might broadly describe as the "intellectual immune system".

Immune System a Model

Our natural, physiological immune system serves as a model for its intellectual complement inasmuch as it has a sense of the subject's identity as well as a capacity for protecting that identity, or what is good for the subject, against factors that are alien and potentially destructive. World-renowned immunologist Dr. Gustav J. V. Nossal of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research at Royal Melbourne Hospital in Victoria, Australia, summarizes the role of the immune system: "The task confronting the natural defense system can be capsulized in six key words: encounter, recognition, activation, deployment, discrimination, and regulation."

It has been said that of all the mysteries of modern science, the immune

system's capacity for distinguishing between self and nonself must rank at or near the top.⁶ In order to protect itself against foreign invaders, the immune system generates 100 billion (10^{11}) different kinds of immunological receptors. No matter what the shape or form of the enemy invader, there will be some complementary receptor to recognize it and effect its elimination.

Added to the mystery of how the immune system recognizes self from nonself is the ability to distinguish between foreign carbohydrates, nucleic acids, and proteins from those which exist within the organism, often in shapes that are exceedingly similar to those of the invaders. When the immune system is functioning properly, it never gets activated by self substances and unerringly responds to nonself substances. When it is not functioning properly, this distinction is blurred and diseases of autoimmunity occur.

Recent study of the immune system has provided new insights into how this self-nonself distinction is achieved. There are two processes by which the cells of the immune system (the B and T lymphocytes) are rendered tolerant to their own organism's molecules. The first is called clonal deletion where cells are eliminated that would otherwise produce an anti-self response. The second is clonal energy where the same type of potentially hostile cells are inactivated.

The philosophical enterprise, with its conscious capacity of distinguishing between ideas that are good and bad, beneficial and harmful, right and wrong, realistic and illusory, represents an immune system that is strikingly similar to our autoimmune system which operates below the plane of consciousness. Two major differences, however, are more than apparent. First, this "intellectual immune system" is inseparably united with spiritual qualities such as freedom, consciousness, understanding, knowledge, and so on. The second is that it is incomparably simpler in that it requires only a few intellectual immune receptors (good ideas) in contrast with the autoimmune system's 10^{11} .

First Point

The first point means that our intellectual immune system is more closely identified with who we are as persons inasmuch as it is what we ourselves have chosen. The second point means that the process of educating the personal self to become fulfilled as a personal self is a practical possibility.

Philosopher and educator Mortimer Adler has written two books which marvelously illustrate the relatively uncomplicated way in which the mind can affirm and resist error. The titles alone are instructive: *Six Great Ideas* and *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*. The former deals with Truth, Beauty, and Goodness (ideas we judge by), and Liberty, Justice, and Equality (ideas we act on). The latter deals with the 10 areas of thought where important (and avoidable) errors are commonly made.

These two works convey the good news that it is not particularly arduous

or complicated (at least in theory) to become educated, to think clearly, to establish a solid intellectual immune system. A person does not need to know very much in order to be wise. The knowledge explosion need not be a source of discouragement for the person who wants to become educated in the fundamental sense of being able to distinguish between good and bad ideas. Philosophy, both speculative and practical, has made few if any advances in modern times. In fact, much as been lost as a result of errors that have infected modern thinking.

Adler's contribution illustrates the value of general ideas for life in general. As an illustration of the value of general ideas for life in particular, we turn to the writing of Viktor Frankl. While incarcerated in Auschwitz, where he closely observed the life and death of his fellow prisoners, Frankl developed his principles of logotherapy. He found evidence for postulating the existence of noögenic neuroses, that is, neuroses whose origin was not in a conflict between psychological factors, but in the clash between incompatible ideas or values.⁷ Victims of noögenic neuroses needed to find a coherent view of life, in short, a consistent meaning to which they could attach their lives.

Frankl's observations in the concentration camp led him to reject the precept *primum vivere, deinde philosophari* (first survive, then philosophize about it). What he found valid and practical was the very opposite precept — *primum philosophari, deinde mori* (first philosophize, then die).

For Frankl, his prison camp experiences were a microcosmic mirroring of the world as a whole. The "pattern of the Zeitgeist," as Frankl describes it, is marked by provisional, fatalistic, conformist and even fanatical attitudes to life. These poorly thought out, philosophically bankrupt approaches to life are not only futile but can easily mount to the proportions of a psychic epidemic. Frankl goes on to explain that while somatic epidemics are typical results of war, psychic epidemics associated with a virtual absence of a sound, realistic philosophy of life are possible causes of war, and thus of new concentration camps.⁸

It is clear from Frankl's writings that philosophy plays a crucial role in the formation and establishment of an intellectual immune system which serves not only the individual but the group and society as well.

Example of Ideas' Values

An excellent example of the value particular ideas have for life in particular is found in Norman Cousins's *Head First: the Biology of Hope*, a book which is the product of his 10 years among the Aesculapians at UCLA.

Cousins is a staunch enthusiast of that relatively new branch of medicine known as psychoneuroimmunology. "The major advances in modern medical science," he writes, "give substance to the principle that the mind of the patient creates the ambience of treatment. Belief becomes biology. The head comes first."⁹

Cousins never loses sight of the unity of the human being together with its inner harmonies and parallel operations. He notes that the neuroendocrine and immune systems can produce identical substances (peptide hormones, or neuropeptides) which influence both neuroendocrine and immune activity. These two systems also share the same array of receptors with which these substances can interact and transmit their messages. Such collaboration, for Cousins, offers evidence of the interactions of mind and body.¹⁰ Moreover, he maintains that hope, purpose, and determination are not merely mental states somehow isolated from the body. Indeed, they have electrochemical connections which play a large part in the workings of the immune system as well as in the entire economy of the total human organism.

Cousins and his medical associates found, for example, that patients who were freed from depression and despair showed an increase in the number of cancer-fighting immune cells. In addition, they also noted that AIDS patients who lived long past the time predicted for them had a strong determination to persevere and prevail. Like Frankl and other prison camp survivors, they did not adjust to an atmosphere of fatalism. They refused to lose faith in the mind's capacity to influence the body. They seemed to know instinctively that the intellectual immune system is somehow able to reinforce the autoimmune system.

We know that pride precedes a fall. It is possible to understand pride as a breakdown in the intellectual immune system wherein the distinction between self and nonself becomes blurred. The proud person is inclined to insist that a particular wrong idea is right simply because it is in his head. He tends to lose his ability to make the more important judgment that the idea does not **belong** there. He no longer sees the wrong idea as part of the nonself. A more humble individual will be less inclined to believe that being in one's head is all it takes to make an idea right. He wants his ideas to conform to truth. He then knows that such ideas belong in his head (his mind) as part of his authentic self.

Similarly, a person driven by lust may protect bad ideas because they represent pleasure, even though they are potentially destructive. An avaricious individual may welcome bad ideas if they offer a sense of security, even though they violate his moral relationships with other people.

Attention Given to Autoimmune System

Much attention is given to our autoimmune system. The humane practice of medicine, however, demands that we regard each other as more than our immune systems. By emphasizing the importance of an intellectual immune system which includes philosophical as well as psychological aspects, we are in a better position to recognize the whole person and minister to him more fully and beneficially. At the same time, in treating the whole person and recognizing the practical and personal value of ideas, we take an important step in society in combatting bad ideas which give rise to ruinous behavior

which, in turn, is often the cause of problems which are manifest on the level of the autoimmune system.

"Head first" is of practical import, not only for the individual, but also for society in general. A wrong set of ideas in culture — what Frankl has described as constituting a "psychic epidemic" — can have an adverse effect on anyone's autoimmune system. Such a problem cannot be righted by attention to the autoimmune system alone. A remedy is introduced only when the source of the problem is recognized — the breakdown of the intellectual immune system.

Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of the philosopher as a physician for civilization. We may affirm this role and express the hope that the intellectual and autoimmune systems which have often been relegated to independently functioning philosophers and physicians be recognized as harmonious and essential aspects of the same body-soul human being and that the philosopher be readmitted into the brotherhood of Aesculapians.

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