

Introduction

Medicine, Philosophy and History of Science: an Overview

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Since its foundation in classical times, medicine has always presented questions on its specific forms of knowledge, in relation to philosophy and science. Nowadays medicine has to be considered as a complex system based on the interaction of formation, research, medical and social facilities, law and ethics. Generally, Philosophy of Medicine deals with

- The epistemological issues in medical sciences as a discipline.
- The definitions of Health and Disease
- The physician/patient relationship
- The ethics of medicine.

The epistemological status of medicine has been discussed at length by philosophers and historians of science. Is there a close relation between History and Philosophy considering the forms of production/representation of medical knowledge? Which actors can investigate these aspects?

In the last decades there has been a strong debate regarding philosophy of medicine and whether or not it could be considered as a specific field, distinct from the philosophy/history of science.

Some decades ago Mirko Grmek underlined the need for a close collaboration between history and philosophy of science. As he clearly expressed,

The specific field of the history of science is the study and explanation of the origin and transformation of the structures of scientific knowledge. The historian of science should render understandable the reality of scientific research. The relationship between the history of science and the philosophy of science is that [...] (1) the philosophical theories on the development of science have a scientific content only as much as they may be compared with the results of the history of science, and (2) the philosophy of science does not refer to an immediate historical reality but to an intellectual reconstruction of the past. (Grmek, 1979)

History isolates epistemic knots on which philosophers work in order to increase knowledge.

The same attitude has been developed by the new historiographical approach and by the suggestion of “epistemic things” as the main object of research. Such general reflection on history and philosophy of science should be applied to biomedical sciences and medical practices.

Grmek drew up a subdivision that allows a clearer view. He outlined three different directions in which to study the history of medicine: a scientific direction - focused on biological and medical knowledge; a historical direction - socio-philologically oriented; and a

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philosophical direction - based on the history of ideas and representation. The production of knowledge in medicine should take into consideration all these aspects.

The epistemological aspects of medicine - as the growth of knowledge and the relation between theory and practice - are of great interest for historians and philosophers of science. In order to institute a productive dialogue between philosophy and medicine, a multidisciplinary approach is required: we have to take into consideration both historical and philosophical methods as tools, in order to understand medical matters and to produce a multi-categorical reconstruction of the past.

A remarkable feature of the most recent developments in history of science consists of the attitude of bringing into focus the origin and growth of knowledge in different research domains. For philosophers the coming into being of scientific theories and practices as well as those concerning medical knowledge has become even more relevant. Many questions need further reflections: Is it more plausible to talk about philosophy of medicine or philosophy & medicine? Which definition better frames the relationship between medical knowledge and philosophical thinking? Is medicine itself a good example for understanding how epistemological dynamics act in the production of knowledge? Is it possible to conceive an interactive approach consisting of the dialogue between historiography – that could be addressed as the epistemological side of the historical research – and philosophy of science?

The main idea of this special issue is that of merging different points of view on medicine in order to enable the reader to overview different perspectives from different research fields. Thus, we have contributions from philosophers on medicine as well as from historians.

The intention in editing the 9th volume of Humana-Mente was to present conceptual and epistemological ways of reading medical issues. The conception of this special issue reflects diverse points of interest and is not structured around a single topic. What is of interest here is the combination of approaches used by philosophers and historians in studying medical thinking and their joint relevance for a better understanding of contemporary medical problems.