

The Human Condition: Medicine, Art and the Humanities

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The theme of the European Society for Philosophy of Medicine and Health Care's 2018 conference in Lisbon, Portugal, is "The Human Condition in between Medicine, Arts, and the Humanities." The editors-in-chief of *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, the Society's official journal, have asked me to put together this special "virtual edition" of past articles from the journal on the topic of the conference.

Interest in the medical humanities as a field of study has been robust over the past several decades. The medical humanities have been widely seen as a response to the dissatisfaction of both patients and care givers to the dehumanizing effects of the increasing emphasis of technology and business in health care. Martyn Evans (2007) sees the field as comprising three kinds of activities: the therapeutic use of creative arts such as writing and painting; the use of art, literature, and creative self-expression in medical education; and the academic and theoretical study aimed at understanding human nature through a critical examination of technological medicine. The last is the "most irreducibly philosophical" of the three, although it is by no means confined to the work of philosophers. William Stempsey (2007) characterizes the medical humanities as a "metamedical multiverse." It consists of a broad family of various disciplines that inform each other yet retain their own individual identities. The various disciplines can expand and contract in their mutual interactions and it belongs to the philosophy of medicine to elucidate the fruits and the limitations of the interactions.

In the philosophy of medicine, aesthetics has received far less attention than the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of medicine. Three papers in this virtual edition highlight some theoretical aspects of aesthetics for medicine. Rolf Ahlzén (2002) cautions against making a simple connection between acquaintance with literary texts and understanding of the work of medicine. Ahlzén (2007) argues that humanistic studies and aesthetic experience are two different "modes of understanding." The medical humanities are characterized by the mode of analytical reflection. The arts—poetry, novels, painting, drama, film—are characterized by aesthetic imagination, which provides an emotive element that can help the humanities in reaching their goal. Marcus Düwell (1999) bids us to consider aesthetic perception of the human body, which he sees as the perception of another in all the particularly of the individual. Aesthetic experience is thus separate from medical practice and enables ethical judgment from a "reflexive distance." This type of perception may open up new possibilities for acting. Medard Hillhorst (2002) argues that physical beauty is more than "skin deep." He draws a distinction between artistic beauty and physical beauty in a human sense, the latter always being contextual and revealing of personal identity, bodily uniqueness and the narrative of a particular life.

The remaining five papers deal with more particular roles of various arts and humanities in medicine. Hilde Bondevik et. al. (2016) use a novel and a case of cancer to argue that medicine can draw wisdom from literature by illuminating the complexity of life stories, contexts, and ethical dilemmas, and thereby help health care professionals to acquire clinically

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relevant skills. “Narrative medicine,” in the view of Murphy and Franz (2016), can help patients and health care providers to foster effective communication and to develop a mutual understanding of illness and care. Andrew Edgar (2007) sees modern art, including poetry, narrative, and music, through the lens of the philosophy of Levinas, as having a role in articulating “useless suffering.” Barbaric poetry, for instance, does not attempt to bring suffering into the realm of the conventional language of meaningfulness but rather to articulate the disruption of the self. This, he argues, might be a vital first step in recovery. Roduit et al. (2018) use a science fiction film as a case study on the ethics of the use of new technology, in this case, radical life-extension. They show us how film can be a valuable resource for debate about our technological future and such matters as human enhancement. Finally, Hendriks (2017) presents an unusual art—clowning—and uses empirical evidence to argue that clowns learn to see “with new eyes” the things and people around them. In particular, clowns can alert us to ways of paying respect to people with dementia.

For centuries, care of the sick has provided subject matter for art to explore the meaning of life, suffering and death; now the arts are providing subject matter for health care to help its mission to care for people as they encounter suffering and death and search for meaning in life. We can look forward to more enlightening papers on this topic in future editions of *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*.

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