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ACCORDING TO PLATO, THE EVILS OF THE BODY CANNOT BE CURED WITHOUT ALSO CURING THE EVILS OF THE SOUL

Plato knew well the medicine of his time. He also had his own form of a philosophy of medicine containing intuitions of extraordinary significance and a core of truth which in certain respects remains largely valid today. I will investigate this point in two of Plato's dialogues: the *Charmides*, which dates from his youth, and the *Timaeus*, his last published work.

I. ONE CANNOT CURE WITHOUT CURING THE WHOLE MAN

A. One Cannot Cure Only a Part of the Body Without Curing the Body as a Whole

In the *Charmides* medicine is spoken of in terms of a rather well-defined metaphor which represents in concise form the principal line of Plato's argument. It is therefore worthwhile to understand the metaphor properly.

The young Charmides has a bad headache and Socrates presents himself to Charmides as possessing a remedy with which to cure him:

[The remedy] was a certain leaf, but there was a charm to go with the remedy; and if one uttered the charm at the moment of its application, the remedy made one perfectly well; but without the charm there was no efficacy in the leaf (*Charmides*, 155E).

The significance of the *leaf* presents no difficulty inasmuch as it symbolizes the medicine or the drug, as the text says expressly. In contrast, the meaning of the image of the *charm* is much more complex. Let us follow the reasoning Plato uses to make the image understandable to the reader.

In the first place, one has to understand the structural link which joins each part of the human body with the body itself in its wholeness. This structural link is essential to such a degree that the mode of being of the part depends strictly on the mode of being of the whole. Consequently,

the part cannot be treated in itself and for itself, independently of the whole. Thus, one will not be able to treat the head without curing the whole head, and one will not be able to cure the head without curing the body as a whole. This, says Plato, is what the most authentic physicians do (and we would add, what the physicians of today who too easily lose themselves in extreme specialization and subspecialization should also do). Let us read the beautiful text:

I dare say you have yourself sometimes heard good doctors say, you know, when a patient comes to them with a pain in his eyes, that it is not possible for them to attempt a cure of his eyes alone, but that it is necessary to treat his head too at the same time, if he is to have his eyes in good order; and so again, that to expect ever to treat the head by itself, apart from the body as a whole, is utter folly (*Charmides*, 156B-C).

What then must the good physician do? He must seek to cure the part, but always with his gaze turned to the totality of the organism.

B. The Evils of the Body Cannot Be Cured Without Also Curing the Soul

But notice now the surprising twist which Plato presents us with after having explained this beautiful concept (which is, by the way, a canon of good Greek medicine). He tells the story of how Socrates, finding himself in a military camp, met a Thracian physician, a student of Zalmoxis (who was venerated like a divinity, and to whose disciples the therapeutic ability of procuring immortality was attributed), who revealed to Socrates the true art of curing the body.

The Thracian physician is obviously a dramaturgical mask through which Plato communicates his own thought in an emblematic way. His argument is the following. The Greek physicians were right in maintaining that one cannot cure a part of the body without curing the body as a whole. But the body is not man in his integral wholeness but rather only one part of him; the totality of man is his body and his soul. Thus, *just as one cannot cure a part of the body without curing the whole of the body, analogously one cannot cure the body without also curing the soul*. But the Greek physicians ignored this and consequently it escaped their attention that most diseases can be cured only if one not only cures the whole body, but also the whole man, that is, the soul as well as the body.

It is precisely from the soul that the greatest evils come to man, as well as the greatest goods:

But Zalmoxis, our king, who is a god, says that as you ought not to attempt to cure eyes without head, or head without body, so you should not treat body without soul; and this was the reason why most maladies evaded the physicians of Greece - that they neglected the whole, on which they ought to spend their pains, for if this were out of order it was impossible for the part to be in order. For all that was good and evil, he said, in the body and in man altogether was sprung from the soul, and flowed along from thence as it did from the head into the eyes. Wherefore that part was to be treated first and foremost, if all was to be well with the head and the rest of the body. And the treatment of the soul, my wonderful friend, is by means of certain charms (*Charmides*, 156E- 157A).

Plato then makes an explicit statement concerning the "charms." They refer to philosophy which educates man in "temperance," that is, in that virtue which teaches him what the *right measure* consists in and how to practice it:

These charms are words of the right sort: by the use of such words is temperance engendered in our souls, and as soon as it is engendered and present we may easily secure health to the head, and to the rest of the body also (*Charmides*, 167A-B).

II. THE ORIGIN OF HUMAN DISEASES ACCORDING TO THE *TIMAEUS*

The concept of the right measure implicit in the concept of the virtue of temperance is developed by Plato in a final section of the *Timaeus* dedicated to the diseases of the body and the soul and their cure. Here it is extended to all levels of man and strictly connected to health.

A. *The Three Groups of Bodily Diseases and Their Origin According to the Timaeus*

Diseases are divided into three fundamental groups. The first group originates in various forms of disturbances which occur in the very

composition of the four elements which constitute the body (water, air, earth and fire). The excess or defect in the composition of these elements, or a shifting of one of them *against nature*, disrupts the right measure, and thus gives rise to disturbances which generate diseases. Notice how Plato affirms the fundamental concept of his reasoning concerning the right measure:

For, as we maintain, it is only the addition or subtraction of the same substance from the same substance in the same order and in the same manner and in due proportion which will allow the latter to remain safe and sound in its sameness with itself. But whatsoever oversteps any of these conditions in its going out or its coming in will produce alterations of every variety and countless diseases and corruptions (*Timaeus*, 82B).

The second group of diseases derives from disturbances which take place in the secondary compositions, i.e., from disturbances of the compositions from which derive the marrow, the flesh, the bones, the nerves, etc. Diseases arise when the compositions which constitute these parts of the body and their functions occur in a mode which is not in conformity with the laws of nature but opposed to them. Plato describes the most serious source of these diseases in the following way:

And the most extreme case of all occurs whenever the substance of the marrow becomes diseased either from deficiency or from excess; for this results in the gravest of diseases and the most potent in causing death, inasmuch as the whole substance of the body, by the force of necessity, streams in the reverse direction (*Timaeus*, 84C).

The third group of diseases is connected with the air, the phlegm and the bile. Specifically, they are connected to the quantity of air which enters into the body in greater or lesser quantity with respect to that which is due, and to the tensions which follow from this. And so, also in the case of the phlegm and the bile, the diseases derive from their greater or lesser quantity with respect to that which is due, from their *excess* or *defect*, that is, from the disruption of the right measure.

B. Diseases of the Soul and their Origin

Diseases of the soul derive from a want of intelligence, either madness or ignorance. Many such diseases do not derive only from the soul itself, but also from those physical conditions of the body which influence it.

The first group of evils derives from an excess of either pleasure or pain, inasmuch as this excess deprives a man of the proper way of seeing things and of acting accordingly.

For when a man is overjoyed or contrariwise suffering excessively from pain, being in haste to seize on the one and avoid the other beyond measure, he is unable either to see or to hear anything correctly, and he is at such a time distraught and wholly incapable of exercising reason (*Timaeus*, 86B-C).

The second group of evils comes from an excess of seed which forms itself in the marrow, producing excessive pleasures and pains, and passions without limit. The man struck by this excess, finds himself in the following condition: "He ... comes to be in a state of madness for the most part of his life because of those greatest of pleasures and pains" (*Timaeus*, 86C-D).

At this point Plato expresses an exquisitely Greek moral judgment of extraordinary Hellenic magnanimity and of a strongly Socratic flavor. Of such a type of man he says the following:

He ... keeps his soul diseased and senseless by reason of the action of his body. Yet such a man is reputed to be voluntarily wicked and not diseased; although, in truth, this sexual incontinence, which is due for the most part to the abundance and fluidity of one substance because of the porosity of the bones, constitutes a disease of the soul. And indeed almost all those affections which are called by way of reproach "incontinence in pleasure," as though the wicked acted voluntarily, are wrongly so reproached; for no one is voluntarily wicked, but the wicked man becomes wicked by reason of some evil condition of body and unskilled nurture, and these are experiences which are hateful to everyone and involuntary (*Timaeus*, 86 D-E).

Plato also holds that certain diseases derive from a bad education. In the first place, certain diseases derive from bad city administration where bad discourses are spread publicly and privately, and, consequently,

Person, Society and Value

Towards a Personalist Concept of Health

Taboada, P.; Cuddeback, K.F.; Donohue-White, P. (Eds.)

2002, X, 262 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0503-9