

**PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS OF
MEDICINE: PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
BEFORE THE AMERICAN MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION AT ITS THIRTIETH ANNUAL
SESSION, ATLANTA, GA., MAY 6, 1879**

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Philosophical problems of medicine: Presidential Address Before the American Medical Association at its thirtieth annual session, Atlanta, GA., May 6, 1879 by Theophilus Parvin

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THEOPHILUS PARVIN

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ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN:—

SCIENCE, Literature, Philosophy, and Theology are the great subjects of human study. Science is the knowledge of nature and of nature's laws. Literature, including history, is the representation of man's life; it tells his joys and sorrows, his aspirations and achievements, his victories and defeats, his glory and shame; it is "man's autobiography." Philosophy studies man's psychical nature, both in its mental and moral manifestations; it seeks to discover the relation he bears to the past and to the future, to nature and to the universe, and in its highest development brings the reflecting mind to believe in an ultimate unity, a great first cause, the fountain of all other causes, a power originant of them if not immanent in them. Theology discusses the being, attributes, and providence of the Divine, the uncreated, the eternal, whose existence philosophy in its sublimest aspirations maintains, even if that existence be not one of the fundamental convictions of the human mind.

Nevertheless, these divisions are in some degree arbitrary. For example, if there be a Divine Being, all-wise and all-powerful, and nature his creation, his name will be recorded on its pages; and to the study of such record, the title of natural theology has been given.

Moreover, man is a part of nature, made of the same material as countless other organisms, and subject to the same general laws, so that the science of physical man is a part of the science of nature. A complete knowledge of man, therefore, includes both science and philosophy.

That department of physical science which has for its objects the restoration from disease or injury, the preservation of human health and the prolongation of human life, is the queen of sciences, and in her royal right and in her grand work accepts

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the services of her handmaids, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, and botany, and commands the obedient subtle forces of nature.

And yet, if Medicine limits its knowledge to that of a mere machine, if its ultimate reason rests in the scalpel, retort, test-tube, and microscope, the whole of man's nature is not comprehended. Will, understanding, reason, conscience, are as surely a part of the human being as muscle and bone, nerve and vessel, liver and lung, brain and heart. Knowledge of the intellectual, of the emotive, and of the moral nature of man, of their laws and manifestations, is just as essential to the thoroughly furnished physician as any knowledge of the merely material organism.

With the marvellous advance made during recent years in some of the physical sciences, the light of their grand discoveries blazing about us, we are well-nigh blinded by the near and sudden glory, and some distant objects that we once saw distinctly, have altogether faded, or have grown so dim and shadowy that in "the strife of aching vision" we scarcely know what they are, where they are. Aristophanes, in one of his plays, ridiculing some of the philosophy of his day, taught that Vortex reigned in the place of Jupiter, and that the three gods in whom belief should be reposed were Chaos, the Clouds, and the Tongue. Twenty-three centuries had nearly passed and Comte found the Jupiter in man; the apotheosis of humanity was declared. Twenty-three centuries have passed, and in some of the literature of the day, philosophical and scientific, there might be found reason to repeat the very jest of the Greek poet.

The heavens here bright with new light; there dark with the disappearance of the old. We breathe an atmosphere of doubt—at any rate, of anxious inquiry—and sometimes find our footsteps tottering and uncertain.¹⁸ Nay, sometimes we seem wrapped in the thick darkness of conflicting opinions, and like Ajax in the long night of strife pray most earnestly for the light of day.

Science,² says one of its most distinguished American representatives, adopting the teaching of Lord Bacon, is the practical interrogation of nature. Let us interrogate medicine, discuss

* The numerals in the text refer to notes at the end of the Address.

some of its philosophical problems, and see if it makes any response to most earnest questionings of the human soul.

At the very outset of our inquiries is, Why does Medicine exist? What reason for it? It is born of human sympathy; it springs from the wants of man, and is an evidence of human power; it lives because it can live—it has a right to live. Montaigne wittily remarked that he rode his horse, not that he knew that he had any such right—possibly the horse had a right to ride him—but because the horse let him. Doctors, however, do not practise physic because the people let them, but because the people want them, demand them. Medicine comes in response to the cry of human suffering—of man's writhing with pain, or starting back, in instinctive horror, from imminent death.

Pain is the first lesson in the book of evil which most human beings, at one time or another of their lives, read in such bitterness of sorrow. "The idea of evil is a generalization from the perception of pain."³

And here we are brought face to face with this problem of physical suffering, this mystery of pain. "Pain expresses an ultimate fact of human consciousness, a primary experience of the human mind, resolvable into nothing more general or more fundamental than itself."⁴ But why is this fact?

In reading John Stuart Mill,⁵ one is almost tempted to believe that a worse than Nero is enthroned in nature, and is inflicting cruelties upon the human race, with less reason than the mistress in Juvenal chastised her slave.⁶

Herbert Spencer⁷ rejects a Supreme Beneficence, because of the existence of suffering on the part of man and inferior creatures.

Among the reasons for the existence of pain, the most obvious is that which the word itself signifies. Often, indeed, pain is punitive. Tracing the word to its Greek⁸ derivation, we find that it originally meant blood-money, or compensation for the killing of a kinsman, while the Latin *poena* simply expresses punishment.⁹

Undoubtedly, infractions of the laws of health or of virtue generally bring punishment, but not always or alone to the offender. Sometimes the wave of suffering widens, bearing innocent and guilty to a common ruin, or sweeps away only the innocent.

Countless children bear in their bones and written upon their faces, the sins, often of their fathers, sometimes of their mothers. Many a pure wife walks a *via dolorosa*, made for her by a licentious husband.

Pain is protective. This conservative power makes it one of the most efficient guardians of health.

The diagnostic value of pain is very great. Pain not only warns the patient of the approach or the presence of disease, but also guides the physician to its recognition and in its treatment.

There are moral uses of pain. Pain is a discipline: Jeremy Taylor has declared with his characteristic eloquence, "Softness is for slaves and beasts, for minstrels and useless persons, for such who cannot ascend higher than the state of a fair ox, or a servant entertained for vainer offices; but the man who designs his son for nobler employments, to honors and to triumphs, to consular dignities and presidencies of councils, loves to see him pale with study, panting with labor, hardened with sufferance, or eminent by dangers."

An attack of sickness may lead to an entire reformation of life. Then, too, what revelations of true nobleness, of all that is gentle and beautiful, unselfish and loving, have we witnessed on the part of some who were called to endure most painful, yea loathsome, yea hopeless disease; and we were ready to exclaim—

"How sublime a thing it is to suffer and be strong."

The Prometheus Vincetus is one of the grandest ideals of ancient mythology.

One of the most distinguished of British scientific men, Prof. Owen, has admirably¹⁰ depicted the beneficial subjective influence of suffering.

So, too, in the sympathy that human suffering evokes, the skill, the kindness, the self-sacrifice, and the unwearied, ever-watchful attention manifested for its relief, we see beneficial results. Take away, for example, those religious orders of women whose whole lives are consecrated to the care of the sick, women in regard to many a one of whom we might apply the words of Tennyson—

"Her eyes are homes of silent prayer,
Her loves in higher love endure"—

and one of the brightest pages of human history is blotted out. Thus, too, of all other noble, self-sacrificing remedial agencies for the sick.

What divine beauty of life, making sunshine in a shady place, is manifested by wife or mother, sister or daughter, when the home is entered by disease. There is no gloom of suffering too dark for woman's smile not to lessen, no depth of distress too profound for woman's sympathy and helpful hand not to reach.

Mr. Mill thinks it quite a natural question, Whether so complicated a machine as the human body could not have been made to last longer, and not get so easily out of order? Reference will be made to the first part of the question hereafter, and the answer that most physicians would make to the second part would be, that considering the needless wear and tear, and the general ill-usage, either from ignorance or neglect, these bodies get, it is wonderful they are not oftener out of order. Moreover, the experience of the vast majority of human beings testifies that so far as physical suffering is concerned, the good greatly overbalances the evil; days of health have been much more frequent than days of sickness.

Even with the various utilities of pain, both direct and indirect, that have been mentioned, we still must refer to it as often a mystery; much is revealed, but much else is hidden. The different attempted solutions of this remaining mystery we omit, only quoting in concluding the topic the eloquent words, in reference to it, of a distinguished London surgeon, the late Mr. Hinton.¹¹ "A touch might transform it wholly. One flash of light from the Unseen, one word spoken by God, might suffice to make the dark places bright, and wrap the sorrow-stricken heart of man in the wonder of an unutterable glory."

And yet one thought more. Mr. Jevons,¹² at the close of a paragraph referring to the presence of pain, and the difficult reconciliation of the fact with the hypothesis of a creator all-powerful and all-benevolent, remarks: "We perpetually find ourselves in the position of finite minds attempting infinite problems, and can we be sure that where we see contradiction an infinite intelligence might not discover perfect logical harmony?"

A similar view is found in these words of one of the most gifted poets of the century, Mrs. Browning:—

"Experience, like a pale musician, holds
 A dulcimer of patience in his hand ;
 Whence harmonies we cannot understand
 Of God's will in the worlds, the strain unfolds
 In sad, perplexed minors.
 We murmur, 'Where is any certain tune
 Of measured music in such notes as these ?'
 But angels leaning from their golden seats
 Are not so minded. Their fine ear hath one
 The issue of completed cadences."

Greater than the mystery of life, it has been well said, is the mystery of death to child and savage. Nay, it is one of the greatest of mysteries unto all. But death is the law of all earthly existence. Lord Bacon has said that possibly it is as easy to die as to be born; certainly it is as natural; death is the necessary sequence of life—sequence, not consequence, for not death, but the continuance, the perpetuation of life is the purpose, the end of life. "The individual life is the continuation of anterior, and the fountain of ulterior lives."

Stahl, in the extraordinary powers with which he invested the Anima, making it the ruler and the governor of the body, has asked, "Since men can live for a time, why not always?"

While medicine has done much, and will do more to prolong the average of human life, the perpetuation of the individual existence is as vain a hope as increasing the physical development to that of the fabled Titans.

Storms on sea and on land, war, famine, pestilence, earthquakes, fire and flood, and the various so-called accidents on ship and on shore, have hurried millions to untimely graves. Even if none of these cut short human life, diseases in numerous forms—coming to us from our ancestry, coming from without or developed from within, coming at every stage of life—bear to the great majority the accursed shears of Atropos, so that few live to reach the goal of old age "weary, wayworn, and broken with the storms of life." Fontenelle, dying at ninety-nine years, when asked what he experienced, replied, simply the difficulty of existing.

To those who have thus had their days prolonged, death is inevitable from changes in the organism, degeneration of tissue rendering the performance of life's functions impossible.

It were a grievous thing if old men did not die, says Dr. Maudsley, for in that sad case the world's movement onward to

where it is going would be very sluggish if it were not actually arrested. So, too, human longevity would violate that proportion established between the different stages of life in all the mammalia, or by the prolongation of the earlier stages in man would bring increased cares, casualties and liabilities to disease and death. It is not difficult, as Dr. Symonds has stated, to discover in the limitation of our existence its fitness to our constitution, and to the universal frame of things.

Life is sufficient for all its purposes if well employed, was the just observation of Dr. Johnson, "and what follower of medicine can forget that the immortal sage of Cos, by the example which he afforded in his well-spent life, disarmed his own antithesis of its woeful point," ο βίος βραχὺς ἢ δε τελευτῆ μάχρη.¹³

But what is this man thus made subject to disease and death, man whose *Misereres* are the invocation of the physician, and whose most grateful *Te Deums* ascend when the physician's skill has restored health or rescued life?

If, to the poets,¹⁴ "one impulse from a vernal wood" has an important lesson "of moral evil and of good"—and the¹⁵ "flower in the crannied wall" has the secret of man and of God—how much clearer revelation of high truths the proper study of man might make to physicians.

Consider the very commencement of human life in the fecundated ovum. Behold a cell $\frac{1}{10}$ of an inch in diameter, an ovum which neither chemistry nor the microscope can distinguish from the common mammalian ovum. And yet, in that human ovum there dwell physical potentialities, species, race, family, individuality; in that ovum there is the assured promise of all organs that, in their harmony and co-ordination, make a perfect organism. In every living germ, said the great French physiologist, Claude Bernard, there is a directing idea which is developed and manifested by the organization. One by whom some of us were instructed in our student days, the late Dr. Samuel Jackson, of the University of Pennsylvania, in¹⁶ eloquent terms, declared that the ideal plan of the universe, in the minute as in the vast, for each individual as for the whole, must have preëxisted to the creation in the Divine mind. Does not this correspond with the teaching of Plato who made the causes of things an efficient architect, ideas and matter? But before Plato, the voice of one of earth's most famous kings bowing before the throne of the Author of existence, declared, "My