

Toward a More Natural Medicine

PATRICK GUINAN

ABSTRACT Modern science and culture attempt to dominate and control nature. Unfortunately contemporary medicine has followed this lead. Traditionally religion has recognized the order and goodness in the natural order and has encouraged followers to comply with the rules of nature. Medicine, from Hippocratic times, has viewed the physician as an assistant to nature. Contemporary medicine while employing modern science, would be well advised to also recognize the healing effects of religion's admonition to acknowledge and respect the wisdom of nature.

KEY WORDS nature medicine, physician

In 1986 Leon Kass published a book, "Toward a More Natural Science"¹ In it he defined natural as "true to life as found and lived"² He further discussed "teleology, Darwinism, and the place of man"³ and concluded that nature has purpose and that the Hippocratic Oath repeatedly emphasized the fact that the physician must assist nature to maintain health, and in doing so the physician will be ethical. His discussions of medicine apply these principles to the relationship between the doctor and the patient.

The topic of what is "nature" and how its insights apply to human behavior, in this instance medicine, are particularly relevant. Although we live in, and benefit from, a modern scientific culture there has been an increasing unease with the dehumanizing aspects of seemingly out of control technology and the resultant mass materialistic consumerism. This unease is reflected in a growing concern with environmental issues and, in medicine, with the rapid growth in alternative or non-traditional medicine. Dr. Kass's reflections on "natural science" are particularly relevant.

Kass observes that nature, far from being simply the result of evolution and blind chance, as modern positivistic science has taught our culture, tells us that our concerns for justice, freedom, and knowledge itself, indicate that human beings have a self evident non-material dimension. This human as-

Dr. Patrick Guinan is an associate professor in the Department of Urology of the University of Illinois-Chicago College of Medicine. He has over 200 published articles and book chapters. He is a practicing surgeon and has an interest in bioethics. He serves on the Ethics Committees of both the University of Illinois and Cook County Hospitals.

pect of nature includes ethics and, in medicine, is perhaps best exemplified by the Hippocratic medical ethical tradition

While we are most familiar with the Greek medical tradition as reflected in today's Western bioethical guidelines, there are several other major cultural traditions Moslem, Hindu, Chinese and others These traditions developed from human experience, the experience of sickness, suffering, and death being one of the most primal and universal In all societies certain members, physicians, were designated as proficient in healing and a basic doctor-patient relationship was recognized While initially there were religious and magic overtones, in all major cultures the physician appears to have observed nature and developed objective clinical criteria to diagnose and treat human disease In dealing with illness the physician and patient have historically worked in conformity with nature

The purpose of this paper is to 1) Describe Kass's understanding of a "natural" science 2) Explain the relationship between nature and the medical ethic, and finally 3) Explore the transcultural conformity to this ethic

I A natural science

For Kass, who in addition to being a physician, is also a scientist (having a doctorate in biochemistry), nature is marvelous in its many manifestations of purposiveness Throughout the animal kingdom there are innumerable examples of the integration of form and function to achieve an end benefitting the involved species There is a harmony between the environment and the accommodations of various life forms, up to and including the human Nature and mankind have coexisted harmoniously until quite recently when our technology appears to have caused environmental damage

Unfortunately the Enlightenment challenged and changed the symbiotic relationship between man and nature with a new understanding of science Kass observes that modern science measures the singular and the material and does not observe the bigger picture, the tendency of nature toward purpose and fulfillment He notes that the tension between the cult of modern science and the understanding of practically all prior human cultures began about three hundred years ago when Roger Bacon and Rene Descartes projected "the vision of the mastery of nature"⁴ For all of recorded history prior to the Enlightenment man accommodated to, and conformed with, nature With the scientific discoveries in chemistry, physics and biology it appeared that man need no longer be subservient to, but could now control and dominate nature The scientific understanding of physiology, pathology, and particularly pharmacology seemed to confirm this mastery of man over nature in the field of medicine as well This development, coincidentally, has profound cultural implications with a decline in the influence of transcendent religions and a rise in the spirit of human autonomy

But can nature be mastered? The modern age, or era of the Enlightenment, appears to be in decline and we are now entering a post-modern time. Our attempt to master nature has resulted in environmental problems perhaps the most serious of which are atmospheric imbalances resulting in apparent global warming. It appears that we must be more in conformity with nature rather than dominating it.

Kass counters the Enlightenment science of blind chance with a more “natural science,” or as he defines it, a science “true to life as found and lived.” This world can be science that looks beyond atoms, molecules and genes and sees purpose and teleology. We look at human history and experience, and note rationality and freedom, but also a sense of right and wrong, which is synonymous with morality and ethics.

In summary, Dr. Kass tells us that if we reflect on our experience we realize that nature has purpose, is intelligible, and our actions have moral consequences. For Kass the harmonious interface between nature and man is nowhere better exemplified than in medicine. The physician works with nature to the benefit of the patient.

II Nature and medical ethics

Kass’s plea for a more natural science or a science “true to life as found and lived” as opposed to a science intent on control or a “mastery of nature” receives impetus from his understanding of medicine. The goal of medicine is promoting the health of the patient. By health Kass means “the well working of the organism as a whole.”⁵ While the newer developments in pharmacology and science are valuable they should be compatible with the natural human condition which conforms with “a natural science.” Medicine must be “true to life as found and lived.” Human beings are more than physical components, they are persons. Greek medicine realized this and incorporated the more natural science into the Hippocratic Oath.

The Oath assumes that medicine is a practical art and that it is a moral art. It is an art because in treating a sick patient the physician diagnoses and treats by the active observation of symptoms and discovery of signs, and then intervenes with dietetics or pharmacology. Medicine is a moral art because the Oath is specific as to what a physician can, and most importantly cannot, do. In other words what is ethical. A physician first and foremost cannot harm (*primum non nocere*). But there are many other proscriptions. Among others, the physician also cannot break a confidence, nor can he/she take sexual advantage of a patient. Interestingly, Hippocratic morality negates social status: a physician must treat a slave as he would a freeman. Medicine is preeminently a moral art.

Kass notes that the wisdom of the Hippocratic Oath resides in the fact that it directs the physician to assist living nature. “The physician is an assistant

to nature”⁶ and more importantly “the doctor is nature’s cooperative ally and not its master”⁷ A doctor’s relationship with his patient is a moral, or ethical relationship. Medicine is a moral art. Kass feels so strongly that medicine embodies the ideal of the “natural” in its ethical principles, as enumerated in the Oath, that he states that the “ethic of medicine rightly understood, could come to be the basis of ethics generally”⁸

Although the Hippocratic Code guided physicians for 2500 years, for a variety of reasons, the imperative it once carried has been diminished. This is unfortunate because the Hippocratic Oath has insights that can benefit both physicians and patients today.

Summarizing, Dr. Kass believes that the Hippocratic Oath is a watershed ethical document. It contains several moral imperatives derived from insights into human nature. Among others are included: respect persons, treat others equally and finally do not harm. Medicine is a moral art and the Hippocratic imperatives are the basis of much of human ethics. That the ethics of the healing art are reflected in nature as “found and lived” is demonstrated by the consistency of medical ethical codes across cultural boundaries.

III Transcultural Affirmation

There are many similarities of the various medical ethical codes of the major human cultures.⁹ In general, the medical ethical traditions of all major cultures have tended to respect nature. They have attempted to find balance and accommodate to natural forces. This may have been, in part, because they couldn’t effectively influence nature, and therefore had no choice. Be that as it may, these cultures saw life as good and to be respected. In general, abortion, suicide, and euthanasia were forbidden. Man was expected to live in harmony with nature.

While nature tends toward wholeness, disease, whether spontaneous or self-inflicted, has been the lot of humankind from before recorded history. Initially men attributed physical disease to divine intervention. In primitive societies the medicine man or shaman was a combined physician and priest but as cultures developed a clear distinction was made between the two. Early recorded history in both Mesopotamia and Egypt¹⁰ indicates that physicians were clearly distinguished from priests. Indeed before there were oaths to be sworn to by doctors there were laws, such as those of Hammurabi and Imhotep, governing the physician’s conduct.

It is possible to compare Greek, Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Hindu and Chinese traditions according to the four principles elucidated in the eight paragraphs of the Hippocratic Oath. These are 1 the invocation of a higher power, 2 the resolve not to harm the patient, 3 respect for the privacy and confidentiality of the patient and finally, 4 regard for the profession and one’s teacher.

The Greek medical tradition, associated with Hippocrates (430–377 BC) and elaborated by his followers originated in the golden age of Greek intellectual genius. The fact that the Hippocratic corpus may have been influenced by Pythagorean philosophy is somewhat immaterial because it was the former ethical tradition which was eventually associated with Greek medicine which has had a profound influence on subsequent Christian, Jewish and Moslem physicians.

Roman medicine, while technically advanced by Galen and others, retained the Hippocratic ethic which in turn was adopted by the Christian and subsequent European physicians after Constantine's Edict in 313 AD. St. Jerome commented favorably on the Hippocratic Oath.¹¹ Jewish medicine, while conforming to biblical strictures, was clinical in nature and not religious. Maimonides' prayer incorporated the four Hippocratic principles.¹² Moslem medicine was strongly influenced by the Greek schools of the eastern Mediterranean. The most recent formulation of the Islam Code of Medical Ethics is essentially a paraphrase of the Hippocratic Oath.¹³ It can appropriately be said that the Christian (or European), Jewish and Moslem medical communities continued, practically intact, the Hippocratic ethic.

The Hindu physician's code¹⁴ begins with an acknowledgment of the sacred fire and admonishes the physician not to injure or desert the patient even at the risk of his (the physician's) own livelihood or even life. It describes at length the doctor's obligation to the patient and his family, and also to his teachers and medical colleagues.

The Chinese physicians' code¹⁵ begins by recognizing the need for divine guidance. It continues by urging the physician to consider the patient's misery his own, and to relieve the patient's distress disregarding any inconvenience to himself. The physician should be competent and care for all patients, rich and poor.

It will be noted that medical codes of the various cultures tend to follow the outline of the Hippocratic Oath. There is a respect for nature and a tendency to work with nature to the betterment of the patient. The ethic of the codes is based on an acknowledgment of a divine authority and is mediated by virtue based on upright personal conduct. The physician becomes special by diligent learning, exemplary behavior, a respect for life and nature, and a recognition of the sacred.

Kass's observation about the Hippocratic Oath can be extrapolated as well to the medical codes of other great cultures. Medical ethics, as distilled through the wisdom of the great cultures and religions, reflects the natural tendency to respect life and do no harm. The interaction of a knowledgeable empathetic physician and a suffering patient represent one of the oldest, most profound, and ongoing of human experiences. It behooves physicians and future physicians to reflect on and absorb Kass's insights into a more natural medicine. As Dr. Kass observed, this medical ethic could be a paradigm for ethics in general.

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