

Happenings

Questions in Contemporary Medicine and the Philosophy of Charles Taylor October 27–28, 2007

Franco A. Carnevale

On October 27–28, 2007, a symposium titled Questions in Contemporary Medicine and the Philosophy of Charles Taylor was held in Montreal. It was convened by Franco A. Carnevale, RN, PhD (School of Nursing, McGill University), and Daniel Weinstock, PhD (Department of Philosophy, Université de Montréal). (“Medicine” is used in the generic sense, referring broadly to the health sciences and health care.)

Many scholars and practitioners in medicine and health care have become increasingly dissatisfied with the dominant philosophical conceptions available to them. A rather narrow form of discourse is prevalent, leaving a great many concerns unarticulated. These relate to a broader view of the challenges faced in health care as a practice and as a social institution. Many have turned to the ideas of the eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor to help address some of these concerns. Taylor’s work has had an extraordinary impact in the humanities and social sciences, and more recently in the health sciences. Taylor is recognized for his critique of cognitivist psychology and mechanistic conceptions of human agency, his analysis of the self in modernity, and the advancement of a hermeneutical framework for the human sciences. Patricia Benner has drawn heavily on Taylor’s philosophy in her own work.

This symposium brought together scholars from a variety of disciplines to critically examine how the philosophy of Charles Taylor can contribute to current discourses on questions in contemporary medicine. Medicine here is conceived broadly in terms of its epistemological, moral, political, and ontological dimensions. The symposium was aimed at advancing our thinking in the philosophy of medicine as well as the philosophy of Charles Taylor.

Invited scholars presented papers addressing one of the symposium’s four thematic domains (two scholars per domain), while discussants

presented their critical reflections on the papers. Professor Taylor was present to actively participate in and contribute to the discussions. The papers were as follows:

I. Epistemology and the (Human) Medical Sciences

Formation in Professional Education: An Examination of the Relationship between Theories of Meaning and Theories of the Self, by Patricia Benner
The Geistes/Naturwissenschaften Distinction Revisited, by Hubert L. Dreyfus
Discussant: Ian Gold

II. Ontological Conceptions of the Human Agent as Medical Subject/Object

Is Medical Hermeneutics Located beyond Ontology? Some Responses from the Clinical Realm, by Gilles Bibeau
Becoming Yourself with Drugs and Surgery, by Carl Elliott
Discussant: Natalie Stoljar

III. Examining the Moral Horizons of Medicine

On Metaphorical Concentration: Language and Meaning in Patient-Physician Relations, by Ronald A. Carson
The Ethical Significance of Illness Narrative: Toward a Theory of Hermeneutical Case Formulation as Gateway to Medical Ethics, by Dawson S. Schultz and Lydia V. Flasher
Discussant: Jane Rubin

IV. Political Problems in Medicine

The Politics of Alterity in the Clinical Encounter: Multicultural Medicine as an Arena for Building a Pluralistic Society, by Laurence Kirmayer
How Should Political Philosophy Think of Health? by Daniel Weinstock
Discussant: Vardit Ravitsky

These papers will be published as a collection. The symposium was funded through the generous support of the Centre de recherche d'éthique de l'Université de Montréal (Principal Sponsor), with additional support from the School of Nursing and the Biomedical Ethics Unit of McGill University.

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