

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Rethinking Descartes

Ripensare Cartesio

Rethinking Descartes is a brief contribution that seeks to encourage medical operators and clinicians to rethink René Descartes' Soul-Body Dualism

Sir,

In the near future, the investigational use of omic, *state-of-the-art* approaches deriving from the discoveries of the Human Genome Project (HGP), may permit the construction of a network of personal, clinical, molecular and physiological databases concerning individuals to proactively foresee complex health outcomes and onset of diseases, to predict, prevent diseases and cure illnesses. However, these clinical skills, even if advanced, are not enough.

Although the tools provided by the present technology have remarkably improved diagnostic and therapeutic approaches, today's medicine has been blamed for leaning too heavy on technological and mechanistic approaches at patients' expense (1).

Isabel Allende, a contemporary Chilean writer, in her masterpiece *Paula*, a memoir about the life and death and of her daughter, wrote, "*Every morning I prowls the corridors of the sixth floor looking for the specialist [...]. He holds your life in his hands [...] He seems more interested in the statistics from his computer and formulas from his laboratory than in your body lying crucified on this bed*". She highlights the limitations and defeats of therapeutic approaches that rely largely on assessment of symptoms' data and analysis (2).

The gold standard of a Patient-centered Medicine – or, better, of a Patient-centered Care - should not be forgotten, because medicine is for the patient, for those who are sick, and physicians should not take for granted or overlook pain and suffering.

In contemporary medicine, both mechanistic approaches and the heavy interference of the technology have been attributed for years to Descartes' dualism and reductionism.

Valued authors claim that "*The field, which is facing crisis today, is that of medicine, and the paradigmatic stance that is responsible for the crisis is Cartesian dualism - a view that mind and body are essentially separate entities*." (3); and "[o]ne unspoken philosophical position underlying modern healthcare is a form of Cartesianism, the idea that bodies are machines and that clinicians are technicians whose job it is to repair those machines" (4).

It needs to be underlined that Descartes never drew distinction between soul and mind, he wrote, "*I consider the mind not as a part of the soul but as the thinking soul in its entirety*" (5, 6).

A lot has been written on Descartes' mind/soul-body, or just soul-body dualism, and how it has influenced the following (later) medical scientific breakthroughs; however, Descartes was not the first philosopher to debate this important philosophical issue.

The emphasis on soul-body dualism appears also in Plato, who wrote "*[...] the soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same [...]*" (7). Two thousand years later Descartes stated, "*From this it follows that the human body may indeed*

easily enough perish, but the mind or soul of man (I make no distinction between them) is owing to its nature immortal” (5, 6).

Albeit, the soul-body dualism has always been an important philosophical topic, several authors still consider Descartes as “*the father of the anthropological dualism*” and impute him to today’s medicine short consideration of social and psychological factors (8).

Has Descartes’ thought been misinterpreted?

Excerpts from essays *Meditations on first Philosophy* and *Passion of the Soul* may indeed provide evidence that the French philosopher has reasoned about the influence of the soul on the body and cast some doubts on the widespread bias that, for Descartes, the human body was just a machine.

In the Sixth Meditation, ‘*The Existence of Material Things, and the real Distinction between Mind and Body*’, from ‘*Meditations of first Philosophy*’, Descartes wrote, “[...] *nature also teaches me, through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I (a thinking thing) am not merely in my body as a sailor is in a ship. Rather, I am closely joined to it—intermingled with it, so to speak—so that it and I form a unit [...]. These sensations are confused mental events that arise from the union - the intermingling, as it were - of the mind with the body*”.

Descartes has firmly stated the “*real distinction between mind and body*”. However, he has also specified that the two are blended as underlined by Duncan, “*while Descartes describes bodily processes in mechanical terms, and defines mind and body as separate substances, the unity of the human body and mind are an integral part of his*” (6, 9).

In his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes continues his reasoning on the nature, functions and interactions between body and soul, “[f]or there are two things in the human soul on which all the knowledge we can have of its nature depends: one of which is that it thinks and the other is that, being united to the body, [...] I will try here to explain the manner in which I conceive the union of the soul with the body and how the soul has the power [force] to move it” (10).

Descartes had an enduring friendship with Elisabeth of Bohemia, he was preoccupied about her and worried for her bad health. He believed that her poor health was related to her distress linked to the Princess’s family tragic events. In one of his exchange of letters he stated, “*The most common cause of a low-grade fever is sadness; and fortune’s stubborn persistence in persecuting your family gives you sources of distress [...] I would be afraid that you couldn’t recover from this, if it weren’t for the fact that you keep your soul content despite fortune’s blows, doing this through the power of your virtue*”.

Moreover, ‘*The Passions of the Soul*’ was first written to explain to Elisabeth how body and soul interact with one another, to help her to manage her feelings in order to overcome her ailments, which were probably related to her afflictions. In the same essay, Descartes asserted, “*Next I note also that we do not observe the existence of any subject which more immediately acts upon our soul than the body to which it is joined, and that we must consequently consider that what in the soul is a passion is in the body, commonly speaking, an action*”, leaving open the possibility of psychic influences on health and illness (11).

A lot has been written on Descartes, the French philosopher has been predominantly criticized for lacking in clarity on how body and soul join and interact with one another (12, 13).

Why is Descartes to blame? Actually, the soul-body dualism is still an open issue, it has been hotly debated ever since and still remained unsolved.

When we are debating on Cartesian soul-body dualism, it should be kept in mind that René Descartes (1596-1650) was both philosopher and scientist and was contemporary of Galileo Galilei. In the seventeenth century, a scientific revolution began, and the French philosopher was one of the most important players of these changes: “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am) was his philosophical proposition (14).

Some scholars consider Descartes a devoted believer. According this stance, Descartes needed to apply a clear separation of body and soul to adopt the scientific methods pursued by Bacon and then by Galilei, still fulfilling his strong Belief in God and respect for the Catholic Church requirements. (14-16).

Furthermore, Descartes’ should be evaluated also by considering his ‘tree of knowledge’, “*PHILOSOPHY signifies the study of wisdom [...] a perfect knowledge of all that man can know, as well for the conduct*

of his life as for the preservation of his health and the discovery of all the arts, [...]. Philosophy is like a tree, of which Metaphysics is the root, Physics the trunk, and all the other sciences the branches that grow out of this trunk, which are reduced to three principal, namely, Medicine, Mechanics, and Ethics” (17).

Descartes asserts that Medicine and relevant fruits derive from the wisdom of Philosophy, built on Metaphysics and Physics, as wished by Hippocrates. The Greek physician, considered as the father of medicine, hoped for a physician, who managed to philosophically pursuing the aim of treating the patients on the basis of scientific knowledge, “*ιατρός γὰρ φιλόσοφος ισόθεος*” (for a physician that is a philosopher is godlike), are his words (18).

“*Descartes on emotions, reason, and the adaptive unconscious: The pioneer behind the caricature*”, a recent article by Kirkebøen Geir, underlines how the French philosopher’s thoughts have been discussed by outstanding scholars “*without referring to either Descartes’ voluminous works [...] or the extensive historical research on his work*” and manages to confute misinterpretation of Descartes’ through the analysis of the French philosopher’s books and letters (7).

In conclusion, it may be worthwhile re-reading the writings of the French philosopher and scientist, and working on some of them over again. Bearing in mind the merging between Hippocrates and Descartes, along with the awareness that mind/soul and body interaction is an issue not defined yet, it may open up innovative areas of interpretations and new definition may arise leading to novel concepts relevant for medical care.

Descartes has still much to teach us!

Yours faithfully,

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Conflict of interest statement

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