

Sydenham's "Theologia Rationalis" and Ethics; an Aspect of the Aristotelian Tradition

SYDENHAM'IN "THEOLOGIA RATIONALIS"İ VE ETİK: ARİSTO GELENEĞİNE BİR BAKIŞ

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Summary

Over a hundred years ago Sydenham's unpublished manuscript entitled "Theologia Rationalis" was acknowledged to be one of the most important milestones for a better understanding of his clinical theory and practice. Nevertheless little or no interest has been shown in it until today. This paper is, to our knowledge, a first attempt at a thorough analysis of this text, aiming to point out the main guidelines along which Sydenham's moral thinking developed. We suggest that, apart from his puritan and utilitarian upbringing, Sydenham was also influenced by Aristotelian Ethics and by Hippocrates. Hence, he formed a kind of medicomoral intellectual system, in which both utilitarian and deontological (in modern terminology) principles coexist. Furthermore, Sydenham's moral speculation poses problems, ideas and questions that can prove useful even to modern biomedical ethics.

Key Words: Biomedical Ethics, Sydenham, Aristotelian Ethics

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Özet

Yüzyıldan fazla bir zaman önce, Sydenham'ın "Theologia Rationalis" adlı yayınlanmamış yazması, onun klinik teori ve pratiğinin daha iyi anlaşılması için en önemli köşe taşlarından biri olarak kabul oldu. Ancak bugüne kadar ona hiçbir ya da en ufak bir ilgi gösterilmedi. Bu makale, Sydenham'ın ahlaki düşüncesinin geliştiği ana klavuzu göstermeyi gaye edinerek bu metnin tam bir analizini yapmaya bir ilk teşebbüstür. Bu çalışmada onun faydacı görüşünden ayrı olarak Aristo ve Hipokrat etiğinden aynı zamanda etkilendiğini belirtiyoruz. Böylece, hem faydacı, hem de deontolojik (modern terminolojide) ilkelerin bulunduğu bir cins tıbbi, ahlaki bir sistem oluşturdu. Ayrıca Sydenham'ın ahlaki spekülasyonu modern biyoetikte yararlılığı kanıtlanabilen problemleri, fikirleri ve soruları ortaya koyar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Biyomedikal Etik, Sydenham, Aristo Etiği

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"...Considering my Self to be part of Common nature of mankind hew'd as it were out of the same block, and likewise out of gratitude to the common Father of us all, I find myself engaged not to hurt, but by all means I can to benefit mankind" (1).

The words belong to one of the greatest English clinicians of the 17th century, the "English Hippocrates", Thomas Sydenham. They are found in his essay "Theologia Rationalis"(T.R.), i.e. "Rational Theology", which had not been published until 1850 (2).

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The Historical Frame

The exact date when the essay was written is still not known. Sydenham's most significant biographers have avoided dating it (3), while Jeffrey Boss has suggested that it must have been written "some time after 1660" (4) when Sydenham was already practising medicine in London. Four versions of the original text are available, while a complete edition is to be found in Kenneth Dewhurst's "Dr. Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689); his life and original writings", published by the Wellcome Institute, 1966.

The title of the manuscript reveals an attempt at connecting Renaissance rationalism with Sydenham's religious idealism. Sydenham's religiosity should mainly be seen as an effect of his

puritan and revolutionary upbringing, which probably influenced his decision to participate in the English Civil War (1642-1652) on the side of Oliver Cromwell. This, however, is a historical matter. "Theologia Rationalis" poses questions that extend beyond the narrow frameworks of both political history and medical practice and puzzle modern thinkers.

It is a fact that many 17th century physicians had a rather good philosophical education. Many well known philosophers of the time had also studied medicine, for instance John Locke, the founder of modern empiricism and Sydenham's close friend and collaborator. This seems quite reasonable at a time when modern science was first getting under way, a period therefore of intense intellectual effort and a search for new principles. Sydenham's best known work, "Observationae Medicae" ("Medical Observations"), 1676, an enlarged edition of his "Methodus Curandi Febres" (i.e. "Method for Curing Fevers", first published in 1666), reflects some philosophical ideas that can be found, for the first time in an elaborated and systematized way, in "Theologia Rationalis". It is quite possible that Sydenham wrote the essay some time between 1667 and 1672 as, despite the lack of chronological evidence, this was exactly the period of his closest collaboration with the physician-philosopher John Locke, another thinker with deep religious interests. Additional arguments are:

a) Sydenham had reproached himself severely for having left London for a period of time during the Great Plague in 1665, a fact that might be responsible for his intense moral consideration thereafter;

b) as proved by a letter of Andrew Cunningham to Locke in 1699, the latter possessed a copy of the manuscript;

c) a synopsis of the most significant moral views expressed in "Theologia Rationalis" can be found in the preface of Sydenham's another manuscript, the "Medical Observations", which was written in collaboration with Locke, mainly between 1669-1671 (5) and constituted the raw material for the writing of "Observationae Medicae", his opus magnum, in 1676; and finally,

d) Sydenham's collaboration with Locke was suddenly interrupted for political reasons in 1672 and never completely restored, mainly due to the latter's long exile abroad.

Epistemology and Ethics

In the last decades of 19th century, the value of T.R. for our better understanding of Sydenham's medical work was acknowledged by an eminent professor in theology, John Cairns. Despite this fact, modern research has shown little or no concern for the text. In addition, while the title "Theologia Rationalis" alludes to the author's attempt at a rational proof of justification of God's existence, the content mostly consists of the moral consequences thereof. Hence, one ought to agree with Cairns that the essay "is quite misnamed. It should be "Ethica Rationalis or Naturalis", i.e. "Rational (or Natural) Ethics" (6).

From another point of view Cairns' interpretation of the term "rational" as "natural" makes its sense clearer. In general "rational" may mean two things:

a) Dominance of the spirit over the sensory experience, in accordance, i.e., with Cartesian thinking: cogito ergo sum, and in Greek noesiarchia (from nous = mind/spirit and archo = rule/govern).

b) Implementation of rational methods as distinct from mystical or supernatural ones: in Greek logokratia (from logos = reason/rational thinking and kratos = power/rule/authority).

According to the former interpretation, the term "rational" may be associated with philosophical idealism, and, on epistemological grounds, may lead to the denial of value to both senses and experience. The latter interpretation may well be accepted by an idealist, a materialist or a sceptic as epistemologically valuable, and it is congruent with Cairns' interpretation of the term.

Sydenham, being unaware of our -isms (idealism, materialism, positivism and so on), in T.R., while trying to offer rationales taken from the natural world in order to prove the existence of a Superior Mind, is nevertheless more interested in ethics. His prime concern is to investigate "how far the light of nature, if closely adverted to, may be extended towards the making us good men" (7).

In grappling with this ancient (Socratic) question, Sydenham finds that knowledge alone is not sufficient to prevent humanity from being tempted into immorality. That is, of course, an Aristotelian stance; but while Aristotle thought of moral practice as of superior value to moral knowledge, Sydenham thinks that prevention of evil can be primarily effected by strong faith in a rewarding Deity.

This is a puritan stance, and Sydenham undertook the task to support it with such rationales as follows: "...there being such order in those particular bodies, whether Sublunary or Celestial, both in reference to one another and to themselves, and not being the last footsteps of Counsel or reason to be found in any of them by which they can contribute anything towards the production of this admirable Order we call nature; the same must be the contrivance of a wise and powerful Being, both without them, and in a condition above them, which we call God" (8).

Ontology and Ethics

Besides his constant use of the Aristotelian vocabulary (Sublunary, Celestial, etc.), Sydenham's ontology is synchronous with Renaissance and post-Renaissance scientific thought, and anticipates the scientific justification of the cosmic perfection that will be found in the "Principia Mathematica" two or three decades later. However, Sydenham's God, unlike Newton's God, is not merely a Creator who, having once set down the natural laws, never interfered thereafter with the life of His creations. Sydenham believes that "...if I shall be shipwreckt far at sea I must need be drowned, yet towards the preserving me from this mischief he [i.e., God] may be pleased so to dispose the previous Circumstances of my Will and other things, as to prevent my going to Sea, and so in this and in other things he may hinder the Occasions leading to my destruction" (9).

The conception of God as an active agent within the human drama does not necessarily contradict the freedom of human will, at least in Sydenham's opinion. However, this conception underlines the imperfectness of mankind, which results from man's dual nature: humans are animals and, hence, subjected to the restrictions of biological necessity;

but they are also intellectual beings endowed by their Creator with the potential to suppress their brutal instincts by attending to their conscience.

Sydenham's acceptance of the animal part of man is interesting. He does not see the body as the prison of the soul; so his point of view is Aristotelian rather than Platonic. This seems quite comprehensible, since Sydenham also accepts the objectivity of the material world, although he does not accept its self-existence. In his effort to demonstrate what one would nowadays call "the materialist's deception", Sydenham suggests that "...science... is either not at all or very little, showing us only things as they consist in matter of fact, and not leading us up into the Causes and efficiencies" (10).

The Need for Rational Ethics

Much has been written on Sydenham's epistemological agnosticism (11). The interesting point here is that this rationale is used by him just to support the need for what he calls "Moral Science". Starting from here, Sydenham tries to elicit moral arguments for God's existence. In his mind, an amoral thinker may well say that there is not "sufficient retribution made for the greatest virtues or vices in this life" (12); Sydenham would also agree with him that "bad men many times enjoy a great affluence of Comforts, and good men are oppress'd with all kinds of misery" (13). However, the Superior Mind who is responsible for the creation of perfect order in the natural world would never give His consent to this undesirable situation. Hence, injustice that does exist within human society can never be used as an argument in support of the nonexistence of Divine Justice. On the contrary, since the unjust have to be punished and just but suffering people have to gain some kind of reward, divine trial will certainly take place at some time, even if after death. The immorality of the soul is well demonstrated, according to Sydenham, when we address and analyze moral problems soberly. In so doing, we shall end up rejecting the possibility that evil will eventually prevail (14).

For the same reasons, Sydenham cannot share the hope of pagan philosophers that human conscience will prove sufficient in solving the problem of justice: the Stoics were wrong at suggesting that licentiousness has by itself the power to dissuade

people from evil thoughts; Cicero (whom Sydenham admired) was also wrong when he asserted that virtue is desirable in itself. Virtues (and vices) are not self-sufficient, Sydenham says, because when "they are not pleasing, what motive is there to me to embrace them? (15)"

In this way strict deontological thinking is refuted. Reading the above lines one may instantly recall Aristotelian connections between virtues and happiness, happiness and pleasure, pleasure and good. Morality is not a matter of theoretical exercise, but the effect of everyday activity, at least if we trust in the "Nicomachean Ethics" (16). Nevertheless pleasure alone can never serve as the ultimate criterion of human actions. Neither with Aristotle nor with Sydenham can we find the concept of crude hedonistic pleasure. Hedone (pleasure) can only be secured by the practice of virtues and can only be defined as moderation, namely as the effect of rational human activities, while its superior form may be identified with intellectual life (17). Only misguided people think of happiness being equal to a life full of material pleasures (18).

Interesting, too, is Sydenham's effort to construct such a "Moral Science" that we would nowadays call "normative ethics". In this effort he seems to implicitly assert that natural laws could be well adjusted in the life of human society. In his words:

a) "there is a most perfect and exquisite Order in the several natures of the world" (19);

b) "there was some Supreme nature, which... did, as he made them so, put them into this order" (20);

c) "the rational faculties are so much more excellent and Superior then brutal ones" (21);

d) "I find my Self engaged to comply with the Lawes of human Society, which is the Bond, by which the good of men is held together, and to fill up the several Duties of my condition in reference to that Society" (22);

e) "concerning the Obligations under which I stand in reference to my Self,... I am to preserve entire to my mind, the Dominion which is given to it over my Body in repressing the Sensual appetitions thereof, which are against my reason" (23);

f) "I embrace verity in all my words, .. making my tongue to be the faithful Interpreter of my mind" (24);

g) "for as much as I consist likewise of a Body which is submitted to the same Conditions with other Animals, ...all those are to be respected by me according to my several wants, but still with a Subserviency to my reason" (25);

And Sydenham concludes: "This seems to be my nature, and these the Laws imprinted on it" (26). That is why, on the other hand, he could never fully trust ancient thought on ethical matters. Pagan deities were in general morally indifferent or amoral. He thought he could fight pagan faith in the power of human mind or in the power of fate, both logical consequences of the inexistence of some moral deity, and replace it with the faith in posthumous reward by a kind and just Superior mind. To the Protestant puritan Sydenham, it is quite legitimate to expect divine trial with certainty, because this expectation is useful and can lead us to a virtuous life, and because neither respect for the human law nor human conscience alone may serve as sufficient guides to virtue and happiness (27). He thinks that, for the same reasons, we are morally justified in considering the virtuous life as valuable not only in itself, but also because it is a means to achieve good, while good is identified as a posthumous reward.

Those obligations, by which a virtuous life is led and which one should fulfill, are basic principles of modern ethics: non maleficence, beneficence, justice. At first glance, Sydenham seems to think that these principles are obligatory to the certain moral agent. But, since he thinks himself "to be part of Common nature of mankind", one could firmly argue that such principles should be followed by all people. A question remains open: should we follow the above mentioned principles in every circumstance or not?

Sydenham does not explicitly express his opinion on this problem. Nevertheless, he thinks of himself as obliged "not to hurt but by all means... to benefit mankind". This Hippocratic dimension of his moral thought has been tested in real life. It is known that he, along with other eminent physicians of his time, had been regularly examining poor patients at home gratis (28,29).

Comments

1. It is interesting to see Sydenham, the "English Hippocrates", presenting so many similar-

ities with Aristotle in his moral reasoning. Yet, we should also remark that there is no reliable evidence that he had studied Aristotle. We safely know his awareness of Cicero's work (29) and it is quite possible that Sydenham was influenced by Aristotelian moral thought via Cicero. Furthermore, Sydenham was a student at Oxford between 1642 and 1655, when Porphyry's "Introduction" to the Aristotelian categories was being taught there.

II. Some aspects of T.R. may be more interesting, in the sense that nowadays much concern about Aristotelian ethics is arising, mostly due to the recent crisis in the field of biomedical ethics after rapid progress in biomedical technology and intense dialogue on the subject of better allocation of medical resources. As Martha Nussbaum has remarked, one of Aristotle's priorities had been to criticize the ethical tradition existing at his time (30).

III. If we were to make the different moral theories, both deontological and utilitarian, productive in practice, we might proceed to a sort of dialectic synthesis of them. That is, to keep in mind both the utility of the effectiveness and the deontological propriety of the alternatives proposed. Such efforts can be quite fruitful, as Beauchamp and Childress have already shown (31).

In this task, useful guides might be texts like Sydenham's "Theologia Rationalis". Ideas, questions, arguments and numerous other vital elements could be derived and lead to a sort of moral thinking that will not aim just at the prosperity of numbers but also at the pleasure of souls. So, beyond the objections one can raise about Sydenham's answers to ethical questions, one could agree that his approach may prove relevant even to this day.

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