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Short literature notices

Andorno, Roberto

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-014-9551-3>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-171959>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Andorno, Roberto (2014). Short literature notices. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 17(2):313-316.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-014-9551-3>

Short literature notices

Roberto Andorno

Published online: 14 March 2014
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

Carel, H., Cooper, R. (eds.): 2012, *Health, Illness and Disease. Philosophical Essays*. Durham: Acumen Publishing. 256 pages. ISBN: 978-1844655434. Price: £ 40.

How should we understand the concepts of health, disease and illness? By what method can medical knowledge be gained? How can we better grasp the experience of illness? These and other crucial questions represent the core of *Health, Illness & Disease. Philosophical Essays*. This volume stems from a conference funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and presents the contributions by well-known philosophers of medicine such as Lennart Nordenfelt, Antonio Casado da Rocha and Fredrik Svenaeus, just to mention a few.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first part explores the concepts of health and disease, the second investigates the patients' experiences related to these concepts, and the third part describes the conflicting relationships between illness and society.

For a long time philosophers of medicine have struggled with questions concerning the concepts of health and disease, and the relationship between them. The notion of disease has often been viewed as a broad umbrella term that includes those conditions that make people unhealthy, such as disability and injury. According to this inclusive tendency there are two main approaches that acquired importance: the descriptive (or naturalistic) and the normative one. Both differ radically: the descriptive approach tends to consider disease in the light of its biological functionality whereas the normative one identifies disease

with something "bad". Nevertheless, no agreement on what "bad" means in this context has been reached yet.

In order to picture the concepts of health and disease, the first essay of the book invites the reader to get a basic understanding of two current opposite theories on health and disease: the naturalistic and the holistic. The author scrutinizes the argumentations offered by both approaches and argues that the biostatistical theory of health (BST), suits better this purpose in terms of applicability.

The theoretical argumentation continues in the second chapter. Thanks to the interpretation tool provided by social constructivism, the naturalist and normativist accounts of health seem to overcome their apparent opposition. The conceptualization of health and disease covers great importance also in bioethics, especially when referring to the principle of autonomy. Assuming that ill people are more likely to be vulnerable than healthy people, and that this condition can jeopardize their decision-making capacity, philosophers wonder themselves if autonomy of ill patients is just like the autonomy of healthy people.

Health, Illness and Disease. Philosophical Essays deals with another important aspect of disease: its relationship with pain, suffering and death. Recently, philosophers devoted efforts to deepen the understanding of the experience of illness. We can have either illness without disease (like in the case of undiagnosed cancer at the early stage) or disease without illness (as in the case of minor depression). However, how can we measure the amount of pain of suffering experienced if it is not necessarily related to a disease? According to the philosophical approach known as phenomenology, what is really important to consider is the life experience of ill people. This approach suggests exploring also the experiences of relatives, friends and health professionals.

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To get a better comprehension of illness and suffering through a patient's perspective, some psychological therapies invite them to report through a diary their illness experiences. In the present volume several chapters are devoted to phenomenology to understand health and illness.

Another important aspect developed in the last part of the book concerns the concept of illness within the social context. Society, sometimes in a misleading way, influences the perception of what health should be and should not be. Generally, we think that a medical treatment is a remedy to cure a disease, although many times diseases are only wrong convictions generated within society. For instance, the condition of intersex (those individuals who have ambiguous sexual characteristics) does not cause neither suffering nor death. Still, they are often considered to be in need of treatment. This and many others are in fact social stigmas.

Overall, *Health, Illness and Disease. Philosophical Essays* is a thoughtful contribution to a better understanding of the core concepts of medicine and will be of interest to medical practitioners and policy-makers as well as philosophers of medicine and ethicists.

Cristiana Baffone
Bologna, Italy

Schermer, M., Pinxten, W. (eds.), 2013, *Ethics, Health Policy and (Anti-) Aging: Mixed Blessings*, Dordrecht: Springer. 298 pages. ISBN 978-9400738706. Price: € 127.00

Due to increasing life expectancies and demographic change, aging is shifting to the center of ethical and political debates. This shift is not only likely to widen the thematic scope of ethics and public health. It also has the potential to transform their theoretical and methodological foundations. While bioethical reasoning has long been focusing on dramatic decisions at the very beginning and at the end of life, aging draws our attention to what happens in between: between conception and death, as well as between full-blown autonomy and total dependency. This could increase our awareness of the life course as a whole, reinforce the shift from general rights and duties to the good life, and highlight the delicate bodily constitution, temporal extension, and relational structure of human existence.

Against this background, the current volume, the first in a new Springer series dedicated to ethics and health policy, presents the papers of an international conference on "Ethics and Aging" held in Amsterdam in 2011. Its four

sections comprise contributions on conceptions of age and aging, problems of caring for elderly frail or demented persons, prospects of biogerontology and life extension, and healthcare policies in aging societies. They all set out to discuss "the mixed blessings of growing old", that is, the ambivalences and perplexities of current changes in individual life expectancies and demographic structures. This proves particularly stimulating whenever it uncovers tacit assumptions underlying our value judgments about aging and old persons, thus touching upon fundamental questions of ethical theorizing. Thus, in his inspiring contribution, Søren Holm criticizes the implicit anthropology of bioethics for tacitly taking an independent ageless self as the standard form of human existence, turning childhood and old age into abnormal, problematic conditions. In a similar vein, Wim Dekkers explores the perspectives of an anthropology of the aging person, underlining the relevance of the lived experience of aging and a phenomenology of the vulnerable aging body. Unfortunately, due to a somewhat sloppy editing, diamonds like these are buried under passages of erratic and erroneous text. Investing more effort in the editing process could have prevented orthographic errors, awkward phrases, or rests of untranslated Dutch, thus making the whole volume more readable. And a more critical review might have helped to jazz up some of the uninspired recycling of well-known arguments, or to add substance to the airy articulation of personal "impressions" in lieu of solid arguments.

Still, in its more accomplished moments, the volume raises important, topical questions: Not only what the discussion of aging can learn from ethical reflection, but also—vice versa—what ethical theorizing can learn from considerations of aging (and consequently from gerontology and aging studies). In this sense, it encourages us to approach aging and old age not so much in terms of just another application of an established set of ethical theories, normative principles, and methodological approaches, to just another field, but rather as a chance for ethics to develop a more comprehensive and profound understanding of its own premises and perspectives. As Wim Pinxten points out, aging offers a powerful paradigm for bundling current research activities in different areas—not only concerning medicine and healthcare, but also embodiment, contingency, temporality, relationality, intergenerationality and sustainability. Last but not least, its consideration could sensitize us to the limits of autonomous choice and just distribution, and hence for the moral challenges of dealing with things we cannot change. Traditionally, reflections on old age have always been a prominent occasion for such considerations on the ethical implications of finiteness and contingency. Despite its legitimate interest

in practical manageability and concrete solutions, (applied) ethics cannot afford to ignore this fundamental dimension of human agency and existence.

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Hottois, G.: 2013, *Généalogies philosophique, politique et imaginaire de la technoscience*. Paris: Vrin. 288 pages. ISBN: 978-2711625291. Price: € 25.

Gilbert Hottois is an emeritus professor of philosophy at the Free University of Brussels and a renowned expert in the field of philosophy of science and technology. Since the 1970s he has been reflecting on the notion of “technoscience” and on the impact that technological developments may have on society and our self-perception. It was he who coined the term “techno-science” in the 1970s to emphasize the current primacy of the purely operational dimension of technologies over theoretical science. In his view, with the advent of technoscience, “theory itself began to be conceived as a mere tool or instrument of transformation of our experience; the real is no more conceived in ontological terms, but it becomes operational itself; it is real what is reproducible, manipulable, and transformable, and no more the visible, intelligible or comprehensible” (*Le signe et la technique*, Paris, Aubier-Flammarion, 1984, p. 61).

In the book which is the subject of this review, Hottois looks backwards to his scholarly writings of around 40 years and attempts, first of all, to clarify the origins and meaning of the term “technoscience” and its evolution along years. The book includes also a section of his doctoral thesis (1976), which was never published before in full: “Philosophy and the Future”. Even if this chapter may not be an easy reading for those who are not familiar with the philosophy of language, it is interesting as it anticipates thoughtful considerations about a topic which will become widely discussed only during the last decade: the future of the human condition and the possibility that posthuman beings could be created as a result of biotechnological developments. Hottois asks: “Is man the future of man? (...) Does anything need to be changed in the *Homo sapiens*? (...) What are the limits to the technological transformation (in the sense of enhancement) of the natural man into imperceptibly mutated humans?” (pp. 148–149). This chapter can also be considered one of the first texts in French language that have used the literature of science fiction as a source of inspiration for philosophical reflection.

In the third chapter of the volume, Hottois tries to show how the idea of technoscience (which he associates with the transformation of humans by humans, as well as with

the concern about the long-term future of humankind) was present in the science-fiction literature from the very beginning. It can be found, for instance, in the *Frankenstein, or The modern Prometheus* (1818) and in *The last man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, as well as in *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and in *The Time Machine* (1895) by H.G. Wells. In the early twentieth century, a new generation of (mainly) American science fiction writers emerged under the influence of Hugo Gernsback, who is considered the formal founder of the genre. Hottois points out that, even if Gernsback still refers to “science”, he employs this term with a broad meaning that encompasses technological developments, which are presented as no less important than purely theoretical knowledge (p. 163). In sum, Hottois convincingly argues in this book that science fiction literature creates a “sense of wonder”, which demands an explanatory, philosophical explanation. Science fiction writings also help to raise awareness about human vulnerability and to develop a sense of long term responsibility, which should be at the very heart of ethics in our technological age. The book includes at the end a thorough list of works on philosophy of technoscience and science fiction.

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Ivone, V.: 2013, *Vulnerabilità del corpo e diritto al consenso*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane. 352 pages. ISBN: 978-8849527148. Price: € 37.00.

Paraphrasing Pascal, one could say: “The Constitution has reasons that the Civil Code cannot understand”. This sentence would adequately reflect the key message of Vitulia Ivone’s book, which deals with the controversial issue of the beginning of life from a legal point of view, especially in relation to reproductive technologies. In this regard, a French lawyer wondered a few years ago if there is a “right to produce a human being”. The question was absolutely necessary because of the increasing demands for reproductive techniques and embryos production.

Habermas’s opinion on that question is well known: acting on someone else is only allowed with his/her own consent. This concept is at the basis of the famous German philosopher’s theory of communicative acting: the embryo is not able to give consent to anything; that is why only beneficial actions are allowed in this regard. But civil lawyers have different worries. They are concerned about the legal concepts to face all the problems that “producing human beings” involves: What are the limits to the freedom that women enjoy in procreating? Does the embryo have rights in the light of this freedom? If yes, which are those rights?

Vitulia Ivone's book runs through these dilemmas exhaustively, providing answers to each of them. The author understands that the problems concerning the status of the body and the beginning of life under the Law cannot be faced only by applying the well-known categories of civil law. It is necessary to consider the values protected by the Italian Constitution—especially those concerning the development of a human being (p.83–93)—without deriving the decisions from moral solutions.

As to the first point, Ivone suggests to draw the principles applicable to the solution of new cases from the Constitution and from international law (p.75). As to the second point, only recently lawyers have considered the possibility that moral rights and interests that seemingly have only a moral importance (thus not recognized under the Law) can be considered as rights, because of their ability to satisfy a necessity. Even if the right to procreate were not provided expressly, it could be anyway a right because of its ability to meet women's needs.

Lawyers still look at this method with diffidence, although it is presented in this book from a different perspective. In fact, the author pays attention to the role that "moral rights" can play to solve legal problems and suggests that they can be resorted to for interpretive purposes.

Ivone thus rejects the idea that ethics may have a prescriptive role, also because of the neat separation between law and morals that she makes. But the method remains, correctly, a positivist one. Lawyers interested in these topics are often stimulated to base their solutions on specific ethical presuppositions; their Catholic and secular background is evident, much more as it may be in any different situation.

Moreover, the author reminds us of the influence that the opposition between secular and Catholic bioethics has on the response to problems concerning the beginning of life. Anyhow, her method remains clung to the positive data, and what it is solved through moral or political (even religious) indications by others, in this book is faced and resolved only through legal criteria, such as the constitutional reading of ordinary norms and the balance of interests. In this way, the difficulties that lawyers have in releasing themselves from the influence of morals, politics and religion can get an answer from this work, which brings—with methodological rigor—the legal debate on the beginning of life back into its own dimension of positive law.

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