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The Humane, the Society, and Us: An Unconventional Christmas Contemplation

The result of the US American presidential election in November this year has scared many people around the globe. The unpolished and in part utterly crude style of communication around this election reveals an inner attitude and a style of thinking which bodes ill for the development of US national, international, and human affairs in general [1]. However, the USA are certainly not the only country to plunge into the rough waves of an increasingly coarse political culture – or rather un-culture. For a number of years, populist politicians have been gaining more and more ground in European countries as well. With simple, loud, and often aggressive arguments, they purport simple solutions for complex problems, promote nationalist or racist ideas, and enhance distrust and hostility among groups of people with different ethnic and cultural origins or world views. The result is an increasing loss of the humane in human affairs, a process of ‘dehumanization’.

It is possible to study this process psycho-neuro-physiologically. Social perception primarily depends on *mind perception*. We first categorize another person as human in that we perceive that he or she possesses a mind like our own and then seek to see whether this person’s intentions are good or bad and whether he or she is capable to enact these intentions. Thereby, our reaction towards the other person is shaped. In her remarkable studies on dehumanization [2], Susan Fiske has shown with the tools of social neurobiology that when people categorize other persons very negatively, e.g., as disgusting outcasts or as objects of hostile sexism, they fail to activate those regions of their medial prefrontal cortex that are necessary for mind perception. Instead, dehumanizing categorizations – e.g., as in racism – can activate brain regions such as the amygdala, which are involved in fear and aggression. Contrarily, the amygdala activation towards an alleged outcast ceases when the attention is turned towards characteristics of the other person’s mind [2]. In other words: ‘considering another person as fully human requires appreciating the other’s mind (intentions, thoughts, feelings)’ [2], whereas ‘the essence of dehumanization is the denial of a distinctively human mind to another person’ [3].

What does this have to do with *us*, as physicians or members of other health care professions, and possibly as researchers, teachers, or practitioners of complementary and integrative medical disciplines? Extremely much. Since the 19th century, conventional science and medicine have consequently denied a distinctively human mind as an existing entity. The brain is seen as an ‘engine of reason’ [4] and the human mind as a ‘virtual actor’, caused by these mechanically conceived brain processes [5], but not as something real. To say it differently: science and medicine have been dehumanizing the human being already for a long time. In this context, it should not be forgotten that the basic scientific and medical conception of the human being as a biomolecular and neurobiological machinery – devoid of ‘life’, ‘soul’, and ‘spirit’ as existing dimensions of human beings – have penetrated all realms of our civilization, the textbooks of many professions, the popular press, the social media, and of course: medical education and education in other professions. So, what happens in a society whose doctors, lawyers, politicians, entrepreneurs, and teachers have since their youth been trained in believing ‘there is no self’ [4] and in focusing on the physical aspects of humanness? What are the consequences of this belief and training for social perception and for the social discourse? – I would guess: a weak interest in and an inadequate perception of the inner states, needs, and sufferings of other persons. This certainly facilitates more general trends towards dehumanization in society. In healthcare, this is quite apparent. It is not surprising, for example, that patients are often dissatisfied with conventional medicine: They miss a holistic approach to their health problems, an adequate appreciation of the inner aspects and needs of their individuality, and a humanely satisfying doctor-patient alliance based on such an appreciation; and

for these reasons, patients seek complementary and integrative forms of care [6]. Indeed, in the Swiss National Program for the Evaluation of Complementary Medicine (PEK) physicians practicing complementary forms of medical care had a significantly more holistic philosophy of care and were more motivated by intrinsic values than physicians practicing conventional medicine only [7].

However, there is no reason to be too proud of or satisfied with that. What is at stake is not a relatively more humanistic form of health care in a variety of complementary and integrative disciplines only, but a 'rehumanization' process within medicine and health care as well as society at large, including culture and politics. This is only possible if the basic conceptions of the human being become adequately humane, in medicine and in science in general. The denial of a distinctively human mind in science has to be replaced by its acknowledgment. Of course, this cannot be achieved through some kind of decision, but only through a careful epistemological work-up of the paradigmatic assumptions and premises which lead to either reductionism or holism, and through a replacement of the mechanistic model conceptions

by anthropological concepts stringently adhering to empirical facts and experiences. As some complementary and integrative disciplines already possess holistic anthropological concepts including the human mind as an existing entity, they even bear a responsibility – at least in my opinion – to contribute – from their perspectives – to the more general scientific process of rehumanization. But as a bridge between these perspectives and the scientific mainstream is largely lacking, there will be a great deal of work to do [8]. We have made an attempt from our (anthroposophic) perspective, but this is only a beginning [9]. Colleagues from Homeopathy, Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, and other humanistic whole-system approaches are encouraged to follow.

What becomes more and more obvious in the present state of human affairs is the increasing dehumanization, in all fields of life and in everyday politics. Its central feature is the denial or even elimination of the human mind. But this elimination is equivalent with spreading darkness in humanity. To re-appreciate the human mind and the willingness to perceive and understand this mind in other persons is the way to shed light into the darkness.

References

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