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To which are Prefixed, Memoirs of his Life and Writings, and a Selection from his
Literary Correspondence: Volume 3

Thomas Percival

Excerpt

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E S S A Y I.

T H E

E M P I R I C

O R

M A N O F E X P E R I E N C E,

BEING ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE USE OF

THEORY AND REASONING IN PHYSIC. (a)

*Sufficit si quid fiat intelligamus, etiamsi quomodo quidque
fiat ignoremus. CICERO.*

IN this polished age, when every art is advancing towards perfection, and every science enlarging its boundaries, it is a melancholy consideration that MEDICINE should alone be left behind, in the general career of improvement.

The

(a) THIS and the following dissertation contain a discussion of the arguments for and against the use of theory and reasoning in medicine. They are not intended as an explanation of the tenets of those two ancient and celebrated sects of physicians, the Empirics and Rationalists, of which Celsus hath given us so elegant an account;

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count;

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The mists of ignorance and error are now vanishing before the lights of genuine philosophy; and knowledge, practical and speculative, extends its influence even to the meanest mechanic. But the Hippocratic art, amidst this rapid and almost universal revolution, is at least stationary, if it move not in a retrograde course. And what is singular in its fate, the same causes which have promoted the advancement of the sister sciences, have, by a wrong direction, checked the growth, and retarded the progress of one, which is

— fairly worth the seven.

POPE.

THE industry of its professors, by an injudicious application, hath served only to darken and perplex it. Instead of patiently treading in the sure steps of EXPERIENCE, they have followed the false clue of

count; but to point out opinions which now prevail in the world, and which naturally arise from the different lights, in which the same subject is viewed by different minds. The author hath endeavoured to suppose himself first of the one party, and then of the other; in order more fully to enter into the sentiments of each, and by that means to do justice to both sides of the question. In this kind of writing it is not easy to avoid declamation; and he hopes to be excused, if he has indulged some degree of that enthusiasm, with which two antagonists may be supposed to be actuated, when pleading against each other, in support of a favourite cause.

THEORY;

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THEORY; and whilst, with infinite pains and labour, they endeavour to penetrate into the recesses of physic, they have lost themselves in the labyrinths of error. Unhappily for the healing art, their mistakes have coincided with the common propensities of mankind, who are more inclined to search after hidden and undiscoverable causes, than to attend to the obvious phænomena of nature. Blinded with their own fictions, these wanton theorists conceal their ignorance from themselves and the world, by unmeaning terms and pompous phrases.

*“ Omnia enim stolidi magis admirantur amantque
“ Inversis quæ sub verbis latitantia cernunt.”*

LUCRETIUS.

BUT descending from the flights of declamation, let us point out the folly, detect the fallacy, and trace the dangerous consequences of theory and reasoning in medicine.

WHOEVER searches into the annals of physic, cannot fail of being astonished at the almost infinite variety of systems and hypotheses, which at different times have been obtruded on the world. The amazing fertility of the imagination is there displayed in its full extent; and perhaps so ample an exhibition of the powers of human invention might gratify the vanity of man, if the agreeable effect were not more than counterbalanced by the

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humbling view of so much absurdity, contradiction, and falsehood. The idlest opinions have had their abettors; the most groundless fictions have been swallowed with credulity. A list of all the follies which, at different periods, have been established as articles of faith in medicine, would form the severest satire on the healing art. Who can withhold his laughter when he reads of expelling, attracting, and concocting faculties; of energies, sympathies, antipathies, idiosyncrasies, and occult causes; of the body being nothing but salt, sulphur, and mercury; of man being a microcosm, and uniting in his frame the motion of the stars, the nature of the earth, of water, air, all vegetables and minerals, the constellations, and the four winds. Yet ridiculous as these several tenets may appear, they have given rise to sects, have been espoused with warmth, and defended with acrimony. But the excentric genius of the theorists hath not been confined within the limits of physiology, and the laws of the animal œconomy: the hidden causes of diseases, the elements or first principles of medicines, and their secret mode of action on the body, have afforded another no less extensive field for the exercise of their creative imaginations. The bare recital of their fictions, would sufficiently demonstrate their absurdity. But to enumerate them would be an almost endless task. Erasistratus defines disease to be a translation of blood from the

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the veins to the arteries; whereas Galen asserts that, as health consists in the equilibrium between dryness and moisture, heat and cold, sickness must depend upon the subversion of that equilibrium. One sect adopts *pletthora* as the cause of all diseases; another denies the possibility of its existence in the body. Sylvius exults in the discovery that an acid is the sole morbid principle; his antagonists ascribe that honour to their alkali. Salt, sulphur, acrimonies, caustics, volatiles, ferments, &c. &c. have each, at different times and by different systems, been received as the undoubted *principia morborum*. No less absurd are the fictions of the theorists, concerning the elements and qualities of medicines, and their operation on the body. The same drug is represented as hot in one degree and cold in another, or as dry in one proportion and moist in another. Certain remedies are whimsically assigned to particular parts of the body, on which they are supposed to exert their effects by a peculiar predilection. Hence the classes of pectorals, stomachics, hepatics, cephalics, cordials, &c. One medicine attracts and eliminates the bile, another the *pituuta*, and a third the *atra bilis* or melancholy. Some preparations *irradiate* the animal spirits, others *darken* and *obscure* them. But enough of these idle conceits, the offspring of theory, and the disgrace of physic!

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PERHAPS

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PERHAPS it may be objected, that though many vain and groundless hypotheses have been advanced, there are two which will bear the test of ridicule, and which have had the suffrages of the wisest and most learned men in their favour. Let us briefly examine their pretensions to credibility.

I. GEORGE ERNEST STAHL, a German physician, of a subtil and metaphysical genius, supposes two opposite principles or propensities in the human frame; one constantly and uniformly tending to corruption and decay, the other to life and health. The former is founded on the elementary composition of the body, the latter depends on the power and energy of the mind. By means of the nerves, the influence of the mind is extended to every part of the system, and if their action be impeded, disease is the unavoidable consequence. A superabundance and spissitude of the blood is therefore the proximate cause of sickness, as the energy of the mind is thereby diminished, and its action on the body obstructed. Hence to lessen the quantity, and break down the *lentor* of the blood, the soul exerts all its powers and excites hemorrhages, sweats, diarrhœas, fevers, and the like. Dr. Porterfield and Dr. Nichols have carried this theory still further. The latter, in his prælection *de anima medica*, affirms without reserve, that the soul at first forms the body, and afterwards governs

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governs it; that she regulates and conducts all its vital and natural motions; circulates the fluids and distributes them to the different parts of the system, with such velocity and in such proportion as she judges right; and that whenever the body is disordered, she excites those conflicts and commotions, which are best adapted to restore it to health and soundness.

SUCH are the principles of the Stahlians.—Let the unprejudiced judge whether they need a serious refutation. Could a mariner plan and construct a ship, launch it into the wide ocean, govern it in storms, direct it from shoals and rocks, and steer it safe into the destined harbour, without being conscious of the skill he exerts, and the labour he employs? The analogy is obvious; and it would be equally absurd to suppose that the mind could form the body, regulate all its motions, superintend its health, rescue it from disease, and be perpetually occupied in planning and executing the wisest designs, without the least knowledge or consciousness of the power and energy she every moment exerts.

BUT the first proposition of the Stahlians confutes itself. For if the body and mind, with equal force, be constantly and uniformly tending different ways, no change can possibly ensue; agree-

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ably to the well known axiom in physics, that action and reaction are equal, and destroy each other's effect. Not to insist however on this error in philosophy, the doctrine of the Stahlians in confining all diseases to *lentor* and *plethora* is false and absurd. The dropsy, scurvy, *cacoehymia*, jaundice, putrid fevers, and many of the nervous class of ailments, are accompanied for the most part with a thin and colliquated state of the fluids. Nor is there more truth in the assertion, that every distemper is an effort of the mind to relieve the body. The slightest laceration of a tendon has been succeeded by the locked jaw, convulsions, and death. An indolent glandular tumour terminates not unfrequently in a cancer. A neglect to evacuate the bladder in due time hath occasioned a suppression of urine; and the palsy has been the consequence of a profuse hemorrhage. Are these then the wise conflicts of the soul, to rescue her suffering partner from impending evil! And must we view in the same light the *angina maligna*, the *tussis convulsiva*, the spasmodic colic, the *tetanus*, *catalepsis*, worms, rickets, &c. &c. No one but a theorist, blinded with the mists of his own brain, would answer in the affirmative.

2. THE important discovery of the circulation of the blood, in the beginning of the last century,
by

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by the ever memorable Dr. Harvey, gave rise to the introduction of MECHANICS into medicine. And as that system of philosophy was founded on the general laws of nature, it was obvious to infer its application to the human body; which was supposed to differ only from the universe of things, in the wonderful variety and complication of its machinery. Bellini, Borelli, Pitcairn, Keil and Boerhaave are the great supporters of this theory. According to the description of the latter, the body is chiefly composed of a conic, elastic, inflected canal, divided into similar lesser ones proceeding from the same trunk, which being at last collected into a retiform contexture, mutually open into each other, and send off two orders of vessels, lymphatics and veins, the one terminating in different cavities of the body, the other in the heart. These tubes are destined for the conveyance of the animal fluids; in the circulation of which life consists, and on whose free and undisturbed motion health depends. *Obstruction* therefore is the proximate cause of most diseases. And as it is produced either by a constriction of the vessels, or by a *lentor* in the blood, these are considered as the remote causes.

HOWEVER plausible this theory may appear to be at first sight, it will be found, on a stricter examination, to be fallacious and defective. The
 mathematician

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mathematician, who calculates the projectile force of the heart, the velocity of the blood in the arteries, and the various secretions of the glands, from the known laws of fluids in motion, and the nature of tubes of different shapes and sizes, must unavoidably be exposed to a thousand mistakes. The vessels of the body are too numerous and minute to admit of an accurate mensuration; and they are perhaps every moment undergoing changes, from the diversified action of that vital power which animates our wonderful system. Hence arises the contrariety in the computations of philosophers on this subject. Borelli reckons the resistance which the heart overcomes, in propelling the blood through the arteries and veins, to be equal to 180,000 pounds weight: Dr. Hales makes it amount to no more than 51 pounds; and Keil, though he computes the fluids of the human body to be five times more in quantity than Borelli supposes, hath reduced the sum to a single pound. One asserts that the pressure of air, overcome in ordinary respiration, is equivalent to the weight of 14000 pounds; a second proves it to be equal only to a 100 pounds; and a third makes it so inconsiderable, as to be almost below comparison; whilst all the three appeal to mathematical demonstration. A similar diversity appears in the conclusions of the mathematicians, concerning the quantity of bile separated by the liver.