

Highlighting the human person: philosophy, spirituality, and health care in view of the COVID-19 pandemic

Ser humano em destaque: filosofia, espiritualidade e cuidados em saúde frente à pandemia de COVID-19

Ser humano en destaque: filosofía, espiritualidad y cuidado de la salud ante la pandemia del COVID-19

Fabio Araujo Dias¹, Eliane Ramos Pereira¹, Rose Mary Costa Rosa Andrade Silva¹

¹Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Objective: to ascertain possible role of philosophy in public health in view of the current COVID-19 pandemic. **Contents:** there is a relationship between the history of Philosophy and of Medicine, one treating the soul and the other, the body. Thus, Philosophy has come to be seen as the introduction of humanitarian and spiritual values that permit ethical conduct in solidarity in the realm of human health. As science and technology have advanced, however, these values have begun to be lost, leading to research into the application of philosophical perspectives in order to humanize public health actions. This reflective study considered the Brazilian and international literature on the subject. **Conclusion:** Philosophy contributes by giving meaning to health care. This can already be seen in Brazil's Integrative and Complementary Practices (PICS), which have sought to treat body and soul, seeking mental, emotional, and spiritual balance.

Descriptors: COVID-19; Public health; Humans; Philosophy; Healthcare Models.

RESUMO

Objetivo: verificar o possível papel da filosofia na saúde pública, considerando a atual pandemia de COVID-19. **Conteúdo:** existe uma relação entre a história da Filosofia e a da Medicina, sendo uma para tratar a alma e a outra para tratar o corpo. Assim, a Filosofia passou a ser vista como uma inserção dos valores humanitários e espiritualistas, que permitem uma conduta ética e solidária, no âmbito da saúde humana. Com o avanço científico e tecnológico, porém, esses valores começaram a ser perdidos, levando à investigação sobre a aplicação das perspectivas filosóficas no sentido de humanizar as ações de saúde pública. Realizou-se um estudo reflexivo da literatura nacional e internacional sobre a temática. **Conclusão:** a filosofia contribui dando significado aos cuidados em saúde. No Brasil, um pouco disso já pode ser percebido nas PICS, que têm buscado o tratamento do corpo e alma, do equilíbrio mental, emocional e espiritual.

Descritores: COVID-19; Saúde pública; Humanos; Filosofia; Modelos de Assistência à Saúde.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: verificar el posible papel de la filosofía en la salud pública, teniendo en cuenta la actual pandemia de COVID-19. **Contenido:** hay una relación entre la historia de la Filosofía y la de la Medicina, una para tratar el alma y la otra para tratar el cuerpo. Así, la Filosofía pasó a ser vista como una inserción de los valores humanitarios y espirituales que permiten una conducta ética y solidaria, en el ámbito de la salud humana. Sin embargo, con los avances científicos y tecnológicos, estos valores comenzaron a perderse, conllevando a la investigación sobre la aplicación de perspectivas filosóficas para humanizar las acciones de salud pública. Se realizó un estudio reflexivo de la literatura nacional e internacional sobre el tema. **Conclusión:** la filosofía contribuye dando sentido al cuidado de la salud. En Brasil, algo de eso ya se puede ver en las PICS, que han buscado el tratamiento para el cuerpo y el alma, para el equilibrio mental, emocional y espiritual.

Descritores: COVID-19; Salud Pública; Humanos; Filosofía; Modelos de Atención de Salud.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main focuses of Philosophy is the conceptualization and understanding of human beings¹. Plato, disciple of Socrates and the first post-Socratic philosopher, was who best developed the conception of man, giving rise to research about Ontology, the self and its essence. It was from his theories that the first bioethical debate about the "end of life" emerged in the public health field².

One of Plato's most important works, The Republic, contributes a conception of medical art as a way to prolong life and, from this idea, the modes of care in human health have evolved more and more². However, the contemporary world has lost many of the humanitarian references achieved over the years, and this is due to globalization and technoscientific advancement, which have created a standard of competing instead of serving, even if the other's rights and needs are ignored³.

This can be noticed based on a major current challenge faced at the global level in terms of public health, that is, the COVID-19 pandemic. What is observed in coping with this disease is lack of knowledge, unpreparedness and lack of empathy towards the patients, both by some health professionals and by the rulers of countries⁴. In different countries,

Corresponding author: Fabio Araujo Dias. E-mail: fabiodiaspsi@gmail.com

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there is criticism to the fact that the patients affected by the disease did not have their physical, psychological, social and spiritual conditions considered as a whole⁵.

In this sense, it is possible to establish a relationship between Philosophy and Public Health, opening up a possibility of applying philosophical perspectives in the sense of “humanizing” health-related actions and focusing on certain values³. Consequently, this study aims at answering the following question: How should Philosophy be applied in the Public Health field in order to contribute spirituality values and make ethical and bioethical limits explicit? The objective of this research is to verify the possible role of Philosophy in Public Health, taking into account the current pandemic, in the search to achieve knowledge of how philosophical concepts and perspectives can be used to operationalize modes of care for human beings.

This study is relevant because it discusses an issue that, although ancient, still has a lot of strength in today's society; in other words, the relationship between Philosophy and health and the values of spirituality as a way to humanize the modes of care. It is an essential debate due to the fact that Public Health underwent a complex period in coping with COVID-19, clearly evidencing the loss of the values that place human beings as focus. By means of this research, it is expected to contribute to the social knowledge about the importance of humanization and its ability to change the current public health panorama

This is a reflective study based on in-depth readings of the national and international literature related to the theme. Not aiming to cover the issue, after presenting a brief historical context on the philosophical perspectives related to human beings and public health, the study is limited to discussing the modes of care and humanization in the pandemic period.

CONTENT

Historical context of human beings in Philosophy

Through research about the self, Plato place human beings as the debate focus in Philosophy. His Ontology is centered on the hypothesis of the intelligible forms⁶. For the philosopher, virtues are attained by the intellect and, although man may acquire knowledge through body sensations, it is through the soul that he knows the essence of things. The soul works as traffic between two worlds, the intelligible and the sensitive ones, by means of which something can get to be known⁷.

For Plato, human beings are comprised by two dimensions: body and soul. This conception contributed at a later time to the first observations of brain functioning and mental activities, which promoted a relationship between Philosophy, Medicine and Psychology: Philosophy to treat the spirit; Medicine for the body; and Psychology for the soul. It is noticed that it was from Plato's thinking that it became possible to elaborate a relationship referring to the humanitarian values that allow ethical behaviors. Consequently, the Greek civilization left marks that still prove to be present in the contemporary times and, even today, contribute to advances in neuroscience and in the body-mind relationship⁸. His theories and ideas allow us to conceive different conception of human beings and reach an understanding of the body, the soul and spirit.

Platonic ontology admits the existence of ontologically independent entities; it focuses on intelligible forms, which can only be achieved through the intellectual part, which is the soul (*psyché*). Thus, Plato concluded existence of the soul as something intellectual and rational that inhabits the body, being also something that differentiates man from other animals⁷. In the antique Greek conception, man is nothing more than a body inhabited by a soul, the former mortal and latter, immortal⁹.

In the Middle Ages, the soul found a different concept in Augustine of Hipona. For this philosopher, the term *animus*, which is the “human soul”, should be applied to designate the human soul in its integrity. This is a soul in which there is a mind, designating peculiarly human rationality⁹. In modern times, the term “mind” reaches new parameters. In this era, the mind is a “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*) and immaterial substance, which is united to a body (*res extensa*); in other words, an “extended thing” and “immaterial substance”¹⁰.

In the modern world, man already starts to seek the concept of his existence more, to deepen his research in questions such as: “Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?”. This search led to the emergence of Existentialism, from Sören Kierkegaard's thinking, who concluded that, in addition to a body with soul and a mind that enables them to doubt and reason, human beings are bodies with the freedom to use their intellect to choose, act, and build their own destiny¹¹.

Body and soul care should have ethics, compassion, solidarity and love as values, among others³. Thus, philosophical perspectives can be an important contribution to the reflections in the Public Health field. There is the possibility to complement and operationalize philosophic genealogy in health and in the modes of care¹².

This genealogy asserts that human beings act towards a goal. In this case, we can mention the example of a health professional that aims at the broad recognition of his skills and, to such end, resorts to all means he has in the modes of care with his patient. When taking care of the patient's health, he is not thinking in the power of his action but aims at the goal, which is being recognized by his practices. Situations such as this point to the importance of promoting a critical reflection that integrates philosophical thinking and privileges care integrality and humanization in health professionals' education¹².

In the 20th century, wars and extremist governments allowed the conduction of experiments and procedures with human bodies, affecting the physical and psychological health of certain groups of people¹¹. In a search to avoid these actions, Bioethics emerged during the 1970s with the objective of rescuing Human Sciences and achieve strengthening of individualistic values¹⁶. Currently, Bioethics can be understood as: 1) ethics applied to health and life; 2) significant appreciation of individual and cultural autonomy; and 3) a discipline that refers to the morality of human actions².

Basically, bioethics emerges as a proposal for dialog between different cultural traditions, them being biomedical techniques and philosophical and religious traditions through spirituality¹⁴. It is important to understand that "without spirituality, values such as compassion, solidarity, love, justice and understanding disappear and that the limits to distinguish what is right from what is wrong are lost"³.

Therefore, the relationship between spirituality and health can be observed in the art of caring. When the modes of health care involve an ethics based on solidarity, empathy, understanding others' pain, then spirituality is reinforced as a possible dimension beyond the biomedical mechanicalness centered on the strict treatment of the body.

Philosophical perspectives and modes of care in Public Health given the COVID-19 pandemic

With the COVID-19, coping measures and strategies were established to avoid rapid propagation of the virus in society, aiming at the humanitarian modes of care⁴. However, due to its significant social inequality, Brazil has challenges when establishing measures such as social isolation or distancing. Countless are the groups of people living in precarious housing and sanitation conditions, in a situation of crowding, people who cannot leave their duties and stay isolated. The highest numbers of deaths due to the virus are found in these groups. Thus, it would be humanitarian to promote dignified survival conditions to the individuals, in a way that they can adhere to the measures established without suffering other types of harms⁴.

In fact, spirituality contributes the possibility of being concerned and caring for the other and of feelings of solidarity³. However, in the pandemic period, lack of compassion can be seen in the actions of the country's rulers, on the part of health professionals and even the population itself, in the disrespect of the measures established, in abandonment, lack of support and care for those who need it most, in lack of empathy and in the use of ineffective measures and medications in the fight against the virus and its dissemination¹⁵.

On the other hand, part of the health professionals and scientists have shown dedication and interest in taking care of people's significant physical and emotional distress, with integrative health practices¹⁵. However, the promotion of humanized care is not yet a reality in Brazilian Public Health. Although the 1988 Constitution has imposed health as a fundamental human right, a number of satisfaction research studies indicated that there is no humanized care¹⁶.

In Brazil, the biomedical model is hegemonic, which led to the rupture from metaphysical-based science and the support of the Cartesian paradigm in the health field¹⁷. Considering its negative points, its implementation in the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde*, SUS) as a health care model underwent many challenges. The discussions were expanded in the National Health Conferences (*Conferências Nacionais de Saúde*, CNS), where the need for care models targeted at the priority health needs was very much indicated¹⁸.

Thus, the country has increasingly sought a care model in line with the SUS principles, oriented toward integrality and the expanded health needs and which overcomes the problems arising from the hegemony of the biomedicine paradigm¹⁹. This is the challenge currently faced in the Public Health scope, and which brings back to light the debate about "humanizing" health through philosophical perspectives.

Aiming at a health care model oriented towards patient integrality, within current health care in Brazil we find Integrative and Complementary Health Practices (IChPs), which are considered as additional to the practices

already applied in the SUS. ICHPs encompass pharmacological and non-pharmacological therapies, such as manual and spiritual ones²⁰.

Also on May 2020, the CNS requested ICHPs to be widely disseminated during the COVID-19 pandemic, although with the understanding that they are practices which do not replace the protocols and therapeutic courses of action internationally defined by the scientific community for the treatment of COVID-19¹⁵. Targeted use of the ICHPs to promote mental and emotional balance, as well as to mitigate the COVID-19 physical symptoms, enables achieving effective results in coping with the disease.

It is noted that Spirituality and Philosophy are still missing in the health field due to non-training of qualified professionals for this type of care and practical difficulties⁵. However, even if there are difficulties to include these practices, the biggest challenge is to generate a concern for this, to show that spiritual aspects also need to be addressed and that values do matter.

Bringing the issue to this day with the pandemic, it is noted that a more humanized treatment with the participation of family, friends and institutions enabled a better recovery of patients affected by COVID-19 in all their aspects, when compared to treatments and care solely aimed at the goal, that is, final recovery of the patient²¹.

The fact that feelings are involved is pointed out as an outstanding difference in humanized treatment²². Thus, not only the patients' needs are considered, but also their values. Involvement and feelings awaken in health professionals the desire to do everything possible to solve all of the patients' needs, while respecting their values.

Humanized care is only possible because it aims at a meaning in the act, and that is precisely the role of Philosophy, to seek meaning, to understand an action²³. Consequently, it can be stated that the role of Philosophy in health care is to contribute meaning to these care measures; hence its utmost importance. A health-related philosophical approach is one of the main factors that can enable the right to health advocated by CRFB/88 to be effectively and satisfactorily met.

CONCLUSION

By means of Philosophy, it was acknowledged that something other than a person's physical sphere should be treated. In order to treat such something, Brazil has ICHPs that aim at complementing the already applied health care measures, even if they are not duly implemented in the health practices. Such ICHPs contribute philosophical and spiritual perspectives in the search to provide more humanized care to the patients.

Therefore, it is concluded that this is the role of Philosophy in Public Health: to confer meaning to health care and, thus, to allow the inclusion of humanized practices, cares measures focused on human beings as a whole, care actions aimed at their integrality. Based on the cases of patients affected by COVID-19, it is observed that, in the places where such practices are carried out, it is possible to see better results in the treatment of each individual in their physical, psychological, social, emotional and spiritual dimensions.

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