

## COMMENTARY

## Hypochondria, or, the awareness of death that goes against the cure

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## Abstract

Fifteen years after the publication of G. Braddock's paper "Epicureanism, death, and the good life" in *Philosophical inquiry* the time has come to think of what actually prevents Epicureanism from taking root in Western societies, thereby facilitating our relationship with disease and care: hypochondria. In this commentary I analyse the philosophical problem of hypochondria overturning Heidegger's idea that awareness of death is positive and calling for medical therapies that, through the help of psychology, would act on the causes and elimination of hypochondria.

## Key words

- Epicureanism
- philosophy of death
- Braddock
- philosophy of Western medicine

*In a flicker  
Love sat in a corner.  
Shy and distracted it was.  
For this reason we no longer tolerated life.  
The Great Beauty, 2013*

As you know, Martin Heidegger had a strange idea of death. In his *Fundamental concepts of metaphysics*, his 1929-1930 lectures, he argues that the only animal that dies is the human, while animals, who are poor in world, literally do not die. I have discussed elsewhere the problems of the negation of world to other life forms in Heidegger [1]. What interests me here, playing on a paradox, is to overthrow his thesis in its principles and parameters.

Heidegger assumes that the awareness of death is something good – the foundation of the spirit, to put it with Hegel – and that therefore the animal is excluded from a fundamental dimension of *Lebenswelt* (life world). However, if we consider the awareness of death from a completely different perspective, things change: dying is often waiting, anxiety, loss of the "here and now" but, above all, it adds extra weight to the condition of illness. The awareness of death, in fact, is already death: because of it, life freezes in its basic categories, which are those that characterize animal life – experiencing the world without understanding the unity between inside and outside, between subject and object. Contemporary Western medicine is completely flawed with hypochondria, which is not, as is often thought, the exaggerated fear of being sick, but rather the knowledge that the laws of disease are those of death<sup>1</sup> [2].

Hypochondria is an absolute evil of our time: Google

searches of suspected symptoms reveal it more than anything – it is the obsession of being able to really control everything that happens to our body. This distorted relationship structurally changes the possibilities of contemporary medicine: care, which should postpone death, actually anticipates its spectre. In this sense, therefore, philosophy comes in handy to medicine by recovering an evergreen related to Epicureanism<sup>2</sup> [3] – as Braddock's famous paper shows [4]: *Death is not an issue because the living, by definition, can never know it*. Death and life are mutually exclusive, so why fear death? In fact, when death supervenes, we will no longer be there, and as long as we're there.

Hypochondria seems to be an involuntary attack to this view [4]. For this reason, it completely makes "the good life"<sup>3</sup> [5] impossible, impeding the psychological dynamics preliminary to good care, and forces to a continuous and erroneous comparison between being (life) and non-being (death). Whatever may be the future developments of Western medicine, precisely because it seems more and more (rightly) concerned with basing the treatment on the patient's history, it must absolutely fight hypochondria as the characteristic feature of our

<sup>2</sup>Epicureanism is a system of philosophy based upon the teachings of the philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC) characterized by an absence of divine principle. It propounded an ethic of individual pleasure as the sole or chief good in life. Epicureanism rejects immortality; it believes in the soul, but suggests that the soul is as mortal as the body. Epicurus rejected any possibility of an afterlife, *while still contending that one need not fear death*: "Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved, is without sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us" ([3], p. 239-40).

<sup>3</sup>About the Bradley philosophical position on contemporary Epicureanism see also [6]. A very good book about the social implications of Epicureanism, not only for philosophers, is [7].

<sup>1</sup>Things are completely different in Eastern medicine [2].

time. The point is that hypochondria is a kind of nostalgia to the nth degree – one is nostalgic of life and its memories, in the terrifying awareness that everything can vanish at any moment and that the body will act as a sentinel of this conclusion.

It is no coincidence that some psychosomatic illnesses vanish with the loss of memory, or with Alzheimer's, because memory is *not* what characterizes human life. Hypochondria, as nostalgia for the possibility of future memory, impedes Braddock's contemporary Epicureanism, for which death is bad for the person who dies if and only if that person could have otherwise continued to live well (a "life worth living", to mention another Epicurean: Lucretius). There are no simple solutions, and after all philosophy can only help medicine by shedding new light on poorly considered problems. Yet it is

obvious that we will have to start from here and create openings so that Epicureanism can allow treatment, or more generally therapy, to take root on virgin territory that has not yet been spoiled by the knowledge (perhaps erroneous, and solely based on some unfortunate Google search) that our days are ending.

Hypochondria has room whenever the human does not understand that people die, not because they are ill, but simply because they were born: and medicine, with all its myths of long life and continuous prevention, perhaps should begin to seriously consider this.

#### **Conflict of interest statement**

None to declare.

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