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Editorial

East and West: from opposition to integration

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In the beginning of this millennium, more than ever, the opposition between West and East, crystallized in the collective imagination since Herodotus (484-423 BC), as it arises from his Persian wars, has put some of our basic certainties into a crisis, making them weak and insubstantial: as citizens and individuals, we have lost our bearings, and bewilderment is widespread and shared in all the so-called industrialized Western countries.

It is instinctive therefore, to wonder why, and if, our magnifying glass for understanding and analyzing this world, which is getting smaller and smaller, is suitable and appropriate only for 'our' Western world.

In these past years, our analysis of politics, economy, science and social developments has concentrated on comprehension, explanation, and anticipation of the Western world, the capitalistic system, and our scientific approach. Western thinkers face change, complexity, and uncertainty, in searching our way to the future, in terms of new technological and organizational conquests, and further scientific advances. We are led to look at and analyze other cultures and other peoples with extreme superficiality, using only our methods of comprehension. Although we come from the enlightened Greek culture, the cradle of democracy, we do not accept diversity, i.e. those who do not conform to our thought, our lifestyle and democracy.

In doing this, we exclude the thoughts of the rest of the world, and forget that we are living in rich countries, with enormous advantages. For instance, for many years now in the West, for the first time in the whole history of humanity, food production and availability are sufficient to plentifully fulfill our needs, while technological, scientific, and medical development has also determined an unexpected and considerable prolongation of average life.

The West, the 'Land of Twilight', has for centuries been able to dominate the East, the 'Land of Dawn' – the land where so many Westerners have long thought to look toward in order to reactivate their strength and hopes for a better understanding of the mystery of life and death. Yet, nowadays, while we all would be pleased if the spirit of the message 'Ex Oriente Lux' could be renewed, we realize that fear comes from the East: from there the darkness is threatening.

Ex Oriente Lux

The West, land of science and logic, has the illusion that scientific thought can grasp any dimension of reality. Instead, only those areas of thought that are strictly objective are well understood, leaving out every single person's or patient's lived experience.

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), an Englishman who was born in Bombay and who lived there for a long time, assimilated the Indian meditative nature, and perceived and accepted the difference between the two worlds he loved, even though he believed they would never meet.

In respect to medical treatment, the fascination with the East is seen in its inclusion in the heart of the West, a fact that some Westerners view as a Trojan horse. The undoubted concentration of traditional Eastern wisdom, different in form but not in aim from the Western one, since both maintain the art of cure, has elaborated different ways of conceiving medicine. It is obvious that we must continue to focus on the attention and verification of results, according to a medicine based on the evidence of efficacy. Anyway, the Eastern approach should make us even more open, being ready to use alternative methods when efficacious and, sometimes, from a bio-ethic point of view, to even oppose Government decisions when made according to western scientific paradigms with which we do not agree.

Since the most ancient times, from the appearance of human beings, or if we prefer, since the banishment from Eden, the figure of the healer has existed: somebody who, through his personal experience, in a frame of religious or magical practices, knows how to face diseases, although the limit between what is efficacious and what is only considered to be efficacious is not always clear. In history, we have seen occur in succession: the healer, sorcerer or shaman, charlatan or priest, astronomer or fortune-teller, followed by the doctor, and then by the qualified professional with a precise field of interest and a deep knowledge of the morbid conditions with which he deals. If, in the past, Western and Eastern medicine were the same, after the introduction of the philosophy of Galileo (1564-1642) and Descartes (1596-1650), and thanks to technological and scientific evolution, a progressive and real differentiation and

separation have taken place. Thus, today, the human and scientific wisdom of the Western clinician lies in the integration of his objective learning with the patient's subjectiveness which he must understand. This integration leads to success in the form of results of scientific knowledge and to the respect and veneration for the wisdom used in practical work, and requested of anyone who has to face human suffering.

This is the way of conceiving the clinician according to an Anglo-Hungarian psychiatrist, Michael Balint (1896–1970). The clinician is a drug to his patient . . . he is the most used drug . . . medicine is not the only thing that counts, because the soul of medicine lies in the relation, in the communication between the healer and the healed.

Eastern medicine has, on the contrary, an holistic approach to sickness and the sick, and, in spite of its apparent non-scientific nature, it is an unequivocal fact that it has worked and healed for many centuries, for instance, as demonstrated in Chinese medicine by the numerous works reviewed in MEDLINE.

In the same way, Ayurvedic, a word that means 'life science' in Sanskrit, is considered as one of the most ancient medicines both for prevention and for cure. It uses an holistic approach to the sick, and nowadays cures at least 600 million people in India. The World Health Organization itself highly appreciates its contribution to public health. Many people maintain that modern Psycho-Neuro-Endocrino-Immunology is very close to the ancient 'mind-body' Ayurvedic medicine, considering tension, stress, fear, delusion, sadness and anxiety as negative emotions causing sickness, while happiness and self-confidence are sources for the absence of sickness and health.

A further confirmation comes from the fact that only 3% of all drugs produced in the West are utilized by Eastern populations. We have to recognize that infant mortality is much higher and average life much shorter among these populations, but can successes achieved by Eastern medicine only be attributed to a placebo effect? Or possibly some of their therapeutic methods do deliver results, at least in less severe pathologies. Can we take advantage of them?

As mentioned above, it is clear that Western medicine, inspired by Galilean and Cartesian thought, focuses its attention on the cause-and-effect principle, putting it at the center of its research and therapeutic strategy. The individualization of the pathogen noxa and its elimination, through pharmacological remedies or through surgical methods, are the main aims to pursue to achieve recovery.

Eastern medicine, currently often called 'traditional' or 'alternative', does not operate on the pathogen noxa (for example, the microorganism), but on the organic factors attributed to its control and neutralization. This kind of approach is more attentive to the 'how' and 'when' rather than to the 'why'. Following these lines, the therapeutic

strategy consists of stimulating the vital energy and the bio-energetic capacity of the global reaction of the individual, and of his organs and apparatuses, in order to restore the equilibrium of the organism troubled by the disease. From this point of view, the real cause of sickness is the weakness of the organism which is not able to defend itself from an external attack, and not the pathogen noxa which could only succeed in favorable conditions.

Is the diversity of the two worlds so deep that it will forever prevent them from integrating in the medical field, as Kipling affirmed?

It has to be noted that, in the beginning of the 1920s, the weakening of the borders between energy and matter and their reciprocal transformation clearly emerged with the birth of quantum physics, the science which studies microscopic physical phenomena and which permitted Werner Heisenberg (1901–76) to win the Nobel Physics Prize in 1932, and this science has diffused into the biological and medical fields.

Thus, a few years ago, a new quantum medicine arose. It examines human physiology and biophysical aspects from an electromagnetic point of view and considers the electromagnetic field as a fundamental factor of human biology, having relevant repercussions on the regulation of the health equilibrium of human beings.

Proceeding in this context, the consideration, that even the smallest part of our organism produces an electric charge in an equilibrium always in evolution, leads the most advanced scientific communities to extend their research to verify the bio-energetic interpretation of oriental medical doctrines, in order to find an explanation for the concept of 'vital energy', the main concept of these doctrines, which takes into account the electromagnetic phenomena operating in a living organism. It is a fact that, in the history of thought, former philosophical theories, such as atomism, were afterwards transformed into scientific theories.

Thus, the meeting point between East and West becomes evident. Those who have a Western medical culture, proceeding from the theories of Galileo and Descartes and thus based upon scientific and objective elements, have now difficulty in accepting doctrinaire metaphysical or in a word different formulations. Anyway, it is well known that scientific knowledge does not cover the entire sphere of knowledge, because there is a variety of learnings, and the validity of each one of them is strictly related to a particular field of reality; it is important, as Bertold Brecht (1896–1956) wrote, not to forget that, among all certainties, the most certain thing is doubt, and our aim and wisdom are to grasp the most helpful aspects for life.

This hold of scientific supremacy must not be an hegemonic will of West upon East, but should express, on the one hand, a desire to satisfy the health needs of all people and all cultures, and, on the other hand, the pledge

to search for the reasons on both sides, i.e. a common point useful to both sides. The ferments ongoing and their complexity, with sometimes tragic implications, if correctly faced should not be seen as an obstacle, but as a spring of new ideas that could lead to the right balance and mutual

respect; from the historic counterposition that Herodotus described, could we thus achieve mutual integration?

With no excessive optimism, there are reasons to maintain that, in the continuous evolution of time, a deep awareness about the past is necessary to live the future.