

Grigore T. Popa – Promoter of Medical Ethics in Romania

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Abstract

Our paper reveals Professor Grigore T. Popa’s view on medical ethics of anatomical teaching as he was bringing in Romania the experience of the Anglo-Saxon education from both England and the United States. We analysed his lecture: “What Anatomy is or is not?” where he introduced some ideas of medical ethics. Professor Popa considered that medical ethics and deontology are required whenever someone studies the anatomy of the human body. Anatomy teaches us the lesson of respect towards human body, and so it can never be reduced to a useless science, since it expresses the spiritual nature of mankind.

Keywords: *medical ethics, Anatomy teaching, creative education.*

Grigore T. Popa is one of the personalities of the Romanian academic field who strongly supported the idea that those training in the noble field of medicine have to be able to become exceptional professionals, valuable scientists and true human beings.

The Encyclopedic Character of Grigore T. Popa’s Personality

Professor Grigore T. Popa formed his complex personality in the first decades of the XXth century in the extremely generous academic and cultural environment of Iași, but also of Bucharest. He attended The Faculty of Medicine

of Iași and dedicated himself to the study of Anatomy. Francisc Rainer appointed him junior teaching assistant of the Department of Descriptive Anatomy of the Faculty of Medicine in Iași while he was still a third year student and he became assistant lecturer after graduation. After obtaining his Ph.D in 1920, he was relocated to the same Department in Bucharest, following his mentor, Professor Rainer, and after a few months, he was promoted assistant professor.¹ The creative energy of his personality was enhanced by further professional studies and rigorous documentation in excellence centers in the United States and Great Britain. He was deeply impressed by the Anglo-Saxon scientific environment from USA and United Kingdom where he arrived because of a Rockefeller 3-year scholarship he had received in 1928.

In Chicago and London he was marked by precision, accuracy and value conferred to scientific research. During its first year he took part in the research activity of the Chicago University with Professor Franck Lillie. For the next two years he is to be found at the University College of London conducting researches in the fields of Anatomy and Anthropology with Professors Elliot-Smith and J.P. Hill.² Guided by his mentors' model, especially by Franck R. Lillie and, above all, by Grafton Elliot Smith, whose "*intellectual son*" he considered himself to be,³ Grigore T. Popa manifested an endless curiosity, acquiring solid knowledges and abilities, both in the scientific field and in other cultural fields, considering that his creative force can be fully developed only by mixing together all spiritual values.

On the other hand, his personality completed its coordinates as he worked in a team with Una Fielding, an Australian researcher, at the University of London. In 1930, they discovered the hypothalamo-pituitary port system to whom they gave a functional role in transferring hormones between hypothalamus and pituitary and so they opened the way to further research by neuro-endocrinology. In fact, this remarkable discovery wouldn't have been possible without the extraordinary capabilities of Grigore T. Popa and Una Fielding: namely loyalty, reliability, communication, trust and mutual respect. Helped to form his

¹ I. Petrovanu, "Evocare", in *În memoria lui Gr. T. Popa. Studii, documente, mărturii* (Iași: Omnia, 1999), 74-78.

² C. Romanescu, Gr. T. Popa in "Istoria medicinei contemporane universale și în memoria școlii ieșene de medicină", in *În memoria lui Gr. T. Popa. Studii, documente, mărturii* (Iași: Omnia, 1999), 87-90.

³ Gr. T. Popa, "Evoluția unui om și evoluția unei științe (Un fel de curriculum vitae)," in Gr. T. Popa, *Conștiință și cunoaștere, vol. II. Publicistică* (Iași: Editura Universității « Al. I. Cuza », 2010), 269-307.

personality by all these masters, Professor Grigore T. Popa discovered the deeper meanings of science and medicine in general.

Grigore T. Popa's Dynamic View of Anatomy as the Theme of Medical Ethics

Grigore T. Popa is recognized as a physician, researcher and teacher, but also as a philosopher, essayist, journalist, and writer. At the Faculty of Medicine of Iași he continued the work of his master, Francisc Rainer, and taught anatomy associated with humanist ideas. He was convinced that only when the medical student will have solid knowledge in Humanities he will become a true doctor and will be able to respond easier to the challenges of this profession and to the expectations of the society. Through his lectures, Professor Grigore T. Popa infused the ideas of medical ethics to his medical students since their first year of study. It can be possible that these ideas were triggered by his medical research activity in the USA and England. He certainly had to follow the rules of medical ethics and probably, as we all know his passion for reading, he surely may have been in contact with the works of John Gregory and Thomas Percival, who reformed medicine into a profession in its proper intellectual and moral sense.

When Grigore T. Popa arrived in United States, there was still in use the *Code of Institutes and Precepts adapted to the Professional Conduct of Physicians and Surgeons*, namely Thomas Percival's *Medical Ethics* which was the first English book with that title, which enormously influenced the medical activity. Percival's *Medical Ethics* was a prospectus for the style of professional medical ethics, self regulating, paternalistic, which typically prevailed until around the middle of the 20th century.⁴

On the other hand, as we all know the Professor's great desire for reading and knowledge, it is possible that, once in England, the Romanian physician and scientist have come into contact with *Lectures on the Duties and Qualifications of the Physician* written by John Gregory from Edinburgh because as we will see many of the ideas presented by Percival and Gregory can be found in Grigore T. Popa's subsequent lectures. In his book, Gregory wrote that a physician had a positive moral duty to be "*ready to acknowledge and rectify his mistakes*" as "*no profession requires so comprehensive a mind as medicine*".⁵ Gregory's contribution was to reform medicine into a profession scientifically and ethically

⁴ K. M. Boyd, "Medical ethics: principles, persons, and perspectives: from controversy to conversation," *J Med Ethics*, 31 (2005): 481-486.

⁵ Boyd, "Medical ethics."

worthy of the name. He established the foundations for his medical ethics on the Scottish Enlightenment moral sense philosophy of Francis Bacon and David Hume. Following Francis Bacon, Gregory appealed to the human capacity to be “*open to conviction.*” This is the capacity of disciplined thought and judgment that requires one to be open to evidence from whatever source it comes and, when the evidence is reliable, to conform one’s knowledge and judgment to it. Gregory wrote:

I come now to mention the moral qualities peculiarly required in the character of a physician. The chief of these is humanity; ...If the physician possesses gentleness of manners, and a compassionate heart, ...the patient feels his approach like that of a guardian angel ministering to his relief: while every visit of a physician who is unfeeling, and rough in his manners, makes his heart sink within him, as at the presence of one, who comes to pronounce his doom.

Gregory invented two components of the concept of the physician as a professional. In his vision, physicians should commit to practicing medicine and conducting research to standards of intellectual and moral excellence.⁶

At the end of the Rockefeller scholarship, Professor Grigore T. Popa returned to Romania in 1928 and was appointed full professor at the Department of Anatomy and Embryology of the Faculty of Medicine in Iași. As he was bringing back the experience of Anglo-Saxon education both from England and the United States, he was opening his Anatomy course that year with the speech called “*What Anatomy is or is not?*” where he introduced some ideas of medical ethics. He considered Anatomy as a modality of thinking. Anatomy deals with the structure of the human body, and it is the human body that is central in medical research and clinical practice. Professor Grigore T. Popa developed and perfected the conception of his magister, Francisc Rainer, on Anatomy as *the science of living forms*. Based on a qualitative vision of anatomical knowledge (instead of a mechanistic, quantitative one), he stated that the purpose of studying this important medical science was the knowledge, the comprehension, the understanding of the living body, otherwise “*Anatomy reduced to a dead body science, a dissection science, ...is as useless and even more dangerous than the bookish Anatomy.*”⁷ So, he promoted proper respect for cadavers used for medical research and education as he emphasized the idea that the main aim of teaching

⁶ LB McCullough, “John Gregory's medical ethics and the reform of medical practice in eighteenth-century Edinburgh,” *J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 36 (2006):86-92.

⁷ Gr. T. Popa, “Ce este și ce nu este Anatomie ?” in Gr. T. Popa, *Conștiință și cunoaștere, vol. II. Publicistică* (Iași: Editura Universității «Al. I. Cuza», 2010), 252-268.

anatomy is to improve the quality of patients' care as the corpse was the first patient of the medical student.

The Creative Education – Essential Characteristics of Medical Ethics

Gr. T. Popa proved to be a harsh critic of the ancient static conception of Anatomy as a mere inventory, and, on the contrary, he imagined a dynamical Anatomy, capable of explaining living forms. The student must understand that to a certain anatomical structure corresponds a certain function, as a result of evolutionary adaptation. Anatomy must be acquired or studied so as to shift the doctor's interest from the dead body to the living active being. In this respect, Gr. T. Popa is extremely clear and categorical when asserting that the student must acquire, by means of studying Anatomy, a full understanding of the mechanisms of life explained in anatomical forms. The student

*have to understand (anatomical) structures as living, active elements being placed at their place in the intact and healthy body. Only sustained by such a skill he will be able to submit further in the study of normal and pathological processes that are at the basis of medical science and art.*⁸

In the same lecture, Professor Gr. T. Popa punctuated the idea that Anatomy could develop the personality of the medical students. For this purpose, the philosophical premises of medical ethics should be taken into account not only from Kant and Fichte, but also from Socrates.

*But the anatomy has a more important role and, even a more exciting one: an educational role. It has more power than other sciences to turn on a man who learns it. This power comes from the circumstance that it enhances the human consciousness of himself. The key was the Socratic philosophy «know yourself!». And no other science doesn't respond better to this motto. ... The future physician will need to be above all a good observer, a good interventionist, a man with precise and resolute thinking who can manage fast and decided in every complicated circumstances. But besides the undeniable technical education that Anatomy teaches us, she turns on in the highest degree the human thinking. The thirst for knowledge is infinitely more stimulated when it comes to know your own body.*⁹

The creative education, cultivated by the great Romanian scientist is not supposed to assert the individual, but the Stranger, the Other, as there is inside of us something deeper than ourselves, whose mark is the transcendental order and, finally, universal transcendence. It is because of our participation to the spiritual

⁸ Popa, "Ce este și ce nu este Anatomie ?"

⁹ Popa, "Ce este și ce nu este Anatomie ?".

world that we are what we are and that we have the ability to offer sense and signification to the material, physical world.

Gr. T. Popa guessed the importance of the transcendental order and, consequently, that of the transcendence in achieving the higher knowledge act, sealed by the indelible mark of the spirit. As a source of spiritual life, the higher education contributes, by means of its valences, to the continuous development of society. To him, an educational system that closes the individual, that reduces him to himself, that does not open the Universe to him, makes him selfish and barbarian. The world of excellence he obstinately cultivated is that opened towards the Universe, is the world transfigured and marked by the creative force of man.

Demands of Medical Ethics in Terms of Anatomical Teaching

For the Romanian scientist, Anatomy is the fundamental medical science, as it contains *in nuce*, all other medical sciences (Physiology, Embryology, Histology, Surgery, Morphology, etc.) Anatomy is considered a convergence point for other medical branches. The perspective of seeing Anatomy in a systemic vision led to the cardinal idea of the understanding of man as an active living being and of revealing the huge potential of this discipline in the field of formation, research and higher education, which enables or allows the training of authentic, true doctors. Anatomy develops the creative spirit, indispensable for every medical research or practice, as in front of any sick person the doctor must act as a live, inquisitive agent, for, as we know, *there are no diseases, there are only diseased people*.

Medical ethics and deontology are required whenever studying the human body anatomically. Anatomy teaches us the lesson of respect towards the human body, and so it can never be reduced to a useless science, but expresses the spiritual nature of mankind. Medical school is perceived by Grigore T. Popa as an institution of reason imposing to determine the student in medicine to understand the spiritual purpose of what he knows, studies, researches, applies and helps him reach an understanding of the notion of humanity. Grigore T. Popa considered Anatomy to be an instrument of personality formation.

Anatomy is not just the substrate of medical personality, but it is still its skeleton, too; it is that frame-work or steel structure of modern buildings, which after being finished from the ground to the roof, are then filled up with bricks, mortar, ornaments and wirings and plumbings. But neither bricks nor ornaments or plumbings can be used if there is missing the frame-work. Well learned Anatomy means a thorough consolidation of the entire medicine and a rich development of the (student's) personality. Anatomical

*data should connect into a exhaustive system of thought, which should make us to fully understand the human being.*¹⁰

He proved that anatomy can become an inquisitive instead of imperative discipline.¹¹ By developing a conception of the education as a sanctuary of reason, Grigore T. Popa managed to shed light on the educational function of medical disciplines, and especially, of the most important of them, according to him, Anatomy – somehow perceived as a queen of medical sciences:

*Anatomy is, by its setting at the beginning of the studies and by the type of its topics, one of the most important educational disciplines, an activity field by means of which the personality of the student itself is being developed, transformed and perfected.*¹²

The great Professor considered that the physician, in order to exist and live with dignity, should look at the world from the bottom up, from Heaven to Earth, from the Others to himself. To see oneself through Another is the greatest conquest a physician can make in order to become a true human being. By means of authentic culture and education, realized by the highest spirits of mankind, the Earth becomes man's country, his house and home. The education required by learning Anatomy, through its complex openings, elevated the man to more than himself.

The Place and the Role of Christian Morality Values in the medical Ethics

Over nearly 20 years, even before his passing, great Professor Gr. T. Popa lectured the famous Conference “*Current times and Christian Morals. Is it possible today the faith in Jesus Christ?*”, at the Romanian Athenaeum on April 15, 1947, on the third day of Easter, in a country that dwelled the brutal fussiness of enthronement of “*popular democracy*” and “*scientific atheism*”. On this occasion, Professor Gr. T. Popa added new elements to the architecture of his own vision on medical ethics that he had conceived in the previous years. Clearly criticising Marxism, Racism, and institutionalized Christianity alike, the author argued upon the superiority of the genuine Christian moral ideals, and associated Jesus with the science of morality.

¹⁰ Gr. T. Popa, “Evoluția unui om și evoluția unei științe (Un fel de curriculum vitae),” in Gr. T. Popa, *Conștiință și cunoaștere, vol. II. Publicistică* (Iași: Editura Universității «Al. I. Cuza», 2010), 269-307.

¹¹ R. G. Constantinescu, *Grigore T. Popa – medic scriitor și publicist*, Phd Thesis (Iași, 2011), 76.

¹² Popa, “Ce este și ce nu este Anatomie?”.

Today mankind roams in the darkness of painful feelings and of life ruins. ... In this serious situation, it is time for everyone to ask his own one consciousness if it remained still pure: «Where shall I go?» and the answer is not difficult to be given: «Back to the Christian Morals!» This Morals heeds on the spirit needs, that aspires to the transcendent, but also on people cohabitation in the society. Jesus understood the structure of the human spirit and man's value ... He asks the man to be modest, and do not think to rival the divinity whose attributes does not possess nor may have.¹³

Christian morals was the basis of Grigore T. Popa's completion as a physician and as a true man. He believed in the purity of the Christic message of love towards his neighbor and by this lecture he wanted that those who listen to him should change their beliefs if those were of a different kind. The victory of Good and helping the neighbor were the most important things for the scientist:

but the essence of Christian morals ... is the idea of tolerance, reconciliation, and love between people. Only on these base can be build human society and can be reach a peaceful and secure coexistence.¹⁴

But those days were unfriendly with him and, just as a Christian martyr, these ideas have sealed his fate as he died sooner in disastrous conditions. Although for Grigore T. Popa all these concepts and ways of living were a source of spiritual, moral, and ethical life, contributing to the ongoing development of the society, they led him in the end to its own collapse. This Conference, followed shortly by the other one entitled *Reform of the spirit* influenced in a tragic way the Professor's destiny, because a year later he passed away, deeply marked by the persecution made upon him by the new social order.

Conclusion

Integrated into the ideas of that time, into the major ideological conceptual patterns, the great teacher Grigore T. Popa has evolved under the influences of Anglo-Saxon values, which he then submitted to medical education from University of Medicine in Iași. The eternal modernity of Grigore T. Popa's ideas consists in the revealing of the place and role of Anatomy in forming a complete doctor, an elite healer, without failure, a valuable researcher by means of new ideas and new working hypothesis, capable of elaborating and substantiating them, and finally marked by the aura of excellence, capable of modeling his life in accordance with an ideal rooted in the spiritual world, in the noosphere.

¹³ Gr. T. Popa, "Morala creștină și timpurile actuale. Mai este posibilă astăzi credința în Isus Hristos?" in Gr. T. Popa, *Conștiință și cunoaștere, vol. II. Publicistică* (Iași: Editura Universității «Al. I. Cuza», 2010), 450-473.

¹⁴ Popa, "Morala creștină și timpurile actuale".

To conclude, we can say that the main axis that has guided his profound and rich activity has been Rabelais' quotation: *Science sans conscience c'est la ruine de l'âme*. He wanted Anatomy to be seen as a constant adventure and research by those willing to discover and understand its mysteries. As to quote Grigore T. Popa: "*Believe that the adventure spirit can still be discovered and preserved in our hearts!*" These means that the creative spirit can be permanently cultivated because once it loses vitality, it fades away.

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