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PREFACE

From its foundation, the International Academy of Philosophy has considered a part of its task to be the inquiry into the practical relevance of philosophical truth, and participation in interdisciplinary investigations aimed at the solution of practical problems. This is perhaps in large part rooted in the phenomenological tradition that is such an important part of the philosophy that is taught at our Academy. Phenomenology is not only a specific philosophical methodology, it is also a way of thinking which can be characterized, among other things, by a general interest in formulating the problems of different disciplines in a clear and concrete way. This in turn is rooted in the general phenomenological conviction that the foundation of all reasoning, all deductions and all theories must be grounded in a foundation of clearly apprehended essential insights.

The attempt to come to grips with the problems of practical life can be divided into two different kinds of approaches. One starts with empirical data and tries to classify or organize them according to categories that are not grounded in the essence of things, but rather in a certain way of thinking. The other, not at all infrequently adopted, consists in predefining a framework – an abstract theory – and then trying to deduce from this abstract theory what should be done in a concrete case or the way in which the empirical data should be adjusted. If this “adjustment” proves to be difficult or even impossible, all the worse for reality, since this way of thinking leads the scientist to consider his first aim to be preserving the purity of his theoretical approach.

Phenomenology, instead, would like to give us a third way. It is convinced that in the empirical material itself there are elements of rationality, and recurring forms in the presentation of empirical data, which allow us to see what the fundamental essence of the phenomena is, and what the essential laws governing the phenomena of this kind are. This makes it possible, then, to investigate the essence of health in a way that allows us to find essential laws, essential insights that can guide the concrete action in this field. As a politician, I must add that such an approach can give us guidelines for concrete health care and welfare policies, which are badly needed today throughout the world, especially in the most advanced industrial countries.

It was with the background of such a conviction that we developed and submitted a research proposal to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF). The goal of our proposal was to take the WHO definition of health as our starting point, and through a cooperative effort of doctors and philosophers, work through the challenges which this (and indeed any) definition of health faces if it is to be both truly personalist and operational.

The collection of papers presented here is the product of a symposium that marked the mid-point of our two-year research. Written to cover topics we had found to be central in the course of the previous year, and re-written in light of the symposium discussions, the papers reflect not only the efforts of the interdisciplinary cooperation between medicine and philosophy, but also an international discussion of the problems central to the current debate about health. We are grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) for its support of our research, and to the symposium participants for their contribution to this research. And we are confident that this volume will indeed stand as a contribution to the important theoretical and practical problem of defining the nature and the value of health.

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