

QUOTATIONS

ON THE USE OF AVERAGES¹

Another very frequent application of mathematics to biology is the use of averages which, in medicine and physiology, leads, so to speak, necessarily to error. There are doubtless several reasons for this; but the greatest obstacle to applying calculation to physiological phenomena is still, at bottom, the excessive complexity which prevents their being definite and comparable one with another. By destroying the biological character of phenomena, the use of *averages* in physiology and medicine usually gives only apparent accuracy to the results. From our point of view, we may distinguish between several kinds of averages: physical averages, chemical averages and physiological and pathological averages. If, for instance, we observe the number of pulsations and the degree of blood pressure by means of the oscillations of a manometer throughout one day, and if we take the average of all our figures to get the true or average blood pressure and to learn the true or average number of pulsations, we shall simply have wrong numbers. In fact, the pulse decreases in number and intensity when we are fasting and increases during digestion or under different influences of movement and rest; all the biological characteristics of the phenomenon disappear in the average. Chemical averages are also often used. If we collect a man's urine during twenty-four hours and mix all this urine to analyze the average, we get an analysis of a urine which simply does not exist; for urine, when fasting, is different from urine during digestion. A startling instance of this kind was invented by a physiologist who took urine from a railroad station urinal where people of all nations passed, and who believed he could thus present an analysis of *average* European urine! Aside from physical and chemical, there are physiological averages, or what we might call average descriptions of phenomena, which are even more false. Let me assume that a physician collects a great many individual observations of a disease and that he makes an average description of symptoms observed in the individual cases; he will thus have a description that will never be matched in nature. So in physiology, we must never make average descriptions of experiments, because the true relations of phenomena disappear in the average; when dealing with complex and variable experiments, we must study their various circumstances, and then present our most perfect experiment as a type, which, however, still stands for true facts. In the cases just considered, averages must therefore be rejected, because they confuse, while aiming to unify, and distort while aiming to simplify. Averages are applicable only to reducing very slightly varying numerical data about clearly defined and *absolutely simple* cases.

¹Claude Bernard, *An introduction to the study of experimental medicine*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, New York. pp. 134-135. 1957.