

HIPPOCRATES AS MODEL OF THE PHILOSOPHIC PHYSICIAN FOR GALEN

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1. Introduction

In the dawn of the 21st century, if one were to hear in a party or to read in a book the strange remark that “the best doctor is also a philosopher,” one would think that this is a kind of joke made by some witty philosopher in order to make fun of his self-importance. In fact, the statement was made by the famous physician Galen in the 2nd century A. D. Apparently in all seriousness this ancient Greek physician believed that one could not be an accomplished “Doctor of Medicine” and practice his art honestly, without the benefit of having a thorough training in philosophy as well as medicine. According to him, it was absolutely necessary for the student of medicine who desired to become “the best physician” to have also a solid grounding in all three basic branches of philosophy, that is, Logic, Philosophy of Nature or Physiology, and especially Ethics.

In this study I will discuss the precise meaning of the above aphorism in the context of Galen’s works. His understanding of the close relation between Philosophy and Medicine will be explored and the specific reasons of his strong recommendation of philosophical training for medical students will be considered critically. It will become clear that Galen’s recommended marriage between the Hippocratic and the Platonic traditions for the better training of physicians and the greater benefit of patients in the civil community, is as much in need in our times as it was in his time almost two millennia ago. In the age of the “managed health care” and the ultimate concern with “the bottom lime” the message of this ancient Doctor of Medicine for the philosophical training of physicians and the humane treatment of patients may strike a cordial horde.

2. Galen’s place in the history of Ancient Medicine

Galen, the son of Nikias, was born in Pergamos at the beginning of the 2nd century A. D. (circa 130) in a well to do family, and moved with ease in the educated and Greek-speaking Greco-Roman elite of his time. By that time the Hippocratic or “scientific” approach to health had been practiced in Greece for more than half a millennium and had developed distinct methodologies followed by specific sects of physicians, such

as the Empirics and the Methodics, both of which were contrasted to Rationalists or Dogmatists. The latter tended to approach Medicine not as medical practitioners, but rather as medical theorists with certain preconceived ideas or theories regarding the physiology of the human body and its health. The Empiric School, which was founded by the followers of Herophilus in the 3rd century B. C. and was influenced by skeptical developments in philosophy, placed little emphasis on theoretical or epistemological requirements, concentrating instead on observation (*teresis*), analogy (*metabasis tou homoioi*), and general experience (*peira*). The Methodic School, on the other hand, which was founded in the 1st century A. D. by physicians who were influenced by Asclepiades, although it had some interest in physiological theory, had simplify the practice of medicine by reducing all states of the human body to two, the constricted and the loose, and provoked Galen's derision by their claim that the medical art could be learned in six months only.

Galen developed his own methodological views on the art of medicine in this context of diverse medical Schools and approaches to human health. It is indicative of his success in unifying the medical theory and practice for posterity that after Galen the different medical Schools ceased to exist. His domination of the history of medicine parallels Aristotle's domination of the history of philosophy so much so that the following comments seem historically justified:

Galen's immense influence on later generations can hardly be denied; with the exception of Aristotle, and the possible exception of Plato, there can be no more historically influential ancient author in matters scientific. In the translations and interpretations of the great Arab and Syrian scholars his medicine became the foundation of a tradition which survives in the Muslim world to this day (the so-called 'Unani' medicine, for example, which is taught in Islamic schools in India); translated again into Latin, and established as the textbook of the early Italian and Spanish medical schools, his work came to underlie the theories of medieval doctors and, in the new editions and translation of the Renaissance, to inform the anatomical debates of the Scientific Revolution; for more than a millennium and a half the effects of his thought can be traced, at a variety of levels from philosophically sophisticated to semi-literate, from Byzantium to the Greek-speaking east, from the Arab world to southern and the northern Europe on the one hand, and to India on the other.¹

¹ Singer, P. N. *Galen: Selected Works*, Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1997, p. xii. The information in this section is derived from this authority. On this subject, see also: O. Temkin, *Galenism: The Rise and Decline of Medical Philosophy* (London: 1973); M. Ullman, *Islamic Medicine* (Edinburgh: 1978); P.-G. Ottosson, *Scholastic Medicine and Philosophy: A Study of Commentaries on Galen's Tegni (ca. 1300-1450)*, (Naples: 1984); and S. Scarborough, ed., *Symposium on Byzantine Medicine* (Dunbarton Oaks Papers 38, Washington D.C., 1985).

Like the Empiric doctors, Galen insisted on the importance of observation and the empirical evidence, but for him at least some theoretical knowledge relating to anatomy and physiology is also necessary, so the doctor would not be deceived by appearances. He knew, for instance, that symptoms might appear in the head, although their causes are noxious humors produced in the stomach. He believes that it is important for the doctor to have all his perceptive faculties trained, especially that of touch which, in order to be able to detect fine variations of the pulse caused by various diseases, had to be highly trained and properly developed. Above all, he stressed the vital importance of theoretical training in logic and the ability to present arguments and scientific findings in a logical manner. As Singer put it:

The securest kind of knowledge for Galen is that based on sound anatomical research in conjunction with a syllogistic presentation of the argument. And he insists that such knowledge is secure, strongly countering the claims of Skeptic philosophers and Empiric doctors on the impossibility of knowledge: the 'geometric-style' proof is of particular importance to him as a tool to counter such skeptical or sophistic claims.²

3. The best doctor is also a philosopher

At the opening of his short treatise on the thesis that *The Best Doctor is also a Philosopher*, Galen laments the "malaise" that he perceives as having infected the state of the knowledge and training of medical doctors of his time. In his judgement it has fallen far below from where Hippocrates had left it more than half a millennium earlier. Although lip-service is still paid to him as the Father of Medicine, the broadness of his conception of the noble art of healing has been narrowed down now and the training of contemporary physicians has become over-specialized and, therefore, impoverished in his eyes. As he sees it, doctors have become like lazy athletes, who dream of Olympic glory, but do not train regularly and vigorously for such task. His diagnosis is stated as follows:

There is a malaise very frequently encountered in athletes; in spite of a desire to become Olympic champions, they take no regular exercise, which might lead to the realization of the desire. A similar problem obtains in the case of doctors. Doctors will pay lip-service to Hippocrates, to be sure, and look up to him as to a man without peer; but when it comes to taking the necessary

² Ibid. p. xv. He uses this type of argument especially in *The opinions of Hippocrates and Plato* (Book VIII, K v. 655) in order to prove that the brain is the controlling part of the soul.

steps to reach the same rank themselves—well, they do quite the opposite.³

Galen proceeded to identify six areas of difference between Hippocrates and the physicians of his time. First, although Hippocrates had a high opinion of astronomy and geometry as being of “central relevance to the study of medicine,” “*these people* [Galen’s contemporary doctors] are not only personally ignorant of both disciplines—they actually censure others who are not equally ignorant.” Second, Hippocrates emphasized the importance of having “accurate knowledge of the body, as the starting-point for the whole science of medicine,” but “these doctors fail, in their studies, to learn any of the following matters: the substance, formation, construction, size, and relationship to its neighbors of each part of the body—and indeed its position too.” Third, Hippocrates indicated that inability to distinguish diseases by “species and genus” leads to “the failure of the doctor in his therapeutic aims,” but “the present generation of doctors, so far from enjoying a training in logical theory, in fact blame those who do this training for wasting their energies.” Forth, while Hippocrates advised that great care should be given to the construction of a “prognosis” regarding the present, past, and future state of the patient, “today’s doctors are so perfectly studied in this branch of the art that if someone predicts a hemorrhage or a sweat they denounce him as a magician or a speaker of riddles.” Fifth, although Hippocrates advocated attention to diet based on the prognosis of the disease, contemporary doctors are not “likely to base their instructions for diets on the expected peak of the disease” apparently because of their luck in diagnostic skill. Sixth, while Hippocrates was a master in “expository skill,” the contemporaries are so lacking in this “that they may sometimes be observed making two mistakes in one word—something which is quite difficult even to imagine.” (pp. 30-31)

This being the deplorable state of medical affairs at his time, as Galen perceived it, he had to wonder about the oddity that Hippocrates was still admired abstractly, but his example was not followed in practice. So he decided to try to “find the reasons why this universal admiration for the man is not backed up by a reading of his texts.” The situation looked quite bleak from Galen’s perspective as captured in the tri-lemma: Either the doctors of his day did not read the works of Hippocrates; or, if they did read them, they did not understand them; or if “by great good fortune” they did understand them, they failed to “study the theoretical precepts seriously” and to turn them “into customary practice.” (p. 31) The outcome was depressive, the medicine of his day did not produce doctors of Hippocrates’ caliber and that sad fact bothered and puzzled Galen greatly. His experience had taught him that greatness in any field presupposed “will and ability.” For:

If either of these is lacking it is quite impossible for the goal to be achieved.
We can readily observe athletes failing to reach their goals, either through

³ The translation is that of Singer, which I will follow throughout here. *Op. cit.* p. 30.

the natural deficiencies of their bodies or through a neglect of exercise. But if someone has a physique that equips him for victory, and performs all the appropriate exercises, what can possibly prevent him from running off with a whole series of crowns? So, are today's doctors deficient on both counts? Do they lack both potential and sufficient eagerness in their preparation for the art? Or do they have one but lack the other? (p. 31)

To these serious question Galen will search for satisfactory answers. Observing that the natural environment had not changed much since the time of Hippocrates, since the sun continued to bathe with soft and delightful light the lovely land of Ionia and the stars and the planets continue to follow their ordered paths, Galen could not believe that the deficiency he perceived in his contemporary doctors was due to some natural causes. Therefore, he came to the inevitable conclusion that:

It must be because of the bad upbringing current in our times, and because of the higher value accorded to wealth as opposed to virtue, that we no longer get anyone of the quality of Pheidias among our sculptors, of Apelles among our painters, or of Hippocrates among our doctors. And yet the fact that we were born later than the ancients, and have inherited from them arts, which they developed to such a high degree, should have been a considerable advantage. It would be easy, for example, to learn thoroughly in a very few years what Hippocrates discovered over a very long period of time, and then to devote the rest of one's life to the discovery of what remains. But it is impossible for someone who puts wealth before virtue, and studies the art for the sake of personal gain rather than public benefit, to have the art itself as his goal. It is impossible to pursue financial gain at the same time as training oneself in so great an art; someone who is really enthusiastic about one of these aims will inevitably despise the other. (pp. 31-32)

Galen's diagnosis of the malaise of the medicine of his time seems right on target. The root of the problem was not that the students of his time were born with natural deficiencies, but rather that they were infested with bad habits and had mixed up their priorities, placing "wealth before virtue." Their studying of the art was not for the art's sake or for "the public benefit" as it should be, but as a means to "personal gain" and wealth. But Galen, like all Hellenic philosophers before him, knew very well that the desire of wealth, like every other unnatural desire, is limitless. He asks pointedly:

Is there, then, any of our contemporaries of whom it may be said that his desire for financial gain is limited to what will provide for the simple bodily needs? Is there one with the ability not only to make a verbal formulation, but also to give an actual example of this: the limitation of wealth to Nature's requirements for the prevention of hunger, thirst, or cold? If such a person exists, he will scorn

Artaxerxes and Perdicas. He will wish never to come into sight of the former; as for the latter, he will heal him of the disease he suffers, regarding him as a man in need of the Hippocratic art. He will not, however, spent all the time with Perdicas, but will treat the poor people of Kranon and Thasos and the small towns. (p. 32)

This virtuous and ideal doctor, whose life is dedicated to healing the poor in need and cultivating his art to the outmost degree, will not rely solely on his reading of medical texts, but will try to gain personal experience by observing nature and mankind. Following in the steps of Hippocrates, he “will himself travel through the whole Greece:”

So as to test from his own experience what he has learnt from reading, he will at all costs have to make a personal inspection of different cities: those that lie in southerly or northerly areas, or in the land of the rising or of the setting sun. He must visit cities that are located in valleys as well as those on heights, and cities that use water brought in from outside as well as those that use spring water or rainwater, or water from standing lakes or rivers. Nor should he neglect to consider whether they use excessively cold or hot waters, or waters of an ‘alkaline’, ‘astringent’ or other such quality. He should look at a city on the banks of a large river, one by stagnant water, one on a hill, one by the sea—and observe everything else about which Hippocrates taught. (p. 32)

This kind of medical doctor, according to Galen, will naturally “despise money” and will be “extremely hard working.” Hard work and virtue go together, as do money and vice. Galen observed philosophically: “One cannot be hard-working if one is continually drinking or eating or indulging in sex; if, to put is briefly, one is a slave to genitals and belly. The true doctor will be found to be a friend of temperance and companion of truth.” (p. 33) In other words, a true doctor is actually truly a philosopher! Since they both aim at virtue and truth, it is obvious to Galen that they need to be trained in the application of the logical method and the understanding of the nature of reality:

Furthermore he [the true doctor] must study logical method to know how many diseases there are, by species and by genus, and how, in each case, one is to find out what kind of treatment is indicated. The same method also provides the foundations for the knowledge of the body’s very nature, which is to be understood on three levels. First, the level of the primary elements, which are in a state of total mixture with each other; secondly, the level of the perceptible, which is also called the ‘homogeneous’; thirdly, that which derives from the organic parts. The use and function for the animal of each of these is also a lesson of the logical method: they too should be learnt by a process of rigorous demonstration, not uncritically. What grounds are then

left for any doctor who wishes to be trained in the art in a way worthy of Hippocrates not to be a philosopher? (p. 33)

That is certainly a very good and insightful question. For Galen who distinguished him-self both as a physician and as a logician, there was no sufficient reason or excuse for any aspiring medical student or doctor not to wish to be also thoroughly trained in the logical methods and the ethical aims or goals of true philosophy. The fact that the doctors of his time had neglected to be so trained in the arts of philosophy, it was a sufficient reason of their failure to distinguish themselves as physicians worthy of the Hippocratic mantle. He is explicit and emphatic on the necessity of the philosophical requirement for the training of the ideal medical practitioner, the worthy follower of Hippocrates:

He must be practiced in logical theory in order to discover the nature of the body, the differences between diseases, and the indications as to treatment; he must despise money and cultivate temperance in order to stay the course. He must, therefore, know all the parts of philosophy: the logical, the physical, and the ethical. In that case there will be no danger of his performing any evil action, since he practices temperance and despises money; all evil actions that men undertake are done either at the prompting of greed or under the spell of pleasure. And so he is bound to be in possession of the other virtues too, for they all go together. It is impossible to gain one without acquiring all the others as an immediate consequence; they are connected as if by one string.

If, then, philosophy is necessary to doctors with regard both to preliminary learning and the subsequent training, clearly all true doctors must also be philosophers. That doctors need philosophy in order to employ their art in the right way seems to me to require no demonstration, when it has so frequently been observed that those who are interested in financial gain are druggists, not doctors, and use the art for the opposite of its natural purpose. (pp. 33-34)

Galen's statement that "money and pleasure" is the double fountain, from which all evil actions flow, may sound logically dogmatic but ethically is not far from the truth. Also, one may doubt whether all the virtues are connected "as if by one string," but the ethical fact remains that those who have mastered their greediness for money and their passion for bodily pleasures are in the road of acquiring the rest of the virtues with ease. Anticipating possible objections and quibbles over his stern statements Galen responds:

I hope that no one is going to quibble over words, and come out with some nonsense just for the sake of argument, for example that 'the doctor should

of course be above monetary matters, and be a just man, but still not a philosopher;’ or that ‘he should know the nature of the body, the use of the parts, the differences between diseases and the indication as to treatment, but still not be practiced in logical theory.’ This would be to agree on the factual issue, but shamelessly concoct a disagreement on a purely semantic basis. We do not have time for this sort of thing. You would do better to return to common sense, and not quarrel with your fellow over mere sounds, like a jackdaw or raven—but interest yourself in the actual truth of the matter... We must, then, practice philosophy, if we are true followers of Hippocrates. And, if we practice philosophy, there is nothing to prevent us, not only from reaching a similar attainment, but even from becoming better than him [Hippocrates]. For it is open to us to learn everything, which he gave us a good account of, and to find out the rest for ourselves. (p. 34)

With such power of the will, and such confidence in the power of philosophy, Galen set out to reach and even surpass the glory of Hippocrates, the father of Medicine. The history of Medicine is proof that he succeeded in his aspiration.

4. Conclusion

Students of the art of Hippocrates and the art of Socrates today could learn much from the case of Galen and his advocacy of the legitimate marriage of Medicine and Philosophy, the Hippocratic and the Platonic traditions. They can benefit from their training in logical and critical thinking as well as by a broader philosophical understanding of the nature of disease and of the place of the human body and soul in the natural scheme of things.

Above all, they can be trained ethically and learn how to put the practice of their art into perspective and, thus, be able to withstand the real temptations of pleasure and money. These Sirens can easily derail the ordinary human being and even the trained doctor from practicing the art of healing in accordance with the precepts and the requirements of the Hippocratic oath.

Thus the best doctor becomes inseparable from the true Hellenic philosopher, who prudently has put his house in order and has grasped the truth of the nature of things, including the truth of the nature of human beings. He has seen clearly through the phantasmagoria of natural world and the conventions of organized political community. Putting virtue before wealth and temperance above pleasure is not easy for the human being, but it is necessary for the philosopher who values his ethical freedom, and for the physician who honors the art of Hippocrates by practicing it as truly trained philosopher.