

Alberto Jori¹
**The Ideal of Health in Ancient Greece
Among Philosophy, Poetry, and Medicine²**

In memoriam matris amatissimae

Unlike gods, human beings are extremely vulnerable: they are characterized by an irremediable ontological finiteness. In addition to mortality, this is confirmed by the constant possibility of falling victim to disease. Indeed, mankind is exposed at every moment to risks and sufferings that endanger their serenity, well-being, and not infrequently their very existence.³ In all ancient cultures the fear of disease and suffering generated a search for means to avoid or defeat them.⁴ Among these, Hellenic civilization is characterized by the decisive role it attributes, alongside the pragmatic dimension of care, to the theoretical side—especially the attempt to define the *essence of*

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³ This theme is developed masterfully in the classic work by Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴ See Klaus Bergdolt, *Wellbeing: A Cultural History of Healthy Living*, trans. J. Dewhurst (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); originally *Leib und Seele. Eine Kulturgeschichte des gesundes Lebens* (München: Beck, 1999), 7ff.

health. In this way, the ancient Greeks encountered a problem familiar to us moderns as well, namely, that defining health is extremely difficult.⁵ It is much easier to extol its benefits, like the Hellenistic physician Herophilus, who stated that “where [health] is lacking, wisdom cannot flourish, art cannot find expression, strength fails, riches are useless, and cunning is ineffective.”⁶

There is no doubt, however, that in order to understand what illness is, a definition of *health* is indispensable. Nowadays we know that health is not a “Platonic” entity, a kind of transcendent essence placed outside the history of men. To define it, we must account for historically-conditioned intellectual, religious, and political factors; health, in fact, varies according to its context. In this sense, it is not only something scientific and “objective,” but *also* an elusive psychological and subjective reality. Health is, in a way, an “absent presence.” When it is there, it is characterized precisely by the fact that it is *not* perceived.⁷ It is not measurable in a rigorous way (despite what current diagnostic techniques seem to suggest); rather, it consists of a feeling of “inner adequacy” experienced by those in tune with themselves on both the physical and psychic levels; an experience in which *we are at ease with ourselves and our bodies*. Yet even this definition is unsatisfactory. As Hesiod made clear (*Works and Days* 102-104), there are “silent” diseases that enter our bodies without our noticing them, and they are often the worst.

How, then, to define health? Is it only a “construct” relative to culture, as argued by many sociologists in the second half of the 20th century?⁸ There is no question that the medical, technical, and philosophical definitions of health have changed many times throughout history, but we must recognize that there is an *invariant* component underlying this notion. In fact, for most people—

⁵ See, e.g., Norbert Paul & Thomas Schlich, eds., *Medizingeschichte: Aufgaben, Probleme, Perspektiven* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1998).

⁶ See Heinrich von Staden, *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 407.

⁷ It is thus essentially “discrete.” See Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. C.R. Fawcett (New York: Zone, 1989), 135ff.

⁸ See Alfons Labisch, *Homo hygienicus: Gesundheit und Medizin in der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1992).

regardless of their differences—the ideal of perfect health coincides with the notions listed by Karl Jaspers in his treatise on general psychopathology, i.e., “life, longevity, ability to procreate, body ready for action, strength, only occasional fatigue, absence of pain”: in short, a condition in which, “apart from a feeling of joyful well-being,” we are barely aware of physical limitations.⁹ Health, then, while not always immediately visible in itself, is expressed in the active, responsive, and creative capacity of the individual—in his or her aptitude to open up to the future, to plan and implement a multiplicity of initiatives. In this way, it comes rather close to the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, which we usually translate—though not entirely correctly—as “happiness.”

In what follows I will attempt to outline a synthetic and (by necessity) selective picture of the theories of health proposed in ancient Greece. We shall see that an important role in that framework belongs to *dietetics*, that is, to the theory and practice of a *lifestyle* designed to ensure the maintenance (or recovery) of health. Dietetics entails, among its essential preconditions, the belief that health or disease is *not* the result of fate or divine will, but depends instead on individual life choices. It is thus an invitation to take *responsibility* for one’s own health.¹⁰ In this context, a link between the physiological dimension of health and a moral one is quite natural. In the Greek world, in fact, good health was often regarded as the testimony and result—the “prize” as it were—of an orderly and harmonious, hence virtuous, life.¹¹ Thus, health was conceived to be a *virtue*. With this in mind, we shall examine some ancient evidence below and attempt to reconstruct the interactions between the medical, aesthetic, and ethical aspects of health in ancient Greek thought.¹²

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. J. Hoenig and M.W. Hamilton, 2 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), originally *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (Berlin: Springer, 1948), 42.

¹⁰ See Fridolf Kudlien, *Der Beginn des medizinischen Denkens bei den Griechen: Von Homer bis Hippokrates*, ed. O. Gigon (Zürich: Artemis, 1967), 55-62.

¹¹ See Bergdolt, *Wellbeing*, 2.

¹² See Georgios Mouratidis and Heather L. Reid, “From *Euexia* to *Eupraxia*: Gymnastic Education and Moral Performance,” in *Paideia and*

Health as a gift from the gods

In archaic Greece, the concepts of health and illness had a clearly religious character. Health was seen as a divine gift and, unsurprisingly, medicine claimed divine origin. Apollo was regarded as a thaumaturge-god, as was Asclepius, whose cult was established in the 6th century BCE.¹³ But if health was a gift from the gods, they also had the power to take it away and cause disease. This concept associated the loss of health (and beauty) with divine punishment. We can see this in the Homeric poems, e.g., when Apollo avenges the humiliation of his priest by striking the Greek camp with plague (*Iliad* 1.45-53). Since the gods were constantly meddling with health, healing was sought in archaic Greece primarily through prayers or ritual practices.¹⁴

We find neither definitions nor theoretical reflection on health in the earliest Greek texts that have come down to us. Rather, its nature and benefits are suggested by describing a satisfying life. The picture provided by Solon (ca. 600 BCE) of a “fortunate” existence due to the protection of the gods is a good example:

A boy, while still an immature child, in seven years grows a fence of teeth and loses them for the first time. When the god completes another seven years, he shows the signs of coming puberty. In the third hebdomad his body is still growing, his chin becomes downy, and the skin changes its hue. In the fourth everyone is far the best in strength, whereby men show their signs of manliness. In the fifth it is time for a man to be mindful of marriage and to look for a line of sons to come after him. In the sixth a man’s mind is being trained for everything and he is no longer as willing to commit acts of foolishness. In the seventh and eighth, a total of fourteen years, he is far the best in thought and speech. In the ninth he still has ability, but his speech and

Performance, eds. H. Curcio, M. Ralkowski, H. Reid (Siracusa: Parnassos Press, 2023), 209-227.

¹³ When it replaced that of Apollo Kyparissios at Kos: see H.M. Koelbing, *Arzt und Patient in der antiken Welt* (Zürich: Artemis, 1977), 59-64.

¹⁴ On health-related sanctuaries, see Senkova in this volume.

wisdom give weaker proof of a high level of excellence. If one were to complete stage after stage and reach the tenth, he would not have death's allotment prematurely.¹⁵

Even for the most "fortunate" man protected by the gods, the idea of a life completely immune from disease and pain was considered a mere illusion.¹⁶ Only men of an earlier Golden Age lived, as Hesiod explains, "as gods, without suffering of the soul, far and free from toil and pain" (*Works and Days* 112-115).¹⁷ In contrast, the *present* human condition was marked by a finiteness that manifests itself not only in mortality but also in what often heralds and precedes death: illness and suffering.

The picture is not purely religious. Among the Greeks, a man in good health is characterized not only by a "fullness of life," but also by complete integration into his family and political community [example/evidence]. This picture does not differ much from other ancient cultures [such as?]. What is distinctively Greek, however, is the philosophical and pedagogical principle of *kalokagathia*, which posits beauty (*kalon*) as a prerequisite of health, and *physical* perfection as the appropriate manifestation of *moral* and *intellectual* superiority.¹⁸ Therefore, aristocratic education aimed at the maturation of both body and soul, seen as closely connected and complementary dimensions. And in general the Greeks regarded intellectual and gymnastic exercise as equally important for the formation of the person.

This ideal of a human being devoid of flaws had strong elitist implications and other aspects that would be ethically questionable

¹⁵ Fr. 27 West, from Philo, *Creation of the World*, trans. D. Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Solon focuses here on males; a specific notion of women's health will take another 150 years (see below).

¹⁶ See, e.g., what Nausicaa says to Odysseus in Homer, *Odyssey*, 6.186-190.

¹⁷ This and all subsequent translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Heather L. Reid, "A Gentleman or a Philosopher? Xenophon vs. Aristotle on *Kalokagathia*," in *Philodorema: Essays in Greek and Roman Philosophy in Honor of Phillip Mitsis*, eds. David Konstan and David Sider (Siracusa: Parnassos Press, 2022), 121-134.

today. For example, we see Homer's heroes mocking ugly and deformed people like Thersites, a soldier of humble origins (*Iliad*¹⁹ 2.270). The tendential equation between *physical* perfection and *moral* nobility often involved the exclusion of the ugly and sick.²⁰ This mentality manifested itself most ruthlessly in Sparta, where individuals who were aesthetically "defective" or afflicted with impairments were punished.²¹ According to Plutarch, the Spartan elders sent weak or sickly infants at the foot of Mount Taygetus, "in the belief that the life of what nature had not well equipped from the beginning for health and strength, was of no benefit either to itself or to the state."²²

What we might call the Greeks' aestheticization of physical, intellectual, and moral health, had considerable effects not only on pedagogy, but also other spheres. For example, in the 5th century BCE, Polyclitus sought to quantify ideal body proportions in his famous *Canon*. In parallel, the Olympic Games, and other athletic competitions promoted this ideal of beautiful goodness.²³ The social esteem accorded to the winners of competitions confirms the high value the Greeks placed on visible perfection.

Archaic philosophers' reflections on health

We have seen that the Greeks originally attributed health to the favor of the gods. However, a question emerged: how is it that not even the most pious are able to escape sickness and suffering, let

¹⁹ On gymnastic education, see Reid & Mouratidis in this volume.

²⁰ See Ingomar Weiler, "Inverted Kalokagathia," in *Slavery and Abolition. A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 2002, 23 (2), 9-28.

²¹ For example, Aelian, *Varia Historia* 14.7.

²² Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, trans. edition. 16. From MS: I don't think there is contemporary evidence for this practice (e.g., in Xenophon, who was an eye witness to the Spartan tradition). Plutarch writes centuries later, and I am not sure how far his text reflects the reality in this particular case... Either way, there is archaeological evidence for a potential place of executions in a cave near the village Tripy (c. 5 km West from Sparta). But it only relates to adults (adult human skeletons were found; no infant skeletons were there - perhaps they didn't survive?

²³ See, e.g., Wolfgang Decker, *Sport in der Griechischen Antike*: (München: Beck, 1995), 39ff.

alone death? Hesiod (*Works and Days* 102) explained that since Pandora's Box was opened, evils afflict human beings independently of the gods and it is *no longer* possible to reverse them. The situation was thus regarded as structural and final, even the gods themselves could not change it if they wanted to.

Later, philosophical (and scientific) reflection framed the phenomena of health and illness within the dynamics of *phusis*.²⁴ In this context, we encounter Alcmaeon of Croton, who defined health as the "balance (*isonomia*) of powers (*dunameis*) within the body" (fr. 24 B 4 D.-K.).²⁵ Alcmaeon thus proposed a "political" theory of health to replace the static and ontologizing concept of diseases as entities that invade the human body and ravage it. His was a *dynamic* and *functional* doctrine that referred to the internal balances of the organism, conceived as a kind of pluralistic structure in which no one component should take over the others. This flexible view of health could explain why the same individual often "swayed" between a good condition and illness. In the same fragment, Alcmaeon also emphasized the influence that changing environmental factors can exert on the body's internal balances.

In the same era, other thinkers showed concern for the effects of the environment on individual and community health. Empedocles of Akragas, for example, purified the waters of Selinunte by means of hydraulic engineering, thus ending a plague (Diogenes Laertius 7.70): the "scientific" and pragmatic approach to a problem of environmental sanitation is here striking. Empedocles was not only a physician and thaumaturge,²⁶ but also a natural philosopher. Indeed, according to him, the four elements or "roots" that make up the universe—fire, water, air, and earth—also form the basis of human physiology (fr. 11-14 D.-K.). When the parts of our body harmonize with each other according to correct proportions, the

²⁴ See James Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine: Philosophy and Medicine from Alcmaeon to the Alexandrians* (London: Routledge, 1993), 32ff.

²⁵ Thanks to Heather Reid for this suggestion.

²⁶ In this regard, let me refer to Alberto Jori, *Medicina e medici nell'antica Grecia. Saggio sul 'Peri téchnes' ippocratico* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino / Napoli: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici, 1997), 341-342.

result is proper functioning (fr. 21 D.-K.). For Empedocles, health is the result of balance among the basic elements, and therefore subject to the laws of nature—as are its pathological deviations.²⁷

It should not be overlooked that Empedocles was profoundly influenced by Pythagoreanism (Diogenes Laertius 8.51 ff.). For the Pythagoreans, physical and spiritual well-being was the effect of a lifestyle governed by proportion and harmony. In order to adopt and maintain this way of life, strict *self-discipline* was necessary.²⁸ Many ancient testimonies attest that Pythagoras followed a specific *diaita*. Diodorus Siculus (10.7.1-2) says that Pythagoras urged his followers “to live a simple life, because extravagance [...] ruins not only the wealth of men, but also their bodies.” In such a spirit, Pythagoras convinced many “to live on raw vegetables and drink water, striving all their lives to attain the true good.” The health of the Pythagoreans is thus the result of an asceticism inspired not only by nature in its quasi-immediateness (raw vegetables and water), but also marked by the rhythms of musical harmony. Such rhythms strictly regulated the consumption of food and drink, stillness and rest, speech and silence of the school’s followers.²⁹

Consistent with this view, Pythagoras regarded individuals as *responsible* for controlling their passions, and thus their own health. As the Neoplatonist Iamblichus stated, “[h]e proved that the gods are not to blame for suffering, and that all diseases and pains of the body are the result of excesses.”³⁰ All human beings thus have the possibility to maintain themselves in a state of purity and good health, provided they conform their inner states and behavior to the precise norms imparted by Pythagoras, which in turn reflect the harmony and order of reality as a whole.

The Pythagorean needs to restrain from excess and remain with iron will at a midpoint characterized by proportion and harmony

²⁷ On Empedocles’s doctrine of the elements, see Alberto Jori, *Sognando l’Arcadia* (Palermo: Nuova Ipsa, 2023), 146ff.

²⁸ Joseph Schumacher, *Antike Medizin: Die naturphilosophischen Grundlagen der Medizin in der griechischen Antike* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), 64.

²⁹ See Bergdolt, *Wellbeing*, 23-24.

³⁰ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagora*, **Trans ed**, 218.

conformed to the traditional Greek principle of *metron* (measure), and *mēden agan* (nothing in excess). This principle also emerges in philosophical currents whose approach is far removed from that of Pythagoreanism. Democritus, for example, whose mechanistic materialism presents a stark contrast to Pythagorean spiritualism, stated that human nature and thought must be led toward a positive condition called *euthymia* through moderation in pleasures and harmony of life (fr. 4 D.-K.). In parallel, passions, which threaten our serenity, must be harnessed through strict self-control.³¹ Democritus thus emphasizes *personal responsibility* for health, criticizing the habit of blaming the gods for misfortunes. He takes psychic and physical health to be linked (fr. 159 D.-K.) and, despite his materialism, institutes a hierarchy in which the good condition of the *soul* is more important than that of the body (fr. 191 D.-K.).

The Hippocratic Corpus

One of the most important expressions of the 5th-century BCE humanistic spirit, which attributed to mankind the power to shape our own destinies (including health), is the Hippocratic Corpus. It consists of some 60 treatises on medical topics composed by different authors between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE, later attributed to Hippocrates of Kos.³² It remained authoritative in the West (and beyond) for nearly two millennia.³³ Noteworthy in the *Corpus*, among the variety of methodological approaches, are the *holistic* view of the patient, and the *individualizing* conception of disease. Most Hippocratic authors do not consider diseases as autonomous entities, directing their attention instead to the sick individual. In other words, a disease is merely an abstraction; what is of interest is the patient and their specific symptomatology. The descriptive power of Hippocratic treatises, such as the *Prognostics* or the *Epidemics*, derives

³¹ Fr. 37, 189 D.-K. See Schumacher, *Antike Medizin*, 152.

³² **MS: Some may be as late as 2nd-century CE (e.g., Decorum). Maybe mention the dates are subject to academic debate rather than just stating this as a fact?**

³³ For an overview of the *Hippocratic Corpus*, see Jori, *Medicina*, 1-22; E.M. Craik, *The Hippocratic Corpus: Content and Context* (London: Routledge, 2015).

from the fact that these works were directed primarily at facilitating the understanding of *individual* pathological cases.³⁴

For example, the author of the Hippocratic treatise *Regimen* criticizes the methods used by the Knidian school to “classify” diseases—methods that, according to Galen’s later testimony, led them to identify seven types of gallbladder disorders, four types of jaundice, twelve different bladder disorders, and so on.³⁵ Because of their abstract and ontologizing view of disease, says the Hippocratic author, the Knidian physicians recognized a different pathological “species” at every slight change in symptoms and instead of treating the sick person, they merely described and classified the (supposedly) different species of disease [REF]. However, the fact that a patient is obese or emaciated, for example, or endowed with a particular constitution, is certainly relevant in choosing the appropriate therapy. In general, then, the condition of a human being is influenced by age, sex, climate, and occupations, as well as changes of seasons and constellations. The Hippocratic physician therefore devises an *individual* dietary regimen that takes all these factors into account. According to the *Regimen*’s author, if he sticks to nature and adopts a regimen specific to his constitution, the patient will be able to defy *all* diseases (*Regimen* 1.26).³⁶

This entails the need for continuous surveillance of one’s body. In fact, poor nutrition, over-exertion, injury, or the slightest deviation from the usual lifestyle can have devastating mental and physical effects. Human health is thus *relational* as well as fluid. The task of every person who can devote himself or herself to this activity is the constant search for a *balance* among all various factors that can affect him or her.³⁷ In the treatise *On the Nature of Man*, the idea that “qualities” determine the state of health surfaces for the first time. According to the author, the substances which inhere in the human

³⁴ See Bergdolt, *Wellbeing*, 25ff. and Schumacher, *Antike Medizin*, 220-222.

³⁵ Galen, *Commentary on Hippocrates’ Regimen in Acute Diseases I*, 1117, 11-13; H. Grensemann, *Knidische Medizin*, Teil 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 25.

³⁶ The practical implementation of this regime required economic and social privilege plus plenty of free time to devote to self-care (see Wöhrle, *Studien*, 86). A “classist” view of health thus emerges.

³⁷ See Schumacher, *Antike Medizin*, 199.

body cause disease by “heating, cooling, drying or wetting each other in a manner contrary to nature” (2.16). Accordingly, an optimal mixture of these “qualities,” procured by adopting an appropriate lifestyle, ensures the best possible state of health. The author of *On the Sacred Disease*, a treatise which criticizes the widely-held view that epilepsy is caused by divinity, takes a decisive step forward. He argues that all diseases (including epilepsy) are natural phenomena, thus health and deviations from it belong to *phusis* (1-2). It is a pantheistic view: nature, which determines the fate of man and the cosmos, is both rational and divine.³⁸

All these authors theorized the great efficacy of *preventive* medicine, understood and practiced essentially as a regimen. This claim came into conflict, however, with the fact that even those who scrupulously followed doctors’ prescriptions could fall ill. How was this to be explained? Evidently, it was not always due to failure to follow the right rules of life, but could be the consequence of *external* influences beyond a person’s control. The Hippocratic doctrine of health, although it tried to clarify the action of these external factors, was however not able to give them a concrete therapeutic response.

The triumph of regimen and the “long death” of Herodicus

Diocles of Charistus is the first Greek physician of whose works we know at least the titles with certainty.³⁹ Even in his writings, *dietetics* – considered as the most important dimension of medicine – was justified only to the extent that it focused on the *whole* individual. It was with Herodicus of Selymbria, however, that Greek dietetics of the classical age celebrated its greatest triumphs, and found its most extreme form.⁴⁰ With him, in fact, diet, as a regimen of life, correlates on the one hand with (even manic) self-observation, and on the other with (near-ascetic) self-discipline. Though Herodicus enjoyed

³⁸ See Bergdolt, *Wellbeing*, 28.

³⁹ On Diocles, see Werner Jaeger, *Diokles von Karystos. Die griechische Medizin und die Schule des Aristoteles* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1963).

⁴⁰ On Herodicus, see Alberto Jori, “Platone e la ‘svolta dietetica’ della medicina greca: Erodico di Selimbria e le insidie della *techne*,” *Studi italiani di filologia classica*, 3. S., vol. IX, fasc. I-II (1993): 158-195.

considerable fame in antiquity,⁴¹ he is singled out by Plato as the main culprit and almost the symbol of the decline of contemporary medicine, and even as a cause of the involution of the *polis*. Plato explains that “Herodicus was a trainer and, falling ill, he mixed gymnastics and medicine, to the torment first and foremost of himself, and then of many others” (*Republic* 406ab). For Plato, Herodicus’s struggle against ailments by means of gymnastics and dietetics was useless and even harmful because,

living in perpetual surveillance of his disease, which was incurable, he was unable to procure a cure, but lived every day unfit for the tasks of life, suffering dreadful pains if he strayed a little from his strict regimen of life. And struggling against death, thanks to his science he obtained the prize of an old age full of torment. (*Republic* 406c)

Herodicus also created a “school” and directed a multitude of followers on his own path. Nor did he neglect to formulate an organic view of health and disease. According to him, in fact, “diseases are generated by an incorrect way of life. Life takes place according to nature when labors and pains are present in adequate measure and when food is digested in the same way.”⁴² There is health “when the body, as far as the way of life is concerned, is in a state in accordance with nature. Disease, on the other hand, results from the unnatural condition of the body” [REF]. Thus, health is the result of conformity to nature, while illness arises when, in one way or another, one fails to that norm. It is to *phusis*, then, that Herodicus—not unlike Hippocrates—attributed a decisive healing power; one which could be aided and enhanced by adopting healthy behaviors, such as walking, running, gymnastic exercises, rest breaks, massages, and baths.

Herodicus seems to anticipate, with his regimen of life that punctuates the day and indeed the entire existence, a conception and practice widespread in our day. His patients become eternally ill, unable to heal, constantly engaged in observing their bodies and

⁴¹ His teachings are preserved mainly in the 2nd c. CE *Anonymus Londinensis*.

⁴² Herodicus, *Anon. Lond.* 4.31-5.35 [give English title, translator, edition]

attentive only to following a very strict discipline. Hence Plato's criticism (*Republic* 406cd), echoed by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1361b5), that the tenacious struggle against death waged by Herodicus and his disciples was nothing but *an artificially prolonged death*, which took the individual—totally devoted to self-observation and the implementation of a strict gymnastic program—away from the care of public affairs.

The health of philosophers: Plato and Aristotle

We have seen that Plato took a stand against the degeneration of medicine—in the guise of dietetics—caused, in his view, by Herodicus of Selymbria. The Athenian philosopher deals with medicine, health, and disease in several dialogues, most extensively in the *Timaeus*, where health is based on the harmony of body and soul (87c-90d). At 82a, Plato refers to the theory of humoral pathology, which had become the dominant paradigm of medicine at the time, making, in this regard, a eulogy of Hippocrates:

Now everyone can see from where diseases arise. There are four natures from which the body is composed, earth and fire, water and air, and the excess or defect against nature of these, or the displacement of one of them from its natural seat to another [...] generate disorders and diseases.

The balance of bodily factors ultimately corresponds to that of the elements of the cosmos (90cd). Relevant practical consequences flow from this view, most notably the need to balance opposites, not only in diet, but also in reproduction: concern for public health, which for Plato is a prerequisite of a functioning *polis*, leads him to advocate eugenics and even a form of euthanasia.⁴³

The traditional ideal of *kalokagathia* also resurfaces in Plato, but he sets it against the background of a metaphysical perspective that deepens its implications and, in part, overturns it. In the *Timaeus*, he places virtue, beauty, and health in a relationship of mutual correlation and dependence, opposing them to disease, ugliness, and

⁴³ See Plato, *Republic* 461c. [MS: I think this passage implies exposure for eugenic reasons rather than euthanasia in the modern sense. Maybe lines 407e are also relevant here??]

weakness [REF]. They constitute the factors that ensure physical well-being. Says Socrates: “We must not move the body without the soul or the soul without the body, and so they will stand guard against each other, and be healthy and balanced” (*Timaeus* 88b). In the *Sophist* (228ad), Plato conceives of disease as revolt and disharmony among contrasting elements. He considers it, like ugliness, to be an effect of wickedness—confirming the correlation between physical and psychic order. If it does not amount to a *lack of virtue*, illness constitutes in his eyes at least a *symptom* of that lack.

More complex is the vision that emerges in Plato’s *Symposium*. Here one of the interlocutors, the physician Eryximachus, adopting a naturalistic perspective, presents the process of cure as based on *phusis*, which tends to restore the harmony lost with the advent of illness (*Symposium* 186be). Yet in the same dialogue, a decisive element emerges that challenges the traditional beauty-health-virtue equivalence, namely the ideal of *kalokagathia*. Alcibiades exalts Socrates and compares him to a satyr of almost repulsive ugliness, who nevertheless conceals within himself images of divinity (228a-d). Socrates thus shows, by his very appearance, that the Greeks’ traditional view of beauty, regarded as an absolute value, is not acceptable: in fact, he has an “inner” beauty—that of the soul—that is far *superior* to that of the body. This suggests the possibility of a conflict between the aesthetic and ethical spheres, and at the same time recalls the Pythagorean equivalence *soma/sēma* (“the body is a tomb”). It should be pointed out, however, that as his thought evolved, Plato overcame his initial, ascetic disdain for the body and the world of senses (evident, e.g. in *Phaedo* 82e-84b). No doubt due partly to the influence of Hippocratic medicine, he eventually came closer to the ideal of harmony between body and *psychē*, while attributing the dominant role to the latter.

A therapeutic orientation flows from the conception we have illustrated. First, if it is true that in the healthy man there is a condition of balance and harmony not only among the elements of the body, but also between the body and the soul, then the treatment of the sick will have to have a holistic character. That is, it will have to concern the patient in his or her totality, and not be limited to the treatment of a specific part. This notion emerges in the *Charmides*

(156b), where Socrates explains that “the most excellent physicians,” if they are consulted by someone with an eye ailment, “cannot undertake to treat his eyes alone: if his eyes are to be treated, his head will also have to be treated.” The reference to Hippocrates is obvious here, a reference that will be carried out in even more explicit terms — with a reference to “Hippocrates’s method” — in *Phaedrus* 156b. Also in the *Charmides* (156d-157c), Socrates takes it a step further, when he points out that the treatment of the body in its totality is not yet sufficient for the cure: instead, the *soul* must also be treated. This will be the task of the philosopher, that is, of Socrates himself.

For Plato, moreover—again in line with the fundamental principles of Hippocratic medicine—the patient is *not* a passive “object” of the treatment. Instead he or she has an *active* role, indeed, is the *protagonist* of the therapy. Consequently, the physician should carry out a dialogue with him or her that is both cognitive and persuasive, so as to accurately inform himself about the symptoms and causes of the disease, on the one hand, and to induce the patient to actively participate in the treatment, on the other. Thus, the doctor-patient dialogue takes on a distinctly *educational* profile, in which the patient will understand what ailment he or she is suffering from and be fully involved in the treatment.⁴⁴ In this way, he or she will become a “good patient,” that is, a “virtuous” patient and therefore, we might say, deserving of recovery. For this to be possible, the physician must act as an educator, and indeed as a philosopher.

Plato illustrates this point in the *Laws*, emphasizing that *true* physicians educate their patients, unlike slave physicians, who issue orders without explanation (857 cd). In other words, for Plato, health education is not only in science, but also in self-domination, thus in virtue.⁴⁵ This also emerges in the *Seventh Letter*:

This, then, is what I have to say: shouldn’t someone advising a man who is struggling and leading a degenerate sort of life suggest first of all that he change his lifestyle, and only make other recommendations if this man is willing to

⁴⁴ See Plato, *Laws* 720 b-d.

⁴⁵ See Alberto Jori, *Il dialogo ippocratico. La comunicazione medica nell’antica Grecia* (Palermo: Nuova Ipsa, 2018), 22-28.

listen? And if he is not willing to do so, well, *I would consider someone who gets out of advising such a person to be courageous and skilled in the art of medicine, and someone who stays on to be unskilled and cowardly.* (italics mine)⁴⁶

Medicine and ethics are thus inseparably connected. The physician demands from the patient a willingness to *reform* his or her way of life, which in turn entails a willingness to purify the self.

In Aristotle, too, we find a close relationship between medicine and ethics. Aristotle was the son of the court physician to the king of Macedonia, and he had extensive knowledge of medicine. Taking up the doctrine of the four humors, he assigns a pair of qualities to each of the four elements of which Empedocles had spoken: thus, fire is classified as hot and dry, air as hot and moist, water as cold and moist, and earth as cold and dry.⁴⁷ His system of nature, including physiology, is based on this tetradic scheme. The arrangement of these qualities determines “life and death, not to mention sleep and wakefulness, bloom and age, sickness and health.”⁴⁸

Similar to Plato, Aristotle also emphasizes the *responsibility* of the sick person. Health is not a virtue in itself, but is regarded as the result of virtuous behavior. Thus, it acquires significance not only at the medical level, but also at the ethical and political one. Aristotle refers to the dynamics of social approval: no one is reproached for ugliness, if it is natural; on the other hand, one is reproached for the blemish that results from poor body care and lack of exercise. In fact, the philosopher explains, “although no one would reproach, but rather pity, a person blind from birth, or because of an illness or accident, everyone would blame someone who had lost his sight because of alcohol or debauchery” (NE 1114a25-28). Not everyone can hope to attain perfect health, of course; but each person can (and should) aspire to *their own state of health*, consistent with the limitations of their body. For every body there is a natural, innate and individual state of health and beauty, and the desire to maintain

⁴⁶ Plato, *Seventh Letter* 330c-d, trans. Jonah Radding in *Plato at Syracuse*, eds. H.L. Reid and M. Ralkowski, (Siracusa: Parnassos Press, 2019), 17.

⁴⁷ See Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption* 2.3.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals.*, 2.2.648b4-10.

this state should also guide the choice of appropriate gymnastic exercises. Remaining healthy thus represents a challenge that places specific demands on *each* person, depending on his or her individual starting conditions (NE 1114a25-28).

Also playing an important role in Aristotle's thought is the doctrine of "temperaments," in accordance with which various personality traits, but also some health risks, are caused by a suboptimal mixture of the body's humors (NE 1114a25-28). Depending on one's "temperament," each person therefore has his or her own health, and must resort to specific means to maintain it, or to recover it. For example, in a pseudo-Aristotelian work, the *Problems*, we come across the description of the "melancholic" subject, whose health, character and intelligence are determined by an excess of black bile (*melaina cholē*). Because of their particular "temperament," these individuals oscillate ceaselessly between opposite moods. "Melancholics" are often brilliant men, but they are also eccentric and sometimes verge on madness. Aristotle explains that "all excellent men, whether philosophers, statesmen, poets or artists, [were] evidently melancholic." (*Problems* 954a). At the same time, the health of the "melancholic" subject is fragile: in fact, black bile, even when well-tempered, is always in danger of slipping into a pathological condition, due to a change in temperature or to quantitative variations.

Galen: a "broad" conception of health

Speaking of Greek doctrines of health, we cannot fail to mention Galen, whose work exerted an extraordinarily profound influence on the medicine of later centuries.⁴⁹ Indeed, Galen became the *auctoritas* and reference point for medicine. His vast work can be seen both as a great synthesis of ancient health knowledge and a pioneering initiation of new avenues of medical theory and practice. Recalling the Hippocratic and Aristotelian tradition, while at the same time renewing it, Galen proposes a "broad" and flexible concept of

⁴⁹ For an excellent presentation of Galen's doctrines, see Sabrina Grimaudo, *Difendere la salute. Igiene e disciplina del soggetto nel 'De sanitate tuenda' di Galeno* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2008), with extensive bibliography.

health,⁵⁰ destined to set the standard. In his view, perfect health constitutes a kind of regulatory ideal, which in reality is very difficult to achieve.⁵¹ Indeed, every body has its own structural weaknesses.

In *On Temperaments* (2.4), Galen identifies a characteristic of the “healthy dyscrasia,” that is, of a constitution that deviates slightly from the ideal mean, in the fact that “no function of the body has yet been significantly impaired.” In other words, one can legitimately speak of health—at least *relative* health—when the body is functioning adequately. Health is thus defined as a “condition in which we suffer no pain, nor are we hindered in the use of our vital energies (*dunameis*)” (*On Temperaments* 2.4). However, the balance that underlies health so understood is unstable, all the more so since it varies with age and circumstances, and must constantly be sought, as Aristotle already stated, through the adoption of a form of mediation⁵² Obviously, the body is not independent of environmental factors, nor of the subject’s behavior. In particular, attention must be paid to the activities whose rhythms directly influence the body, such as exercise and rest, sleep and wakefulness, food and drink, filling and evacuation (*The Medical Art* 23).

Consistent with this view, Galen emphasizes that health and disease do not result from good or bad fortune: instead, they are the consequence of individual behavior. In his treatise *On the Preservation of Health*, he stresses the importance of prevention by insisting on the logical, temporal and ontological *priority* of health over disease (1.1).

Moreover, Galen advocates a *holistic* approach to health, in which medicine becomes a truly encyclopedic discipline: he merges the Hippocratic system of the four basic humors—blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile—with the elemental qualities—hot, cold, wet and dry—, the cardinal organs, the seasons, the stages of life and the phases of the day.⁵³ This conception is also echoed in his

⁵⁰ Galen, *De optima corporis nostri constitutione*, 3.

⁵¹ See Grimaudo, *Difendere la salute*, 99-124.

⁵² See Wöhrle, *Studien*, 219.

⁵³ See Karl Eduard Roths Schuh, *Konzepte der Medizin in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Hippokrates, 1978), 190.

reworking of the pharmacological tradition.⁵⁴ Galen regards the drug as a natural substance endowed with a “power” (*dunamis*) that enables it to modify the human body positively or negatively. *Dunamis* is in fact a relational notion, indicating not a state of the substance, but its capacity for action,⁵⁵ which suggests a distinctly “interactionist” view of reality.

Indeed, health and disease result not only from the individual constitution but also from the multiple actions and reactions that occur between the organism and the environment. The therapeutic theory and practice that flow from this view are as flexible as ever, and at the same time extremely complex. In his endeavor to systematize as much as possible both the material of tradition and his own discoveries, Galen is in fact well aware that writing about pharmacology does not mean defining *absolute* criteria, but rather identifying “laws of reference,” regulatory principles, for a subject with wide margins of uncertainty.⁵⁶ And if, because of the countless variables involved, the preparation of a simple drug constitutes a challenge, the level of complexity increases exponentially when a compound is to be prepared.⁵⁷ In fact, the presence of multiple *dunamis* can result in their alteration or even neutralization. This is the case with the *thēriakē*, the “universal” drug intended to treat a myriad of ailments and diseases, a kind of pharmacological “holy Grail” to whose research even Galen — evidently not insensitive to the pressing demands of his clientele — devoted himself.

Toward a gender (or gender-specific) medicine? Women’s health

It is useful to briefly illustrate the vision of the human body that underlies these theories, especially the extraordinarily topical theme of the female body and the health inherent in it. There is no period of antiquity in which we find a conception of the human body shared by *all* physicians. The prevailing idea in the Hippocratic Corpus,

⁵⁴ See Valentina Gazzaniga, *La medicina antica* (Roma: Carocci, 2014), 101-3.

⁵⁵ Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis et facultatibus*, 1.1-2.

⁵⁶ See Heinrich von Staden, “Inefficacy, Error and Failure. Galen on *dokima farmaka aprakta*,” in *Galen on Pharmacology, Philosophy, History and Medicine*, ed. A. Debru (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 59-82.

⁵⁷ See Bergdolt, *Wellbeing*, 90.

according to which the body is a kind of hollow container in which humors collect and move, was modified in the Hellenistic era thanks to better knowledge of the internal organs obtained through anatomical dissection. Beginning with Herophilos and Erasistratus, in fact, the investigation of cadavers (previously eschewed) made it possible to locate the tetradic pattern of humors in a three-dimensional structure. From this emerged the notion that different parts cooperate with each other for the healthy maintenance of the body, understood as a *unit*.⁵⁸

Also present in Hippocratic medicine was the deeply influential principle that in a scale of ideal health, the body of the adult male constitutes the highest point, the apex.⁵⁹ Children's bodies were seen as rich in moisture and heat, necessary for their growth,⁶⁰ but also a factor that exposed them to serious health risks. From this precarious state, the child develops gradually until it reaches the perfect balance of "qualities" or "powers" in adulthood. Old age is accompanied by a decrease in vital warmth. Males and females do not participate equally in this process, however. From the Hippocratic authors, through Plato and Aristotle, down to Galen and Soranus of Ephesus, and throughout late antiquity, there emerges in fact a peculiar ideology of the female body, seen as structurally different from the male body and therefore as also characterized by a *different* health.⁶¹

Already in the Hippocratic gynecological writings, women's bodies are ideally organized around the uterus. This anatomical diversity is matched by a diversity of constitution: female flesh is considered softer and more porous than male flesh.⁶² According to the Hippocratic authors, excess moisture in women's bodies prevents the burning of residues from nutritive processes, which then remain in the body in the form of an excess of blood that spills into the uterus: the menstrual cycle is thus interpreted as a kind of

⁵⁸ On this, see Mario Vegetti, "La medicina ellenistica," in *Storia del pensiero medico occidentale*, ed. M.D. Grmek (Roma: Laterza, 1993), I 73-120.

⁵⁹ See Gazzaniga, *La medicina*, 112.

⁶⁰ See Hippocrates, *Epidemics* 5.296; *De natura hominis* 6.62; *Regimen* 6.510.

⁶¹ See Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁶² Gazzaniga, *La medicina*, 116.

purification system [REF]. Female anatomical and functional diversity, outlined in the gynecological treatises of the Hippocratic Corpus, was later codified by Aristotle. In his work *On the Generation of Animals*, the philosopher argues that, compared with the male, the female is incomplete and defective. According to him, in fact, in embryogenesis the male seed, which shapes the matter (*hulē*) produced by the mother, normally produces a *male* child. The birth of females is thus a “degenerative” phenomenon (though necessary to ensure the reproduction of the species) caused, in essence, by a weakening of the male seed (*On the Generation of Animals* 775a). Female nature is seen as an impairment (728a17 and 775a16), a stage of incomplete development, in which the perfect and efficient formation of all parts of the organism is prevented.

Galen, in taking up the Aristotelian conception of the female body as an intermediate and incomplete product of generation, develops it into a true “reversed anatomy.”⁶³ In his doctrine, male and female anatomy end up coinciding. However, in the final stages of gestation, the parts that in the male project outward due to the proper supply of heat, in the females fold inward due to a heat defect, produced in a mirror image that “imitates” the male sex organs.⁶⁴

Until Galen and even beyond, *pregnancy* was regarded as a period of health, albeit transitory. In fact, it was thought that the female body underwent a qualitative transformation during this period that made it become, thanks to the contribution of male heat, a kind of “oven,” designed to “bake” of the child. Consequently, it was widely believed among physicians that without pregnancy and childbirth women could *not* enjoy a good health.⁶⁵ It was Soranus of Ephesus (1st/2nd century CE) who corrected and almost overturned this view. Pregnancy is presented in his treatise *Diseases of Women* (1.62) not as a phase of “tendential health,” but, on the contrary, as a long period of suffering and discomfort. It constitutes for him a

⁶³ See Galen, *De usu partium corporis humani*, XIV, 6-7.

⁶⁴ See Gazzaniga, *La medicina*, 120-121.

⁶⁵ See Valeria Andò, “Modelli culturali e fisiologia della maternità nella medicina ippocratica,” in *Madri. Storia di un ruolo sociale*, ed. G. Fiume (Venezia: Marsilio, 1995), 33-44.

disease, capable of causing nausea, feelings of oppression, emaciation, softness, pain, and even premature aging.

As heir to Alexandrian anatomical thought, Soranus had a fairly accurate knowledge of the female body. It is true that the physiology he proposes is still basically “uterine;”⁶⁶ however, he mentions the ovaries, which are fragile and covered by a thin membrane; he also illustrates the color and nature of the outer and inner membranes of the uterus (2.4ff.). On the basis of such notions, he reinterprets other moments of a woman’s life. Thus, sexual intercourse, to which physicians previously ascribed a therapeutic role (in that it would allow the woman to temporarily fill that heat deficit from which she would be structurally affected), becomes for him one of the many stressful events that affect the female body. In this way, Soranus comes to the conclusion that only the preservation of virginity can guarantee female well-being for a long time (*Gynecology* 1.30-2).

We thus see the outline of what we would call today gender-specific medicine emerging, attentive to the physiological and functional differences between men’s and women’s bodies, and interested at the same time in their respective, and specific, health conditions. However, it should be noted that the approach to women’s health retained a strong devaluating component among the Greeks. Indeed, as we have seen, it correlated with the prevailing belief about the “imperfect” nature of women, which would not be challenged until many centuries later.

Conclusion

In this concise reconstruction of the main conceptions of health and illness formulated in ancient Greece, we have identified *three* basic lines of development. First, the older, religious view, according to which health and disease originate from the gods, is joined and then partially replaced by a “secular” conception of health and its opposite: in accordance, these phenomena are *natural* processes, and more precisely are the consequence of the balance (or, in the case of disease, imbalance) of forces (*dunamis*) acting within the organism.

⁶⁶ See Danielle Gourevitch, “Situation de Soranos dans la médecine antique,” in *Soranus d’Ephèse. Maladies des Femmes*, eds. P. Burguière, D. Gourevitch, and Y. Malinas (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1988), I, VII-XLVI.

Second, in the development of Greek medicine, the focus gradually shifts from the disease—initially considered as a reality in its own right, endowed with a kind of ontological autonomy—to the individual *patient*: it is the latter in his concrete individuality, and not abstract entities, that the physician must deal with. Third, this process of individualization—which in time will pave the way for an embryonic formulation of “gender medicine”—is accompanied by an increasingly in-depth view of the relationship between humans and the *environment*.

In parallel with these theoretical developments, important therapeutic changes also occur. Greek physicians and thinkers come to understand that every man or woman must strive for “his or her own” specific state of health, and in order to achieve it—or, at least, to come close to it—he or she must adhere to a specific lifestyle (*diaitē*). Thus was born the *regimen* as a form of preventive medicine: it emphasizes personal responsibility toward the health of the body and also of the mind. Greek thought about health has thus left us a very important legacy, one that is worth rethinking, not least to recover that sense of *harmony* and *measure* that the ancient Greeks placed at the center of their vision and that we have in part lost.