

The “Problem” of Contagion and Ancient Greek Biopolitics

1. [Hippocrates], *On the Nature of a Human Being* 9

αἱ δὲ νοῦσοι γίνονται, αἱ μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν διαιτημάτων, αἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος, ὃ ἐσαγόμενοι ζῶμεν. τὴν δὲ διάγνωσιν χρὴ ἑκατέρου ὧδε ποιεῖσθαι· ὅταν μὲν ὑπὸ νοσήματος ἑνὸς πολλοὶ ἄνθρωποι ἀλίσκωνται κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον, τὴν αἰτίην χρὴ ἀνατιθέναι τούτῳ ὅτι κοινότατόν ἐστι καὶ μάλιστα αὐτῷ πάντες χρεόμεθα· ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο ὃ ἀναπνέομεν. φανερόν γάρ δι’ ὅτι τὰ γε διαιτήματα ἑκάστου ἡμῶν οὐκ αἰτία ἐστίν, ὅτε γε ἄπτεται πάντων ἢ νοῦσος ἐξῆς καὶ τῶν νεωτέρων καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, καὶ γυναικῶν καὶ ἀνδρῶν ὁμοίως, καὶ τῶν θωρησσομένων καὶ τῶν ὑδροποτεόντων, καὶ τῶν μάζαν ἐσθιόντων καὶ τῶν ἄρτον σιτευμένων, καὶ τῶν πολλὰ ταλαιπωρεόντων καὶ τῶν ὀλίγα· οὐκ ἂν οὖν τὰ γε διαιτήματα αἰτία εἴη, ὅταν διαιτώμενοι πάντας τρόπους οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἀλίσκωνται ὑπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς νοῦσου...

ὅταν δὲ νοσήματος ἑνὸς ἐπιδημίη καθεστήκη, δῆλον ὅτι οὐ τὰ διαιτήματα αἰτία ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ ὃ ἀναπνέομεν, τοῦτο αἰτιόν ἐστι, καὶ δῆλον ὅτι τοῦτο νοσηρὴν τινα ἀπόκρισιν ἔχον ἀνίει. τοῦτον χρὴ τὸν χρόνον τὰς παραινήσεις ποιεῖσθαι τοῖσιν ἀνθρώποισι τοιάσδε· τὰ μὲν διαιτήματα μὴ μεταβάλλειν, ὅτι γε οὐκ αἰτία ἐστὶ τῆς νοῦσου, τὸ δὲ σῶμα ὀρᾶν, ὅπως ἔσται ὡς ἀογκότατον καὶ ἀσθενέστατον, τῶν τε σιτίων ἀφαιρέοντα καὶ τῶν ποτῶν, οἷσιν εἰώθει χρῆσθαι, κατ’ ὀλίγον· ἦν γὰρ μεταβάλλῃ ταχέως τὴν δίαιταν, κίνδυνος καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς μεταβολῆς νεώτερόν τι γενέσθαι ἐν τῷ σώματι, ἀλλὰ χρὴ τοῖσι μὲν διαιτήμασιν οὕτω χρῆσθαι, ὅτε γε φαίνεται οὐδὲν ἀδικέοντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον· τοῦ δὲ πνεύματος ὅπως ἢ ῥύσις ὡς ἐλαχίστη ἐς τὸ σῶμα ἐσίη καὶ ὡς ξενωτάτη, προμηθεῖσθαι, τῶν τε χωρίων τοὺς τόπους μεταβάλλοντα ἐς δύναμιν, ἐν οἷσιν ἂν ἢ νοῦσος καθεστήκη, καὶ τὰ σώματα λεπτόνοντα· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν ἤκιστα πολλοῦ τε καὶ πυκνοῦ τοῦ πνεύματος χρῆζοιεν οἱ ἄνθρωποι.

Diseases arise, in some cases from regimen, in other cases from the air by the inspiration of which we live. The distinction between the two should be made in the following way. Whenever many men are attacked by one disease at the same time, the cause should be assigned to that which is most common, and which we all use most. This it is which we breathe in. For it is clear that the regimen of each of us is not the cause, since the disease attacks all in turn, both younger and older, men as much as women, those who drink wine as much as teetotallers, those who eat barley cake as much as those who live on bread, those who take much exercise as well as those who take little. For regimen could not be the cause, when no matter what regimen they have followed all men are attacked by the same disease. ...

But when an epidemic of one disease is prevalent, it is plain that the cause is not regimen but what we breathe, and that this is charged with some unhealthy exhalation. During this period these are the recommendations that should be made to patients. They should not change their regimen, as it is not the cause of their disease, but rather take care that their body be as thin and as weak as possible, by diminishing their usual food and drink gradually. For if the change of regimen be sudden, there is a risk that from the change too some disturbance will take place in the body, but regimen should be used in this way when it manifestly does no harm to a patient. Then care should be taken that inspiration be of the lightest, and also from a source as far removed as possible; the place should be moved as far as possible from that in which the disease is epidemic, and the body should be reduced, for such reduction will minimise the need of deep and frequent breathing. (trans. W. H. S. Jones)

2. [Hippocrates] *On Breaths* 6

ἔστι δὲ δισσὰ ἔθνεα πυρετῶν, ὡς ταύτη διελθεῖν· ὁ μὲν κοινὸς ἅπασι καλεόμενος λοιμὸς· ὁ δὲ διὰ πονηρὴν δίαιτανιδίη τοῖσι πονηρῶς διαιτεομένοισι γινόμενος· ἀμφοτέρων δὲ τούτων ὁ ἀήρ αἴτιος· ὁ μὲν οὖν κοινὸς πυρετὸς διὰ τοῦτο τοιοῦτός ἐστιν, ὅτι τὸ πνεῦμα τωυτό πάντες ἔλκουσιν· ὁμοίου δὲ ὁμοίως τοῦ πνεύματος τῷ σώματι μιχθέντος, ὁμοιοὶ καὶ οἱ πυρετοὶ γίνονται.

To proceed on these lines, there are two kinds of fevers; one is epidemic, called pestilence, the other is sporadic, attacking those who follow a bad regimen. Both of these fevers, however, are caused by air. Now epidemic fever has this characteristic because all men inhale the same wind; when a similar wind has mingled with all bodies in a similar way, the fevers too prove similar. (trans. W. H. S. Jones)

3. [Hippocrates] *Airs, Waters, Places* 2

Καὶ ἀπὸ τούτων χρὴ ἐνθυμεῖσθαι ἕκαστα· εἰ γὰρ ταῦτα εἰδείη τις καλῶς, μάλιστα μὲν πάντα, εἰ δὲ μή, τά γε πλεῖστα, οὐκ ἂν αὐτὸν λαυθάνοι ἐς πόλιν ἀφικνεόμενον, ἧς ἂν ἄπειρος ἦ, οὔτε νοσήματα ἐπιχώρια οὔτε τῶν κοινῶν ἢ φύσις, ὁκοίη τίς ἐστιν· ὥστε μὴ ἀπορεῖσθαι ἐν τῇ θεραπείῃ τῶν νόσων μηδὲ διαμαρτάνειν· ἂ εἰκὸς ἐστί γίνεσθαι, ἢν μὴ τις ταῦτα πρότερον εἰδῶς προφροντίση περὶ ἐκάστου· τοῦ δὲ χρόνου προϊόντος καὶ τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ λέγοι ἂν, ὁκόσα τε νοσήματα μέλλει πάγκοινα τὴν πόλιν κατασχῆσιν ἢ θέρους ἢ χειμῶνος, ὁκόσα τε ἴδια ἐκάστω κίνδυνος γίνεσθαι ἐκ μεταβολῆς τῆς διαίτης.

Using this evidence he must examine the several problems that arise. For if a physician know these things well, by preference all of them, but at any rate most, he will not, on arrival at a town with which he is unfamiliar, be ignorant of the local diseases, or of the nature of those that commonly prevail; so that he will not be at a loss in the treatment of diseases, or make blunders, as is likely to be the case if he have not this knowledge before he consider his several problems. As time and the year passes he will be able to tell what epidemic diseases will attack the city either in summer or in winter, as well as those peculiar to the individual which are likely to occur through change in mode of life. (trans. W. H. S. Jones)

4. [Hippocrates] *On Regimen* III 69

Ταῦτα μὲν παραινέω τῷ πλήθει τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὁκόσοισιν ἐξ ἀνάγκης εἰκὴ τὸν βίον διατελεῖν ἐστί, μηδ' ὑπάρχει αὐτοῖσι τῶν ἄλλων ἀμελήσασιν τῆς ὑγιείης ἐπιμελεῖσθαι· ὅτ' αὖ δὲ τοῦτο παρεσκεύασται καὶ διέγνωσται, ὅτι οὐδὲν ὄφελός ἐστιν οὔτε χρημάτων οὔτε τῶν ἄλλων οὐδενὸς ἄτερ τῆς ὑγιείης, πρὸς τούτοις ἐστί μοι δίαιτα ἐξευρημένη ὡς ἀνυστὸν πρὸς τὸ ἀληθέστατον τῶν δυνατῶν προσηγμένη.

Such is my advice to the great mass of mankind, who of necessity live a haphazard life without the chance of neglecting everything to concentrate on taking care of their health. But when a man is thus favourably situated, and is convinced that neither wealth nor anything else is of any value without health, I can add to his blessings a regimen that I have discovered, one that approximates to the truth as closely as is possible. (trans. W. H. S. Jones)

5. Galen, *On the Differences of Fevers* VII 291 Kühn

ὑποκείσθω γοῦν ὡς ἐν παραδείγματι, κατὰ μὲν τὸ περιέχον ἐμφέρεσθαι τινα λοιμοῦ σπέρματα, τῶν δ' ὁμιλούντων αὐτῷ σωμάτων τὰ μὲν εἶναι περιττωμάτων παντοίων

μεστὰ ἐτοιμῶν ἤδη καὶ καθ' ἑαυτὰ σήπασθαι, τὰ δὲ ἀπέριττα καὶ καθάρᾳ· καὶ προσκείσθω τοῖς μὲν προτέροις ἔμφραξις τῶν πόρων πολλαχόθεν, καὶ ἡ καλουμένη πληθώρα καὶ βίος ἀργὸς ἐν ἀδδηφαγίαις καὶ μέθαις καὶ ἀφροδισίων ἀμέτροις χρήσεσι καὶ ταῖς ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἅπασι τοῖς εἰρημένοις ἀκολουθούσαις ἀπεψίαις· τοῖς δ' ἄλλοις ἅπασι σώμασι τοῖς καθαροῖς καὶ ἀπερίττοις ὑπαρχέτω πρὸς τοῖς οὖσιν ἀγαθοῖς εὐπνοια μὲν ἅπασι τοῖς πόροις ἀφράκτοις τε καὶ ἀθλίπτοις ὑπάρχουσι, γυμνάσια δὲ σύμμετρα καὶ σώφρων δίαιτα. κᾶπειτα ἐπὶ ταύταις ταῖς ὑποθέσεσιν ἐννόησον, ὅπως ἐκάτερα τῶν σωμάτων εἰκὸς ἐστὶ διατίθεσθαι πρὸς τῶν ἀναπνεομένων εἰς αὐτὰ σηπεδονωδῶν ἀέρων.

Suppose, then, for the sake of argument, that certain seeds of plague are carried in the surrounding air, and that of the bodies which come into contact with it, some are full of various residues which are already prone to putrefaction in themselves, while others are clean and free of them. Assume also that in the former there is a widespread blockage of the pores, what is called "plethora", and a life of ease devoted to gluttony, drink, and sex, and all their consequent digestive disorders. Let all the others, who are clean and lack these residues, as well as being fine in themselves, have a wholesome transpiration through all their pores, which are neither blocked nor constricted, and let them take the right exercise and lead a moderate life. Assuming all this, consider which of these bodies is likely to be most affected by breathing into themselves the putrefying air. (trans. R. J. Hankinson)

6. [Aristotle] *Physical Problems* 7.5

Διὰ τί ἀπὸ φθίσεως καὶ ὀφθαλμίας καὶ ψώρας οἱ πλησιάζοντες ἀλίσκονται, ἀπὸ δὲ ὕδρωπος καὶ πυρετῶν καὶ ἀποπληξίας οὐχ ἀλίσκονται, οὐδὲ τῶν ἄλλων; ἢ ἡ μὲν ὀφθαλμία, ὅτι εὐκινητότατον ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς, καὶ μάλιστα ὁμοιοῦται τῷ ὀρωμένῳ τῶν ἄλλων, οἷον κινεῖται ὑπὸ κινουμένου ὥστε καὶ ἀντιβλέπων τεταραγμένῳ ταραττεται μάλιστα;

Why do those who come in contact with consumption, eye disease, and scurvy get infected, but they do not get infected from dropsy, fevers, apoplexy, and others? In the case of eye disease, is it because the eye is most easily moved, and more than the other (senses) assimilates itself to what is seen, for instance, it is moved by (seeing something) being moved, so that when it looks at (an eye) that is disturbed, it too is especially disturbed? (trans. Mayhew)

7. Plato, *Phaedrus* 255D

ἐρᾷ μὲν οὖν, ὅτου δέ, ἀπορεῖ· καὶ οὐδ' ὅ τι πέπονθεν οἶδεν οὐδ' ἔχει φράσαι, ἀλλ' οἷον ἀπ' ἄλλου ὀφθαλμίας ἀπολελαυκῶς πρόφρασιν εἰπεῖν οὐκ ἔχει, ὥσπερ δ' ἐν κατόπτρῳ ἐν τῷ ἐρῶντι ἑαυτὸν ὀρῶν λέληθεν.

So he is in love, but he knows not with whom; he does not understand his own condition and cannot explain it; like one who has caught a disease of the eyes from another, he can give no reason for it; he sees himself in his lover as in a mirror, but is not conscious of the fact. (trans. H. N. Fowler)

8. Plato, *Republic* 10, 605d

Ἀκούων σκόπει. οἱ γὰρ που βέλτιστοι ἡμῶν ἀκροώμενοι Ὀμήρου ἢ ἄλλου τινὸς τῶν τραγωδοποιῶν μιμουμένου τίνα τῶν ἡρώων ἐν πένθει ὄντα καὶ μακρὰν ῥῆσιν ἀποτείνοντα ἐν τοῖς ὄδυρμοῖς ἢ καὶ ἄδοντάς τε καὶ κοπτομένους, οἷσθ' ὅτι χαίρομέν τε καὶ ἐνδόντες ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς ἐπόμεθα συμπᾶσχοντες καὶ σπουδάζοντες ἐπαινοῦμεν ὡς ἀγαθὸν ποιητὴν, ὃς ἂν ἡμᾶς ὅτι μάλιστα οὕτω διαθῆ.

Listen to this and think about it: you see the best of us, I imagine, listen to Homer and any of the other tragic poets representing the grief of one of the heroes as they pour forth a long speech in their lamentation, even singing and beating their breasts, and, you know, we enjoy it, we surrender ourselves to it and suffer along with the characters as we follow and eagerly applaud whoever thus affects us in this way the most as a good poet.” (trans. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy)

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