

The “Problem” of Contagion:

The Biopolitics of the Natural Body in the Genre of Physical Problems

As the Covid-19 pandemic first began to take hold in the United States, a narrative quickly emerged: the virus doesn’t discriminate. Everyone is vulnerable. But just as quickly, it became clear that this narrative was mistaken: the pandemic was disproportionately harming communities of color. The fantasy of a politics-free zone untouched by radical economic and racial inequity crumbled. As we have learned in the sphere of eco-politics, the longstanding commitment to a nature–culture divide is a debilitating illusion, as Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway have long argued (Haraway 1991; Latour 2004). Politics is biopolitics. Bodies are implicated in networks of power saturated with all-too-human agency.

Is there an ancient biopolitics? The question is an open one, whose answers have largely been shaped by Giorgio Agamben’s reinterpretation of Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics (through Hannah Arendt’s work on totalitarianism) *as* ancient, rather than distinctively modern, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Agamben 1998). It is also unavoidable, to the extent that the very theorization of *bio*-politics has been inextricably bound up in modern investments in Greek *bios* as a site of refuge from modernity and its politics of life (Holmes 2019). In this paper, I acknowledge the entanglement of the contemporary theorization of the biopolitical in different tropes of Greco-Roman antiquity (refuge, origin, zone of obsolescence) as the frame for analyzing the political stakes of one of the primary genres of theorizing about contagion in Greco-Roman antiquity—namely, the genre of “physical problems” (*problēmata phusika*).

The genre of “physical problems,” exemplified by the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physical Problems*, first develops in a Peripatetic context in the fourth century BCE. True to its title, the genre examines a wide range of puzzling questions arising from the study of nature (*phusis*). Insofar as many of these are addressed to the nature of human and other animal bodies, they often draw on the discourse of learned medicine that forms around the sixty-odd texts of the Hippocratic Corpus. At the same time, they bring up questions that learned medical writers had a hard time answering. The phenomenon of contagious disease is just such a problem. It is well known that contagion is largely avoided by ancient medical authors (Hankinson 1995; Nutton 1983; Nutton 2000). The resources of humoral medicine were fairly inadequate when people faced the “ontological” notion of disease expressed through the phenomenon of contagion. Such diseases thus fall into the genre of physical problems.

The ancient paradigms of contagious disease were eye disease (*ophthalmia*), phthisis, and scabies. In both the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* (Book 7) and also the pseudo-Alexander *Problems*, probably compiled in the second or third century CE, these problems are associated with phenomena that contemporary scientists would classify as contagious affect, such as contagious yawning, under the heading of *sumpatheia* (which appears in the title of Book 7). The “problem” of contagious disease thus opens onto a larger set of questions about how an affect (*pathos*) is communicated from one body to another. On the one hand, because *sumpatheia* encompasses the transmission of affects that involve the mind, such as yawning, the phenomenon raises questions about how affect can be shared within a human community (an early case of the verb *sumpaskhō* is in Plato’s critique of tragic spectatorship in *Republic* 10). On the other hand, by including contagious disease within this category, the authors of the physical problems continue to keep this inherently political question in a genre that looks to

nature and, more specifically, the involuntary circulation of affect between bodies, to supply answers. In this paper, I therefore take up contagion in both pseudo-Aristotle and pseudo-Alexander, with an eye to Galen, as a specific site for theorizing ancient “biopolitics.” I ask how attempts to explain the transmission of affect between living bodies encourage speculation about a nature “common” to all humans while at the same time insisting on bodies as apolitical nodes in a network of migratory affects.

Bibliography

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