

Classical Greek Attitudes to Illness

K. Dover

Summary

The history of Greek attitudes to illness is characterised throughout by two oppositions. One concerns aetiology (divine intervention or the operation of fully explicable natural forces) and treatment (by science or by magic). The other opposition concerns the role of the sick or disabled individual in the community : a liability, to be rejected as such, or a fellow-human deserving compassion.

Résumé

L'attitude des anciens grecs face à la maladie était paradoxale. Ils attribuaient l'étiologie à l'intervention du divin comme à des éléments naturels tout à fait explicables et, en outre, avaient recours à la magie comme à la science pour la thérapeutique. L'autre paradoxe concerne le malade et l'handicapé et leur place dans la société. Ces derniers étaient soit rejetés, soit acceptés par compassion.

I use "classical" in its narrow sense, to mean 500-300 B.C., as opposed to "archaic" (before 500 B.C.) and "Hellenistic" (after 300 .C); remember that the Greeks of the classical period were not a nation but a thousand nominally sovereign city-states. I speak of "attitudes" rather than "beliefs", because any large city-state was heterodox, lacking creeds, dogmas and sacred texts.

One Greek text exhibits with particular striking force a conflict between "science" and "magic", between the "intellectual" and the "popular" approach to illness. This text is *On the Sacred Disease*, and it is one of the many works which by the third century B.C. had been put together under the name of "Hippocrates". It is clear from the details given that the author's concern is with epilepsy, and he calls it "the sacred disease" because it was popularly believed to be a spectacular intervention in our

physical state by some kind of superhuman power. He asserts vigorously that every disease whatsoever has an aetiology which is in principle discoverable by rational scientific procedure, and he rejects all treatments which entail spells, charms and incantations. Those who profess to treat illness by such means he lumps together with sorcerers and rainmakers as fraudulent charlatans (Lloyd 1979 19-29, 37-40). It would seem that in a case of epilepsy the doctor and the patient's own circle might not simply disagree over the efficacy of alternative treatments but fundamentally, in their views of the world.

When we hear about doctors in Greek non-medical literature of the Classical period, it is most commonly in connection with wounds and injuries, and that is not surprising in a society so addicted to warfare. What has survived of the medical literature itself is traditionally ascribed to Hippocrates, about whom, as an individual, remarkably little is known. It cannot be shown that even a single one of the numerous works transmitted under his name was actually composed by him (Lloyd 1975). The ascription

Sir Kenneth Dover, 49 Hepburn Gardens, St. Andrews

- All the Greek texts cited in this paper are available in English translation in the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press).

of this mass of works to a single author is a phenomenon which has analogies; it profited ancient booksellers to ascribe as much as they could to famous names (Dover 1968 23-26).

The "Hippocratic" treatises include much that is practical and down-to-earth; strong on regimen, they are disappointingly uninformative on pharmacology, and a few of them are (to our way of thinking) dismayingly philosophical. They agree, however, in one important negative respect: they never suggest that amulets, charms, spells and incantations have anything to contribute to the treatment of illness. Which side were most intelligent laymen on? It is not surprising that tragedy takes spells for granted, because the tragic poets tended in many respects to work on assumptions which were already going out of date in their own time. But there is a more telling contrast between one of the Hippocratic *Aphorisms* (vii.87) and certain passages of Plato. The aphorism says:

*"What drugs do not cure, surgery cures.
What surgery does not cure, cautery cures.
What cautery does not cure must be considered incurable."*

Plato, speaking (*Republic* 426B) of the sick person who will not take advice on his life-style, says

"Neither drugs nor cautery nor surgery, nor again spells or amulets, will benefit him."

And in *Charmides* 155E he represents Socrates as divulging a cure for headaches, thus:

"I told him that there was a certain herb, and a spell such that if he recited it at the same time as using the drug would restore his health completely; but without the spell the drug was of no use."

The passage is actually a device for introducing a philosophical discussion, and headaches are soon forgotten; its importance lies in the fact that Plato represents the advice as taken seriously in a realistic conversation (cf.

Theaetetus 149CD on the "medicines and incantations" used by midwives).

Of course, in ancient societies the distinction between science and magic, however readily we nowadays may classify a practice as one or the other, is resistant to precise definition. That is notably so when a process regarded as "purification" is simultaneously physical and ritual (Parker 207, 213-8). Compare, however, the ingestion of a substance and the utterance of magical words. Both appear to set in motion a sequence of events, none of them detectable by unaided vision, which sometimes culminate in the patient's recovery. When the treatment is pharmacological, we expect every instant of the process to exemplify laws of biochemistry which we either understand already or expect to understand next week or next century. When the treatment is magical, we do not have that expectation, because there is a gap between one kind of event, the singing of charms, and another kind, the cessation of a pathological condition. But the possibility of drawing this distinction depends on biochemical knowledge which the ancient world did not possess. Did Greek medical writers grasp the distinction intuitively? Or was their view a reflex not just of scientific curiosity but also of a critical attitude towards religion from the standpoint of morality, criticism which had already begun by 500 B.C.?

The notions that epidemics are "acts of God" - in the literal sense, not the insurance-policy sense - was widespread and deep-seated in Greek society, and the notion that individual illness, particularly mental illness, was god-sent was also widespread. The earliest Greek text we have from the archaic period, Book I of the *Iliad*, describes how Apollo came down from Olympus and "fired his arrows" at the Greek host, so that "the funeral pyres blazed in abundance". That is Homer's way of describing a plague. In the second year (430 B.C.) of the Peloponnesian War, Athens was struck by a devastating plague which killed a third of the population. Thucydides,

writing in the 390s, says that this brought to mind the promise made to the Peloponnesians a couple of years earlier by the oracle of Appollo, assuring them that if they fought with all their might against Athens he would lend a hand on their side.

Apollo was a major god. In Homer he creates the plague in response to a prayer - a prayer which he could have declined to answer. After all, unanswered prayers are an ingredient of life to which all cultures have to reconcile themselves. Here we may glimpse something of a difference between magic and religion, spells being proper to the former and prayers to the latter. A prayer is an interpersonal transaction. The god to whom it is addressed may decide that you do not deserve a favourable answer; you may not be a good enough person, or what you are asking for may be sinful. It might be easier to predict success or failure in prayer if the gods were invariably good and just; but in the Classical period the idea that they were, strongly held by some philosophers and destined to prevail in theology, was by no means universal. Persons, whether human or superhuman, have prejudices and predilections, and may act in the interests of their friend's friends and their enemies' enemies. Even if the gods are good, the point of the suffering which they inflict as part of a means to a good end may be unintelligible to us (a problem which besets the faithful in all religions). Furthermore, the gods act on an extravagant scale; they may sink a ship and drown all those aboard in order to punish one sinful passenger; or, of course, they may send a plague, which respects neither sex nor age, as a mark of their displeasure at the conduct of the ruling element within a community. And notoriously, (though this idea was waning in the Classical period) they may punish an offence by visiting its consequences upon descendants of the offender, who may not even know of their ancestor's guilt.

All this means that if we accept the idea that some illnesses (and other forms of suffering) are

divinely caused, we don't know which ones; and even if we do persuade ourselves that we know that, we don't necessarily know the reason. Perhaps there is no reason. Greek religion has no Devil, but it accommodates a host of sub-divine beings, often the ghosts of ancestral heroes, with whom it is always unwise to tangle, because they may react viciously (Parker 243-6). In this area spells and magic become important. As opposed to the interpersonal transaction of prayer, magic is an operation of machinery. If we follow the right procedure in starting a lawnmower, we expect to hear the reassuring roar of the motor; and if we get the words of a spell right and accompany it by the right ritual objects and actions, we expect our suffering to abate. Magic thus offers us a way of mastering minor superhuman beings. If in the process we also offend them, that does not matter so much, because if our spells are efficient enough we can afford offence. But we cannot afford to offend major superhuman powers.

If it had been a systematic belief among the Greeks that all illness was caused by superhuman intervention, and if it had also been an article of faith that all superhuman powers were unfailingly good and just, it could be expected that the Greek attitude to illness would be peculiarly lacking in compassion, since the logical assessment of any affliction would have been "it serves you right", and no one would have been anxious to appear sympathetic to a sinner. Fortunately the Greeks were very rarely willing to agree on one explanation of an event when a range of alternative explanations was available, and when compassion for the sick and readiness to alleviate their suffering are portrayed or described in Greek literature we find ourselves on familiar ground.

Not, however, familiar in all circumstances. Illness within the household, the family, the clan, the city-state, mattered, but beyond those limits suffering, did not necessarily elicit a compassionate response; the charitable relief of suffering

abroad is a very modern phenomenon. A civilised person would normally be expected to evince compassion when directly and inescapably confronted by suffering, but not even then if the sufferer was a personal or political adversary. It is clear from allusions in comedy that it was quite acceptable in forensic and political conflict to ridicule people for skin disease, defects or diseases of the eyes, lameness, chronic diarrhoea, and the like.

Generations which have revered the Socrates depicted by Plato and Xenophon as a kind of honorary post-Enlightenment Christian have usually failed to notice that he was an absolute stranger to compassion. The Socratic-Platonic tradition in philosophy was preoccupied with justice, which after all, is constantly in conflict with compassion. This conflict created a problem for Aristotle, because the society in which he lived and worked at Athens attached importance, as we see from forensic oratory and fourth-century comedy, to the virtues *philanthropia* and *epieikeia*, which together comprised magnanimity, compassion, generosity and helpfulness. How he resolved that problem is a matter too remote from the subject of this paper to pursue, but the importance of justice and desert is nicely brought out in a passage of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1114 a 20-29):

"No one reproaches those who are ugly by nature, but those who are ugly through lack of exercise and neglect of themselves, yes. It is the same with illness and impairment. No one would blame a man who is blind congenitally or from a disease or an injury, but would pity him; but the man who is blind from alcoholism or some other indulgence everyone would reproach."

Stern words, and thoroughly Greek. It is hard to believe that any Greek would have comprehended the contemporary notion that affecting one's own health by smoking or drugs is one's own business, in which the State has no right to interfere. In Greek eyes, anything that

makes one less useful than one might have been is everyone's business.

Forensic oratory illustrates the extent to which the interests of the community could be treated in the Athenian democracy (which, incidentally, prided itself on its humanity) as overriding the rights of the individual. We find a prosecutor arguing (Lysias xiii 52) that a defendant's plea of action under duress should be ignored if the offence is serious enough; the notion that condemnation of the innocent is worse than acquittal of the guilty, although a notion naturally favoured by defendants, was not unchallengeable. We hear also (Aeschines i 86-88) of the execution of two jurors who yielded, through poverty in old age, to the temptation to accept a bribe. Maintenance of the integrity of the jury system mattered more than individual lives (Dover 1974 288-292). None of that sounds good news for the congenitally handicapped or for the insane.

The life of a Greek was regarded as beginning not when s/he first drew breath into the lungs, but when the head of the household (within ten days) acknowledged the child. After that, to kill the child would have been homicide; but before it, the head of the household - or, in the case of illegitimate children where there was no household, the mother - was entitled to expose the baby: that is, to put it out in a lonely place to die of cold and hunger or to be eaten by animals. It might, of course, be picked up by someone who wanted a baby; but whatever happened, exposure, involving no shedding of blood by human hand, was legally acceptable (Garland 13-16). Aristotle (*Politics* 1335 b 19-26) firmly expresses the opinion that parents should be compelled by law to expose congenitally deformed or disabled infants. To recommend a law for an ideal state implies that it does not hold good for existing states, and certainly there was no such legal compulsion at Athens. But passing references in comedy take exposure for granted, and in a passage of Plato (*Theaetetus* 161 A)

Socrates says to a young man :

"When <a hypothesis> has been born... we must look very carefully to ensure that if it's not worth rearing, that doesn't escape our notice... Or do you think that, come what may, it's right for you to rear your offspring instead of discarding it ?"

At Sparta the head of the household has less latitude. Not he, but the elders of his clan, had the right to decide whether a newborn child should be reared, and they could normally be expected to judge that a handicapped or sickly-looking child would be of no value to the community. The idea that one's children belong to the State, not to the parents, is not unique to Sparta; we encounter it again in Athenian tragedies in contexts which have to do with the sacrifice of a princess.

The elevation of communal over individual interests is especially conspicuous in the treatment of mental illness. References in comedy indicate that a common way of "treating" menacing or troublesome schizophrenics was to throw stones at them until they ran away. Provision for a plea of diminished responsibility when such people committed violent crimes is made in the ideal state envisaged in Plato's *Laws* (864DE), but in the surviving forensic speeches which concern real cases it is clear that such a plea was not possible. In fact, it could be argued that a crime committed in expression of a vicious nature and not from rational criminal intent "cannot on any pretext claim forgiveness" (Demosthenes xx 40). It is the prosecutor who imputes insanity to the defendant, and not out of any desire for scrupulous fairness but to heighten the jury's revulsion.

This is the point at which the notion of surperhuman intervention reappears. Although the Greeks were well aware that injury to the brain could affect behaviour profoundly, and medical writers readily include insanity among symptoms generated by a defective regimen, a

prosecutor could argue (e.g. Lysias vi 19 f., 31) that a deity intervened in the mind of the defendant to direct him into a course of action which no rational person would have taken; and it is inferred that an acquittal, being contrary to the wishes of the deity in question, would be disadvantageous to the community (Dover 1974:149f).

No culture taken as a whole has a logically coherent system of attitudes, and Greek intolerance of social uselessness coexisted with a strict sense of obligation to one's parents, however useless they may have been rendered by senility. In the diagnosis and treatment of illness our own culture has given the victory to science, but the problem of reconciling communal with individual advantage remains with us.

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Biography

Sir Kenneth Dover is Chancellor of the University of St Andrews, which hosted the 16th Congress of the British Society for the History of Medicine in August 1995. He had been professor of Greek at St Andrews University from 1955 to 1976 and then President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford between 1976 and 1986. He was president of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies 1971-74, of the Classical Association in 1975 and of the British Academy 1978-81 and has contributed greatly to the understanding of Greek literature and morals.