The Virtuous Physician

A Brief Medical History of Moral Inquiry from Hippocrates to COVID-19

By

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Preface

What gives me the right…?

It is difficult to address the issue of scholarly cross-contamination between medicine and the humanities. It really does not occur with much frequency. True, especially over the past few years, there has been significant intrusion of medical people into the world of 'pop journalism', if that counts as 'humanity'. 'Medical experts' have become recognizable – if not downright celebrated, at times vilified – talking heads now on many 'media' outlets. But this is less a fruitful, scholarly interdisciplinary project than it is, frankly, an excuse for bombastic self-promotion, self-aggrandizement, and, in the end, social media social-climbing. If anything, medicine, or at least patients, have suffered rather than benefited from this mass(ive) media collaboration. Certainly, any sense of critical or moral inquiry has either been quashed under the weight of public opinion, or superficially bloated, when convenient, and in accordance with the political leaning of this or that particular outlet. In other words, those of us in the medical field who actually see, who actually treat, patients, and who try our best to hold on to common sense, even as the world around us descends repeatedly into chaos and nonsense, have been, and continue to be, professionally, and personally, embarrassed by egregiously superficial mass media attempts at negotiating the field of medicine. Worse, we are mostly, the doctors who doctor, I dare say, *grievously* ashamed of our colleagues who have become so thoroughly infatuated with the sound of their own ten-second sound-byte, with the sight of their own images, with the warm fuzziness of their own self-absorption.

Infatuation with oneself, a pithy description both of depression and of narcissism, and at best these self-proclaimed 'thought leaders' are merely blowing hot air into the magic mirror. At worst, they lend a frightening measure of melancholic inauthenticity to the entire practice of medicine.

In this volume, I try to avoid the catchphrase. I try to avoid the meme, the studied attempt at bad taste, at 'going viral'. Rather, I play the more

traditional, the more scholarly role of historian, of linguist, of translator, of writer, and of cross-cultural critic. I do this, have done this, all the while continuing my daytime, and not infrequently nighttime, role as physician. All within the coincidentally telling milieu of the last few pandemic-ravaged years.

That said, I offer the rest of this brief preface more to present my qualifications to engage in such a project in the first place. No doubt the critical, the astute, reader is (appropriately) dubious, is healthily skeptical. I guarantee I would be if the roles were reversed.

So, here are my cards.

First, I did enjoy a previous life as a doctoral student in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA. I completed my master's degree there, and subsequently passed all of my doctoral exams. I specialized in the cross-cultural influences between the Ancient Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East. This confluence of the great early civilizations is at the heart of this current project. This confluence of the great early civilizations also required significant study of the relevant languages. Almost all of my doctoral exams were in ancient languages, including Greek, Hebrew/Ugaritic, Aramaic/Syriac, Akkadian, Egyptian, and Sumerian. (I did pass them all, by the way.) I also taught several university courses on the cultures of the Ancient Mediterranean and Ancient Levant.

Perhaps this is 'TMI', to borrow the preferred brevity of the current thumb-heavy generation, but also relatable to the audience for such a book project, which is all to say that financial circumstances at the time precluded the completion of a dissertation, and I next went to work as a high school teacher of Latin and Greek. It was soon after that experience that I made the decision to abandon my secondary school teaching career and to enter medical school. (Please do not misinterpret. I loved teaching. But I could not make a living in Massachusetts by doing so.)

I never abandoned my first academic loves, however, of language, philosophy, and history, and I in fact have since published far more by way of humanities articles as a physician than I ever did as a doctoral student, including translations of Greek and Sumerian medical texts. I founded the

Yale Philosophy and Psychiatry Group as a resident physician, and my first book, *Reconceptualizing Mental Illness in the Digital Age: Ghosts in the Machine* (Cambridge Scholars) was published in 2021.

I am also a triple-board certified physician, and the Director of Medical Psychiatry at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, just outside of Boston, now part of the greater Mass General Brigham healthcare system. I am also Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine.

All of which is to say that indeed I do bring some medico-academic chops to the table, and I am as qualified as any physician, as any scholar, to discuss the medical humanities in general, and the ancient medical humanities in particular. I am as qualified as any other physician, as any scholar, to translate, to interpret, to comment on, and to discuss ancient medical texts. And I am as qualified as any other physician, any other scholar, to apply historical lessons and cultural criticism to the current state of the art.

Introduction

On Precepts

At my graduation ceremony from medical school I, along with the rest of my class, raised my right hand and regurgitated, line by line as recited by the dean of some-such-or-other, some sort of 'oath', attributed to 'Hippocrates', in which we swore rather blandly to do 'this, that, and the other thing', or maybe it was *not* to do 'this, that, or the other thing'. Or probably a combination of both: to be the *best* doctors we can be, and to try our best *not* to be the worst doctors. Regardless, it was a non-memorable exercise other than as lead-in to the congratulations at the end that we were all finally 'real doctors'.

My own situation was a little unique in that prior to medical school, as I stated in the preface, I had been a teacher of Latin and Greek, I had been a former doctoral student in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. I was very familiar with the works attributed to the historical Hippocrates, including *The Oath*. From the introduction by that same dean of some-such-or-other, stating summarily that *The Oath* dated back to 1000 BC (wrong; the historical Hippocrates lived from the sixth to fifth centuries BC – his mistake was the equivalent of asserting confidently at the start of a presentation on the Obamas that Barack Obama's memoirs date back to 1520), to the bland, generic promises we mechanically swore to uphold, I was painfully aware of how inauthentic the whole ceremony was. I suppose in the end it didn't matter. As rote as swearing on a Bible in a courtroom. To the person who has never opened the Bible what does such a ceremony really mean anyway?

These days, in American medical schools at any rate, typically as part of the so-called white coat ceremonies in which students receive their first white coats, supposed symbols of physician-hood, some sort of 'oath' is still spoken aloud. Only rather than recite an administered oath, students actually create their own, promising to uphold particular values they wish to uphold. (Sort of like soon-to-be spouses composing their own wedding

vows, only on a larger scale, as only one version will be used at the ceremony.) These, as one might reasonably guess, are typically composed by the most vocal students, the most self-assured (i.e., the least tolerant of other opinions), the most pushy, and almost always nowadays the most involved in 'activism', whether or not their particular values actually align with classmates or not. At that point in their medical careers, however, most students are just so relieved to be where they're at that they will recite almost anything. If someone else wants to do the work, great. (The many required board examinations are standardized and the same across state and country lines, but apparently any oath will do.) In other words, the Hippocratic Oath has become as trite, trivialized, superficial, and in the end, meaningless, as any other TikTok meme.

That said, it is almost mind-numbingly ironic that bioethics and medical ethics have correspondingly exploded as separate fields over the course of the same recent time span. Every medical school now offers at least a course or two on these subjects, and every hospital has an ethics committee with which to consult for 'difficult' cases and/or situations. Dozens of journals devoted to these subjects have sprouted over the past two decades, and many universities, in addition to the standard medical school nod, now have multidisciplinary courses on the subject, and even majors. Philosophers, historians, legal scholars are now all part of the greater discussion. Clearly, the humanistic element of 'classical' medical education remains alive, if somewhat removed from the actual medical education experience.

And having sat on some of these ethics committees, having put together multidisciplinary seminars and colloquia, having taught these very subjects, I can tell you that there is almost never reference to a Hippocratic oath other than a throwaway nod to quaintness. What *is* frequently referred to is a presumed common history of moral and ethical standards and behaviors from which we, participants, players, invested parties, can make comparisons, can debate and discuss, and can finally, hopefully, arrive at a decision, or a recommendation, or a policy even. We acknowledge a history that has evolved, and continues to evolve, but with certain absolutes that provide guidance when all else fails. And these are philosophic, humanistic, 'virtuous' absolutes.

Do we specifically reference any ancient text? Ever? Do we reference *any* core text at all? Ever? No. We *do*, however, reference certain core principles, and these can be found in some celebrated seminal texts published over the past fifty years or so. But these are articles of convenience, articles that have merely elucidated, maybe modernized, perhaps post-modernized, concepts that had been presented and discussed centuries, even millennia earlier. In fact, these are generally lived principles, typically discussed and applied through clinical and academic experience, through shared and common experience. In other words, these are concepts and tenets that are much too complex, much too human, to be compressed into an introductory course, much less a two- or three-hundred-word oath. These are in fact ethical guidelines meant to be discussed, debated, applied, not applied, or even selectively applied depending on circumstance. They are not really appropriate to swear oaths to. As stated, many medical schools otherwise allow their students to compose their own 'oaths', indicating, or at least accepting, that the values of physicians will change over time. An oath, at least in theory, binds one very specifically to those principles sworn therein. It creates a 'right' and a 'wrong', a 'good' and a 'bad'. It is by nature simple, and simple-minded. It must be grossly applicable across all situations and, again in theory, across all time. (Does the courtroom oath suddenly dissolve once one leaves the courtroom? Is the plaintiff or defendant, or witness, no longer bound to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?)

Hippocrates, mythical miracle-worker and inspiration for professional oath-taking, in a way, can be compared to the later Jesus of Nazareth. There was in fact an historical Hippocrates, who did found a medical 'school', meaning more of a medical 'school of thought'. Based on the more mystical theories and pronouncements of the earlier polymath Pythagoras, Hippocrates inspired more of a priestly evolution of the physician, presiding over the change from 'soul-care' to 'health-care'. His, and his disciples', cross-cultural influence was remarkable in an era of difficult mass communication. And more, he inspired the composition, compilation, and cataloguing of medical texts, and the eventual early standardization of medical practice. Much like the Gospels and Pauline letters of the New Testament provide and standardize accounts of a Jesus long dead across time, the so-called Hippocratic corpus was collected, edited, and rewritten

by unknown authors, presumably physician and philosophers, mostly after the death of Hippocrates. But respectful attribution was accorded to him as their acknowledged inspiration/mentor, I might dare say 'god'. (This is also quite similar a phenomenon, as we have opened this particular philosophy door, to Plato's taking up the mantle of his mentor and inspiration, Socrates. Also, as comparison, consider the Jewish tradition of attributing the authorship of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, to Moses.)

And this is where my work comes in.

I make the case, or at least try to make the case, that the Hippocratic corpus, coincidentally put together mostly around the time of the historical Plato, reflects a critical turning point in the history of medicine and religion both. I argue that prior to the philosophic turn of the Greeks, medicine had been a branch of religion, of shamanism, of playing 'medicine man'. Indeed, ancient medicine was a mantic practice of incantation and prognostication and magic. However, with the work first of Pythagoras, and then Hippocrates – although historically these two thinkers were still mostly firmly rooted in the religio-mystical tradition – medicine became a 'thing', or at least its own 'thing', a subject of study, of wonder, of abstraction, of increasingly rigorous study. Again, not unlike the historical Jesus, it was not so much what the historical Pythagoras and Hippocrates actually said, or did, but that their followers took it and ran with it. Hippocrates' followers created the 'Hippocratic corpus'. Where Hippocrates himself likely lived in a small world of theory and abstraction, his followers, from this, spread the word and created the 'science' of medicine. They created 'textbooks', substantial, and substantially influential, enough to be extensively catalogued centuries later in the greatest ancient library ever to have existed, that at the scholarly center of the then very cosmopolitan Alexandria. That catalogue included *Precepts*, the seminal text re-translated and re-interpreted over the course of much of this present volume. Attributed to Hippocrates in the Alexandrian catalogue, although written two to three hundred years after his death, not unbeknownst to the librarians, and such works are often labeled 'pseudo-Hippocratic'.

The influence of Hippocrates, whether intended or not, whether as a real person or as an idea of the perfect doctor, at a remarkably fortuitous intellectual moment in history, following the broader Greek, or Hellenistic, acculturation of the known world in the wake of Alexander the Great's hyper-rapid empire-building and not-as-rapid empire-collapsing – especially with the spread of Greek as the *lingua franca* of the historical world – undeniably led to more of a philosophical discussion in terms of medicine and medical decision-making. More profoundly, Hippocrates', and by extension, Pythagoras', influence led to the development of rival schools of medical thinking, but with a form as well of early medical standardization across the Mediterranean and Near East.

In other words, bigger things were happening. Scholars, like water, were finally finding their own level. Intellectually and philosophically.

And medicine became a proxy. A scientific proxy for moral inquiry. I would say 'as medicine advanced', but medicine never really 'advanced' *per se*. What medicine did was become less reliant on religion, less reliant on the supernatural. In the truest sense, it became more 'scientific'. Good physicians became keen observers, keen logicians. They became skilled diagnosticians. They knew the limits of their abilities and the limits of the human body, and mind, to heal itself, to heal themselves.

This acknowledgement makes the Hippocratic Oath as inconsequential as any TikTok meme, but is why *Precepts* offers a much more enduring, fruitful, practical, ethical and philosophical document. Why? Because *Precepts*, a brief but comprehensive review of the state of the art of medicine at around the second century BC, is much more than that. It is also a repository of humanistic guidelines, from which physicians and other medical personnel, from which ethicists, philosophers, and medico-legal scholars, would all do well to draw from either when guiding professional behavior, when researching its history, or when criticizing it.

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As far as the other essays in this collection, I have stayed framed within an ancient lane throughout, loosely connecting all of them with the primary

piece on *Precepts*, tracing the philosophic theme, the Platonic ideal, if you will, of a 'virtuous physician', a term first used in *Precepts*.. In "The Greeks May Have the Last Word, but Who Has the First?" I take a look at the earliest extant words for 'physician', for 'healer', and I make the case that the classical Greek term for physician can be traced back much further, in fact to a root in Sumerian, the earliest written language. More than an exercise in linguistic etymology, if I am correct, this illustrates a direct link among Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures between the early shaman-medicine-man-magician and the later philosopher-physician. But more than that, I argue that the Sumerian word had survived, persisted even, all of these millennia such that it can be found, via the Greek, in several common, current English medical words. This would also make the term one of the oldest surviving words in the history of recorded language.

More importantly, this bolsters the grander narrative case that the history of medicine has been, and remains, a persistent and consistent reflection of the history of thought.

"An Archaeology of Disease", originally published before the COVID-19 pandemic, has gained an increasingly eerie premonitory significance now in the disease' aftermath. In this essay, I discuss Thucydides' account of the nonspecific plague that befell Athens in the early years of the great civil war between Athens and Sparta in the latter half of the fifth century BC, the war that spelled the end of 'Classical Greece', that spelled the end of the brief political experiment with democracy. I look to Thucydides, a non-physician, but a well-educated, intelligent, and razor-witted critical observer. Considered an historian I argue he is really a sharp and observant journalist. 'History', arguably, describes events in the past, typically the more distant past. Thucydides' 'history' of the so-called Peloponnesian War is less a report, a compilation, of the 'war' itself than it is an ongoing, 'live' account of the conflict, of the politics, of the disease, all around him. With the benefit and clarity of hindsight we have named the conflict accordingly, we have seen it, conceptualized it, for the seminal event, as a whole, it has come to represent historically, and we have come to regard Thucydides, the war's primary chronicler, as an 'historian', by our own standards of history.

But that is unfair to Thucydides the writer, the thinker, the cultural critic of his time. He is so much more than an historian, and although remarkably prescient, he could not know just how profound was his particular 'moment in time'.

Could he?

His political discourses have been well-documented, well picked apart, as have his at times overwhelmingly haunting, grotesquely lyrical battlefield accounts. What has been generally glossed over, relative to the rest of his work, has been his outstanding description of the Athenian plague of 431-430 BC. A comparatively minor episode within his grander opus, I argue he offers a more profound lesson in epidemiology, especially as re-read, and re-translated, now among the ruins, among the tragedy, of the COVID-19 pandemic. And I think it only appropriate that a physician, a physician trained as a classicist, and more, a physician who played active participant and witness to the harrowing, the horrific, the heroic events of the most recent epidemic be the one to translate anew Thucydides' work for a newer generation. Not to prove that history repeats itself, but that history remains relevant within medicine, and that despite the best efforts of the 'number-crunchers', medicine really is more a branch of the humanities than science. Back to *Precepts*, or I should more properly say *forward* as Thucydides, a generation-plus after Hippocrates, actually predates the pseudo-Hippocratics by two hundred years, and I take the physician from the bedside to the ward, from the ward to the 'battlefield'. From thinking, and over-thinking, the individual patient, to the midst of existential catastrophe.

A test, so to speak, and *Precepts* still holds up.

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In the concluding essay, "The Existential Fallout of COVID-19", I move to a piece published toward the tail end of the worst of the pandemic. The inspiration for the work was yet another book about a physician, this time a fictional creation, unwittingly trapped within the walls of a latter-day plague-ridden town. Simply titled, *La Peste*, in English, *The Plague*, by the absurdist/existentialist, Algerian-born, survivor of the French Resistance,

journalist-novelist-philosopher Albert Camus, should have been a natural starting point for those wishing to try to understand, to try to comprehend, to try to *cope* with an illogical tragedy of obscene proportions. Camus' is a brilliant example of reason coming up against unreason, of the testing of the limits of medical morality specifically, and human morality more broadly, of the limits of our *Precepts*.

This exercise was especially meaningful for me as a physician who worked in the hospital setting throughout the entire pandemic, from the early days of chronically impending doom, to the early days of hope, to the repeated crushing of hope, to the eventual learned hopelessness of 'being so over it', to the even more overwhelming crush of patients once the worst of the pandemic itself was over, to the suffering through the insufferable politics of disease, from all sides. In other words, the question I struggled with as I considered this particular piece, was why was no one discussing Camus' masterpiece throughout this nightmare? Or even his slightly lesser, if better known and more accessible, other masterwork, *The Stranger*?

So, rather than scream these questions into the wind, I wrote my own essay. And I looked at both Camus' *magna opera* to try to interpret better the events all around me. Did I discover some hidden meaning in these works? Some means of making sense of the tragedies and comedies all around me?

No.

What I did discover was some solace, some odd comfort in the common misery of humanity, some hope even to move forward both as a doctor and as a person. I found the ability, or at least the will, to reconcile scientific inquiry with the absurd where I could, and to leave it alone where I could not.

How?

More than at any other time in my career did I look to the recommendations of *Precepts*. More than at any other time in my career did I aspire to at least the idea, the myth, of the 'virtuous physician'. In the end, what else was there but to come to work daily, to comport myself with as much dignity as I could muster, and to try to lead, to inspire by example.

And so the answer is 'yes'. *Precepts* remains relevant even here in the rarified air of the post-postmodern digital era. And in the face of unprecedented tragedy, where our 'cutting edge' fails us, even more so.

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So, hope remains.

Even Camus reduced his absurdist outlook, in the end, to hope. His Sisyphus (from his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*), even in hell, finds purpose, finds meaning, in as meaningless a task as rolling a boulder repeatedly up a hill, only to have it repeatedly roll back down. This is as apt a metaphor as any for the essential despair of medicine, the treadmill of sickness, recovery, sickness, dying, death. Whether from plague, warfare, malaise, melancholy, all disease is essentially, and eventually, terminal. The ancients knew this. They practiced medicine in a world perhaps with some remedies, but without cures.

And what exactly is 'medicine' in such a world? This is an interesting question to pose to the latter-day physician. Take away all of the post-postmodernist physician's 'magic', all of the post-postmodernist's encapsulated powders and herbs, the lotions, the potions, and the salves, and what is this physician?

I would answer that you are what your intellect, your empathy, your dignity, your humanity, your virtue, allow you to be.

This is the tradition of medicine.

This is the common bond, the fellowship, the sodality, of the medicine-man, the shaman, the priest-healer, the philosopher-physician, the scientist-physician, the doctor.

The Oath is a symbol, a pledge, an acknowledgement of the past, an epitaph to the first Age of Reason, at the emergence of medicine from a perceived 'dark age'. We will see that the *Oath* was really a composite, if enduring, product, a pastiche, of the preceding 'dark ages', the preceding 'nothingness', the preceding 'fundament'. *Precepts* is really the first

document – a culmination of its own immediately preceding Hippocratic tradition – to provide genuine, useful, practical guidance to the physician without the earlier encumbrance of superstition, of religious bias. In other words, it is a *real* document, as real as many other ancient documents, as real as the people, the intellects, the anxieties and the morals that conceived them, that thought on them, that eventually were inspired enough by them to put them to clay, to stone, to papyrus, to paper.

Precepts is as relevant today as it was, as other texts like it were, over two thousand years ago.

But don't just take my word for it, let me show you…

Chapter 1

The Virtuous Physician: A New Translation of a Pseudo-Hippocratic Text and its Implications for the History of Moral Inquiry[1]

Introduction

> He hated not only Greek philosophers, but also Greek physicians. For he had heard, so it seemed, how Hippocrates had replied when consulted by the king of Persia – who had promised him a fee of many talents – that he would never lay his skill at the service of barbarians who were enemies of the Greeks. Hippocrates then asserted that this was a common oath sworn by all Greek physicians. Cato thus urged his son to beware of them all.
>
> Cato the Elder, as described in Plutarch[2]

This is the earliest reference to an 'oath' of Hippocrates. Far removed from the previously near-sacred pledge sworn to by generations of new medical doctors, far removed even from its more modern and postmodern faithless iterations, Cato's second-hand account of the Hippocratic oath is an unflattering, sweeping, portrayal of Greek medical practitioners. There is no room for misinterpretation of what one may consider to be a 'virtuous physician'. And Cato was quite well-known for, in fact justly famous for, his utterly unwavering moral rigidness. His name, in fact, was synonymous

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[1] Originally published as Martin EB, Jr., December 2012. "The Virtuous Physician: A New Translation of a Pseudo-Hippocratic Text and its Implications for the History of Moral Inquiry: or, The Significance of an Insignificant Text", *Journal of the Interdisciplinary History of Ideas*, vol. 1, no. 2., 1-41. The original has been substantially revised and updated for inclusion in the current volume.

[2] Plutarch, *Life of Marcus Cato*, xxiii, 3-4, first century AD, translated by the author.

in the ancient world with conservatively high moral standards.[3] Less Donald Trump than George Washington. In other words, in an era of constant political campaigning and more political corruption than even today, Cato simply could not tell a lie. He could not confabulate. He told the truth, at least as he knew it, at least as he saw it. Based then on Cato's account of a Hippocratic oath, and with no other available evidence, one could not be criticized too soundly for concluding that Greek physicians were a powerful lot – more powerful even than the philosopher-pedagogues – who selfishly swore, in secret ceremony or not, to help, to tend to, only their own.

With no other available evidence, it is also quite easy, and quite tempting, to find oneself caught up in Plutarch's popular and swift-moving narratives. Having collected anecdotal accounts, written and oral, he writes authoritatively, convincingly, here of two histories really; one (that of Cato) is already well over two hundred years old when Plutarch collected his sources, and the other (Hippocrates) is nearly five hundred years old. This is Plutarch's method. Not unlike that of Herodotus, the seminal Greek-historian-storyteller of the fifth century BC, who with his gift for selective narration and ability to manipulate the evidence in often titillating fashion, became the popular inspiration for generations of Greek and Roman historians. What perhaps separated Plutarch from Herodotus is Plutarch's blatant pedagogy, his (very Roman) acknowledgement that history is created by singular men of outsized ability to do so. (Herodotus was more democratic, treating all of his sources essentially equally.) Plutarch intended his writing to be educational, to inform the next generation of 'great men'. (Plutarch, though born Greek, became a Roman citizen, and immersed himself in Roman culture. His philosophy of history thereby was the opposite of the *other* great earlier Greek historian, a generation removed from Herodotus, Thucydides. Thucydides was the disgraced Athenian general who wrote one [unfinished] work, *The Peloponnesian War*, detailing the politics, strategies, and battles of the civil war between Athens and

[3] Cato the Elder, great-grandfather of Julius Caesar's rival Cato the Younger, lived from 234-149 B.C.. He was a senator and leading proponent of empire-building and colonization, and a staunch critic of Hellenization, or the 'Greek'-ization of Roman culture as corruptive and emasculating. He was the first Roman to write a history of Rome, the fabled *Origines*, a text that unfortunately does not survive.

Sparta that marked the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Greece. His, however, was a staunchly critical, incisive, unfailingly pessimistic, decidedly modern, journalistic take on the current events of his time, with no 'great' men populating the story, only intermittent great self-promoters and stage-hoggers. Really, the opposite of Herodotus. And something quite less than breezy, easy reading. We will look a little more closely at him later.)

The revisionist historian, like Thucydides, might just as easily counter that Cato's account is, truthful or not in its details, a testament to the sort of 'cultural jealousy' Rome maintained toward its easily bullied, easily militarily subjected – if thoroughly 'enlightened' and newly 'rational' – predecessor and contemporary in empire-building. (Romans, logical, pragmatic and ruthless as they were, generally were not an imaginative lot, and like a bully bested in a game of wits, they often knew just enough to know when they had been outwitted.) Or moving along, the counter-revisionist might make the case that Cato's referred to oath in this instance has simply not survived. The counter-counter-revisionist, of course, might then argue back that such an oath would have been purposely destroyed for political, economic, or other situational expediency. And so on and so forth.

This philosophico-historical guessing game can continue, as the Romans might say, *ad nauseum*. But the one question (a question that may seem fairly obvious in that way the obvious has of only appearing so when declared so) that appears not to have been pondered at any length, at least as far as I have been able to determine, is as follows: Why would ancient physicians swear a fealty oath to a self-same higher power in any case? There is, after all, no precedent for any profession to have sworn an oath to itself in antiquity. In fact, there is no evidence for the 'Hippocratic Oath' in its own time but for the above quote and oblique references to bits and

pieces of a reputed oath in much later texts.[4] Indeed, the medical historian who seeks to ground the roots of medical ethics in the creation of the so-called 'Oath of Hippocrates' can go no further back, with any real confidence, than to 1508 AD, the year *The Oath*, at least in its (previously) familiar form, was collected from its gathered, purported fragments and revived as a ceremonial attestation in Western medical education as part of the graduation ceremony at the University of Wittenberg.

If not neatly packaged by a lone, mythically inspired, legendarily talented Greek physician who also divined the future accordingly and handed down his most pithily distilled words of wisdom from generation to generation, from where then did the blueprint for Western medical ethics emerge? And is there in fact, regardless of its etiology, a single text that best expresses the moral tenets to which the ideal ancient (or otherwise) physician should ideally have subscribed? And perhaps more importantly, if there is, is it even translatable, in a modern sense, to any universally applicable 'code of ethics'?

I contend that the best evidence for a more universally practicable, if not in fact universally practiced, code of moral conduct does indeed exist among the ancient textual evidence. It is not to be found, however, among the traditional Hippocratic corpus, those works attributed to Hippocrates and his followers from the fifth century BC, but within the two centuries later Hellenistic-era, pseudo-Hippocratic text, *Παραγγελιαί*. Transliterated as

[4] It is a curious thing that Galen makes no reference to the Hippocratic *Oath*. In fact, no one makes reference to the *Oath* until the first century AD, when Scribonius Largus, court physician to Claudius, in his list of 271 *Compositiones*, 65.175.177, refers to Hippocrates' proscription against abortifacients. Soranus, a hundred years later, provides the next reference in his *Gynaecologia*, I.19.60, again in reference to abortifacients. Not until Jerome, 347-420 AD, do we have a reference other than abortive; in his *Epistles*, LII.15, he compares an unfounded regimen of devotion among the followers of Hippocrates, as witnessed by an oath, to the devotion expected of Christians. The oath was revisited throughout the Middle Ages, in Arabic sources, and even a Hebrew version, and into the Renaissance; see Rütten T, 1996. "Receptions of the Hippocratic Oath in the Renaissance: The Prohibition of Abortion as a Case Study in Reception", *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* , Translated by Leonie von Reppert-Bismarck vol. 51, 456-483, and, as noted, first codified as ceremony among medical school graduates in 1508, in its original form (that is, as a medical school attestation), at the University of Wittenberg.

Parangeliai, from the root 'παραγγέλλω' ('parangello'), the literal meaning is 'I pass the word along'. (The standard format of Greek dictionary entry is the first person singular present form of the verb, rather than the infinitive. Of note, the English word 'angel', meaning 'messenger', is found within this same root, 'par-angel-lo'.) *Παραγγελιαί*, the plural nominal noun form, is usually, traditionally, translated as *Precepts*. A distillation of the major schools of medical thought between the age of Hippocrates (460-370 BC) and the age of the next 'great man' in medical history, Galen (129-200 AD), *Precepts* is appropriately, and more correctly, not an oath, but a set of pragmatic, comprehensive guidelines for the comportment and practice of what the author describes as the 'ιητρός ἀγαθὸς', the 'yae-tros aga-thos', or the 'virtuous physician'.

In this work I present the key cultural-historical background from which this text emerged, a new, updated translation of the text itself, with extensive commentary, followed by a discussion in which I attempt to place the work in its broader context at a literal crossroads in the history of moral inquiry. More broadly, I propose a new way of interpreting the development of Greek ethical notions, as exemplified in our sample text, as the inevitable philosophic product of the religious influence of the Ancient Near East on a Greek rationalism more heterodox in character than is typically ascribed. Medicine was the most rational branch of this early enlightenment, the 'science' of its time, and specifically I consider the – perhaps ironic – 'magical' context from which the physician, the healer, originally emerged. Rather than propose a conflict, however, between the Western (Greek) polytheists and the challenge of Eastern (Near Eastern) monotheism that pervaded thoughtful inquiry at an especially fortuitous moment in intellectual history, I propose more of a synthetic interplay between the two belief systems. Examining polytheism as the knowable 'science' of the day (thesis) and monotheism as the unknowable absolute (antithesis),[5] I propose that the Greek attempts at reconciliation between the two (synthesis) were the critical impetus for the development of moral

[5] I borrow freely from seminal Enlightenment philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's grandly narrative terms here, if two thousand years removed from the text, as the collision between the East and West that played out in antiquity along the Eastern Mediterranean was about as 'grand' a 'narrative' as ever there was in recorded human history.

inquiry alongside the birth of 'rationalism'.[6] *Precepts* is an exemplary text in this regard, marrying reason and artfulness in a thoroughly understandable, and workable, blueprint that, even if it does not apply today, could and perhaps should.

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Polytheism was in fact the scientific process of the (ancient) day, culminating, without any intended irony, in the first 'Age of Reason' in Classical Greece (roughly 500-336 B.C.) and then, following the rise and fall of Alexander's empire, with its consequent 'Hellenizing' or 'Greek-izing' of conquered territory, extending well into the Roman era. I say 'without any intended irony' because unlike the burgeoning, and highly restrictive, faith-based orthodoxy of the monotheists, polytheism operated under the assumption of an imminently knowable world. Mythopoieisis, literally 'myth-making', was the narrative tool of the polytheist, the means of contriving, of explaining, of glorifying, of making immediate and concrete an abstract theory; more so than as any fantastic means of projective identification.[7] In other words, these were not intended as moral tales, or as psychological portraits, but as explanatory theory.

How? Why?

To answer these questions, we have to consider the milieu whence emerged Greek thought itself. The Greeks, despite the biased propaganda of centuries of Western academia, did not arise in a vacuum. They themselves

[6] And these were not mutually exclusive. Rationalism, according to Greek standards, was not the same as reason. Reason was a tool toward acquiring rationalism, but rationalism itself was absolute. It did not allow for mistakes. One drew logical conclusions based on the best available evidence, whether empirical or reasonable.

[7] Projective identification is a psychological primitive defense mechanism, according to psychoanalytic theory, in which (typically) intolerable aspects of oneself are 'projected' onto another to the point that this 'other' eventually takes on those projected characteristics. For example, the angry, promiscuous adolescent girl with an alcohol problem screams incessantly at Mom that she is 'nothing but a drunken slut' such that eventually Mom finds herself as just that. In myth-making, god/goddess-making, one may project the good and/or bad in oneself onto nature, onto animals, onto fantastic imagined gods, goddesses, and 'fantastic' beasts. These, over time, tend to then take on a life of their own.

are really a cultural culmination, a cultural amalgamation, a beneficiary of fortuitous geographical and historical circumstance.

So whence emerged the Classical Greek way of thinking; that is, rational thought? Influenced primarily by the Mesopotamians[8] and Egyptians[9], but

[8] The remnants of the Babylonian and Akkadian empires, as filtered through the Persians, Mesopotamian history provides an even earlier recorded model of cultural jealousy and assimilation. The very first recorded history we have is from Ancient Sumer, now southern Iraq. The reason we have a record of the Sumerians is that they invented writing. It is clear from surviving accounts that Sumerian culture was similar to Greek culture at the time, a loose confederation of otherwise independent city-states, easily conquered, eventually, by a more centralized, and militarized, Babylonian empire under much stronger monarchical rule. But even among the Sumerian city-states there was a cultural hierarchy (not unlike, say, that among the fifty United States). The Semitic Babylonians assimilated this culture, from which they developed a much more complex writing system, a much more complex literature, and a much more complex 'religion'. That is, they developed a very complex pantheon, really a proxy for proto-science. Their northern neighbors, the Assyrians, also Semitic (the Sumerians, however, were not, and their language is not related to any other known language), meanwhile grew militarily stronger and eventually conquered the Babylonians. The Assyrian-Babylonian cultural relationship was very much akin to the Roman-Greek relationship. That is, an intellectual jealousy of the conquered, combined with a grudging respect and need for that brain power to conduct the business of empire. The Babylonians, under Assyrian rule, wrote volumes of mathematical, astronomical, agricultural, and medical texts. (The language of both Babylon and Assyria was Akkadian. This became the prototypical Semitic language, the parent tongue of modern Arabic and Hebrew.) What separated their texts from the later Greeks was the all-pervasive theological and divinatory elements to their 'scientific' process. That is, using medical texts as example, symptoms, though well-described, generally had a supernatural etiology, and more, they were prognostic in and of themselves. They were omens. And a good physician was adept at reading these omens and thus was able to predict outcomes.

[9] The Egyptians seemed to have developed a writing system nearly concurrent with the Mesopotamians, though a century or two later. The precise relationship between the Ancient Egyptian tongue and Akkadian has yet to be definitively elucidated, but there are enough similarities in structure to be both titillating and frustrating. Egyptian is not Semitic but contains elements of such. In all likelihood, just like the Greeks did not develop in a cultural vacuum, there was almost certainly interplay among the early Egyptians and Mesopotamians, at least through geographically intervening cultures, to have allowed linguistic and other influence. The fabled 'Amarna Letters', for example, are a collection of correspondences between Egyptian monarchs and Canaanite and Hittite rulers in the mid-second-millennium BC that paint a picture of a much greater cultural diversity in the Near East than had previously been ascribed. Certainly, there were large populations of Semitic people in Egyptian lands during the second millennium, whether the Biblical flight from Egypt in the Book of Exodus is entirely true or not. The earliest alphabetic writing has been found in Egypt (the so-called proto-Sinaitic script) dating to this same period. The script borrows pseudo-Egyptian

also by the Anatolian and Levantine cultures immediately East[10], the Greeks borrowed heavily from the Persians[11], as well as from the early Italic, Etruscan, and Celtic cultures to the West[12].

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pictographs, but these conceal an underlying Semitic language. The earliest complete alphabet was developed by the Phoenicians, another Semitic language and ethnicity. The Phoenicians were of Canaanite origin, famed for their seafaring abilities, their travels in and around the Mediterranean especially (with the earliest Phoenician alphabet bearing striking resemblance to the proto-Sinaitic letters). The Greeks borrowed the consonantal Phoenician alphabet, created their own symbols for vowels, and literature exploded across the known world. Indeed, the invention of the alphabet was akin to the postmodern invention of the Internet.

[10] The Anatolian and Levantine cultures were much more of a heterogeneous lot than the greater empires further East and South. In Anatolia the Hittite kingdoms were dominant, influenced by the Lydian kingdoms along the coast and the Hurrian and Scythian kingdoms to the East and North. The Hittite language is Indo-European, but written in the cuneiform borrowed from Akkadian. (Akkadian similarly had borrowed, initially, the cuneiform of the earlier Sumerian.) Lydian is also Indo-European in nature (as is Greek and Latin), but with a unique pictographic writing system. Hurrian is considered a Hurro-Urartian language and Scythian is an early Iranian variant. Again, there were no cultural vacuums, especially East to West and West to East where similar geographic patterns encouraged movement, trade, and technological innovation, including the representation of language.

[11] The Persians emerged as a mish-mash of ethnicities conquered by the Assyrians, and initially centered in Babylon. Like the later Romans they built an empire quickly by relying on the footprints of previous empires. In this case, the Assyrian road and administrative networks. It was the Persian empire with whom the early Classical Greeks clashed in the fifth century BC that led to the unification of the city-states into various federations and leagues, with Athens and Sparta eventually emerging as the dominant forces. These conflicts also inspired the Athenians and Spartans to build their own empires throughout that century. This race to colonization and empire culminated in the great and protracted civil war between Athens and Sparta, the Peloponnesian War, immortalized, as noted earlier, by Thucydides in his self-same work. The Persian tongue is Indo-European as well, and it was through Old Persian translations of cuneiform texts that cuneiform was finally deciphered in the nineteenth century. (Similar to the Rosetta Stone facilitating the decipherment of Egyptian.)

[12] These are languages that remain mysteries. There are hints, especially at the Etruscan tongue, from Latin borrowings and transliterations, but there have been no major translational breakthroughs. The earliest written Greek texts extant are the so-called Linear B texts from the Mycenaean empire of the second millennium. These are written in a pictographic script with some similarities to the earlier Minoan Linear A, but unrelated to any other writing system. The interesting piece is that Linear A and B are otherwise wholly unrelated. Linear A, in fact, remains a mystery, despite a century of intense study. Minoan culture is typically considered 'Greek', but the Minoan language would not bear that out. All of which is to continue my point that the Ancient Mediterranean was really a cultural hodge-podge rather than a collection of discrete and unified states.

Long before the emergence of the Greeks, these other cultures, more especially the religion-focused empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, had become materially comfortable enough, at least within certain social – priestly – strata, to contemplate the nature of the universe, the place of humankind. (Each of these major cultural players seemed to have had a sort of middle, or upper middle, management stratum of educated religious figures, perhaps better thought of as academic and/or literary, who were comfortable enough to devote at least some thought and energy not just to pondering the nature of the world, the universe, humanity itself, and the place of humanity in the cosmos, but to putting it down on clay or papyrus.) With a full stomach (thanks to the long-standing economically orthodox model of royal bureaucracies run on slave labor), and an inquisitive mind, came the luxury of contemplative thought, of speculative thought. And with the development and refinement of writing systems, truly the equivalent of digitization of the time, came the Adam-ic magic of naming, of at first 'noun'-ing, then 'verb'-ing, and eventually the ability to create abstraction through writing, of the manipulation of language itself as philosophy, as a way of thinking, even a way of being.

With such cutting-edge tools now at their disposal, it is not difficult to imagine the priestly classes turning to the questions of why things were the way they were, are the way they are. Subsequently abstracting to supernatural beings as an ultimate cause is in fact entirely reasonable in this regard. At least as a start. Should a *more* reasonable explanation come along, the ancient mind was generally quite flexible and perfectly willing to forsake previous theory.[13] This would account for the vast, confusing, overlapping, inconsistent, redundant array of deities across the region, the multiple, myriad, borrowed, and recycled names, the fact that some were major deities and some minor, and not consistently so, across geography, the fact that some were major or minor dependent on the culture, or even the city or village, and the fact that all these roles and stories and attributes were frequently switched, borrowed, or made interchangeable. This explanatory etiology would also account for multiple and variegated cults and priesthoods, multiple and variegated sacrificial and divinational

[13] See Frankfort H, 1978, 1948. *Kingship and the Gods, An Oriental Institute Essay*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

practices. [14] Indeed, the study of ancient 'religion' has always been especially complex and unforgiving and, I daresay, at times despair-inducing to the student. But if considered more as the roiling, boiling, chaotic predecessor of scientific inquiry, of the blind and groping 'working through' of knowledge, really if considered as the infancy, in philosophic terms, of epistemology, then the confusion, if not more clear, at least becomes more understandable, and perhaps even allows the chaos a measure of classifiability.

Monotheism, on the proverbial 'other' hand, however, rooted in – or at least first attested to in the historiography of – Egyptian religion and politics, and controversially so, as the conceptualization of a pantheon boiled down to one, to One, has become associated with a single, identified individual. Without precedent, the ascending fourteenth century BC pharaoh Akhenaten created the world's first monotheistic theocracy when he declared the restriction of all worship throughout the empire to the Sun-disc Aten, really at the time a mere attribute of the greater, and seemingly likelier, sky-god Ra. Perhaps influenced by, or perhaps the influencer upon, the Semitic slaves and bureaucrats of the empire, soon to be, at least in part, the refugees of the Biblical 'Exodus' (and perhaps more significantly for world history, the introducers of the proto-Sinaitic alphabet to Levantine culture) monotheism was historically refined in the Levant just as the Greeks were beginning to emerge as a cultural force.[15]

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[14] Divination is the practice that is the (logical) means to this end, an attempt, when all is said and done, less at communing with nature than at communicating with the absolute. See Bottéro J, 2004. *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

[15] Examples of early Greek influence to emerge during the late Bronze Age into the early Iron Age, somewhat chronologically, include the Minoan civilization of Crete, the Mycenaean civilization of the southern Peloponnese, and the stories of the fabled Sea Peoples as they appear in Egyptian texts. The Minoans present the earliest evidence, as far back as the mid-third millennium BC. The interesting piece regarding the Minoan contribution to Greek history is that they were Greek in geography only. The original Minoans likely came from Anatolia, and may or may not have eventually been conquered by roving Greek marauders (the Sea Peoples) in the later second millennium. Regardless, the later Greeks certainly saw themselves as connected to Minoan civilization, popularized in the literature of the day (the myths of King Minos, Ariadne, and the Minotaur, of Daedalus and Icarus; in the Homeric tales of the ninth century BC, several Greek armies of the *Iliad* are from Crete, and in the *Odyssey* Odysseus claims to

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Of note with respect to the briefly lived Egyptian experiment with monotheism, while this never took permanent root as a revelatory religious movement, the backlash it inspired undoubtedly expanded the even more novel possibility of an *a*-theism. This was because prior to Akhenaten and his 'reforms' the pharaoh was considered a god on earth. After mandating the worship of Aten exclusively the pharaoh immediately declared himself the sole earthly being with authority to worship Aten, essentially mandating worship of himself only, effectively banning divine worship, essentially mandating, by extension, atheism.[16] This disregard of religious ceremony is evidenced mostly in the marked shift in written language that accompanied this historical period. (Akhenaten reigned at the time of the now famously identified Amarna correspondence, the aforementioned cache of well-preserved royal letters providing exceptional insight into Near Eastern diplomacy of the time.) Written Egyptian, the language of the priests and bureaucrats, converged increasingly with the (presumed) popular vernacular of this time, at least in the surviving official documents,

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be a Cretan when he returns to Ithaca). The Mycenaeans, at their height in the second half of the second millennium, were definitively Greek. They have left the earliest extant Greek writing, the colorlessly named Linear B. They too were wiped out under mysterious circumstances. They may in fact have been the origination point of the Sea Peoples, and Homer certainly had them in mind when creating the armies of the 'Achaeans' or Greeks in the *Iliad*. The Sea Peoples, referred to as such in Egyptian sources, were mostly Greek pirates who first terrorized Eastern Mediterranean coastal towns in the later second millennium, and more likely eventually colonized them. (The 'Peleshet' in Egyptian, whence derives the word Philistine, and likely Palestine, were an example of some of the Sea Peoples who settled in present-day Israel.) It was very likely that the oral tales of the marauding Sea Peoples became the basis of the story of the Trojan War, culminating in the great epic poems of Homer.

[16] Interestingly, Akhenaten declared himself the sole divine intermediary on Earth by claiming to be the son of Aten. An early version of the Christian orthodoxy of Jesus as the Son of God, but with the key difference that Jesus was a commoner. A more relevant parallel would have been if Jesus were the Roman emperor and openly declared himself the Son of God. (Indeed, the Roman emperors, especially of the Julio-Claudian line in power at the time of the historical Jesus, saw themselves as divine, but they placed themselves among a pantheon of gods. This 'practice' continued through the Dark and Middle Ages into the Renaissance and Early Modern periods, and really up until World War I, as the infallible doctrine of the 'divine right of kings'. One may argue it persists to this day as embodied in the Catholic pope, as embodied, really, among any of the religious leaders of current theocratic countries.