

Medicine and Physicians in Aristotle's Ethics

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Abstract

Stephen Toulmin's question "How medicine saved the life of ethics?" can be paraphrased into "how medicine contributed to the verification of moral knowledge, in general, and to the theoretical foundation of ethics?" in the context of the ancient eudaemonism based on virtue. Even if Robert Bartz's verdict that "the ethical considerations raised in the Hippocratic treatises should be read as concerns deriving directly from the practice of medicine, and preceding and influencing the more structured subsequent philosophies of Plato and Aristotle" seems exaggerating, it is verified to a certain degree by the first attempts at achieving the foundation of ethics made by Socrates, Plato and mainly Aristotle. The analogy between medicine and ethics, used by both Plato and Aristotle, might have been initiated by Democritus as it appears in fragment 31 DK: "medicine heals body's diseases, wisdom removes the soul's suffering" which was fully embraced by the therapeutic arguments advanced by philosophy during the Hellenistic period. Thus, Galen's quote "the best doctor is also philosopher" does not sound foreign to us. In fact the approach between philosophy and medicine, both in medical ethics and bioethics, is not foreign to the ancient Greek philosophical and medical thought, although nowadays it is very different because of the rapid development of biosciences and biotechnology, along with its newborn dilemmas.

Socrates was considered as the father of ethics –which was not taken as a substantive noun before Xenocrates. He brought philosophy from heavens down to earth and wondered "how one should live" and "in what way one should guide his life". However, ethics's systematic theorist was Aristotle. He did not consider medicine as just one paradigmatic science of "politics", that is to say of social, morality, but he used the analogy between medicine and ethics for his ethical theory and in the three treatises that have come down to us in his name: *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*.

In this lecture I will try to discuss briefly the analogy between medicine and ethics, as it is presented in all three ethical treatises, because this issue illuminates to a certain degree the relation between the two, acknowledged as original, Aristotelian ethical

treatises, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics* whose date of writing was discussed by Anthony Kenny a few years ago. I will also be commenting on the dubious *Magna Moralia* in respect of the use of this analogy. This analogy in the context of the Aristotelian determination of the form and the precision of moral knowledge and in the more general context of the foundation of ethics was excellently discussed by Werner Jaeger, and both its positive and negative or skeptical side was investigated by Martha Nussbaum and others. A comparative dealing, however, focusing on the use of medical terms can cast some light to the philosophical evaluation, at least of the two original ethical treatises, as well as to the problem of their comparative dating. Moreover, maybe the interest for the philosophical labeling of Aristotle's ethics can be renewed, usually considered as a paradigm of virtue ethics, but being also characterized otherwise according to the form of ethical truth it professes. The analogy between medicine and ethics as empirical and particular "sciences", leading to the attainment of the "human good", was very useful to Aristotle's criticism against Plato's transcendent good. The stricter philosophical scope of *Eudemian Ethics* –to which the three common books belonged initially— suggests a more positive evaluation of them than the usual one. We do not deal of course with medical ethics here, as it happens with some Hippocratic treatises, but with a peculiar "medical philosophy".