

Is Hippocrates obsolete?

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Socrates: Is the Hippocratic art obsolete?

Antisthenes: Of course it is, Socrates. The Hippocratic Oath and the art itself are inventions of avaricious physicians as a way to placate the sick and exploit the well.

Crito: That is not so. The Hippocratic art is real. The sons of Aesculapius are philanthropic and sensible, and the Oath of Hippocrates is a proud one.

Socrates: Tell me, Crito, why do physicians swear the Oath of Hippocrates?

Crito: It seems to me, Socrates, that they swear the Oath to pledge themselves to virtuous behaviour, and to acknowledge their place in the long tradition of medicine.

Socrates: Those are fine words, my dear Crito, but the physicians of my acquaintance are not always virtuous.

Crito: That is so. Still, everyone should have goals, and the Oath embodies an admirable collection of goals.

Antisthenes: But Socrates, the Oath is already obsolete. Physicians ignore its proscriptions and the people in the marketplace suspect its motives.

Socrates: How do physicians violate the Oath?

Antisthenes: The Oath forbids giving poison, but physicians frequently give dying people drugs which hasten their death. In fact, you might say that physicians are the most accomplished poisoners in the world. The Oath forbids abortion, but physicians perform abortions anyway. The Oath pledges honour to other physicians before the sick, which makes people in the market nervous about consulting a doctor. Physicians vow to protect the interest of the art at the expense of the people, and conspire to keep their art mysterious, so that even educated people cannot understand it.

Crito: Antisthenes, you know that few physicians espouse literal adherence to the provisions of the Oath. Physicians do not need to be philosophers to practise their art, and not many believe in the philosophy that inspires the Oath.

Antisthenes: Then why do physicians swear an oath that they do not believe? That is folly, or hypocrisy.

Crito: Most honour the art rather than the Oath, which only symbolizes Hippocratic medical values. Swearing the Oath is a symbolic act, a ritual which binds physicians to an honourable craft. We all take part in rituals, big and small. You can see rituals take place in the temples, in the marketplace and at the table. Swearing the Oath is no different.

Antisthenes: If that is true, why don't the sons of Aesculapius devise an oath which embodies practices that the swearers could follow more closely?

Crito: My friend, there is no shortage of oaths and declarations to which physicians may subscribe, and many of them seem preferable to the Oath of Hippocrates. Even so, many physicians see in the Oath a connection to the tradition of medicine which extends beyond the mists of our memories.

Socrates: Hippocrates of Cos is certainly a famous physician, but I don't see why he should be immortalized, or that idealized medical values should be called Hippocratic.

Crito: People naturally honour their ancestors, and the art encompasses more than the teachings of Hippocrates of Cos. But it is not so wrong to call the art Hippocratic, because most Greek physicians admit some respect for the ideas of Hippocrates, if not the Oath.

Socrates: You are right, Crito. I have seen people from all over the world put down good money for the skill of Greek medical craftsmen, regardless of their allegiance to the teachings of Hippocrates of Cos. Perhaps we should forget Hippocrates, and speak only of the art.

Antisthenes: The Hippocratic art, as Crito calls it, is superstition. Cures are the result of good fortune, not skill. The sick recover without a physician, and those who receive a physician's attention die anyway. The prognostications of physicians are little more accurate than the examination of entrails.

Crito: Surely the art is more than superstition. Even those who do not believe are cured. You yourself, Antisthenes, consulted a physician when you broke your leg in battle. Those who are healed have no difficulty in attributing their cure to nature, not to the gods. The more that a physician knows about nature, the more he can cure.

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Socrates: Does the physician's art really require knowledge of the natural world?

Crito: I think it does, Socrates. Nature is a balance of elements, and good health requires a natural balance. Careful attention to the patient lets a physician recognize an imbalance of nature, and he can sometimes do some good.

Antisthenes: Crito, you make me laugh. The explanations provided by the followers of Hippocrates defy all reason. They act as if only they, and not the rest of us, can see the natural balance of which you speak. When I look for evidence of these things I see only nonsense. As far as I can see, the Hippocratic art is completely irrational.

Crito: Explanations count for nothing when you are healed.

Antisthenes: You are right, Crito. Actions are more important than words. Tell me, though: how should I judge the physician whom I consulted for my headaches? He is said to be the best doctor in the city, with firm hands and a gentle manner. He prescribed a fine regimen of diet and exercise, but I still get headaches.

Crito: Perhaps you spend too much time in thought, my friend. Everyone knows that too much philosophy gives you headaches.

Socrates: In the marketplace physicians charge a large fee. They claim good will and unselfishness, but at the table I have never met a more misanthropic crowd.

Crito: My good friends, we must judge people by their deeds. Physicians act for the good of the city, and they are privy to all the foolishness that a city can produce. That knowledge alone would make anyone wonder about mankind's good intentions. You must also remember that physicians cared for the sick during the epidemic, and many of them died rather than flee the city. They do not charge a fee to those who cannot pay. The Hippocratic art, of which Antisthenes is so critical, is a benevolent one.

Antisthenes: The physicians in the marketplace advertise their benevolence as if it were a loaf of bread. Those who broadcast their virtue loudest seem to be the most successful, but I doubt that their success is due to any skill other than a loud voice.

Crito: I cannot agree, Antisthenes. When I go to the marketplace, I seek out a doctor who is calm and gentle, not boisterous. Even if I still have pain, I feel better afterwards. You probably do the same thing.

Socrates: I do not understand your argument, Crito. How do you know that the doctor's words play a part in healing?

Antisthenes: You are right, Socrates. The Hippocratic art is an illusion. Doctors are so vain that they think that their words alone are enough to banish melancholy. A soldier can set fractures, and I have seen a magician turn iron to gold. As for soothing words, a poet heals more people than a physician.

Crito: Encouraging words from a person whom I trust make me feel better, and I trust a virtuous physician. His optimistic words play an important part in curing the sick. You may not agree, my friends, but in the marketplace the doctors' shops are always full.

Socrates: You are quite right, Crito. The best doctors are those who have virtue as well as skill. I would go so far as to say that, if I had to choose between a skilful physician without virtue or a virtuous one without skill, I would choose the virtuous physician.

Crito: We all admire a physician who is both virtuous and skilful, but no one can deny that physicians have the same weakness as anyone. That is why the Hippocratic Oath encourages virtue, and Hippocratic physicians strive to live blameless lives.

Socrates: Doesn't the Oath impose an impossible code of behaviour on the weak of spirit?

Antisthenes: Of course it does, Socrates. That is why the Oath is obsolete. No one is strong enough to live up to it, and a failure of virtue has a contrary effect on the psyche.

Crito: That is not so. Homer and the tragedians tell us that those who struggle are admired, even if they fail. The Hippocratic art can never become obsolete so long as its followers strive to be virtuous as well as skilful.