
Untersuchungen zur hippokratischen Schrift „Über die alte Heilkunst“
by Brice Maucolin

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Of the more than 70 works that compose the Hippocratic corpus, perhaps none has been more studied and debated than *Περὶ ἀρχαίης ἱητροικῆς* (*De vetera medicina*), usually referred to in English as ‘On Ancient Medicine’ or, among Hippocratic scholars, simply as *VM*. In his *Untersuchungen zur hippokratischen Schrift „Über die alte Heilkunst“*, Brice Maucolin reminds us that the interest in *De vet. med.* is a relatively recent phenomenon. The ancients, though familiar with it, paid it scant attention. In all likelihood, this was due to the fact that its author, though espousing a theory of health and disease that might be called ‘humoral’, does not conform to what was widely regarded as the standard Hippocratic picture of the humors, which emphasized fluids like blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile, and the powers hot, cold, wet, and dry. Indeed, *De vet. med.* oozes resentment for proponents of such theories, all of whom are guilty of ‘postulating one or two things as the principle for everything’ [Littre 1961, 1.570] and this resentment was repaid with virtual banishment for centuries. Not until the physician-turned-classicist and positivist philosopher Emile Littré placed *De vet. med.* at the head of his masterly edition did its fortunes begin to change. But change they did. Since the mid-19th century, the literature on *De vet. med.* has grown at a pace suggesting that scholars are trying to make up for lost time.

The problem with this literature, claims Maucolin in his introduction, is that scholars have tended to reduce *De vet. med.* either to a confrontation with Plato or to a document in the history of ideas, with the result that it has not been appreciated as a literary work in its own right [6–7]. This, in turn, has led to a general failure among scholars to treat certain parts of the text adequately, most notably

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chapters 13–19 [8]. Maucolin’s aim, then, is to right this wrong by considering *De vet. med.* as a literary text in its entirety, with special focus on those chapters and their polemical character.

Maucolin is probably correct that *De vet. med.*, like several treatises in the Corpus, is viewed by many, if not most, through the lens of Presocratic philosophy and science; and it might be true that to some extent scholars have failed to meet its author on his own terms. In any case, Maucolin is certainly correct that the treatise’s literary style has been understudied and the strength of his book lies in the contribution which it makes in this regard. For evidence, one need only turn to the book’s appendix, which studiously catalogs the various stylistic figures employed by the author. Indeed, Maucolin’s analysis of language and style is impressive throughout, though he sometimes fails to credit adequately the work of other scholars. For example, many aspects of the treatise’s polemical character are treated ably in [Ducatillon 1977](#); and, though Ducatillon’s study appears in Maucolin’s bibliography, there are surprisingly few references to it in the body of the book itself. A larger problem, however, is that Maucolin ignores important secondary literature in English that has appeared over the last several decades. Anglo-American scholarship has produced a number of important papers, dissertations, and books on *De vet. med.*; and some of these, like [Jones 1946](#), [Vickers 1977](#), [Hankinson 1992](#), and [Schiefsky 2005](#), are given short shrift by Maucolin, while others, like [Hutchinson 1988](#), [Allen 1993](#), and [Cooper 2004](#), are not even recognized in the otherwise exhaustive bibliography.

Maucolin might counter that the above list comprises the very scholarship that he decries in his introduction. But, while it is true that such studies treat *De vet. med.* primarily as a document in the history of philosophy and science, it is difficult to understand why they deserve to be dismissed on these grounds alone. Or rather, it is difficult to see why their approach (supposing for the sake of argument that they can be treated *en bloc*) precludes them from appreciating *De vet. med.* on its own terms. They do not regard *De vet. med.* as a mere afterimage of Presocratic or Sophistic thought; each has something original to say about *De vet. med.* in its own right. It is regrettable that Maucolin ignores these voices.

This criticism would be far less trenchant if Maucolin limited himself to a strict literary analysis of the text. However, he appears

to believe that his analyses yield conclusions of importance for the history of philosophy and science. In his first chapter, for example, he discusses at length the meaning and significance of the author's complaint about

those who attempt to speak or write about medicine by laying down for their arguments hot, cold, wet, dry or whatever they want as a postulate, simplifying the causal principle for human disease and death, even postulating one or two things as the principle for everything. [Littré 1961, 1.570]

Any English rendering of this famous passage is cursed with clumsiness due to the awkwardness of the original Greek, which has never ceased to intrigue and frustrate Hippocratic scholars. Maucolin surely would take issue with my version on many counts, but especially with my translation of (a) ὑπόθεσις as 'postulate' and (b) τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς αἰτίας as 'causal principle' where he would prefer the allegedly less anachronistic 'assumption' [25] and 'proximate cause' [20], respectively. The difference is substantial. According to Maucolin's translation, the author is merely complaining that some doctors have oversimplified medical theory and, as a result, are practicing with a poor picture of human disease in mind. According to mine, the author is flagging a deep methodological disagreement with roots at the level of ontology. In fact, my translation reflects the prejudices of what has become more or less the received view in the history and philosophy of science, a view that Maucolin emphatically rejects [24]. The author of *De vet. med.* is not introducing technical terminology to make an abstract point about method, he claims [18], and we would be wrong to read him as such.

The problem is that the author seems to be doing just that: he certainly avails himself of terminology current in mathematics and natural philosophy. Much turns, of course, on how we take (b) above, since it may well explicate (a). But Maucolin does not really argue for his reading of (b). Instead, he cites in his defense a passage from another Hippocratic work, the second book of the *Epidemics* [Littré 1961, 5.126] as well as variant readings of the *Epidemics* passage gleaned from citations in Galen [20n34]. But the *Epidemics* passage is not a perfect parallel and it is unclear what is to be made of Galen's citations. Even if Maucolin has the correct interpretation, an argument from language and style alone will not be adequate to

make his case. A hard slog through the philosophical literature is required, but Maucolin appears unwilling or unable to undertake it. Again, that would be excusable if Maucolin limited his project to analyses of language and style in a strict sense, for that is where he makes original contributions of real interest. But as it stands, we are left with a solid study of *De vet. med.* that supplements but does not supplant existing scholarship, though its ambitions may incline toward the latter.

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