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TAKING CARE OF THE CITY: THE APPEAL TO NOTIONS AND METHODS OF HIPPOCRATIC MEDICINE IN PLATO'S POLITICAL THOUGHT¹

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The important role played by the medical *techné* as a paradigm of knowledge and skill in Plato's psychological, moral, and political thought is a well-known and much-debated theme in classical scholarship. One cannot count the passages scattered throughout the dialogues in which Hippocratic medicine is more or less overtly summoned as a model of *care* either of the individual's soul or of the *polis*. As a matter of fact, towards the end of the 5th century BC medicine had stood out in the then flourishing world of *technai* for its underlying conceptual apparatus, championed by the notion that healing is achieved both through methodical investigation of the object (the causes of disease) and through the accurate mounting of the tools (the therapies). Therefore, the medical *techné* lent itself to giving the best food for thought to the philosopher analogously concerned about the *eu zen* of his fellow citizens.

The paper will focus on a particular aspect of this vast topic, namely, on Plato's exploitation of the analogy between the balance and order that doctors try to achieve within the body constitution on one hand, and the harmony and justice to be achieved by rulers in the *polis* on the other.² However, for this purpose it will first be necessary to examine Plato's

¹ I dedicate this paper to Malcolm Schofield, who sponsored my stay at St. John's College in Cambridge in January and February 2019 with a project on Plato's political thought: he has always been of greatest inspiration to my research both through reading his writings and friendly dialoguing with him. I am also grateful to all the colleagues and friends that made me enjoy the unique environment of Cambridge Classics. I am also grateful to Arnaud Macé for the opportunity he gave me to participate in the atelier Clisthène as well as to all the participants for their helpful comments; to Silvio Marino for many good suggestions *per litteram*.

² For broader and more systematic accounts I refer to Cambiano 1991; Hutchinson 1988; Hintikka 1991, p. 31-49; Hoffmann 2003; Lloyd 2003, p. 142-157; Demont 2016. It was only after this paper was

general attitude towards the *technai*, and particularly towards medicine, in relation to the concept of moral virtue; then, in the second and final section, I will discuss the passages of the *Republic* and of the *Laws* that are directly relevant to the main issue I am addressing.

I- FIRST, MIND VIRTUE: THE SOCRATIC IMPRINT

To start, it is also necessary to mention that Plato's interest in the concept of *techné* as a model of knowledge and action is Socrates' legacy—a fact that has rarely received proper attention.³ Owing to his social background, Plato was actually prone to being hostile to the social category of manual laborers. This proclivity is exemplified by his putting artisans in the seventh place in the hierarchy of occupations in the *Phaedrus*, just above sophists and tyrants,⁴ and it emerges even more when we consider his disparaging those who claim to embrace a philosophical life after having earned a little money with servile work, since the latter disfigures not only the body, but the soul as well.⁵ Conversely, the son of a sculptor and a midwife was known to sympathize and to spend time with cobblers, washer people, cooks, doctors and a number of other figures of low social status. He also liked to talk *about* them—in a way that I will soon clarify.⁶ The reason for this attitude was not just a biographical one, however. As we learn from Plato's *Apology*, when Socrates wanted to test the Delphic oracle about him being the wisest man on earth and started to cross-question such recognized *sophoi* as politicians and poets about the scope and guiding principles of their activities, he discovered the politicians to be ignorant of “anything fine and good” and found the poets quite incapable of speaking about their own poems, having composed them by divine inspiration; conversely, the hand-workers (*cheirotechnai*) proved to have accurate knowledge of “many fine things” (*polla kai kala epistamenous*) and thus to be *sophoi* in each one's field, although they too failed owing to their presuming to have their say on things “of utmost importance”.⁷

submitted for printing that I became acquainted with Johansen 2021 and the interesting Plato-focused articles in it (Hussey, Nawar, Barney, Johansen).

³ Exceptions I know are Heinemann 1961, p. 105-106; Cambiano 1991, p. 61-66; Graham 1992. I already developed this point in Sassi 2015, p. 133-143.

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248e.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 495c-e.

⁶ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 221e; *Gorgias*, 490-491a; *Hippias major*, 288d.

⁷ Plato, *Apology*, 21b-22e. I cannot dwell here on this expression of Socrates' dislike of the democratic criterion extending to the *demos* the decisional power in Athenian politics.

The early Platonic dialogues show well to what extent the world of the *technai* offered an effective model for Socrates' undertaking to give epistemic foundation to moral philosophy.⁸ For Socrates' stress on the need to define moral concepts hinges on the notion that moral action, just like craftsmanship, requires a precise knowledge of the matter at hand (in this case, the quality of a certain action) as well as a knowledge of how to operate in view of a practical good. This notion is indeed the core of Socrates' ethical intellectualism, based on the assumption that if one knows what is the true good to be pursued, he cannot but accomplish it. While in the various contexts such knowledge is often qualified as *episteme*, with emphasis on precision and certainty, or as *sophia* or *sophrosyne* or *phronesis*, with emphasis on practical wisdom, the *techne* model is always implied and sometimes quite explicit.⁹

Let us mention at this point that between the 5th and the 4th centuries BC Greek doctors enjoyed a status higher than that of all other *technitai* for the obvious reason that they dealt with the basics of human life, with the added bonus of the intellectual reputé afforded to them by the vast production of treatises they consacréd to collecting a huge amount of facts of medical experience, expounding theories about the nature of the human body and the causes of diseases, suggesting therapies, and, not least, giving rules of moral conduct for the good physician¹⁰: what we call *Corpus Hippocraticum* consists of about seventy of these treatises mostly written from 450 to 350 BC, none of which can be ascribed to Hippocrates himself.¹¹ So not only is medicine often mentioned on a par with the other *technai* in the passages of the early dialogues where the general problem of virtue is tackled, but it definitely comes to the

⁸ See Irwin 2007, p. 13-44, for a subtle reconstruction of Socrates' moral thought.

⁹ See esp. *Apology*, 25b-26c.

¹⁰ As far as I have seen, Heinimann 1961 was the first to observe in relation to Plato that such Hippocratic writings as *On Art* and *On Ancient Medicine* (both of them dated to the late 5th century) let medicine stand off all other *technai* owing to the theoretical self-consciousness they displayed. However, Heinimann traced both the doctors' and Plato's reflections on *techne* back to a common source, which he argued to be a "theory" about *techne* discussed within the Sophistic movement (especially by Protagoras, as Plato's *Protagoras* would prove). Without denying the Sophistic imprint of the *De arte*, one should rather keep in mind that interest in *technai* was widespread in various fields of early Greek culture, tragedy famously included (see Cambiano 1991, p. 15-19). Moreover, Plato had good acquaintance with Hippocratic literature (see following note).

¹¹ Demont 2016 helpfully argues that the whole of Plato's references to medicine more or less correspond to the contents of the texts handed down in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, which does not exclude that his theory of disease in the *Timaeus* was also indebted to Philistion of Locri and other medical writers based in Sicily and Magna Graecia.

fore whenever the state of the soul is directly addressed, thrust by a powerful, albeit often implicit, analogy between bodily health and virtue, combined with the analogy between disease and vice, which makes the philosopher's work on the goodness of souls similar to the physician's healing of bodies.¹² I think it likely that the inspirational core of this analogy too goes back to Socrates, who famously identified the main objective of his "mission" to convert his fellow citizens with taking care (*epimeleia*) of their soul's goodness rather than of external goods.¹³ Therefore I would be tempted to find a truly Socratic resonance in the *Alcibiades I*, because Socrates here invites Alcibiades to take care of himself specifying that the "self" of the human being, being distinguished from the body, needs to be treated by its specific *technē*; for any *technē* has its own object, which is distinct from anything that happens to "belong" to it (as the body does to the soul), so much so that, for example, foot care is the trainer's job, not the shoemaker's.¹⁴ In any case, in the Socratic dialogues Plato assumes the analogy between physical health and moral virtue and elaborates it to such an extent that it is impossible to tell apart Socratic inspiration from Platonic development. So from now on I will refer to Plato's theory, leaving aside the issue of what may have been the purely Socratic elements in it.

The discussion in the *Laches* is particularly significant. Here Socrates first mentions medicine as an example of *technē* that is knowingly focused on finding what is best for the recipient of its products in order to remark that also in questioning on the care of the soul of young people (*peri mathematōs [...] tes psuches heneka tes ton neaniskōn*) one should look for someone competent (*technikos*) and thus able to find the right ways (185c-e). Medicine is mentioned again later on, within the discussion on courage. In order to demonstrate that courage is knowledge (*epistēmē*) not only of present dangers, but also of past and future goods and evils, Socrates offers first the example of medicine, observing that the doctor must know the patient's past (the stage that would be called *anamnesis*) in order to grasp what has caused his or her present conditions and then prognosticate the future, that is, the progress of the illness. Socrates also mentions farming and generalship for doing the same for, respectively, products of

¹² It is not to forget that the parallel is already attested in Gorgias (*Encomium of Helen*, 14) and Democritus (68 B 31 DK), and it is implied in Antiphon's practice of a *technē alupias* (87 A 6 DK). Cf. Laín Entralgo 1970 on the general issue as well as the recent assessment by Kouloumentas 2016, p. 256 (with further references) on the Pythagoreans' parallel between medicine and music, the former healing the body diseases, the latter purifying the soul.

¹³ Cf. Plato, *Apology*, 29d-30a.

¹⁴ Cf. *Alcibiades I*, 127e-135e, a section rich in technical comparisons. The authorship of the *Alcibiades I* is irrelevant to the surmise that the technical comparisons in it have Socratic flavour.

the earth and military strategy—strategy being superior to the seer’s art in predicting what is going to happen in war.¹⁵ Notably, here Plato shows to be aware that medicine, while sharing with divination the claim to comprehensive knowledge inherited from archaic conceptions of wisdom,¹⁶ is superior to divination in that it strives to build rational frameworks of interpretation, namely, clinical pictures and nosological categories useful for tracing back a certain set of symptoms to their causes. In what was a clear sign of professional competition, a few Hippocratic writers were indeed keen to mark the distance between their own prognostic methods and divination.¹⁷

The initial pages of the *Charmides* are equally worthy of attention. Here Socrates says that Greek doctors know that it is impossible to look after the eyes without also caring for the head, just as it is impossible to look after the head without considering the whole body; therefore, they “try to treat and to heal the part along with the whole, by applying their regimen to the whole body” (156c). Yet during the Potidaea siege Socrates learned from “one of the Thracian doctors of Zalmoxis” that Greek doctors, no matter how good they are, neglect to care for the soul, and “this is the reason why most diseases escape the Greek doctors: they neglect the totality (τοῦ ὅλου), whose bad state makes the good state of the part impossible” (156e). This distinction between Greek and Thracian doctors is part of the strategy deployed by Socrates to persuade the beautiful Charmides to be involved in the conversation. Socrates is promising to cure Charmides’ headache through incantations that address the soul, meaning that they should go to talk about *sophrosune*, a virtue that, going along with a temperant behaviour, might effectively cure Charmides.¹⁸ What matters to us here is that Greek medicine is presented as a *technē* that, while being of lesser value because it addresses the body, not the soul,¹⁹ still has the merit of looking at the body *in its entirety*.

I maintain that the reference to the medical “holistic” approach in the *Charmides* is ultimately appreciative, despite the playful overtones of the context, also on account of the parallel with the well-known passage in the *Phaedrus* where Socrates finds the source of Pericles’ oratorical prowess in his natural talent as well as in his acquaintance

¹⁵ *Laches*, 198d-199a-e.

¹⁶ Remember both Kalchas’ description of his prophetic capacity in Homer, *Iliad*, 1, 70 and the contents that the Muses promise to inspire in Hesiod, *Theogony*, 32.

¹⁷ Cf., e. g., *De Victu Acutorum*, 3 and *Prorrhethicon*, 2, 1. Cf. Sassi 2001, p. 142-147; Lloyd 2003, p. 40-43.

¹⁸ *Charmides*, 156e-157a.

¹⁹ I think that consideration of this passage is fatal to the Levin’s claim I discuss below, p. 122-124.

with Anaxagoras' science of the universe and the *Nous*.²⁰ Pericles drew his expertise of "the nature of soul", and consequently his rhetorical skills, from his knowledge of the "nature of the whole" (τῆς τοῦ ὅλου φύσεως), the same source from which the doctors used to draw their expertise of "the nature of the body".²¹ That this is the basic principle which doctors methodically pursue in their inquiry is a central point in this section of Socrates' conversation with Phaedrus, where Hippocrates' name emerges as that of a *protos eures*:

—Socrates: Ὁ αὐτός που τρόπος τέχνης ἰατρικῆς, ὅσπερ καὶ ῥητορικῆς ... Ἐν ἀμφοτέραις δεῖ διελέσθαι φύσιν, σώματος μὲν ἐν τῇ ἐτέρᾳ, ψυχῆς δὲ ἐν τῇ ἐτέρᾳ, εἰ μέλλεις μὴ τριβῇ μόνον καὶ ἐμπειρίᾳ, ἀλλὰ τέχνῃ, τῷ μὲν φάρμακα καὶ τροφὴν προσφέρων ὑγίειαν καὶ ῥώμην ἐμποιῆσαι, τῇ δὲ λόγους τε καὶ ἐπιτηδεύσεις νομίμους πειθῶ ἢ ἀν βούλῃ καὶ ἀρετῇ παραδῶσαι ... Ψυχῆς οὖν φύσιν ἀξίως λόγου κατανοῆσαι οἶει δυνατόν εἶναι ἄνευ τῆς τοῦ ὅλου φύσεως;

—Phaedrus: Εἰ μὲν Ἱπποκράτει γε τῷ Ἀσκληπιαδῶν δεῖ τι πιθέσθαι, οὐδὲ περὶ σώματος ἄνευ τῆς μεθόδου ταύτης.

—Socrates: The method of the art of healing is much the same as that of rhetoric....In both cases you must analyse a nature, in one that of the body and in the other that of the soul, if you are to proceed in a scientific manner, not merely by practice and routine, to impart health and strength to the body by prescribing medicine and diet, or by proper discourses and training to give to the soul the desired belief and virtue ... Now do you think one can acquire any appreciable knowledge of the nature of the soul without knowing the nature of the whole?

—Phaedrus: If Hippocrates the Asclepiad is to be trusted, one cannot know the nature of the body, either, except in that way.²²

The meaning of the expression "the whole" is controversial. It is not clear whether Plato wants to stress the need of knowing the "whole" of the person (as I tend to believe) or the "universe" for the sake of the knowledge of the soul.²³ In any case, Greek doctors satisfied both needs as they used to look not only at the afflicted body part but also at the patient's general conditions and habits, while at the same time taking into account the natural environment and its influence on physical constitutions. In other words, their

²⁰ *Phaedrus*, 269e-270a.

²¹ *Phaedrus*, 270c-d.

²² *Phaedrus*, 270b 1-c 4, transl. North Fowler; my brackets.

²³ Thein 2012, p. 142 f., interestingly argues that "nothing hints, in what Socrates says here, at the cosmic whole", and "the actual complexity of the incarnate and especially *human* soul [...] leaves open two options concerning the implied meaning of the 'whole' at 270c 2: either it is the totality of the soul, or the whole that consists of a soul and a body tied together". In any case, the good arguments brought on the opposite sides of the discussion by Joly 1961; 1983 and Jouanna 1977 are still to be remembered.

perspective was consistently holistic. The Hippocratic writings are full of exhortations, often in opening programmatic chapters, to approach the patient by considering the nature of “the whole” human being, namely, his or her physical constitution and age, by inquiring about any deviations from his or her normal regimen and by evaluating the nature of the place (geographical position, winds, waters) as well as the season of the year. So the physician will grasp what went wrong in the normal balance of the body constituents and he will identify the best treatment in a certain dosage of foods, drinks and exercises apt to cool, heat, dry or humidify the body according to what is needed for health to be restored. It is worth quoting extensively a passage of *De victu* in which all these aspects converge into a lucid agenda:²⁴

Φημί δὲ δεῖν τὸν μέλλοντα ὁρθῶς συγγράφειν περὶ διαίτης ἀνθρωπίνης πρῶτον μὲν παντὸς φύσιν ἀνθρώπου γινῶναι καὶ διαγινῶναι· γινῶναι μὲν ἀπὸ τίνων συνέστηκεν ἐξ ἀρχῆς, διαγινῶναι δὲ ὑπὸ τίνων μερῶν κεκράτηται· εἴτε γὰρ τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς σύστασιν μὴ γινώσεται, ἀδύνατος ἔσται τὰ ὑπ’ ἐκείνων γινόμενα γινῶναι· εἴτε μὴ γινώσεται τὸ ἐπικρατέον ἐν τῷ σώματι, οὐχ ἱκανὸς ἔσται τὰ συμφέροντα προσενεγκεῖν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ. ταῦτα μὲν οὖν δεῖ γινώσκειν τὸν συγγράφοντα, μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα σίτων καὶ ποτῶν ἀπάντων, οἷσι διαιτώμεθα, δύναμιν ἥντινα ἕκαστα ἔχει καὶ τὴν κατὰ φύσιν καὶ τὴν δι’ ἀνάγκην καὶ τέχνην ἀνθρωπίνην.

I maintain that he who aspires to treat correctly of human regimen must first acquire knowledge and discernment of the nature of man in general—knowledge of its primary constituents and discernment of the components by which it is controlled. For if he be ignorant of the primary constitution, he will be unable to gain knowledge of their effects; if he be ignorant of the controlling thing in the body he will not be capable of administering to a patient suitable treatment. These things therefore the author must know, and further the power possessed severally by all the foods and drinks of our regimen, both the power each of them possessed by nature and the power given them by the constraint of human art.²⁵

It is true that in the *Phaedrus* Socrates goes on to say that he and Phaedrus should put Hippocrates’ theory to the test, meaning that knowledge of the *soul* requires further reflections and distinctions (270c-d). Similarly, in the *Charmides* the Greek doctors’ focus on the body had led Socrates to belittle them in playful contrast with Thracian doctors. Nevertheless, there should be no doubt that Plato is constructing his image of the ideal expert of the soul on the model of the medical method.²⁶ Also

²⁴ Just as representative of the Hippocratic holistic stance is *De veteri medicina*, 20, 3.

²⁵ *De Victu*, 1, 2, transl. Jones.

²⁶ Significantly, such a model is at play also in Plato, *Protagoras*, 313a-314b, where the emphasis is on the role of dialogue in the relation between doctors and their patients: cf. Marino 2019, esp. p. 26-48.

there is significant continuity, shown by a few significant verbal echoings, between the passage in the *Phaedrus* quoted above, where the technical procedures of medicine are opposed to skill and routine (εἰ μέλλεις μὴ τριβῇ μόνον καὶ ἐμπειρίᾳ, ἀλλὰ τέχνῃ), and the long section of the *Gorgias* where medicine occurs as the best example of *technē*, as it knows how to do the good of the body, in opposition to rhetoric which is even accused of deceiving and spoiling the soul, thus coming rather close to cookery.²⁷

The *Gorgias* is indeed the dialogue where the medical *technē* is most often praised for its being consciously aimed at bringing real benefit to its object, the body, thus providing the best model for the way in which rhetors should address their audience: namely, they should try to instill justice in the listeners' souls with truth-oriented speeches rather than entice their lowest desires.²⁸ What is new in the *Gorgias* is that the body-soul analogy is enriched with an explicit theory of health and illness, health being identified with a state of balance and order, while illness is seen as a consequence of imbalance due to excessive indulging into physical desires and pleasures; moreover, the analogy itself is complicated by adding a "new" term, *i. e.*, the *polis*. The double shift in Plato's thinking with respect to the earlier dialogues is manifest in Socrates' long discussion with Polos on the status of rhetoric. In order to demonstrate that rhetoric is not an art, but a mere know-how aimed at flattering the audience, Socrates remarks that behind each art is hidden some counterfeit disguised as the art for which it tries to pass: such is the case for cookery, which "impersonates medicine, pretending that it knows the best foods for the body" (464d). And just as cookery aims at pleasuring the body without that concern for the best dietetic treatment that is proper to medicine, rhetoric only aims at persuading the citizens' souls by its ornate speeches, whereas justice wants to make them *actually* better—in other words, the rhetor seeks only to flatter his audience, like a cook who likes to see people devour his food at the cost of getting sick. The same imagery is reprised later on in terms that clearly consolidate the status of medicine as a *technē*. Culinary "art", as it is called, is not really such because it aims at the mere pleasure of the consumers without bothering to know better; conversely,

Marino shows well in his book, among other things, that Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is upstream of Plato's reflection about the need for the philosopher to appropriate the capacity of persuasion through *logoi* shared by doctors and sophists.

²⁷ On the difference between the two passages, due to the different strategies adopted in the respective dialogues against current rhetoric practice, see Yunis 2011, p. 10-11 and 210-211; Balla 2013, in partic. p. 145-147.

²⁸ See esp. 462b-466e; 477e-480d; 500e-507c; 513c-522a.

medicine accurately analyzes the *phusis* of its object, administrates the appropriate treatments, and is able to give an account of all its activities:

ἡ μὲν ὀψοποιικὴ οὐ μοι δοκεῖ τέχνη εἶναι ἀλλ' ἐμπειρία, ἡ δ' ἰατρικὴ λέγων ὅτι ἡ μὲν τούτου οὐ θεραπεύει καὶ τὴν φύσιν ἔσκειπται καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ὣν πράττει, καὶ λόγον ἔχει τούτων ἐκάστου δοῦναι, ἡ ἰατρικὴ· ἡ δ' ἑτέρα τῆς ἡδονῆς, πρὸς ἣν ἡ θεραπεία αὐτῇ ἐστὶν ἅπασα, κομιδῇ ἀτέχνως ἐπ' αὐτὴν ἔρχεται, οὔτε τι τὴν φύσιν σκεψαμένη τῆς ἡδονῆς οὔτε τὴν αἰτίαν, ἀλόγως τε παντάπασιν, ὥς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, οὐδὲν διαριθμησαμένη, τριβῇ καὶ ἐμπειρίᾳ μνήμην μόνον σφωζομένη τοῦ εἰωθότος γίγνεσθαι, ὥ δὴ καὶ πορίζεται τὰς ἡδονάς.

I don't think cookery is a science, but a skill, whereas medicine is a science, because, I said, one of them has examined both the nature of the things it looks after and the reason for the things it does, and it can give an account of each of these things—that's medicine. But the other, in its concern for pleasure, towards which all its care is directed—well, it just makes a beeline for it, quite unscientifically, without undertaking any sort of examination of the nature of pleasure, or its cause. It works in a completely unreasoning way, making virtually no distinctions at all—it has the skill to use everyday experience to keep just the memory of what usually happens, which is how it provides its pleasures.²⁹

The concept of regularity (*taxis*) and order (*kosmos*) is notably introduced into the discussion of the *Gorgias* to explain that both in the case of the body (whose orderly state is health and strength) and in the case of soul (whose orderly state is justice) the “happiest state” is determined by restraining one's desires.³⁰ Moreover in the *Gorgias*, along with taking issue with the rhetor's claim to monopoly over the behaviour of the multitude, Plato extends his concern from the health of the individual soul to that of the community. From now on medical terms and concepts will occur equally often in connection with the question of who is most suitable to provide the kind of knowledge and treatment that the *polis* needs, *i.e.*, of who is fitter to rule.³¹

²⁹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 501a 3-b 1, transl. Griffith.

³⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 477c-478c; 505a-b.

³¹ It is likely that Socrates too was keen to the issue of politics as *techne*. In Xenophon's *Memorables* Socrates is often found to claim that leading armies or governing men are productive activities alike to construction of buildings, smithery, agriculture or livestock; therefore both military and political leadership must rest on precise knowledge both of one's field of action and of the character and virtues of men (to be guided with adequate eloquence) for the sake of the good of the individuals subjected or governed (Xenophon, *Memorables*, 1, 1, 7; 3, 2; 3, 4; 5, 21; 6, 17-8; 9, 10-11). Of course, Xenophon's emphasis on this point is likely due to his own intellectual preferences, just as Plato's silence may be due either to his sticking to the apologetical representation of an apolitical Socrates or to his willing to stress his own progress in political thought, or both.

Finally, in the *Gorgias* there emerges an identification of *justice* as the virtue *par excellence*, which marks another turning point in Plato's thought. In this connection, the *Gorgias* can be seen as a laboratory of ideas that go on to constitute a fertile ground for the discussion on justice in the *Republic*, where the analogy between the soul and the state is famously theorized and maximized. In the next section I will focus exactly on the project of the *Republic* in an attempt to stress the continuity of Plato's "psychopolitical" project.³²

II- MEDICINE AND PHILOSOPHY ON THE WAY TO A HEALTHY CITY: COMPETITORS OR MATES?

The survey above, for all my emphasis on the paradigmatic value of Hippocratic medicine to Plato, may have let it show that unqualified appreciation is not easy to find through Plato's allusive writing, whereas questioning and criticism tend to prevail. Accordingly, in the last five decades scholarship has periodically fluctuated from pleading Plato's positive attitude towards medicine, as I too am doing now, to taking his critical remarks as evidence of his rejecting it *de facto*.³³ A new reading, apparently aimed at finding an intermediate and resolute option between the two opposite stances, has recently been proposed by Susan Levin in a book entitled *Plato's Rivalry with Medicine: a Struggle and Its Dissolution* (2014). Levin's claim is that Plato is never admiring towards the methods and aims of medicine, nor is he ever disappointed when discovering its weaknesses. According to Levin's reading, as the title of her book declares, Plato rather considers medicine as a dangerous *rival* of philosophy owing to its self-presentation as a *techne* promising human beings to make them achieve happiness; for his part, Plato is committed to promoting philosophy as the true and only *techne* capable of ensuring *eudaimonia*.³⁴

I think that this construction is based on two major flaws on which I want to dwell briefly before getting to the heart of the matter. In the first place, Plato's efforts

³² I take this definition from Brill 2015, p. 3.

³³ The main test field of this thesis has been Eryximachus' speech in the *Symposium*, which has been alternatively interpreted either as a serious praise of the medical *techne* or as a parody of the medical type as "pretender to philosophical wisdom", as Trivigno 2017, p. 49 recently put it. See also Dover 1980, p. 105; Hunter 2004, p. 53-59; Levin 2009; Nieddu 2009. For a more positive evaluation of Eryximachus' role in the dialogue, it will be sufficient to mention the most accurate assessment by Keime 2018 as well as the fresh reading by Krinks 2020.

³⁴ See, e.g., Levin 2014, p. 1: "In his thoroughgoing efforts to establish philosophy as the rightful arbiter of *phusis* and *eudaimonia* (flourishing), Plato must and does challenge medicine"; p. 177: "The *Republic* defends philosophy's position as the *techne* par excellence".

are not so much directed towards establishing the preeminent standing of philosophy as the *techné par excellence* as at configuring a totally new kind of philosophical knowledge, namely, dialectic, whose supervisory powers over the standard *technai* result from ascending through the Forms to the “unhypothetical first principle”.³⁵ Secondly, and more importantly for our topic, it is incorrect to attribute to Hippocratic physicians a claim on privileged authority over *phusis* and *eudaimonia*. Since the word *eudaimonia* does not even occur in the Hippocratic writings, Levin painstakingly argues that the aforementioned claim is implicit in the general tendency of doctors to trace the causes of illnesses to excesses of food, drinks and sex as well as in their extending attention to signs of cognitive disturbances shown by their patients. This approach, in Levin’s view, is equal to stating that health is the *highest* human good and so to affirming the medicine’s monopoly of knowledge. Yet it is obvious to any unbiased reader of Hippocratic literature that doctors did not purport to go beyond a professional commitment to their patients’ health. It is true that examination of the patient’s habits and way of life was integral to their job, which was aimed at maintaining or restoring a good psychophysical condition through an appropriate treatment. However, judging from the relevant passages of the *Charmides* and the *Phaedrus*, it looks like Plato does not blame medicine’s holistic approach for any illegitimate claim and even holds it in high regard.³⁶

All in all, Levin’s analysis misses a crucial point: namely, that Plato is working on an *analogy* between medicine and philosophy, which is based on a set of interrelated analogies such as those between health/virtue/order and disease/vice/*stasis* of body and soul, city and soul, and city and body – as well as between the activities aimed at taking specific care of the latter.³⁷ There may be tensions in how these analogies work in this or that context, which often gives Plato reasons for qualifications and criticisms. However, for an analogy to work *per se*, it is necessary that *inlustrans* and *inlustrandum* are separated; and it is clear that Plato does consider medicine as a specific *techné* whose operators did not pretend to go beyond their boundaries. What is more, the analogical scheme only emerges more and more clearly as Plato’s political thought develops. We

³⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 510b6. It is true that the noun *dialektiké* is formed by an adjective that implies the word *techné*, yet the dialectician’s method is superior to *mathemata* in the pursuit of knowledge (see *Republic*, 511a-c), whereby dialectic comes close to *epistémē*.

³⁶ See above, p. 117-120. Levin does not even examine in her book the texts of the *Charmides* and the *Phaedrus*, while she predictably maximizes the parodic interpretation of Eryximachus’ speech (on which see above, p. 122, n. 33).

³⁷ For the purpose of this discussion see esp. Macé 2010 and Renaut 2019.

have already observed that the medical theory of bodily health as a state of balance is introduced in the *Gorgias* as a model to reflect not only on virtue in the soul, but also on justice in the city.³⁸ From now on, I will argue that this model pervades the entire construction of the *Republic*. It is still necessary to specify that Plato does not adopt Alcmaeon's definition of health as a state of perfect equality between the body powers (*isonomia ton dunameon*) nor the corresponding explanation of illness as caused by one of these powers prevailing and "ruling" (*monarchia*) over all the others.³⁹ As the organization of Kallipolis is oriented by an ideal of *harmonia* based on the obligation that each of the three groups of the city remains in the place assigned to it in the social scale, what is fatal for the safety of the city is not so much that one alone has the power as that the natural *hierarchy of powers* is endangered. To this end, all the members of the community must consent on the (unequal) distribution of powers in the city and the conflict (*stasis*) caused by differences of opinion must be prevented. On this point Plato could rather find food for thought in such Hippocratic writings as *On ancient medicine*, where disease is said to be caused by the very separation and isolation of a humor from the mixture, so that "the unitary and simple 'whole' of the body is disrupted" (*holon hen [...] kai haploun*, c. 14).⁴⁰

Let us finally come to the *Republic* and try to sketch the development of Plato's construction through the various books of the work.⁴¹ In Book 1, in the argument against Thrasymachus' definition of justice as doing what is good for the (politically) stronger, and thus for who is in charge, Socrates remarks that any art looks out on the contrary for that of which it is an art and then introduces the helmsman, who operates for the advantage of the sailors, and in particular the doctor, who operates for the advantage of his patients, as paradigms of the good ruler.⁴² This passage may be seen as

³⁸ See above, p. 120-121. See also Schmid 2020, p. 12-19, for lucidly pointing out the numerous elements of Plato's theory of *technē* added in the *Republic* with respect to the *Gorgias*, in particular: "a reorientation of the arts from the goal of bringing about justice, which is understood not in relation to the body and soul separately, but in relation to the good person *in community*" (p. 12, my italic).

³⁹ In any case Alcmaeon initiates in his fr. 4 the "politicization" of the body that is found in a number of nosological descriptions of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. On Alcmaeon's notion of health and disease see Kouloumentas 2014.

⁴⁰ I already made this remark in Sassi 2007, reprising one by Cambiano 1982. See Balansard 2006, p. 31 on the clear equation of *stasis* with a *nosos* of the *polis* at *Sophist*, 228a 4-8.

⁴¹ Ménissier 1995 and Renaut 2019 provide helpful discussions on this issue.

⁴² Plato, *Republic*, 1, 342c-e. See Auffret 2019, p. 17-29 for reading a positive evaluation in the contexts in which Plato emphasizes the conjectural character of the medical *technē* (said to be *stochastike*, as those of

anticipating the analogy between injustice (both in the soul and the *polis*) and disease that will gradually emerge in the next books of the *Republic*.⁴³ So in Book 2 the “city of pigs” is said to be “healthy” (ὕγιής, ὑγιεινή) because its inhabitants are content with satisfying their necessary needs, while introduction of luxury and pleasures make the city “inflamed” or “fevering” (φλεγμῖνουσαν; 372e-373b). In this passage, where the image of the “sick city” makes its first appearance in the *Republic*,⁴⁴ Plato notably appropriates the technical vocabulary of Hippocratic literature, where the humors *phlegma* and *chole* (bile) are considered to cause pathological states if they are in excess or in abnormal motion.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Socrates adds here that doctors will be required in this kind of city, differently from the earlier one, to heal by a suitable regime (διαιτώμενοι, 373d 1-2) the many diseases that will result from the immoderate way of life of their inhabitants.

After such considerations, it might come as a surprise that in Book 3 (403a-410a) Socrates is found to scold the actual practice of doctors of his (and Plato’s) time for patronizing through a mild dietetic approach the lazy and vicious conduct of the inhabitants of the contemporary city, which has inherited the boundless desires and thus the sickness of that ancient “luxurious city” (τρυφῶσαν πόλιν, 372e). However, this change of attitude is explained considering that Plato’s project is motivated by his severe diagnosis of the social disease from which his city is suffering. In his eyes, in Athens medical practice has ended up being an accomplice of moral degeneration by privileging

the pilot and the archer, for its lack of precision). However, as I cannot discuss this issue here, I believe it is appropriate to mention as well the subtle and more negative reading by Roochnik 1996.

⁴³ During the discussion with Thrasymachus the causal link between injustice and the emergence of conflicts (*staseis*) in the city is also mentioned (351d).

⁴⁴ However, let us remember that in Protagoras’ myth it is said that according to Zeus’ law who does not partake of *aidos* and *dike* is to be killed as he were a “disease of the city” (νόσον πόλεως, *Protagoras*, 322b); moreover, see Demont 2013a on the relation between the *Protagoras* and the Hippocratic writing *On ancient medicine*. The image of the city “hurt” or “sick” (the disease being civic *stasis*) is an old one in Greek literature, whose fortune grew more and more from the beginning of 6th century onwards: see the general survey of Brock 2013, p. 69-82 and 147-156, discussions of specific texts in Bacelar 2013, p. 112-119, and Bacelar 2017. Clarke Kosack 2000 negatively answers the intriguing question she herself asks about the fortune of the image of *polis nosousa*, namely, whether the Greeks of the late 6th and 5th centuries might associate disease spread to urban growth. Nonetheless she effectively concludes that in the late 5th century Athenians at least were led by the events of their city “to see the physical city as a dangerous place, where the disease of *stasis* found a breeding ground [...] they believed *stasis* to be a disease arising in the city—and indeed infecting the city itself, as a kind of corporate entity” (p. 50-51). I would like to notice that one of these Athenians was Plato.

⁴⁵ Cf. a similar reference to *phlegma* at *Republic*, 8, 564b-c. Vegetti 1995 offers an extensive survey of the use of technical vocabulary of medicine in Plato’s work.

a dietary approach aimed at maintaining the health of wealthy and lazy people focused on their own superficial well-being rather than on the common good. This is why Plato calls for a return to the standard remedies of archaic medicine, such as purging, surgery and cautery for the only sake of healing the most overt illnesses and keeping the citizens working.⁴⁶ In this context Plato debunks his usual appraisal of medicine because he wants to stress that a drastic treatment is needed for the current city, whose goodness can be restored only through a radical transformation. It is significant that later on in Book 3, in arguing that rulers and only rulers may lie to enemies or friends for the benefit of the city, Socrates compares an “useful lie” (ψεῦδος [...] χρήσιμον) to a medicament (φάρμακον). On the one hand, this remark implies again an appeal to doctors as the only experts who can administer drugs; on the other hand, intervening with medicines is more energetic than giving just some dietetic prescriptions and more suitable for addressing a situation in need of strong change.⁴⁷ An example of such medicament is at the end of Book 3 (414c-415d) the “noble lie” that rulers should tell the citizens about their natural brotherhood (all of them are born from the earth itself) and, at the same time, about the naturally differentiated class structure of the city decided by the gods at the moment of the original creation. For the people who believe this tale will be more inclined to take care (κηδεσθαι, 415d) of the city and of each other.⁴⁸

In any case, while the critical remarks in Book 3 pertain to the operational side of the treatment, the Hippocratic theory of health as balance of the body constituents continues to shape Plato’s project of reforming the soul-and-city complex.⁴⁹ This is evident from reading *Republic* 4, where the discussion of individual justice is famously resumed by inverting the proposal made in Book 2 (368 d-e) to read in large (that is, in the city) what seemed to be illegible in small letters (that is, in the soul); henceforth the theories about the state and the soul will be reciprocally tested, and “the spark of justice” will possibly flash forth, as from rubbing two rods against each other (434e-435a). For

⁴⁶ An accurate reading of this passage against the background of medical knowledge at Plato’s time is offered by Demont 2013b. I refer to Vegetti 1996 for an accurate framing of this polemic in the context of Plato’s general attitude of medicine, against Levin’s reading in Levin 2014, p. 105-122; on the other hand, Demont 2020 indicates in the *Ion* some early signs of Plato’s concern with the “modern” medicine.

⁴⁷ Resorting if necessary to painful remedies is recommended as well in the *Gorgias* (479a-480d, 522a), where the dietetic dimension of medicine is far from being devalued; see for example *Gorgias*, 464d, where the doctor’s knowledge of useful and harmful foods is played against the cook’s practice.

⁴⁸ See Schofield 2007, in partic. p. 147.

⁴⁹ Longhi 2020, p. 216-217 offers a brief analysis of the notion of medical balance in the *Republic* by looking at the lexicon of κατάστασις, ῥέπω, ἔλκω.

this purpose the theory of tripartite soul is spelled out, whose conclusion is formulated by Socrates in the usual medical language: “it seems that virtue is a sort of health, beauty and good condition of the soul, whereas vice is sickness, ugliness, and weakness” (444e: Ἀρετὴ μὲν ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικεν, ὑγίειά τέ τις ἂν εἴη καὶ κάλλος καὶ εὐεξία ψυχῆς, κακία δὲ νόσος τε καὶ αἴσχος καὶ ἀσθένεια).⁵⁰ Soul health, that is the individual’s capability to act justly, is established when its parts are “in the natural relation (κατὰ φύσιν) of controlling and being controlled by another, while injustice is to cause the one to rule or be ruled by the other contrary to nature (παρὰ φύσιν)” (444b-c). Therefore, in order for virtue to be there reason must have command over passions (the thumoeidetic faculty) and appetites (the desiderative one), while injustice arises when the lower parts take the lead breaking the natural and hierarchical structure of the soul, just as physical illness is brought about by imbalance of the constituents of the body. It is significant that the language of *stasis* emerges here to describe the relations between the different parts of *psuche*, saying that *thumos* must align to reason when a fight arises (στασιαζόντων, 440a-b; ἐν τῇ στάσει τῆς ψυχῆς, 444e)—similarly to how soldiers must ally with the philosophers-rulers against political defections. So we are recalled that in Plato’s theory inner conflict is the main issue both at the individual and at the political level. And again, the medical language of diagnosis, prognosis and treatment will resurface within the analysis of degenerate regimes and souls in Books 8 and 9.⁵¹ Tyranny, for instance, is considered as “a *polis* disease” (*poleos nosema*, VIII, 544d-e), because the natural hierarchy of powers is distorted and harmony between unequal parts is destroyed by the power being concentrated in the hands of the worst element. Later on, democratic people are described as drones who, with or without darts (i.e., more or less bravely), cause troubles in the *polis* constitution similarly to how phlegma or bile can make the body sick; on the example of the wise beekeeper, the good physician and the good legislator must take their precautions against the kind of disorders on which they have competence (9, 564a-c).

Admittedly, a crucial shift in Plato’s attitude to medicine takes place within the *Republic*. For during his search for the best ruler Plato has also come to question the validity of *technai* from the point of view of their knowledge of the good and has identified a major weakness of all of them, medicine included, in their ability to

⁵⁰ The double analogy, which occurs with slightly different wording at *Sophist*, 228a 2-4 (see above, n. 40), gets lost in the Loeb translation of the second member of the phrase by Emlin-Jones and Preddy: “while sickness is evil, a disgrace, a weakness”. My translation here is rather close to Shorey’s.

⁵¹ Brill 2015 provides a brilliant reading of the “political pathology” displayed in *Republic*, 8 and 9.

do good limited to each one's field.⁵² So in the central books of the *Republic* Plato elaborates on the superiority of the dialectic method in attaining knowledge of the true Good –the directive knowledge to which *philosophers* owe their right to rule. As I already mentioned, I think that it is this development in Plato's thought, rather than a mere rivalry to medicine, that explains why references to the *technical* aspects of the medical art become less frequent after Book 1 of the *Republic*—while references to the Hippocratic *theories* become, as we have seen, more numerous.⁵³

On the other hand the issue of political expertise, conceived as a complex of knowledge, procedures and purposes of its own, comes back again to the center in the *Statesman*. In a renewed quest for the best ruler a number of *technai* are considered from a point of view or another, and the figure of the doctor too reappears. The meaning of the analogy, to tell the truth, may be disturbing to the reader. For the Eleatic Stranger summons the doctor for his aiming at the good of all of his patients (be they rich or poor) and his being able to heal them even with painful remedies if necessary, with or without their consent, his personal unselfishness being the best guarantee of the correctness of his actions; then he suggests that truly knowledgeable (*alethos epistemonos*) statesmen should be similarly entitled to rule with or without the consent of their subjects, and even to go against the laws and to resort to death sentences and exile in order to purge the city for the good of it (*kathairosin ep'agathoi ten polin*: *Statesman*, 293a-e). One understands why Malcolm Schofield, based on this as well as other passages, argued that the *Statesman's* account is “sparer”, “more purely hypothetical” and “more impoverished” with respect to the vision of the *Republic*.⁵⁴ Such crucial issues of the *Republic* as the moral qualities of the ruler and the consent of the governed are indeed obscured in the *Statesman*, whose focus is rather on the material exercise of politics. The statesman is not a philosopher temporarily serving as a ruler, but a professional. It is significant that in this dialogue the closest art to politics is not medicine but weaving, which supervises several subordinate techniques to make them to cooperate and to obtain the final product; similarly, the *episteme* on which

⁵² Cambiano 1991 still offers a fundamental survey of the development of Plato's thought on the *technai* in its connection with the question of *politike technē*; it is now to add Cambiano 2016, p. 14-41.

⁵³ See above, p. 125-126.

⁵⁴ Cf. Schofield 2006, p. 174, 175, and 175-185; see *ibidem*, p. 123-124, on the significant difference between the *Republic* (488d-489a) and the *Statesman* (298c-e) in exploiting the analogy of the ship.

the ruler is based in taking care (*epimeleia*) of all things of the city looks rather like a management skill.⁵⁵

This general look at the *Statesman* allows us to get closer to the conclusion of our attempt to track the coherent albeit bumpy path taken by Plato throughout his work in his appealing to medicine. For Plato's last political work reconnects to the picture of the *Republic* and bypasses the *Statesman* in bringing the attention back to the moral fundamentals of political knowledge as well as to the consent of the governed to obey the rulers; and in this connection, notably, Plato often resorts to a new analogy with a well-known feature of the Greek doctors' behaviour—that is to say, that dialoguing relationship with the sick person which must be imbued with the power of persuasion, according to a motif that had already run through the *Gorgias* since Gorgias himself flaunts to have assisted his brother, a doctor, in his activity, even managing to treat the sick better than he did.⁵⁶

There are no philosopher-rulers in the city of the *Laws*, whose political project pivots around the notion of the rule of the law, the sole reliable source of the commands of divine reason.⁵⁷ After a philosophical lawgiver has incorporated his knowledge of the divine reason into a most complex and meticulous system of *nomoi*, the preservation of legislation, that is the salvation of the city, will be trusted to the so-called Nocturnal Council, whose members must be especially educated to virtue as well as to understanding such highest things as the power of gods, the divinity of astral bodies, and the superiority of the soul to the body.⁵⁸ More importantly for our issue, the relation between the legislator and the citizens is taken into equally serious consideration; the need is now emphasized to persuade the citizens to abide the impersonal dictates of the laws. To this end Plato considers it necessary for each law to be preceded by a “prelude” (*prooimion*) designed to unfold the rationale of the norm so that citizens feel it more palatable. The prelude is the non-prescriptive part of the legislative text, aimed at persuading people to obey the norms that will follow and so at making punishment unnecessary; in other words, it works as a medicine administered to prevent a subsequent and more aggressive cure.⁵⁹ The famous analogy with the approach of the so-called “free-born doctor” is introduced to illustrate the kind of

⁵⁵ *Statesman*, 305e 2-6, 311b-c.

⁵⁶ *Gorgias*, 455a-c.

⁵⁷ *Leges*, 713e-714a.

⁵⁸ *Leges*, 964-968.

⁵⁹ As Schofield 2006, p. 85 put it.

persuasion envisaged as well as to show that the communication between the legislator and the citizen should be conducted in a cooperative mood and mutual trust, so that the citizen be educated (4, 719e 7-721e 5; 9, 857d-e):⁶⁰

ὁ δὲ ἐλεύθερος ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλείστον τὰ τῶν ἐλευθέρων νοσήματα θεραπεύει τε καὶ ἐπισκοπεῖ, καὶ ταῦτα ἐξετάζων ἀπ' ἀρχῆς καὶ κατὰ φύσιν, τῷ κάμνοντι κοινοῦμενος αὐτῷ τε καὶ τοῖς φίλοις, ἅμα μὲν αὐτὸς μανθάνει τι παρὰ τῶν νοσοῦντων, ἅμα δὲ καὶ καθ' ὅσον οἷός τέ ἐστιν, διδάσκει τὸν ἀσθενοῦντα αὐτόν, καὶ οὐ πρότερον ἐπέταξεν πρὶν ἂν πῃ συμπίσῃ, τότε δὲ μετὰ πειθοῦς ἡμερούμενον αἰεὶ παρασκευάζων τὸν κάμνοντα, εἰς τὴν ὑγίειαν ἄγων, ἀποτελεῖν πειράται;

The free-born doctor spends most of his time treating and keeping an eye on the diseases of the free-born. He investigates the origin of the disease, in the light of his study of the natural order, taking the patient himself and his friends into partnership. This allows him both to learn from those who are sick, and at the same time to teach the invalid himself, to the best of his ability; and he prescribes no treatment without first getting the patient's consent. Only then, and all the time using his powers of persuasion to keep the patient cooperative, does he attempt to complete the task of bringing back to health.⁶¹

Thus do the doctors make their newest and ultimate entry into Plato's political scene.⁶² Since several passages in the Hippocratic corpus confirm that a benevolent personal interaction with the patients was crucial to the approach of ancient Greek physicians, I deem it appropriate to conclude my argument by pointing out this passage as the final proof of the role that Hippocratic medicine has constantly played in Plato's political thought as a model of *technē* that is "good to think with".

⁶⁰ I skip the question of the distinction between the free and the slave doctor, a Plato's construction (not corresponding to any historical reality) functional to recalling in this context the contrast between *technē* and *empeiria* of *Gorgias*, 462a-465d, 500d-501c. Helpful discussions of the passage of the *Laws* along with references to several passages of Hippocratic literature are found in Jouanna 1978; Jori 1997; Marino 2019, p. 118-125. Brancacci 1995 rightly focuses on the passages in *Laws* 1 where Plato's concern for civic conflict emerges (*stasis*, opposed to political *harmonia*: see esp. 628a 9-c 1). Notably, the Athenian adds that the lawgiver's prime concern should be with the best state of the city itself, compared to a human body that does not need treatment, rather than with the external war, because a torn city is like a sick body (628d 1-e 1).

⁶¹ *Leges*, 4, 720d 1-20, transl. Griffith.

⁶² Yet finally, there is a remarkable passage in the *Seventh Letter* (330d-331d) all played out on the persuasion motif, where the parallel with medicine is introduced to illustrate the advisory role that Plato tried to hold with Dionysius I: Plato eventually let him go not wanting to exert constriction on a free man, namely, on an individual fully responsible for his or her own conduct.

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