HIPPOCRATES, THE
HIPPOCRATIC CORPUS
AND THE DEFINING
OF MEDICINE

Except for the Bible, no document and no author from Antiquity commands the authority in the twenty-first century of Hippocrates of Cos and the Hippocratic Oath. They are regularly cited in both learned journals and the popular press as the standard of ethical conduct to which all practising physicians should adhere. In medical schools around the world students give assent to principles and words they believe go back to the Father of Medicine, and in the eyes of their prospective patients failure to live up to his prescriptions for competence and morality is the greatest of all medical sins. Revised, bowdlerised, set to music and made into a CD-Rom, updated or denounced, the Oath has made Hippocrates a familiar name even today, appealed to as the creator of the modern medical profession. It may then come as a shock to learn that almost nothing is known of Hippocrates himself, that he is unlikely personally to have devised the Oath, and that several passages in the Hippocratic Corpus describe practices that would have involved a doctor in breaking it, even assuming that he ever had sworn it, which is itself unlikely.

This discrepancy between what is generally believed about Hippocrates and what he may in reality have said or done is the result of three converging tendencies. The first is the understandable wish of Greeks and Romans to know more about the great figures from the past; the second, the gradual accretion, whether deliberate or accidental, of anonymous or suppositious treatises around more genuine writings; the third, the growth of a Hippocratic tradition of interpretation that emphasised the value of certain treatises above others and the consequent belief that these in particular came from the pen of the master. Together they allowed free rein to the imagination of those who wished to reconstruct the life of Hippocrates on the basis of information contained in texts in the Hippocratic Corpus.

The Greek habit of composing imaginary speeches or letters by famous persons from the past as school exercises and public display pieces gradually blurred the distinction between the genuine and the false. A group of letters and speeches which on grounds of style, content and historical detail must have
have been composed at the earliest around 350 BC, and some perhaps over a century later, helped to fill out the otherwise brief data on Hippocrates' life.⁵ They depict him as a wise sage, called in to cure Democritus of madness — and other patients — refraining from intervention because he found him sane; a patriot who refused to take Persian gold to serve their king, the enemy of Greece; and a wonderfully versatile doctor, capable of treating both a monarch's lovesickness and the great plague of Athens, which Thucydides had deemed incurable. These stories in turn became part of the picture of the historical Hippocrates, so that, for instance, they played the dominant role in shaping Galen's understanding of the behaviour of the ideal physician and figured prominently in the only surviving substantial biography of Hippocrates from Antiquity, that written by Soranus around AD 100.⁶ Other stories also grew up around him, numerous busts were made of him, and Cos in the Roman imperial period even had coins struck bearing his image.⁷

Figure 4.1 Hippocrates curing the plague of Athens. The mediaeval illustrator of the Epidemics imagines Hippocrates lancing an inguinal bubo as if he were dealing with bubonic plague. Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Db 93, fol. 458r.

Figure 4.2 Hippocrates reading, while two bystanders argue. Opening illustration from a late fifteenth-century manuscript of the Aphorisms in Latin translation. London, Wellcome Ms. 353, fol. 3r.

In order to penetrate behind the legend, historians have usually adopted the principle of giving greater weight to those testimonies that go back to the lifetime of Hippocrates. So, for instance, the Athenian philosopher Plato, writing his dialogue Protagoras in the early years of the fourth century but setting it fifty years earlier, around 430 BC, confirms that Hippocrates came from Cos and that he already enjoyed a great reputation for medicine,
rhetoric and medicine share the same procedure; they both have to employ a
logical method of division of the nature of their subject, medicine dealing with
the body, rhetoric with the soul. When Phaedrus gives only lukewarm assent
to this formulation, Socrates repeats his question in a different way: ‘Then
can you understand the nature of the soul intelligently without the nature
of the whole?’ Phaedrus’ response is a somewhat ironic assent: ‘At any rate,
if we’re to believe Hippocrates, one can’t even learn about the body without
this method.’ Agreement established, Socrates then demands more than the
authority of Hippocrates; he demands ‘true reason’ as well. Only then does he
go on to define the true (and ostensibly Hippocratic) method, which consists
in determining whether the object is a single thing or multiplex, and, if the
latter, dividing it up into its constituent parts and determining the relationship
and interactions between the parts.

What Plato meant by this has been the subject of vigorous debate ever
since the time of Galen, if not earlier. He is not quoting Hippocrates directly,
although Phaedrus’ words certainly imply that Hippocrates spoke in general
about the need to understand the nature of ‘the whole’, but he is using this
famous figure of his own day to exemplify proper procedure in a discipline,
medicine, parallel to that which he himself wishes to investigate. The success
of Hippocrates in medicine shows the validity of this method in practice: it is
more than mere words. Nonetheless, Plato is here interpreting a Hippocratic
statement for his own purpose, and, given Plato’s formulations of the views
of historical figures elsewhere in his dialogues, there is no guarantee that
his interpretation agreed with what Hippocrates himself intended. For Plato,
the crucial point is that Hippocrates employed a similar logical method in
dealing with the body to that of the ideal rhetorician in dealing with the
soul, and ‘the whole’ must be taken in the sense of the whole of the object
under discussion. Since Plato’s focus of attention is on correct procedure, it
is impossible to decide whether in considering ‘the whole’ and the inter-
relationship and interaction of its parts Hippocrates believed that illness
in one part of the body could only be explained by looking at the body as a whole,
its nutriment and its activities, or that the human body could be properly
understood only in the wider context of ‘the whole of nature’. Both these (and
other congruent) doctrines can be found in the Hippocratic Corpus, but to
claim that one or other of them is mentioned here approvingly by Plato, or
that this can then be used to identify a genuine treatise by Hippocrates, is to
go beyond the evidence. All that Plato is doing is to stress the accurate method
employed by Hippocrates, and to insist that it requires supplementation from
‘true reason’ if it is to be more than highly effective empiricism.

This mention of Hippocrates in the Phaedrus, although disappointing in
what it reveals about Hippocrates’ ideas, is still valuable for the importance it
assigns to him as the representative of medicine, even in his own lifetime. More
questionable is the report by Galen in his commentary on Joints that a
younger contemporary, the doctor-historian Clesias of Cnides, took issue with

Figure 4.3 Hippocrates’s dream. A mosaic from Cos showing Hippocrates seated,
while a fisherman greets Asclepius as he disembarks. Second or third
century AD.

comparable to that of Polyclitus and Phidias in sculpture. His paradigmatic
status is also shown by Aristotle’s somewhat later use of his name in his Poetics
to show the need for precision in the definition of terms: Hippocrates is a
‘biggest’ with regard to medicine but not to height. Plato, in the same passage
in the Protagoras, also indicates that Hippocrates was an Asclepiad, a member
of a family that claimed descent from Asclepius, and that he was teaching
medicine for money. Far from restricting his medical knowledge to a family
group, as suggested in the Oath, Hippocrates is portrayed as willing to accept
anyone who wished to pay him to be taught medicine.

What he taught them, however, is far more difficult to determine. In a
passage in the Phaedrus, written at some point after the Protagoras, Plato again
uses Hippocrates as an example to elucidate his concerns about a slightly
different topic, rhetoric. Socrates, Plato’s chief interlocutor, first announces that
Hippocrates for claiming that he could successfully reset a dislocated thigh, a statement which, if true, would imply that the text Joints and probably the closely related Fractures also were indeed written by him. But Galen may be merely interpreting a comment by Ctesias, that a reset thigh bone quickly dislocated again, in the light of his own belief in the Hippocratic authorship of Joints, and turning a general observation into a specific polemic against a particular text. The final pre-Alexandrian testimony to the beliefs of Hippocrates is both the longest and the most controversial, as it was already in Antiquity. The writer of the Anonymus Londinensis papyrus places the views of Hippocrates third in a list of those who believe that diseases arise from pathological residues of nutriment.

Either because of the quantity of things taken or through their diversity, or because the things taken are strong and difficult of digestion, residues come to be produced. ... When the things that have been taken in are too many, the heat that produces digestion is overpowering; by the multitude of foods and does not effect digestion; because digestion is hindered, residues are produced. When the things taken in are diverse, they quarrel with one another in the belly, and because of the quarrelling there is a change into residues. When they are very coarse and hard to digest, there is thus some impediment to digestion because they are hard to assimilate, and thus a change to residues occurs. From these residues arise breaths; when they move upwards, they bring on disease. This is what Hippocrates said, influenced by the following conviction. Breath is the most necessary and the most important component in us, since health is the result of its free, and disease the result of its impeded, passage. We are like plants; just as they are rooted in the ground, so we are rooted in the air by our nostrils and by our whole body. We are like the (water) plants called soldiers. Just as they, rooted in moisture, are carried now to this moisture and now to that, even so, we, being like plants, are rooted in air, and are in motion, changing position now here, now there. If this is so, it is clear that air is the most important component. On this theory, when residues are produced, they give rise to breaths, which rising as vapour cause diseases. The variations in the breaths cause the various diseases. If they are many (or violent), they produce diseases; if they are very few, they also produce diseases. Diseases are also produced by the changes in the breaths, in two ways, to excessive heat or excessive cold. Whichever way the change takes place produces (different) diseases.

This is striking testimony from an apparently good, scholarly source that was both concerned to investigate the documentary evidence from the past and
confirms the importance of the man and his work within his own time, and moreover suggests that the so-called Hippocratic tradition, based on the theory of the four humours, was not one in which Hippocrates himself, in fact, believed. This theory Aristotle, quoting from The Nature of Man, ascribed to Polybus, who was believed to have been Hippocrates’ pupil and son-in-law; and it is the master himself.  

The Hippocratic Corpus as we have it is made up of sixty or so works written in the Ionic dialect of Greek.  

The collection, in the form in which we have it today, goes back only to 1526, when the Aldine press in Venice printed the first edition of the complete works of Hippocrates in Greek, for no single ancient manuscript surviving today contains every tract from the collection, and many have only a small selection.  

But it is also clear from the manuscripts themselves and from the work of ancient commentators and compilers of Hippocratic dictionaries that the great majority of the texts printed in 1526 were already circulating together under the name of Hippocrates by the first century AD, if not 300 years earlier.  

Nonetheless, anomalies remain. One text, the so-called Testament of Hippocrates, is found in many Greek manuscripts and in a variety of translations, but was never included in the printed editions of the Corpus. By contrast, Sevens, which was regarded as Hippocratic in Antiquity, was effectively lost until 1837 and today appears within the Corpus mainly in the form of a Late-Antique Latin translation.  

The total number of treatises in the Corpus is also uncertain, for some were already wrongly combined or separated in Antiquity. Most scholars, for example, are agreed that Generation and The Nature of the Child once formed part of the same work, and, equally, that the seven books of the Epidemics were written at three different dates (books 1 and 3 around 410 BC; books 2, 4, and 6 around 400 BC; books 5 and 7 between 358 and 348 BC) and, probably, by several different authors. Some groups of books may have been written by the same author, like Airs, Waters and Places and Sacred Disease. Others were put together from the same material; a block of case reports in Epidemics 5 repeats almost verbatim cases in Epidemics 7, although neither version appears to preserve exactly the wording of the initial reports. Elsewhere, separate chronological layers have been discerned within the same tract.  

Dating individual treatises is not easy. There are a few sparse references to events whose dates are known from other sources, but usually a decision has to be made on grounds of the style of the language (just as a modern writer today uses words and sentences in a way that differs from that of the 1920s or 1970s); on (occasional) internal relationships, where passage X is copied from Y (thus for example Aphiorsim is placed in the first half of the fourth century BC, since it contains traces of earlier writings); and on scholars’ ‘feel’ for where a treatise might fit in relation to particular developments. This is far from infallible. Nonetheless, it is very likely that the great majority of the treatises come from the period 420-350 BC, roughly corresponding to the active lifetime of Hippocrates. Others, like The Heart and Precepts, are to be placed in the third or second centuries BC; Deorum has been given an even later date, the first or second century AD.  

Where and when the bulk of the collection was assembled can only be conjectured. The tradition that Hippocrates gained his medical information from writings within the temple of Asclepius at Cos is demonstrably false; from writings within the temple of Asclepius at Cos is demonstrably false; even more fanciful is the legend that, having done so, he burned the rest of the library to preserve his superiority. Galen believed that at least part of the library was written down by Hippocrates to preserve the oral doctrines of the family of Asclepiads that were in danger of disappearing because they were handed down only by word of mouth. Cos figures scarcely at all in the Corpus, neighbouring Cnidus somewhat more, and various towns in North and Central Greece still more prominently, which raises doubts about an origin on Cos itself. Nonetheless, it remains likely that the collection was first assembled in broadly the form we have it at Alexandria in Egypt in the famous library of the Ptolemies, at a time when Cos was part of their empire. Certainly some texts were being studied there from around the 270s onwards by Herophilus, who may have had connections with Cos through Praxagoras. The discussions of writers of medical glossaries like Bacchus and Zues starting about 250 BC show that a Corpus had already been formed by then, although it may not have coincided entirely with what we know today.  

The somewhat haphazard way in which materials were brought together and stored at the Alexandrian library would also explain, at least in part, the varied nature of the collection. Medical volumes crammed together on the library shelf could easily be attributed to a single author, particularly if more than one work was included on the same book-roll and if there was little or no indication of the original author’s name. The presence of even later Greek texts within the Corpus shows that the process of accretion lasted for centuries. A comparison between our Hippocratic Corpus and other works attributed to Hippocrates and surviving in Greek, Latin or Arabic shows that the name of Hippocrates continued to attract to itself a mass of spurious and pseudonymous material, often with next to nothing to do with what survives from the fifth and fourth centuries BC. The ascription to Hippocrates, where it was made deliberately and not by an accidental confusion, was used in these works to give authority to their contents, and to suggest that their message went back to the very earliest days of medicine.  

Establishing which, if any, of the surviving Greek texts was actually the work of Hippocrates himself is, as has already been suggested, difficult, if not impossible, task, and scholars continue to disagree, as they have done since Antiquity. Aristotle’s opinion differs from that of Anonymus Londinensis himself, and the selection of treatises used by the earliest writers of medical glossaries is slightly different again. What until the mid-nineteenth century were viewed as ‘the genuine writings of Hippocrates’ were defined as such by Galen in the second century AD on the basis of the tradition as he knew it and
his own sophisticated investigations into language, style, and content.\footnote{He based his argument principally on the authenticity of most of The Nature of Man and claimed to identify different grades of genuine material from those penned by Hippocrates, through collaborative works and books by his pupils, and their students. But for all Galen's diligence and learning this was an ultimately circular procedure; Aristotle had already denied the reliability of its starting point.}

While one may lament the absence of agreement on the works composed by the great physician himself, this has paradoxically opened up the Hippocratic Corpus to scrutiny. Instead of concentrating on a small group of 'genuine' writings, scholars are now free to consider the Corpus in all its diversity of forms and doctrines, and indeed purposes.\footnote{Some texts, notably Aphorisms, Causa Prognosis and Dentition, are little more than a series of easily memorable sentences, perhaps for use in teaching; others, like Breaths or The Art, are public outpourings of particular medical point of view; still others, especially Humours, have attracted a charge of deliberate obscurity.\footnote{Some, like Sacred Disease, propound a definite thesis; some, like Diseases, merely list a variety of ailments. Affections is written for the layman, The Use of Liquids for the practitioner with his own surgery. Some, particularly Breaths, are written in elegant prose; others, most notably the Epidemics, represent case notes at various stages of creation and selection.\footnote{No generalisation can cover all the texts, and no summary do more than hint at the multiplicity of (often conflicting) theories they contain. Together they show the gradual creation of a form of medicine that came to dominate Western medical thought and practice for centuries to come, as a source of theories, therapies and ideas on the way in which medicine should be taught, studied and put into practice.}}

That there were doctors who lived before Hippocrates is clear from the Homeric poems, and it is also beyond doubt that some of them were wealthy and enjoyed a certain prestige. One has only to glance at the beautiful statue of Sambrotidas, son of Mandrocles, from Megara Hyblaea in Sicily in the early sixth century BC or the equally fine relief of an unnamed doctor, now in Basle, from the end of the sixth century to see that these were men of wealth and standing in their communities.\footnote{Equally, the evidence of archaic literature and art shows how doctors were expected to act and what methods they were expected to use.\footnote{They are shown touching the patient or bandaging, while the Basle relief (p. 94) depicts cupping glasses for bleeding the patient. Cutting and burning, procedures universally acknowledged to be painful, are the two techniques associated with doctors by authors as different as the philosopher Heracitus and the playwright Aeschylus, and Plato adds to them incantations and drugs.\footnote{That on the whole doctors were appreciated for their services is also evident from the literary texts, even had we not the career of Democedes as a paradigm. Before he became the personal physician to Polycrates of Samos, he had been employed as a public physician - that is, a doctor in receipt of some public funds - by the island of Aegina and by the city of Athens, and after his escape from Persia he returned home to Croton, where, rich and respected, he married the daughter of the famous athlete Milo. A later civil war saw him again in mainland Greece, in exile at Plataea with other defeated aristocrats.\footnote{But until the Hippocratic Corpus we have no surviving testimony from the doctors themselves as to how they saw their profession, and only then can we begin to place the iatro within the wider context of others offering health advice and healing.}}

From this abundant evidence it is obvious that in the late fifth century BC there was considerable debate and discussion about what constituted medicine and that the authority of the iatros was far from universally accepted. The author of The Art has to defend medicine against those who have made an art out of criticising the arts and who denied the validity of medicine because some people recover without the aid of physicians while others die despite all their efforts. His argument is thus aimed at demonstrating that medicine is more effective than merely trusting to nature or to chance.\footnote{A similar approach can be found in Ancient Medicine, whose author, while accepting that if the art of medicine did not exist the treatment of the sick would be left to chance, demonstrates the absurdity of relying only on chance by pointing to the discoveries of medicine made through carefully conducted enquiry. In his view the art of medicine lies in an understanding of causes and in an ability to discriminate between what is significant and what is not.\footnote{What the iatros offers the patient is a deeper concern for causes, for the way things are linked together. Once these are understood, asserts the author of Breaths, one can administer whatever the body needs for recovery, a sentiment widely shared by other writers in the Corpus.\footnote{It is a claim that takes the notion of true healing beyond the mere application of remedies to the possession of an appropriate epistemology of health and disease. It takes for granted the possibility of a successful cure, and places the distinction between the good and bad practitioner in the understanding of the reasons behind the disease and its cure. An investigation into the causes of illness leads simultaneously to knowledge of the treatment. The more one knows what is causing illness, the more easily one can take steps to ensure recovery, prevent any further deterioration or, if the cure is such that there seems little hope of life, prepare the patient and the family for death.\footnote{Conversely, so it is claimed, knowing why a particular treatment works will assist the doctor in the future in his choice of an appropriate therapy.}}

This argument, however, goes only part of the way to defining what medicine is about. While asserting its superiority over mere chance or to empiricism, it does not mark it off so clearly from the healing provided by those who might believe in causation but who employ non-Hippocratic methods of treatment, or whose understanding of causes is only partial or is antithetical to that of the Hippocratic doctor.\footnote{Some of the most famous tracts in the Corpus address themselves directly to this problem, while others discuss it implicitly or in a passing comment. Ancient Medicine takes the...}
philosophers as its target, denouncing them in general, and Empedocles by name, for believing in ungrounded or foolish hypotheses. Its author rejects all unitary theories of the body, for a unity could hardly feel pain or change from health to illness and vice versa, while he attacks theories of elements and opposites for their lack of an empirical basis. Far from deriving medical theories from wider notions about the nature of the cosmos, he believes that understanding the body through medicine provides the best way of understanding the world of nature. Nature and the body are indeed linked, but his process of investigation is the reverse of that of the philosophers. He sees the body as a battleground for a multitude of hostile forces, sweet, sour, acrid and the like, which are most evident in foodstuffs and which he believes he can demonstrate to be at work within the body. He accepts that in its early days medicine may have had a basis in simple experience (when one was ill one took whatever foods were thought to make one better), and that it was little different from cookery, but gradually, over a long period, doctors began to investigate just what it was that made one treatment superior to another, thus carrying out a form of research. The results of these investigations may not be entirely accurate and precise, but that is no reason to reject medicine as such. One has only to compare its results, obtained by a sound method, with those produced in a different fashion to see that the doctor is aiming in the right direction. Acting on the principle that a certain eventuality is likely to happen for the most part is better than inaction, and one can always make allowances for the lack of total certainty by leaving a wide safety margin in therapy.

Similar claims are made elsewhere by authors who are seeking to distinguish their type of dietetics from those of earlier practitioners and of the gymnastic trainers. Physical exercise and proper diet had become fashionable in the middle years of the fifth century, when a science of gymnastics had been introduced by Herodicus of Selymbria. The author of Ancient Medicine sees this development as something positive, as a move towards a more widespread understanding of health and illness in proper medical terms, but he believes that Herodicus and his followers did not go far enough in their understanding of the effects of their training and diet. Other writers in the Corpus were less charitable: the 'unnatural' lifestyle of athletes was remarked upon critically in The Nature of Man and Nutrition: at Aphorisms 1, 3, the word 'perilous' is used to describe it four times in only a few sentences. Galen, much later, also enjoyed quoting the playwright Euripides, who denounced the follies of excessive training. Aristotle shared some of this disdain, wondering whether the attainment of perfect health and fitness in the manner of Herodicus could really be called healthy living if it required so much abstention from all, or nearly all, the things that made human life enjoyable — a criticism that could equally be made of the precise regulations for health laid down by the medical author of Regimen.

An even more vigorous attack is mounted by the author of Sacred Disease against those who believed that epilepsy, mania and a range of other diseases were caused by the gods and thus needed to be treated by religious means. He denounces those who use incantations, prayers, chants and charms to communicate with the gods, 'magi, purifiers, wandering priests and charlatans' with their claims to piety and special knowledge. In many of their procedures they come close to what the doctor does: they prescribe special diets and bathing, and, of course, says the writer, if the patient recovers that is due to the foods they have been given, not to any supernatural intervention. Some of them resemble doctors in their mode of life, wandering the roads of Greece, seeking out patients, just like the doctor to whom Airs, Waters and Places is addressed, and they too attend to the patient's signs and symptoms, although they then interpret them differently. A madman foaming at the mouth has been made ill by Ares, god of war; nightmares are the result of the intervention of Hecate or Heroes; making shrill strident neighing noises shows the influence of Poseidon.

This attack by the author of Sacred Disease is threefold. He can accept the reality of some of his opponents' cures, while at the same time denying the causal connection that they have asserted: a patient has been cured by the drugs or diet they prescribed, not by the will of the gods. Incantations do not add to the effectiveness of the drugs already prescribed. Second, he can provide a better and simpler explanation for these diseases: an excess of bile or phlegm affecting the head. Third, he accuses his opponents of impiety and irreverence, while at the same time proclaiming his own convictions of the divine nature of the universe. Their claims that the body of a human being can be possessed and defiled by a god are blasphemous, for the role of gods is to purify, not to make impure. If it is true that they advertise their ability to bring the moon down to earth or cause storms and drought to cease (all activities that, as we have seen, were associated with Empedocles), then they can themselves be convicted of impiety for wishing to disturb the natural order of the heavens and for pretending to greater power than the gods themselves. Praying to the gods to come and assist them is a blasphemous attempt to manipulate the gods for personal reasons. It detracts from the power and majesty of the divine that is revealed above all in the 'necessity' that binds everything together, and that allows the true doctor to understand the whole course of disease, from its beginning in the past to its development in the future.

This author is not alone among the writers of the Corpus in opposing this new view of Nature and of the gods to the more traditional one that allowed the gods to intervene in the world, for good or ill, as they saw fit. In his search for natural causes he sees himself as properly pious, and certainly far from an atheist. In this he can be compared with the author of Regimen, who in his last book explores the medical significance of dreams. Some are divinely sent, foretelling good or evil, and must be interpreted by 'those who possess the skill in dealing with such things'. These interpreters may also offer to explain the meaning of other dreams that are more closely related to changes in the body such as surfeit or deficiency. Sometimes they may even reach the right
conclusion. But these dreams, claims the author, are really the province of the doctor, who can give instructions on the proper precautions to be taken. Prayers to the gods are good, but man should also lend a hand. This is not a rejection of the gods, but a demarcation of spheres of effective action. These spheres may overlap. The patient should take note of the changes in the heaven and avoid chills and the hot sun, and, at the same time, offer up prayers to the gods to turn away the forthcoming evil. Both here and in Sacred Disease the author is broadening the space available for the doctor’s intervention by stressing his particular competence in the medical marketplace.

Another way of claiming an advantage over other practitioners was to appeal to ethical considerations and to suggest that the knowledge that was on offer was based on more than mere technical expertise. Indeed, one of the major requirements of the true practitioner is to know the limits of his ability, and to be prepared to hand over to others more skilled if necessary. The decision to treat or not is his responsibility, and hence he ought to know which cases are curable and which not, and, if the latter, how far any treatment might help to ameliorate them. No blame was attached to a reasoned refusal to treat, and at least one author in the Corpus believed that it was essential to reject any case judged to be incurable: another advised that a decision to treat should be accompanied by an announcement of the likely outcome. Above all, the doctor must choose the treatment that is most effective, not that which is most dramatic and creates the best immediate impression. There is no point in finishing an operation with a wonderful display of bandaging if after three days the patient is still in pain. Similarly, one must learn how to speak tactfully and effectively, both in public and at the bedside, and know which arguments are to be accepted and which critically rejected. Even the manner of one’s disagreement with others offering treatment can help to create the right impression on those in search of a doctor. Those who fail to live up to these high aims for medicine may still be considered doctors, albeit foolish ones; other patients may prefer to label them as charlatans or quacks and have nothing to do with them.

Nowhere is this division between the true and the false doctor more clear than in the Oath. This famous document falls neatly into two parts, one detailing the obligations of the swearer in receiving and transmitting medical knowledge, the other his obligations with regard to medical practice and his patients. Many of the so-called ethical aspirations in the Oath find general acceptance elsewhere in the Corpus; for example, the notion that the doctor should act to the best of his ability, ‘to heal, or, at any rate, not to harm’, and keep whatever information he has gained in the course of his practice secret. The Physician mentions the special position of the doctor with regard to his patients, especially with women and girls, and there are references elsewhere to the need to keep ‘the holy things’ of medicine restricted to those who are part of the same medical community. But other sections of the Oath go far beyond what is said in other treatises, and at times contradict them.
While a willingness to yield in treatment to others more qualified can be regarded as a valuable part of the make-up of the doctor, nowhere else in the Corpus is there the strict division between dietetics and pharmacology on the one hand and surgery on the other. The Oath's ban on the use of the knife is absolute, even for a relatively minor procedure such as lithotomy. The involvement of the doctor in prescribing poisonous drugs, and in 'taking the lead in giving such advice', would doubtless have been deprecated by most ancient doctors if it resulted in murder, but there is ample evidence of their willing participation in suicide and euthanasia. Likewise, despite what is said in the Oath, The Nature of the Child contains a famous case of an abortion, while the prescription of pills, potions and pessaries to prevent conception or provoke abortion is found in medical writings throughout Antiquity.

What makes the Oath different from all other documents on medical ethics and etiquette from Antiquity (and, in part, why most scholars are reluctant to attribute its authorship to Hippocrates, although they may disagree on when and in what circumstances it was in fact written) is its heavily religious tone. Religion binds the disparate parts of the Oath together: the gods are called at the beginning to witness, and at the end, it is implied, to punish the backslider. The middle sentence, 'In purity and holiness will I keep my entire life', employs words of deep religious significance. The doctor's whole life is to be guided by this religious ethic, within and without the sickroom. He must refrain from all gossip, and from sexual relations, not just with the patient but with any members of the household, male or female, slave or free. He will protect his patient from 'harm and injustice', the latter going far beyond the former. Only by fulfilling the precepts of the oath will the doctor enjoy both his life and his art and gain an eternal reputation among men (words more familiar on a tombstone than in a working document).

In this way, the Oath defines what medicine is, and what it is not. Even if it was not composed by Hippocrates, its circulation as part of the Corpus and possibly its prominent position among the first treatises on the book-roll ensured that it became widely seen as a summation of ethical practice — not always with approval. Cato the Censor in the mid-second century BC saw it as proof of a sworn conspiracy by Greek doctors to harm their (Roman) patients. But allusions to it on the tombstones of doctors from around the ancient world attest to its prestige and importance, and by the fourth century AD it had come to stand for the medical profession. Only then do we begin to find evidence that might indicate that the Oath was being sworn, but it does not appear to have been universally imposed anywhere for several centuries after this.

Indeed, the tradition of writing on medical ethics in Antiquity takes, for the most part, a different line. Whereas the Oath starts off from an ethical and religious base and then goes on to define what is expected of the doctor, most other authors, including notably Galen, adopt a more pragmatic approach. Good practice is effective practice: whatever contributes to that end is acceptable; whatever detracts from it is to be rejected. That the two approaches at times coincide is understandable, but this should not obscure the singularity of the Oath.

The opening section of the Oath, dealing with the obligations of the taker towards his teachers and the art of medicine, is no less unusual. The aspiring practitioner, having taken the oath 'according to medical law', and signed up, is to join the doctor's own family and to treat its members, and be treated by them, as a son or brother. He will be taught from books and orally and 'in every other way' — that is, with practical training and advice — and in turn he is to be willing to impart his knowledge to the members of his new family and to those who wish to enrol and take the oath. This document extends the obligations of the medical apprentice, in contrast to other apprenticeship contracts known for other crafts, far beyond the bounds of his education. It imposes obligations on him that are lifelong and that extend sideways to take in the family members of his teacher. Even when, as must have been common, someone wishing to learn a craft — and one must never forget that doctors in Antiquity ranked as craftsmen — joined the household of his teacher, they did not thereby undertake to pass on that craft, free of charge, to their teacher's family or to support them in adversity.

It is tempting to set the Oath in a situation in which an earlier pattern of medical education is gradually breaking down. Medicine, which was once restricted to members of a medical clan, is now available to all who wish to learn it. They will be taught alongside the members of the clan (who will not be charged for their instruction). Whether they too must take this Oath is less clear: probably it is assumed that being brought up from an early age in a medical household will have been enough to impart the essential ethics of good practice, especially as the 'children of doctors' (a phrase used from Antiquity onwards for centuries to refer to younger practitioners) may well have been employed in doing simple tasks as assistants (bandaging, applying ointments, making up common remedies) from an early age, just as in other crafts. Plato, indeed, claims that, whereas slaves who were to become doctors would have to be sent out to learn medicine, for the children of free-born doctors this is a natural process, since they are taught by their fathers from childhood.

That there was a strong family component within ancient medicine is not surprising: even today, a high percentage of medical students come from medical families. Hippocrates claimed descent from Asclepius, son of Apollo (according to a fabricated genealogy, he was the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth generation from the god, depending on which variant story one follows), as well as from another healing deity, Hercules. Not surprisingly, legend also knew of many distinguished doctors in his family before him. The historian Theopompus, writing around 330 BC, confirms the tradition of a long-standing link between Cos and the family of Asclepius, adding that another branch of the family had never left Asia Minor but had stayed at Cnidus, a town on a mainland peninsula directly opposite Cos. This was
branch to which Ctesias allegedly belonged. A further tradition, reported by Galen, had it that there were once three 'choirs' of doctors, settled respectively on Cos, at Cnidus and on the neighboring larger island of Rhodes, but that the third had become extinct, a story also alluded to by an earlier doctor, Andromachus, and by Galen’s contemporary, the hypochondriac worshipper of Asclepius, Aelius Aristides.  

The existence of a strong family tradition linking Cos and Cnidus with descendants of Asclepius was confirmed in 1956 when an inscription from the great oracular shrine at Delphi was published. Inscribed in the fourth century BC, it instructed the members of the ‘commonalty’ of Coan and Cnidian Asclepiads how to identify themselves by an oath in order to claim the privileges accorded at Delphi to Asclepiads ‘in the male line’. One may legitimately doubt the validity of this divine descent, but this inscription proves that belief in it was of at least moderately long standing, and that it was accepted beyond the immediate region of Cos and Cnidus. But it should not escape notice that it is the male descendants of Asclepius, not doctors as such, who are the beneficiaries of the privileges. As we might surmise from the Hippocratic Corpus, and not least the Oath, not every doctor was a descendant of the god, and not every descendant a doctor. Whether at some dim and distant date in the past Greek medicine had been kept solely within a few families, as the Oath implies, is a matter solely for conjecture. If there ever was such a time, it antedated the Homeric poems, for, while concentrating on the healing activities of two Asclepiads, they also imply the existence of other healers outside the family.

By the time of the Hippocratic Corpus, then, medicine was no longer the preserve of a group of clans, if it ever had been, but a subject publicly debated and capable of being taught to anyone who wished to learn and could afford a master’s fee. Its most celebrated practitioner was Hippocrates of Cos, whose reputation stretched at least to Athens and was soon to spawn a whole series of legends and documents to flesh out the details of his family and career. But while the achievements of the historical Hippocrates lent authority to the books that circulated under his name, he cannot have written more than a fraction of them at best, for, as we shall see, they contain a multiplicity of different doctrines.

What they do show is that within these varied writings medicine was being defined both for what it does and, even more importantly, for what it does not do. It covers all aspects of the health of the individual, mind as well as body; it goes beyond mere chance; it believes in a logical causation that is independent of any divine intervention, for good or ill; it avoids chants, charms and exorcisms; and it claims a basis in empirical fact and sound practice that rejects flimsy philosophical hypotheses. That some of the authors in the Corpus themselves indulged in speculation or argued in ways that seem unconvincing that many, if not most, doctors, and certainly very many of their patients, continued to leave a place for the gods within healing; that many of