CHAPTER 2

Philosophy of the Nature of Man

I maintain that whoever aspires to write properly on human regimen must first acquire knowledge and discernment of the nature of man in general.

(Vict. 1.2)

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that On Regimen played a prominent role in the history of Greek dietetics and medicine, but its philosophical significance has been much less appreciated. In this and following chapters, therefore, I would like to focus on the philosophical, epistemological and cosmological contexts of the text. Is it, after all, a relevant piece of evidence for the philosophical tradition represented by authorities such as Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato and Aristotle? Can we learn from the treatise something about the tradition of natural philosophy or, as it was commonly called before Plato, the ‘inquiry into nature (περὶ φύσεως ἱστορία)’? Does the author, who so proudly claims the originality of his contribution to the field of dietetic therapy and prevention, also bring something new to the field of philosophical speculation about the nature of man? Did On Regimen have any impact on its contemporaries or on later authors working in fields other than medicine?

If we are to judge according to standard modern accounts of the development of early Greek philosophy, answers to these questions would have to be, for the most part, negative. With few exceptions, the Hippocratic evidence in general and that of On Regimen in particular is either not taken into account at all, or is mentioned only occasionally in footnotes, sometimes with evident disdain. J. Barnes mentions the treatise in his textbook on Presocratics because

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1 Cf. Plato, Phd. 96a8; Aristotle, Cael. 298b2; Theophrastus, Physicorum opiniones (ed. Diels), 1.10.
3 Some examples have been already mentioned in the Introduction (pp. 4–5).
of its parallels with Heraclitus, and his severe judgement that *On Regimen* provides only ‘a silly farrago of ill-digested Presocratic opinions’⁴ is rather extreme although sadly not far from the mainstream. W. Jones is appreciably more sympathetic to at least some aspects of the treatise and has something good to say about the composition of the text in particular. He characterizes the author as an ‘intelligent and progressive eclectic, who combines, instead of merely adding together, the results reached by his predecessors’, and concludes that there is, therefore, ‘no patchwork effect, so skilfully are the parts woven together.’⁵ Nevertheless, when it comes to evaluation of the philosophical aspect of the text, Jones is very critical indeed and discourages his readers from taking the work too seriously. Though admitting that ‘the medical treatises of the Hippocratic Collection sometimes contain a philosophical element’, he warns that ‘we must not expect of them too much consistency, too much conformity with experience, too much scientific method’.⁶ As far as the scientific method is concerned, Jones holds that theories presented in these treatises (*On Regimen* sits besides *On Nutriment* as his main example), ‘cannot always be treated like a truly scientific account’, because ‘conformity with experience, a *sine qua non* of scientific reasoning, is not to be demanded of works in which imagination plays a large part’.⁷

In response to these critical assessments, which are partly based on anachronistic views on the nature of early Greek science and partly on a rather too narrow approach to the Greek concept of philosophy and its tradition, I shall start in this chapter with an analysis of topics related to the philosophical predecessors and contemporaries of the author. I will begin by briefly illustrating that he builds his account on some of the most powerful philosophical concepts of the fifth century philosophy and develops them into a remarkable synthesis which does not lack original innovations, as it is most evident in chaps. 4 and 5. In the rest of the chapter I shall narrow my focus and examine one of the most prominent philosophical and scientific ideas of the time, namely the concept of *mimēsis*, which is employed in the Hippocratic text in two different contexts, each deserving attention on its own: in the analogies between microcosm and macrocosm, and in the *phusis-technē* analogies.

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⁴ Barnes 1982, 49.
⁵ Jones 1931, xliii.
⁶ Jones 1931, xxiv.
⁷ Jones 1931, xxxix.