CHAPTER TWO
THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND HEALTH AND ILLNESS

Friend (if I may call thee) who ever thou art, that readest this small Treatise, if thou do it only for pleasure, it may add some profit also: but much more if thou practise. For what more pleasure canst thou have in any earthly employment, then to recover thy sickly beast to health by thy labour and industry?¹

As Michael Harward pointed out over three hundred years ago, the successful attempt to return a sickly animal to a state of health could bring a range of economic and emotional rewards to owners. However, it must be remembered that historical concepts of ‘health’ or ‘illness’ may not necessarily be the same as they are today. There are a range of social and cultural factors that, in combination with time period in which they existed, play a huge role in shaping our ideas about what constitutes a healthy or diseased state. This includes the ways in which language is used to define these conditions, the theoretical models that lay behind them and the various mechanisms developed to cope with them.

There is a large body of contemporary literature about what human ‘health’ means in early twenty-first century Western Europe.² However, the most commonly used definition is still that coined by the World Health Organisation in 1946. This states that health is ‘a state of complete physical, mental or social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.³ The most striking part of this statement is the suggestion that a ‘complete’ state of mental or social well-being could ever actually exist. There are other components which are also problematic, such as what ‘well-being’ means, particularly in the context of ‘social’. Finally, it does not seem to include animals, but focuses exclusively on the overpowering importance of human life and the relative insignificance

¹ M. Harward, The Herds-man’s Mate: Or, a Guide for Herds-men (Dublin, 1673), p. 3.
² M. Bury, Health and Illness (Cambridge, 2005), Chapter 1.
of defining health and illness in other types of creatures. That said, a recent survey of modern veterinary texts suggests that the predominant definition of health for animals is also the absence of disease.

The contemporary idea that ‘health’ is the opposite of being diseased is firmly linked to the medical model of ‘biomedicine’ which is predominant in Western Europe and the Americas. Since this is centred on the idea of external pathogens attacking the body, it follows that a body which has been invaded by ‘disease entities’, such as a virus or bacterium, would no longer be in a state of well-being. In order to treat what is ‘a pathological process or deviation from a biological norm’ the modern medical profession relies mainly on technological interventions. Furthermore, our system attempts to generalise causes of disease, how they will affect living creatures and how they can be treated. In many ways, this has turned the ‘art of healing’ in what might be called ‘merely repair work’. Although there has recently been a growing interest in social and/or psychological factors, for most health professionals the emphasis is still on finding new drugs or treatments to eradicate the effects of the attacking pathogens.

This is very different from the leading health model of medieval and early modern Europe. Alternatively referred to as ‘classical’, ‘Hippocratic’, ‘Galenic’ or simply as the ‘humoral’ theory, this was a holistic model of health. Unlike the twenty-first century view that disease can be viewed in isolation as a ‘generic entity’, humoralism rested on the idea that ‘disease was an integral part of the self...[and] the world of God and nature’. In other words, the emphasis was on the individual and their experiences rather than on some external ‘attacker’. A state of health could be defined as when the four humours within the body were ‘in their natural state, or while they balance one another in quality, quantity and mixture’. Such a functionalistic description did not suggest that a ‘perfect’ state of ‘well-being’ was possible. It also acknowledged

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