CHAPTER 8

Physical Pain in Celsus’ On Medicine

Aurélien Gautherie

Abstract

Celsus’ approach to physical pain in his On Medicine (De medicina) is both subtle and extensive. The encyclopaedist shows a deep consciousness of the difficulties of its evaluation and tries to tackle related issues as well as he can. Indeed, taking pain into consideration seems to play a major part in the relationship between the patient and the practitioner.

Introduction

No systematic study of physical pain in antiquity exists, and even though a reference book like Rey’s Histoire de la douleur devotes a full chapter to this period, it can hardly fulfil the curiosity of a Classicist.1 By specialists in antiquity, one can only find articles dealing with single authors,2 with a specific part of the body,3 or written from a pharmacological perspective regarding pain relief remedies.4

Vt summum malum esse corporis dolorem opinor, sic sapientiam summum bonum.

Just like pain of the body is, I believe, the chief evil, wisdom is the highest good (trans. is mine).

※ I’m most grateful to Irene O’Daly and Graham Smith for their help in the translation of my article, subsequently revised by Jon Wilcox.
1 Rey (1993: 14–51).
3 Cocher (1998).
4 E.g., the contribution of Valérie Bonet in this volume.
This sentence, most certainly echoing the second book of the Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations (Tusculanae disputationes)*, was assumed by Augustine to be the transition between the medical and philosophical parts of Celsus’ *Arts (Artes)*. Though it might not be from Celsus himself, it gives a clear idea of how great a part physical pain plays in *On Medicine*. However, Celsian pain has not really attracted attention so far, even if, as we shall demonstrate, the encyclopaedist deals with most—if not all—aspects of it.

Our analysis will first focus on the place of physical pain in Celsus’ *On Medicine*, before tackling the issue of pain evaluation and questioning the role of pain in the friendly medicine promoted by Celsus in his *Preface*.

The Place of Physical Pain in *On Medicine*

Were we to leave aside related words such as *punctio* (“throbbing pain”), *tormentum* (“torment”) and *crucio* (“to torture”), the very noun *dolor* (“pain”) is used by Celsus over two hundred times in *On Medicine*. Its occurrences are divided as follow: 115 in Books 1–4 on dietetics, sixty-five in Books 5–6 on pharmacology, forty-six in Books 7–8 on surgery. Overall, *dolor* is found on its own more densely present in *On Medicine* than is the lexical field of physical pain in the *Hippocratic Corpus*. In addition, *dolor* is more and more frequent as we move through the three main parts of *On Medicine*, with a notable increase in the books on surgery, probably because this part of medicine deals with more severe and therefore painful cases, and also because it demands more attention from the practitioner.

Besides this omnipresence of physical pain in *On Medicine*, it is worth noticing that it stands at the core of every moment of medical practice: diagnosis, therapeutics, and prognosis.

In the context of diagnoses, pain is a sign of an imminent illness to be cured three times out of four. The first step towards potential recovery is to locate physical pain. In *On Medicine*, almost every part of the body is concerned with pain, from the skull to the feet. Among the most prone to pain, head (*caput*) stands first (45x), especially because of headaches associated with fevers. The next most common are (not exhaustively) internal organs (28), eyes (22), and

---

5 Cf. the words credited by Cicero to Aristippus (*Tusc. 2.15*): *summum malum dolorem*, “pain is the chief evil.” For Cicero this opinion is “one of a coward and of a woman” (*eneruatam muliebremque sententiam*). If Augustine’s sentence is authentic, one measures the distance between the Roman philosopher and Celsus, who constantly reminds of the concrete dimension of pain, maybe because of his sincere devotion to the *alter dolens*, “the other suffering.”