Corvisart and Broussais: Human Individuality and Medical Dominance

W. R. Albury

Introduction

The more one tries to capture what was the truly distinctive element in Parisian medicine of the early nineteenth century, the more elusive the quarry seems to become. Both Ackerknecht and Foucault in their respective seminal works acknowledge ‘antecedents’ of the Paris school’s clinical teaching, and in the present volume the contribution by Brockliss explores this issue in great depth. Moreover, Keel has mounted a decisive challenge to the notion that such concepts and practices as tissue theory, diagnostic percussion and the study of pathological anatomy can be uniquely associated with the clinical school of Paris. But if clinical teaching, tissue theory and other such putative touchstones of Parisian medicine prove inadequate, how then should we characterize the importance of the Paris clinic?

One of the themes in Foucault’s analysis of the clinic that seems to have been of less interest to historians of medicine than to other readers of his work, is the relationship between medical developments in early nineteenth-century Paris and the establishment of a new concept of human individuality. As Foucault notes in his opening sentence, *The Birth of the Clinic* ‘is about space, about language, and about death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze’. Much critical attention has been given to the idea of the clinical ‘gaze’, but to treat this element in isolation is to miss a fundamental point of Foucault’s account. For it is the relationship among all these elements that is at issue here, much more than the novelty or uniqueness of any one of these elements in itself. The ‘new medicine’ of Paris, according to Foucault, arose from a
systematic reorganization of this relationship and, in so doing, constituted one of the foundations of modern medical thought.

It is this *formal* reorganization, *in depth*, rather than the abandonment of old theories and systems, that made *clinical experience* possible; it lifted the old Aristotelian prohibition i.e., that nothing below the level of the species could become an object of scientific knowledge: one could at last hold a scientifically structured discourse about an individual.\(^5\)

The theme of the present discussion, then, is the medical knowledge of human individuality – what form the concept of such knowledge took for two of the Paris clinical school’s most prominent figures, how it was systematically related to other concepts in their work, and how it differed from the classical Hippocratic–Galenic concept of the diversity of human constitutions.

**Idiosyncrasy and Health**

The recognition of constitutional variations between different persons was a central feature of Hippocratic–Galenic medicine, something for which the physician had to make due allowance when recommending measures for the preservation or restoration of any individual’s health.\(^6\) Everyone, according to this doctrine, was literally ‘idiosyncratic’ (\(\text{ιδιο} \varepsilon \text{ς} – \text{pertaining to oneself; συν} – \text{with; κρασί} \varepsilon \text{ς} – \text{mixture, blending of constitutional elements}\)). These idiosyncratic differences in anatomy and in ‘temperament’ or ‘complexion’ were not in themselves seen as pathological. On the contrary, they played an important role in the definition of the healthy state; for ‘good complexion – that is, good health – lay somewhere within a range, or latitude, that differed in each individual and could never be precisely measured’.\(^7\) Idiosyncrasy fell within the domain of the medical art, but it was not an object of medical science.

This doctrine of individual variation and the ‘relativistic definition of health’\(^8\) that went with it was still prominent in eighteenth-century medical thinking. As the article, ‘Health’, written for the *Encyclopédie* by the Montpellier medical graduate Arnulfe d’Aumont, maintained:

*Health* does not consist ... in a precise point of perfection which is common to all persons in the exercise of all their functions; but it admits of a kind of latitude of extension ... which establishes many variations in the manner of being in good *health* ....

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\(^5\) Corvisart and Broussais