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## Competing Arts: Medicine and Philosophy in Aristotle's *Protrepticus*

**Abstract:** Aristotle's *Protrepticus* shows traces of a long-standing dispute concerning the hierarchy of different *technai*. In this paper I argue that the *Protrepticus* stages an *agon* between philosophy and medicine, both of which strove for the status of a *techné* of cognitive and intellectual authority. By making reference to several medical methods and concepts, Aristotle tried to reveal the preeminence of philosophy in the knowledge of human nature and, thereby, debunked the claims of medicine for a rightful and unerring arbiter of the best way of life. Through my analysis I try to illustrate that a large part of Aristotle's polemic with medicine was directed against several statements made in Hippocratic literature. Finally, I suggest that in his polemic against medicine Aristotle envisaged a particular type of opponent which is to be identified with the rigoristic medical practitioners and writers whose methods of inquiry and viewpoints were exposed by the Hippocratic author of *Ancient Medicine*.

**Keywords:** Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, ancient philosophy, ancient medicine, Hippocratic literature, philosophical protreptic

As a large amount of scholarly literature attests, the relationship between ancient medicine and philosophy has become in the past few decades a topic of interest among scholars. Various studies have shown that reciprocal influences between the two disciplines in antiquity were pervasive and wide-ranging. Among many illustrative examples, Aristotle's work seems to be a case in point. While Aristotle's natural philosophy has significantly influenced the development of ancient medicine, the influence exerted by medical theories and methods upon his own work is no less extensive. Detailed and insightful analyses of both these aspects have been offered, among others, by Jaeger (1957), Lloyd (1968), Hutchinson (1988), Nussbaum (2009), and Johnson (2012). However, despite all these significant contributions, still there are several aspects of Aristotle's use of medical matters which require further investigation.

The relationship between medicine and philosophy as attested in Aristotle's *Protrepticus* has not yet received its due attention.<sup>1</sup> This paper is intended to contribute to this question. In what follows, I hope to show

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that a closer analysis of the references to medicine in the *Protrepticus* can help us better understand the purpose and intended audience of this Aristotelian work.

Modern scholars tended to interpret the *Protrepticus* as a defense of the Academic concept of philosophy and education against the critiques mounted by Isocrates in the *Antidosis* (Einarson 1936, 273-276; Düring 1961, 33-35; 284-285; Hutchinson 1988, 48; Swancutt 2004, 139; Hutchinson & Johnson 2010, *passim*; Collins 2015, 256-257). While not necessarily disagreeing with this interpretation, my argument will move in a different direction. In what follows, I propose to read the *Protrepticus* as a polemical work directed not only against Isocrates' criticism in the *Antidosis*, but also against some statements made by authors of ancient medical literature. I will argue that the *Protrepticus* staged an *agon* between two competing arts (*technai*): philosophy and medicine. As it will become clear below, one of Aristotle's main aims was to establish the cognitive and intellectual preeminence of philosophy over medicine.

To better evaluate and understand the polemical elements of the *Protrepticus*, we should keep in mind that in fourth century B.C. Athens, philosophers, physicians and teachers of other disciplines often engaged in an intense competition for students, each of them trying to promote an art (*techné*) over those of other competitors. It was this competing marketplace of ideas that prompted authors from different disciplines to write and deliver protreptic speeches, whose main function was to promote a certain course of action, a practical skill, or, more generally, a way of life (Aune 1991, 91). If we take into consideration these facts we can understand why Aristotle points so often to the existence of a plurality of arts, mentioning philosophy, medicine, gymnastics, politics, and others. It seems that one of Aristotle's main purposes in writing the *Protrepticus* was to defend and argue the preeminence of philosophy over such other competing *technai*.

Before delving into the analysis of those fragments of the *Protrepticus* in which there is evidence of polemics against medicine, it is necessary to mention the widespread interest in medical matters in the Greece of the fourth century B.C. As Jaeger (1957, 55) has argued, in the time of Plato and Aristotle, "the methods of medical procedure, like those of mathematics, became the object of widespread interest even among educated laymen." There was a substantial public interest in medical techniques and ancient philosophers often exploited this common interest in medical matters for their ends (Carrick 2001, 21). When they "wished to emphasize the peculiar tasks of the philosophical enterprise or instruct others on the nuances of their own theories, the idiom and examples of medicine often proved to be useful pedagogical tools" (*Ibidem*).

With regard to Aristotle's use of medical matters, it is worth noting, with Jaeger (1957, 55-56), that in the older Peripatetic school medicine was one

of the most respected and studied sciences. This fact occurred mostly because of Aristotle's great interest in medical matters.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, the son of a physician himself, could thus have expected his audience's familiarity with the language and the specific aspects of medicine.

Even if the philosopher held more prestige than the physician in the public's mind, "the average Athenian [also] held in high regard the practical applications of the medical craft" (Carrick 2001, 21-22). Physicians were often regarded as experts in matters pertaining to human health, and, since health was generally held as one of the highest goods, "physicians could wield a considerable power and authority" (*Ibidem*). They were expected to describe the conditions for a healthy and happy life and prescribe a regimen or a diet to be followed by their adherents (Jaeger 1957, 60; Edelstein 1967, 360; Levin 2014, 1). Yet, defining the conditions of a happy life was also the task of the philosopher. The fact that both physicians and moral philosophers gave instructions on how to have a better life, resulted in a competition between the two groups for moral and intellectual authority.

Ancient sources attest to the efforts of several medical writers to present medicine as the highest *technē* or as the single authoritative source of knowledge about human nature. To provide but one relevant example, the Hippocratic author of *Ancient Medicine* overtly argues in favor of the cognitive preeminence of medicine in matters of human nature, health and disease:

"Certain physicians and philosophers (τινες καὶ ἰητροὶ καὶ σοφισταί) assert that nobody can know medicine who is ignorant what a man is. (...) But the question they raise is one for philosophy; it is the province of those who, like Empedocles, have written about nature – what man is from the beginning, how he came into being at the first, and from what elements he was originally constructed. But my view is, first, that all that philosophers or physicians (ἢ σοφιστῆ ἢ ἰητροῦ) have said or written about nature (περὶ φύσιος) no more pertains to medicine than to painting. I also hold that clear knowledge about nature can be acquired from medicine and from no other source (περὶ φύσιος γνῶναί τι σαφές οὐδαμῶθεν ἄλλοθεν εἶναι ἢ ἐξ ἰητρικῆς), and that one can attain this knowledge when medicine itself has been properly comprehended, but till then it is quite impossible – I mean to possess this information, what man is, by what causes he is made, and similar points accurately." (*De vet. med.*, 20, 1-17; transl. by Jones 1957, 53)<sup>3</sup>

The above passage clearly indicates that the Hippocratic author mounted a critique against philosophy, and actively rejected philosophical speculation as a way to obtain real knowledge about human nature. He claimed that medicine alone was the real art (*technē*) that could provide meaningful insights into nature. By stating that there is no clear knowledge about nature

from any other source than medicine, the Hippocratic author implicitly proclaimed the cognitive preeminence of medicine over philosophy.

Hippocratic physicians contrasted their methods to those used in philosophical inquiries into human nature. As the Hippocratic author stresses, “medicine has long had all its means to hand, and has discovered both a principle and a method (ἀρχὴ καὶ ὁδός), through which the discoveries made during a long period are many and excellent” (*De vet. med.*, 2, 1-3, transl. by Jones 1957, 15). The method to be used in medicine is that of observation (ἐμπειρία), not that of philosophical postulates or hypotheses which lacked empirical basis. The author of the treatise on *Ancient Medicine* overtly states that medicine has no need of empty postulate (οὐκ ἤξιουν αὐτὴν ἔγωγε κενῆς ὑποθέσιος δεῖσθαι) (*De vet. med.*, 1, 20-21).<sup>4</sup> He further sets himself against anyone who attempts to “to conduct research in any other way or after another fashion (ἑτέρη ὁδῶ καὶ ἑτέρῳ σχήματι ἐπιχειρεῖ ζητεῖν)” (*De vet. med.*, 2, 7). Thus, from the Hippocratic author’s point of view, only the discoveries of medicine could be regarded as the results of real investigations.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, as L. Dean-Jones rightly stressed, if it is true that “the status of medicine increases in the fourth century to that of a *technē* par excellence”, it is also important to note that increasingly open criticism of medicine dates from the same period (Dean-Jones 2003, 98). More than others, philosophers reacted to the self-positioning of the medicine at the pinnacle of the *technai*.<sup>6</sup> As the analysis below will show, Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* can be interpreted as an attempt to establish philosophy not only as the preeminent *technē*, but also as the most credible and authoritative guide for those in need of a proper way of life. References to medical concepts and methods figure highly in Aristotle’s endeavor to present philosophy as the activity most worth engaging in. This may be regarded as a mark of a certain, though not entirely overt, rivalry with medicine.

As pointed out by Longrigg (1993, 150), like Plato, Aristotle was “firmly committed to the belief that the first principles of medicine should be derived from general philosophical principles.” The speculative reasoning professed by philosophers is thus regarded as necessary also in medical theories about human nature. There is strong evidence in the *Protrepticus* that Aristotle tried to set philosophical methods of inquiry in stark contrast to the method recommended by the author of *Ancient Medicine*. Thus, in frgs 46-48, we find an approach clearly opposed to that described by the Hippocratic author. The Aristotelian text reads: “All intelligent physicians (τῶν ἰατρῶν ὅσοι κομψοί) and most experts in physical training agree that those who are to be good physicians or trainers must have a general knowledge of nature” (δεῖ τοὺς μέλλοντας ἀγαθοὺς ἰατροὺς ἔσεσθαι καὶ γυμναστὰς περὶ φύσεως ἐμπείρους εἶναι). (*Protr.* frg. 46, transl. by Düring

1961, 67) This is because nobody “who has not practiced philosophy and learned truth”, is able to “judge what is just, what is good, and what is expedient.” These preliminary statements serve Aristotle to overtly proclaim philosophy’s cognitive preeminence: “In the other arts (τῶν μὲν ἄλλων τεχνῶν) men do not take their tools and their most accurate reasoning from first principles (οὐκ ἅπ’ αὐτῶν τῶν πρώτων), and so attain something approaching knowledge (σχεδὸν ἴσασιν); they take them at second or third hand or at a distant remove, and base their reasoning on experience (ἐξ ἐμπειρίας). The philosopher alone copies from that which is exact (ἅπ’ αὐτῶν τῶν ἀκριβῶν); for what he looks at is the exact itself, not copies «viz. at second or third hand».” (frgs 47-48, transl. by Düring 1961, 69, slightly modified).

Aristotle’s statements in the fragments quoted above may be seen as a direct and polemical allusion to a few issues raised by the Hippocratic author of *Ancient Medicine*. (Hutchinson 1988, 48-48) As we have seen, the Hippocratic author sharply criticized the philosophers and physicians who made use of speculative inquiry when discussing or writing about nature. The same author also stated that “clear knowledge about nature can be acquired from medicine and from no other source”, arguing thus in favor of the cognitive authority of the *technē* of medicine. By contrast, Aristotle states that those who lack philosophical insight can attain only something close to knowledge (σχεδὸν ἴσασιν). As already mentioned, for Aristotle, the first principles of any theoretical knowledge should be drawn from philosophy. Instead, the physicians who neglect philosophy ground their alleged knowledge of nature on mere experience (ἐξ ἐμπειρίας).<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that a similar outlook appears in Aristotle’s *De sensu*, 436a17-436b1. There, the philosopher states that it is the task of the natural philosopher to inquire into the principles of health and disease (φυσικοῦ δὲ καὶ περὶ ὑγείας καὶ νόσου τὰς πρώτας ἰδεῖν ἀρχάς). In the same passage, Aristotle notices that most natural philosophers as well as the physicians who pursue their art more philosophically (τῶν περὶ φύσεως οἱ πλεῖστοι καὶ τῶν ἰατρῶν οἱ φιλοσοφωτέρας τὴν τέχνην μετιόντες) have this in common: while the former end up by studying medicine, the latter begin by grounding their medical theories on the principles of natural philosophy. That discussing the causes of health and disease is the task not only of the physician but also of the natural philosopher is stated again by Aristotle in *De respiratione*, 480b 22-30. Here too, medical and philosophical activities are intertwined. Like in the *Protrepticus*, Aristotle argues that “those physicians who have subtle and inquiring minds (τῶν τε γὰρ ἰατρῶν ὅσοι κομφοὶ καὶ περίεργοι) have something to say about natural science and claim to derive their principles thence (τὰς ἀρχὰς ἐκεῖθεν ἀξιούσι λαμβάνειν), and the most accomplished of those who deal with natural science tend to end up

investigating medical principles.” (Translation from Longrigg 1993, 3) Thus, it seems that, when arguing that medical research must be based on philosophy, Aristotle manifests an outlook that anticipates Galen's viewpoint that the best physician must also be a philosopher.

Additional evidence of the dramatic contrast between the arguments in *Ancient Medicine* and Aristotle's conception of nature and knowledge is provided in frgs 35-36 of the *Protrepticus*. Here, Aristotle argues that “it is far more necessary to have knowledge of the causes and the elements than of things posterior to them; for the latter are not among the highest realities, and the first principles do not arise from them, but from and through the first principles all other things manifestly proceed and are constituted” (*Protr.* frg. 35, transl. by Düring 1961, 61). And Aristotle concludes: “Whether it be fire or air or number or other natures that are the causes and principles of other things, if we are ignorant of them we cannot know any of the other things” (transl. by Düring 1961, 63). It is likely that these fragments may also have been part of a polemic against the medical writers who rejected and criticized philosophy.

In order to argue more convincingly the preeminence of philosophy over medicine, Aristotle introduced in the *Protrepticus* a *topos* used in moral philosophy, namely the soul-body distinction. The use of this *topos* in the *Protrepticus* may be regarded as part of a broader polemical strategy directed by Aristotle against a certain branch of medical thinkers. As I will indicate in the following, Aristotle lays down the fundamental division between body and soul, in order to provide new arguments for the preeminence of philosophy among other *technai*.

To put it simply, for Aristotle, man consists of body and soul (*Protr.* frg. 23). In frg. 34, *technai* like medicine and gymnastics are introduced as points of comparison in establishing philosophy's task (*ergon*) and specificity. While medicine and gymnastics are described as *technai* of the body, philosophy is regarded as a *techné* of the soul. “Therefore if soul is better than body (being by nature more able to command), and there are arts and sciences (τέχναι καὶ φρονήσεις) concerned with the body, namely medicine and gymnastics (ἰατρική τε καὶ γυμναστική) (...), clearly with regard to the soul too and its virtues there is a care and an art (τις ἐπιμέλεια καὶ τέχνη), and we can acquire it, since we can do this even with regard to things of which our ignorance is greater and knowledge is harder to come by.” (*Protr.* frg. 34, transl. by Düring 1961, 61)

As indicated in the passage above, Aristotle conceives of philosophy as a soul-focused *techné*. Its *ergon* is to care for the health of the soul (*Protr.* frgs 2 and 4). By contrast, the scope of medicine pertains exclusively to bodily health. As frg. 46 reads, physicians and experts in physical training “use their skill only on the health and the strength of the body” (τῆς τοῦ

σώματος ἀρετῆς εἰσι δημιουργοὶ μόνον). (Transl. by Düring 1961, 67, slightly modified) Thus, while medicine aims at providing the health of the body, the *ergon* of philosophy is to create a certain disposition of the soul.

Yet, according to the already mentioned frg. 23, the soul governs the body: “man is by nature composed of soul and body, and soul is better than body, and that which is inferior always is servant to that which is superior” (*Protr.* frg. 23, transl. by Düring 1961, 57; The same point is made in frg. 59). Now, if the soul is better than body (cf. frg. 61: ψυχὴ μὲν σώματος βέλπιον), it follows that the health and disposition of the soul will be of greater importance than the health and state of the body. This statement gives philosophy and medicine respectively different ranks in the hierarchy of the *technai*. In other words, since medicine is a *technē* whose object is the human body – an inferior element when compared to the soul – medicine cannot be placed in the pinnacle of *technai*. It seems likely that by this argument too Aristotle tried to establish the preeminence of philosophy over medicine.

The primacy Aristotle grants to the soul supports his argument that medicine cannot stand as the preeminent *technē*. The body-soul division is of special importance to Aristotle in laying out the theoretical ground for his description of philosophy as the highest and most worth engaging in activity. The soul-body distinction thus provides additional and significant evidence to support our reading of the *Protrepticus* as a polemical work directed against the claims of intellectual and cognitive authority put forward in the fifth and the fourth centuries B.C. by medical thinkers such as the author of *Ancient Medicine*.

Aristotle’s efforts to establish philosophy as the preeminent human endeavor acquires further visibility in the fragments in which he extols the value of philosophical insight. For instance, frg. 65 states: “Health (ὕγεια) is the proper work of the doctor (ἰατρικοῦ), and safety that of the sea-captain. Now we can name no better work of thought or of the thinking part of the soul, than the attainment of truth. Truth therefore is the supreme work of this part of the soul.” (Transl. by Düring 1961, 75) In a similar vein, in frg. 67 Aristotle indicates: “Now than philosophical insight (φρονήσεως), which we maintain to be the faculty of the supreme element in us, there is nothing more worthy of choice (οὐκ ἔστιν αἰρετώτερον οὐδέν), when one state «of the soul» (ἔξις) is compared with another; for the cognitive part, whether taken alone or in combination with other parts, is better than all the rest of the soul, and its excellence is knowledge.” (Transl. by Düring 1961, 77)

For Aristotle, human *endaimonia* cannot be attained just by taking care of the body. Instead, it is necessary to cure and heal primarily the soul. Therefore, philosophers alone are able to control both soul and body and to prescribe right rules of conduct. This idea emerges in frg. 9, where Aristotle

stresses that philosophy alone is the kind of knowledge that “uses reason and envisages good as a whole”, comprising “right judgment and unerring wisdom”, “commanding what ought to be done or not to be done.” (*Protr.* frg. 9; translation by Düring 1961, 51) A similar view appears in frg. 39, where Aristotle depicts the wise man as the right “standard” (κανών), or “landmark” of what is good (ὄρος ἀκριβέστερος τῶν ἀγαθῶν; *Protr.* frg. 49.).

To Aristotle, the task of recommending the best way of life is one of the philosopher’s duties. In writing the *Protrepticus* he was concerned to grant to philosophy the status of an arbiter of the good life. Because of their lack of philosophical grounding, the other arts, including medicine, fall short in prescribing rules of general conduct. While the physician’s activity is restricted to preserving or restoring bodily health, philosophers, by their speculative inquiry can reach the true knowledge of what human nature really is. It is not by chance that Aristotle insists so often in the *Protrepticus* on the philosopher’s grasp of reality and supreme knowledge (*Protr.* frgs 9, 18-20, and 27). By constantly referring to the philosopher’s high speculative activity, Aristotle suggests the physician’s inability to grasp the ultimate truth about the nature of human beings. This is why, according to him, only philosophy, as the supreme *techne*, can be the rightful arbiter of the best way of live.

## **Conclusion**

My aim here was to identify in Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* traces of a polemic against medicine’s claims of being a *techne* of intellectual and cognitive authority. The polemic against medicine in the *Protrepticus* should be understood by paying attention to Aristotle’s contemporary intellectual context. In the fourth century B.C. medicine had reached the status of a highly esteemed *techne*, often regarded as providing regimen and rules of conduct for healthy and happy living. Some of the medical authors also rejected philosophical methods of inquiring into human nature and argued for medicine’s cognitive and intellectual preeminence. The *Protrepticus* may be interpreted as a critical refutation of some of these claims. Aristotle polemicized with those medical writers and practitioners who rejected and condemned any use of philosophical methods and concepts in medical theories about human nature. The medical language in the *Protrepticus* is particularly used in connection with this type of rigoristic medical writers. There is good reason to assume that the *Protrepticus* was at least partially directed against the type of physicians and medical writers who embraced the views laid down in treatises such as *Ancient Medicine*. It is also likely that those people would have recognized in the *Protrepticus* the polemical allusions to their own theoretical statements.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to the *Protrepticus* follow Düring's edition and translation (1961).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. van der Eijk 2005, 14: "Aristotle and his followers were well aware of earlier and contemporary medical thought (Hippocratic Corpus, Diocles of Carystus) and readily acknowledged the extent to which doctors contributed to the study of nature. This attitude was reflected in the reception of medical ideas in their own research and in the interest they took in the historical development of medicine."

<sup>3</sup> A similar point is made in the Hippocratic treatise *De natura hominis*, 1 (Loeb edition).

<sup>4</sup> In the same treatise (*De vet. med.*, 13, 1-3), the author argues against those who "prosecute their researches in the art after the novel fashion, building on a postulate" (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως). Cf. *Ibidem*, 15, 1-4.

<sup>5</sup> See also Plato's *Symposium* (186a-188e), where Eryximachus – a spokesman of the class of the physicians and himself a practitioner of the medical art – extols the merits of the medical *technē*. As pointed out by Levin (2014, 81-82), Eryximachus' words may reflect the position stated in some of the Hippocratic writings. For further discussion of the polemic of medicine against philosophy in the fifth and fourth centuries, see Longrigg 1993, esp. 82-103.

<sup>6</sup> See also Carrick 2001, 22, who points to the fact that for the fourth century B.C., "There is little reason to doubt that on some occasions, at least, philosophers and physicians competed for influence and authority before their public on moral matters relating to the right way to live. (...) Mindful of this potential competition for influence between physicians and philosophers on matters of personal conduct, philosophers from Plato and Aristotle on sought to reassert the supremacy of their discipline as the only proper authority on the ultimate questions of human value."

<sup>7</sup> As Frede (1985, XXIV) has rightly stressed, like Plato, "Aristotle quite firmly reject[s] the idea that a science can be a matter of mere experience. A true art or science has to be based on truly general knowledge, which only reason and not experience can provide us with. However much our experience may suggest that something is quite generally true, experience itself does not justify this assumption. Only reason can. Experience does not give us any explanations but, at best, facts." But see Hutchinson 1988, 50, n. 30, and Longrigg 1993, 159.

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