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The Linacre Lecture 6 May 1943
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AUTHORITY IN MEDICINE: OLD AND NEW

AN INVITATION from the Master and Fellows of St John's College to prepare this lecture brought me satisfaction of a kind which a majority of the audience cannot experience. I have known and loved Cambridge in general and St John's College in particular for many years, but my memories are largely of vacations. You will recall Charles Lamb on Oxford in vacation: 'Here I can take my walks unmolested, and fancy myself of what degree or standing I please. I seem admitted ad eundem. I fetch up past opportunities. I can rise at the chapel-bell and dream that it rings for *me*. In moods of humility I can be a Sizar or Servitor. When the peacock vein rises, I strut a Gentleman Commoner. In graver moments, I proceed Master of Arts.' My memories are not quite those of Elia, for I have known Cambridge in term and even had a tiny share in her teaching; but more akin to his than to those of her sons and daughters. My memories are of week-ends and haunt a set of rooms in the Second Court of St John's where, thirty years ago, a young week-end visitor eagerly listened to his host's account of Cambridge life and, if he did not actually break the 10th Commandment, was certainly more conscious of the advantages than of the drawbacks of Collegiate life.

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The, no longer, young week-end visitor takes pleasure in the thought that his name has secured that degree of permanent association with St John's College which entry on the College roll of memorial lecturers confers. Some lecturer may idly wonder whom this forgotten name denoted and what the predecessor had written, but will hardly satisfy so faint a curiosity. Few lecturers are like the profound classical scholar who, Sir Thomas Watson tells us, 'was possessed with the strange curiosity to read all the printed Harveian Orations' and found very few 'the latinity of which he could praise'.

That Sir Thomas Watson—once a Linacre Lecturer—characterises this zeal as a 'strange curiosity' is not encouraging; a President of the College of Physicians, he had heard a great many Harveian Orations. I have not equalled the industry of the profound classical scholar, but have read a good many Harveian Orations. The variates of my sample had this common feature. *All* the lecturers expressed a high opinion of Harvey; many of them devoted much of their space to a study of some aspect of Harvey's work or of its bearing upon the progress of medical science. My sampling of printed Linacre Lectures has been smaller and the resulting inferences subject to a large error of sampling. But, in my small sample, the merits of the pious founder are not always emphasised.

In 1922 Sir Humphry Rolleston politely observed that, as Sir William Osler had sympathetically considered Linacre in 1908, he need do no more than attempt the briefest reference. In 1928 Sir George Newman did grace-

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fully praise Linacre, but the tribute paid in 1940 to the pious memory of the founder by my old friend and former colleague Dr Topley* reminded me of the lines:

> 'A while like one in dreams he stood,
> Then faltered forth his gratitude
> In words just short of being rude.'

Topley spoke kindly of Linacre as a scholar but: 'As a physician, I cannot avoid the conclusion that the only reason he did no more harm than he did was because the times were too much for him.' Linacre 'spent his labour in putting a brighter polish on the fetters that held medicine in thrall'.

Topley's opinion was that Linacre believed the science of medicine to have been perfected by the Greek physicians and that Galen's works crystallised their conclusive wisdom, so that the primary need of his time was to diffuse accurate knowledge of the ancient treatises.

It *is* certain that Linacre attached great importance to the preparation of a correct and readable translation of Galen's works and himself made valuable contributions to this task. But little else is certain. Our knowledge of Linacre is shadowy. We have a portrait of him and a fairly precise record of his academic career and of his numerous preferments. We have appraisements of his intellectual and ethical qualities by good judges who knew and admired him, even by one, a professor in this university, Cheke, who did *not* greatly admire him. But Linacre

* W. W. C. Topley, *Authority, Observation and Experiment in Medicine*, Cambridge (U.P.), 1940.

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as a human being is hidden from us. Of his personal correspondence one, quite uninformative, letter (1) remains. We do know that he was human enough to quarrel with a friend who thought a book he had written too hard for schoolboys, but what he really thought of the future of medicine, what were his dreams and aspirations, is matter for guess-work. My guess has no more intrinsic value than Topley's, but is different.

However great our admiration of the heuristic method, even now we admit the use of text-books. If respect for authority means accepting the assertions of a teacher whom we believe (without being good judges) to be competent, even now the most independent-minded of medical students bow to authority. The medical curriculum is lengthy; it would be still longer if, for instance, every student verified experimentally text-book statements on the properties and dosages of all the relatively few drugs which are still esteemed. What we try to do is to encourage students to verify experimentally some statements and to put into their hands only text-books all the statements of which have been verified by competent persons.

Linacre must have found that the text-books of his student days were bad, but that they purported to record the opinions and reasonings of Galen. There was a Galenical faith, just as there is now a Marxian faith, and medical students at the end of the fifteenth century were no more familiar with the words of Galen than young English sectaries of Marx with *his* opinions; they were probably

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less familiar with them, Galen wrote much more than Marx and had been far less accurately translated. Linacre was familiar with Galen's writings. The problem he had to solve as an educational reformer was whether Galen's teachings were so bad that no selection of his writings could be made into an elementary text-book, that a root and branch reform was imperative, or whether Galen not as a vague oracle but as a writer known at least at second-hand might be a useful teacher. If Linacre as an educational reformer, like Burke as a political reformer, shrank from violent changes his bias would be towards a use of Galen. The question is whether Linacre's conclusion was wrong. This involves a consideration of what kind of writer Galen was.

Nobody who reads Galen now is in danger of the bias with which the idol of a powerful class must be judged; the enemy of mankind has, however, set two traps for him. These, as usual with Satan's most effective methods, are baited to catch vanity; herd vanity and personal vanity. If one discovers that an ancient writer had reached some conclusion similar to our own on a matter which still interests us, herd vanity assures one that he must have been a very superior man. Individual vanity prompts us to make rather too much of the (to us) hitherto unknown merits of a writer we have read with difficulty; it is not pleasant to think that we have been wasting our time, that the ignorant world is wiser than we. I suppose I show the teeth marks of both traps. During the last twenty-five years, at odd moments, I have read a fair amount of

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Galen's work (2), say 15 per cent of it carefully and another 10 per cent cursorily, including two of the three larger treatises Linacre translated. I avoided Galen's anatomical works and concentrated on his epidemiology, general hygiene and medical psychology.

The first thing which occurs to a modern reader is that Galen was almost comically unlike one's idea of an oracle or a prophet. He had certainly two characteristics in common with the Hebrew prophets, viz. an extremely low opinion of most of his contemporaries and an immense command of the vocabulary of vituperation; also, at times, a beauty of phrasing which still glows faintly in translation. Thus he reproved a writer who, he said, ignored the creative power of Nature and adds: 'Aristotle, dealing with this very subject, wondered whether there were not a beginning more divine, something other than just heat and cold and moist and dry. Wherefore I think it wrong of men to draw such rash conclusions in matters so great and to assign to the qualities alone the power of shaping the parts. It may be these are nothing more than instruments and something else the master hand' (*de Temperamentis*, Bk. 2, Kühn, vol. 1, pp. 635–6). There the resemblance ends. Galen was emphatically not the prophet of the Most High God, dictating commandments; he was for ever giving reasons, he was sometimes witty, often abusive, but always arguing. If he conceived himself to be a dictator (there is no reason to think he did) he was guilty of the imprudence Bagehot attributed to John Milton, who made God argue, with the in-

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evitable consequence that later generations would discover God did not argue very well.

Galen's epidemiological influence was, I think, bad because he over-rated the creative power not of Nature but of his own intelligence. He skilfully developed a formal description of epidemic phenomena, a description which actually did describe the phenomena and explain why epidemics rose, declined and fell, so neatly that men might easily think the problem solved (3). He never considered alternative hypotheses and deserves blame for that because the demography and medical statistics of Imperial Rome were at least as well documented as those of London in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Had Galen been less proud of his intellect, he could have done as much as John Graunt, a humble-minded researcher, did 1500 years later. We can hardly blame Galen's mediaeval pupils, who had no demographic data of value, for not doing what he left undone.

Galen's treatise on personal hygiene, one of the longer works translated by Linacre, is probably the most readable and illuminating of his books. It is not tediously long—a modern translation would run perhaps to 250 octavo pages—and could easily be reduced in bulk by omitting repetitions; Galen's sense of literary form was not Platonic. The proportion of repulsively obsolete technicality is small. Within the limits he defines, Galen's advice would be regarded by most physicians as excellent. The narrowness of the limits, however, shocks our humanity. Early in his treatise, Galen tells the reader that a great majority

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of mankind live 'encumbered by affairs which must need injure those engaged in them, and cannot change their condition'. Some are poor, some slaves, some unintelligent. 'To lay down rules of hygiene for such persons is idle. But if anyone by luck or design is free, to him it is proper to describe how he may be healthy, may be tried as little as possible by disease and may grow old agreeably' (Kühn, VI, 82).

Having thus limited the discussion to a small minority, viz. to persons who can command the services not only of physicians but gymnastic instructors, architects, cooks and personal servants, he gives an admirable exposition of practical dietetics, physical training and the Horatian philosophy of life. The importance of moderation, the need to distrust general formulae, to study the individual are emphasised in a way which would surprise a reader who has supposed Galen to be a dogmatist—in the modern sense of the word *not* the Galenical sense. A modern reader may object that while Galen's practical advice is sound, his reasons for the advice are nonsensical. For instance, while his remark that to give a boy wine can do him no good and must do him harm is morally and medically sound (Kühn, VI, 55), the explanation, that the humoural type of children is humid and this deviation is exacerbated by alcohol, is nonsense. But—quite apart from the danger of misinterpretation which a changing connotation of technical words brings—one feels that these 'reasons' are often either rationalisations in the modern sense, or simply a framework of reference, a kind

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of mnemonic which helps Galen, and perhaps his readers, to retain in an orderly way knowledge which has been gained by experience. He makes the significant remark: 'I always teach that in the art of medicine, reasoning may easily find an explanation; belief comes from experience' (Kühn, VI, 368).

If Linacre thought this treatise a sound introduction to the study of personal hygiene, I see no reason to dissent from his opinion.

As a medical psychologist, Galen was in advance of any medical writers of the Renaissance age (4).

His chief psychological work, *de Placitis*, the only one of his major writings available in a modern critical edition (Mueller's) (5), probably never had many medical readers. It is very long and to a modern reader the Stoic doctrine that πάθη, Cicero's *perturbationes*, St Thomas Aquinas' *passiones animae*, our *affects*, have their origin wholly in faulty intellectual processes and can be corrected by wholly intellectual, cognitive methods, does not now seem to need refutation. Indeed, one is apt to suspect that the Stoic theory could not have been so silly as Galen seems to say it was. Reference, however, to the *Tusculan Disputations*—the work of a disciple not a critic of Stoicism—does not confirm the suspicion. 'Totus vero iste qui vulgo appellatur amor—nec invenio quo nomine alio possit appellari—tantae levitatis est, ut nihil videam quod putem conferendum' is a fine phrase, but an odd one in the mouth of a man whose career was destroyed by affects *his* excellent intellect could never control. Galen did

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realise that the clinical treatment of psychoneuroses needed sympathetic insight and, had his 'authority' prevailed, the volume of psychoneurotic misery might have been diminished a few centuries sooner. That all he knew and all St Thomas Aquinas knew—a good deal more than Galen—has been independently re-discovered, does not alter the fact that Galen was a much better medical psychologist than most medical successors down to very modern times.

If I have *fairly* characterised the work of Galen, then, in my view, Linacre in retaining some of Galen's writings as text-books did not convict himself of authoritarianism in the disparaging sense of the word, viz. as used by Topley. But a closer examination of what we do mean by authority in science is needed.

The emotional attitude which compels one to believe that what A said is true and to decline even to examine evidence that what A said is false can have no defenders among men of science. But I doubt whether it *ever* greatly influenced men inquisitive enough and intelligent enough to discover any new truth. Such men as Galen and Thomas Aquinas, who professed enormous reverence for authority—Galen for that of Hippocrates, Thomas for that of Aristotle—will often be found attributing to their professed masters their own, original opinions.

Most modern authors speak with a special contempt of the Scholastics. Linacre's biographer, Johnson, is eloquent on that theme. My casual reading of these derided thinkers leads to me conclude that they were neither less

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