REVIEW ARTICLES

GALEN'S TREATISES

DAS, Aileen R. (ed.), *Galen's Humanistic Medicine. The Essay* Quod Optimus Medicus. (SAPERE 43.) Pp. xiv + 190, ills. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023. Cased, €84. ISBN: 978-3-16-161957-1.

JOHNSTON, Ian / PAPAVRAMIDOU, Niki (trans.), *Galen on the Pulses. Medico-historical Analysis, Textual Tradition, Translation*. (Medicine in the Medieval Mediterranean 10.) Pp. xii + 555. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2024. Cased, £113.50, €129.95, US$144.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-061161-8.

POLEMIS, Ioannis / XENOPHONTOS, Sophia (edd., trans.), *Galen:* On Avoiding Distress *and* On My Own Opinions. (*Trends in Classics* Supplementary Volume 151.) Pp. xiv + 168. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. Cased, £82, €89.95, US$98.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-132041-0 (978-3-11-132081-6 open access).

doi:10.1017/S0009840X25102059

The books under review contain new translations of Galen's works, accompanied by studies not intended solely for experts. Two of them deal with sources themselves written for a wider audience: Galen's opusculum *That the Best Doctor is also a Philosopher* (*QOM*); and two texts from MS Vlatadon 14, whose microfilm copy was discovered by A. Pietrobelli in 2005: *On Avoiding Distress* (*Indol.*) and *On My Own Opinions* (*Prop. Plac.*). The third book, in turn, provides the translation of Galen's specialised works on pulses. While the first two books complement the well-known image of Galen as a popular philosopher, the third provides rare access to sources of his reputation as a natural scientist and founder of scientific medicine.

The title of the volume edited by Das is explained in a densely written preface (pp. viii–ix). The editor offers an interpretative approach to Galen's work that goes beyond the purely historical and exegetical level. It is based on the presumed analogy between the role of philosophy in Galen's conception of medicine and the role of humanities in relation to medicine in the contemporary field known as 'medical humanities'. This is an intriguing idea, but it is not developed in detail. Nor does it seem to be close to the hearts of the authors of the individual chapters. F. Steger is closest to the approach outlined in the preface when he attempts to identify points at which Galen's concept of medicine is still relevant. These include observations such as that medical practice should be guided by ethical standards (p. 48); that medicine is to be founded on natural explanatory models (pp. 48–51) and should be evidence-based and logical (pp. 51–3 and 61–3); that doctors should continuously educate themselves and put their knowledge into practice (pp. 53–5); that they should be guided by the interests of the patient (pp. 55–6); that they should not be greedy (pp. 59–61). However, one wonders if these general points of contact are correctly described as 'ancient lessons', as their specific content is always supplied from common sense reflections on contemporary medical practice. B.L. Wickkiser explores the role of Asclepius among first/second-century elites, including, and above all, Galen. While useful in itself, the chapter

The Classical Review (2026) 76.1 23–28 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25102059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stands out as having no obvious connection either to medical humanities or to *QOM*. A brief coda whose purpose is to justify its inclusion in the book (pp. 88–9) strikes this reader as unconvincing. The next three chapters are exegetical pieces focused on *QOM*, each of which presents a different picture of its goal. T. Curtis contextualises *QOM* by comparing it to the second-century CE philosophical rhetoric of Epictetus or Maximus of Tyre, arguing that Galen's goal is to prove 'that the study of Hippocratic medicine is conducive to the philosophical life' (p. 97). Curtis thus regards *QOM* as a sort of philosophical protreptic, whose aim is to bring the readers of the Hippocratic corpus beyond medical expertise and guide them towards the same goal as Maximus guides the readers of Homer (pp. 110–11). R.M. Rosen directly contradicts this conclusion, arguing that *QOM* is 'not a protreptic guide for future doctors' (p. 118). Rather, it is 'a personal assessment of the great Hippocrates', directed against those of his followers who deny that Hippocrates was a philosopher (pp. 118–22). In other words, Galen is concerned with constructing 'a historical portrait of a distant historical figure', focusing on the question of whether this figure can be considered a philosopher (pp. 122–3). Describing this question as 'rather pedantic' (p. 119) and the debate as 'somewhat petty' (p. 121), Rosen makes no secret of his negative assessment of Galen's argument: he complains about its incoherence (pp. 119–20) and accuses Galen of a 'flight of fancy' (p. 124) or 'awkward anachronistic shoehorning' (p. 125). There is no space here for a proper evaluation of this dispute. But T. Tieleman offers a sort of middle ground. Like Rosen, he points out that in *His Own Books* (9.14, 162.7–11 V. Boudon-Millot) Galen mentions *QOM* among works pertaining to Hippocrates; and he interprets it to the effect that Galen regarded *QOM* as an introduction to the Hippocratic treatises explained in his commentaries (p. 128). However, for Tieleman, the point Galen makes in *QOM* is not historical: rather, Galen argues that, if the followers of Hippocrates are sincere about their adherence to their master, they should study philosophy and keep practising it as Galen does, as this is the best way to follow Hippocrates in their own time (pp. 133–4). This stimulating exchange offers insight into Galenic scholarship, which, as any expert discussion, leaves many questions open. It is followed by two concise and informative chapters tracing the history of the reception of *QOM* and the ideal of the perfect physician from late antiquity to the Arabic-Islamic World (E. Wakelnig) and in the Renaissance (C. Petit).

The text of *QOM* printed on pp. 24–31 is based on the edition by V. Boudon-Millot (henceforth 'BM'), with some modifications proposed by H.-G. Nesselrath (pp. 20–1). I found the majority of these corrections plausible, except for the addition of ἄριστος in *QOM* 3.11 (p. 30 = 291.16 BM), which (as pointed out by Das, p. 43 n. 54) is without textual foundation and strikes me as superfluous. Also, the change of ἀσκεῖν to ἀσκητέον in 3.4 (p. 28 = 290.8 BM) is unnecessary, as the infinitive arguably still depends on ἀνάγκη in 289.18 BM. There is a difficult passage in the first sentence, which, according to the Aldina edition, reads: ἐπαινοῦσι μὲν γὰρ Ἱπποκράτην καὶ πρῶτον ἁπάντων ἡγοῦνται γενέσθαι δὲ αὐτοὺς ἐν ὁμοίοις ἐκείνῳ πάντα μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦτο πράττουσιν (284.6–9 BM). In her translation, Das follows BM, who (after Coray) changes αὐτοὺς to αὑτοὺς, and translates: 'For, while they praise Hippocrates and consider him the foremost of all doctors, when it is a matter of bringing themselves to a similar level as him, they will do anything rather than that' (p. 25). As reported, Nesselrath finds the passage suspect, as 'the strange expression ἐν ὁμοίοις τινὶ γενέσθαι is apparently found nowhere in Greek literature' (p. 32 n. 5). However, the phrase ἐν ὁμοίοις γενέσθαι/εἶναι does occur (e.g. in Libanius or Gregory of Nyssa) roughly in the sense of 'getting into/being in the same position', and there is no reason why it should not be linked with a dative. But I agree that the syntax is odd and propose to emend as follows: ἐπαινοῦσι μὲν γὰρ Ἱπποκράτην καὶ πρῶτον ἁπάντων ἡγοῦνται <τὸ> γενέσθαι [δὲ] αὐτοὺς ἐν ὁμοίοις ἐκείνῳ, πάντα <δὲ> μᾶλλον ἢ τοῦτο

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25102059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

πράττουσιν. Translation: 'For they praise Hippocrates and consider it most important to attain the same level, yet they do everything else but achieve it'. Of the minor reservations I have about the lively and readable translation, I will mention only the rendering of the often quoted phrase ὅστις ἂν ἰατρὸς ᾖ, πάντως οὗτος ἐστι καὶ φιλόσοφος (3.11, p. 30 = 291.16 BM). Although in Nesselrath's text, πάντως belongs to the apodosis, Das translates as if it belonged to the protasis: '… whoever is a doctor *in every way* is clearly also a philosopher'. She probably follows BM, who puts a comma after πάντως and translates accordingly. Yet there is little doubt that πάντως ('by all means' *vel sim*.) expresses the force of an inference, as it often does in Galen, approaching the meaning of 'necessarily'.

Polemis and Xenophontos produce a new critical edition of texts that have been edited several times since the sensational discovery of Vlatadon 14: *Indol.* five times and *Prop. Plac*. twice. However, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that the editors, based on personal contact with the Monastery of Vlatadon, gained access to the original manuscript, discovered by S. Alexandrou in 2008, while previous researchers had to rely on an old and partly illegible microfilm. The editors usefully summarise the main findings of their research on pp. 28–38 (*Indol*.) and 40–4 (*Prop. Plac*.). Only a few of the deviations from previous editions draw on better access to the original, and notoriously difficult passages mostly remain as controversial as before. Overall, the textual decisions made by the editors are reasonable and well justified, and the generous critical apparatus, which attempts to record all different readings and proposed emendations, makes the book an indispensable starting point for the study of both texts.

In what follows I register a few doubts or disagreements. (1) In *Prop. Plac*. 1.14 (p. 96) the editors retain the MS reading, where others have made corrections: (διὰ τὴν) κατέχουσαν ἀτυχίαν ἰατρικὴν τε καὶ φιλοσοφίαν, and translate: 'because of the prevailing failure in relation to [the study of] medicine and philosophy'. But the translation does not match the Greek, which lacks the equivalent of 'in relation to' and seems syntactically incoherent. (2) As is clear from the translation, *Prop. Plac*. 2.2–7 (p. 98) is construed as a long conditional sentence with the apodosis in the form of a rhetorical question: 'Since I say that I am ignorant of such things, namely of what the nature of the creator of everything in the world is …, do I then say that I am perplexed about the gods as well?' But it is likely that τὰ τοιαῦτα ('such things') in 2.3 is analeptic, referring to τοιαῦτα mentioned in the previous sentence – whether the world is generated or not or whether there is anything outside of it – and that the apodosis starts already with δηλονότι in 2.3: 'However, since I say that I am ignorant of such things, obviously [I say the same] also …' This interpretation gives justice to καὶ before τὸν δημιουργὸν, ignored in the translation. If this is correct, there should be a full stop after διατρίβων in 2.5. (3) In *Prop. Plac*. 3.7–8 (p. 98) the editors change κοινωνήσας to κοινωνῆσαι. I fail to see why this is necessary or even better than the received text. (4) *Prop. Plac*. 6.7–8 (p. 112) is one of the happy places where the first-hand study of the manuscript provides a better reading than editions based on low-quality microfilm. The passage deals with the generation of the soul, whose exact description previous editors were unable to decipher. According to Polemis and Xenophontos (p. 41) the MS 'clearly' reads: ἡ ψυχὴ σύν τῷ διαπλαττομένῳ σώματι τὴν γένεσιν ἔχει, i.e. it describes the generation of the soul as taking place 'along with the formation of the body'. This statement is a protasis introduced by εἴπερ and followed, as we are told, by: κατ … ὴν τῶν τεσσάρων στοιχείων κρᾶσιν αὐτὴν γίνεσθαι. The editors propose, 'with some reservation', the supplement κατ[ὰ ψυχ]ὴν, and translate: 'its generation must also be a mixture of the four elements in the soul' (p. 113). However, it is hard to make sense of this or of the Greek sentence. A much more satisfactory sense would be produced by reading κατὰ τὴν, namely the following: 'If the soul comes into being along

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25102059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the formation of the body, it comes into being based on the mixture (κατὰ τὴν … κρᾶσιν) of the four elements'. (5) Finally, in *Prop. Plac*. 14.9–11 (p. 134) the editors adopt two corrections that can (and should) be avoided, reading καὶ αὐτῆς (instead of κατ' αὐτὴν) in 14.10 and ὑπ' αὐτὴν (instead of ὑπ' αὐτῆς) in 14.11. In the preceding lines Galen mentions several views of what the soul might be: some believe that it is an incorporeal substance, others that it is pneuma, yet others believe that 'there is no being peculiar to it, except for the peculiarity (τὴν ἰδιότητα) of the substance of the body'. There is an asyndeton after οὐσίας in 14.9, which could be healed by adding καὶ, but, starting from there, only one minor correction is needed in the next two lines, which is adopted by all editors: οὐσῶν to οὐσιῶν. According to the considered view – i.e. the view that the soul possesses no substance apart from the peculiarity of the nature of the body – the soul is said to possess the powers of the things it is naturally capable of doing, but 'these powers are not some substances having their own nature' (οὐκ οὐσιῶν τινῶν ἐκείνων ἰδίαν φύσιν ἐχουσῶν, where the referent of ἐκείνων are δυνάμεις and the participle of the genitive absolute – ὄντων – is omitted). Rather, 'the active substance of the soul' (τῆς ἐνεργούσης οὐσίας κατ' αὐτὴν, scil. τὴν ψυχὴν) – i.e. the peculiarity of the nature of the body, considered to be the soul's substance – 'is said to have the powers of things it is naturally capable of doing in relation to the things that come about through it (δι' αὐτῆς) and by it (ὑπ' αὐτῆς)'.

Xenophontos's translation is generally clear, but sometimes lacks consistency. For instance, ἀλλοιωτικὴ δύναμις is translated as 'altering' or 'alterative' on one occasion (p. 101) and 'transformative' on another (p. 133). The word ἰδιότης is translated as 'peculiar nature' on p. 119, but 'propriety' on p. 135. Θεωρητικὴ φιλοσοφία is 'speculative' on one occasion (p. 117) and 'theoretical' on another (p. 139). Πιθανόν is both 'plausible' (p. 121) and 'probable' (p. 123), εὔλογον both 'reasonable' and 'logical' (p. 123). These epistemologically significant words should be translated consistently, especially in the course of the same argument. Sometimes the translation misses the point: ἄκουε δέ μου λέγοντος εἶδος ὡς πρὸς τὴν τῆς ὕλης ἀντίθεσιν (*Prop. Plac*. 6.12–13) does not mean 'Pay attention when I say "form" as opposed to matter' (p. 113), but rather: 'Understand that I mean form as opposed to matter'. In *Prop. Plac*. 8.1–3 Galen mockingly compares doctors and philosophers who contradict the proposition that the ruling power of the soul is in the brain to those who do not believe that the Sun is larger than the Earth. The translation presents the *comparandum* as an example (ὥσπερ being rendered as 'for example', p. 115), as if those who do not believe that the Sun is larger than the Earth were the *instances* of doctors and philosophers who contradict Galen's proposition. In *Prop. Plac*. 11 Galen argues, based on Hippocrates, that food and drink produces not only blood in our body, but also the other three humours. However, the question arises whether these humours are produced κατὰ τὸν προηγούμενον λόγον or κατ' ἀκολουθίαν (11.33–4). This is a technical distinction (of Stoic origin) between that which (in the providentially organised cosmos) happens according to the primary intention and the unintended consequences. Galen claims that, from a practical point of view, it does not matter 'whether we say that the four humours are elementary (στοιχειώδεις) or whether only blood is produced by nature according to the primary intention (κατὰ πρῶτον λόγον), but the other three humours follow its generation of necessity' (11.41–3). The translation misses this. In the first instance, κατὰ τὸν προηγούμενον λόγον is rendered as 'according to the previous argument', and, in the second, κατὰ πρῶτον λόγον is translated 'in the first instance', as if it referred merely to a temporal sequence. Finally, on p. 97 n. 1, the translator remarks that Liddle–Scott–Jones fails to register the meaning of λέξις as 'the literal meaning of the word', which is attested in *Prop. Plac*. 1.5. In this passage Galen speaks about a particular verse (ἔπος) of the poet Parthenius, which was subject to different interpretations. It so happened that Parthenius himself met two grammarians, one of which interpreted the λέξις of the verse

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25102059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(ἐξηγεῖτο … τὴν κατ' αὐτὸ λέξιν) just as Parthenius intended when he composed it (οὕτως … ὡς ὁ Παρθένιος ἐννοήσας ἐποίησεν). It is far from obvious that in this passage λέξις indicates the literal meaning of the word. Rather it seems to refer to the combination of words being said or written, which is subject to interpretation. This use of the word λέξις – as that which is said or written, as opposed to that which is understood – is rather common and occurs, for example, in the context of Galen's Hippocratic commentaries.

If Galen's short and widely studied works still pose a challenge for both exegetes and translators, this is even more true of his multi-volume treatises dealing with complex questions of natural philosophy, many of which have not been translated into any modern language. Embarking on such studies requires a great deal of time and dedication, and the number of people venturing into this business is so small that every such attempt should be welcomed with enthusiasm. At the same time this job requires rather wide-ranging erudition, which is more likely to be found in research teams than in individuals. When an essential component of this erudition is lacking, the results may still seem dazzling, but upon closer inspection they reveal so many problems that one begins to doubt how seriously to take them. In the last of the books reviewed here Johnston makes available in English all of Galen's writings on the pulse, including the four great pulse treatises, each of which consists of four volumes. None of the writings translated (except for the short *De usu pulsuum* and the Pseudo-Galenic *Medical Definitions*) has been properly edited (we are still relying on K.G. Kühn), which is why Johnston joined forces with Papavramidou, a specialist in the history of medicine. In a highly valuable chapter (pp. 41–59) Papavramidou gives a list of all relevant manuscripts and their precise location, and provides *stemmata codicum*, based mainly on previous research by H. von Staden and I. Garofalo, but also – with regard to the great treatises – on her own collation. She also provides a useful overview of textual history.

The core of the book consists of translations accompanied by synopses and footnotes. The translations are Johnston's (p. vi) and made on the basis of Kühn's text, with some manuscripts also consulted to some extent (p. 63). The style and quality of these translations varies: in narrative or descriptive passages they are quite reliable and smooth; but in passages that are more complex in terms of ideas or syntax they often fall into literalism. This, in combination with insufficient attention to the syntactic structure of the Greek sentence, omission or misinterpretation of particles, the use of semantically shifted or vague equivalents and various other errors, often produces a text whose meaning is difficult to discern. There is not enough space in this review to adequately illustrate this point. I will select only a short example from a less technical and relatively easy part of the first book of *The Difference in Pulses* (p. 159):

> Everyone who wishes to investigate the pulses comes, I think, to the same thing–what do they signify by their natures? Although they cannot accomplish their objective without investigation of classess and kinds, they do anything rather than this. But here we avoid this nonsense of theirs, and when we turn to what they might wish to bring forward, let us pursue utility, saying this much in advance–to those who wish for definitions in respect of the pulses, or to learn about the correctness of their names, everything is written in the book following this, i.e. the second book. This particular book has a single use only, containing what is necessary but touching on none of the sophistical investigations, so that if someone should ultimately wish to omit those, he could do so.

I hope I am not exaggerating when I say that this passage as it stands is incomprehensible. A more accurate rendering shows that Galen is not to blame for this confusion (I mark the most important differences in italics):

> For I suppose that everyone who wishes to explore the pulses has arrived at the question of what they *naturally* signify. And *since they are able to achieve this goal without examining genera and*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25102059 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *species, they do everything but examine them*. In this regard too, however, we will avoid their nonsense and *let them claim whatever they want*, while sticking to what is useful. Before we start, though, let us add that for those who wish to learn about the definitions of pulses or the correct use of their names, everything is written *in the books* [*of the present treatise*] *that follow this first book*. For *only this book*, which does not touch on questions related to sophistry, *contains what is useful*. Therefore, if anyone wishes to skip *the following* [*three*] *books entirely*, they may do so.

Johnston's translation most closely resembles a working draft, not intended for publication, but rather for a seminar. Greek words are often simply transliterated, the main text includes explanatory notes or alternative options. For instance: 'Of the causes changing the pulses, there are the causes of their genesis, and the causes of their change only. Those of genesis are the use (need) for which they arise, the capacity by which they arise, and the organs (arteries) through which they extend. All the rest are causes of change – both those called *proegoumenic* (internal antecedent) and those called *prokatarktic* (external antecedent)' (p. 338); 'And when we say strength or excellence of a power (capacity), or conversely weakness and badness, we must understand these terms in regard to the function (action)' (p. 339). Johnston is right that the semantic fields of Greek and English words often do not overlap and that consistency is sometimes difficult. For example, his observation that χρεία ('use') occasionally takes on the meaning of 'need' is valuable, and δύναμις is certainly both 'capacity' and 'power'. However, this indecisiveness complicates reading and is sometimes confusing, for example when the pair of *differentiae* called ὁμαλότης–ἀνωμαλία is translated alternatively as 'equality–inequality' and 'evenness–unevenness' (pp. 75 and 160), but then ἀνωμαλία becomes 'irregularity' (p. 170), which is elsewhere the equivalent of ἀταξία (p. 160). At other times, the translation blurs locally significant semantic distinctions, such as those between ἀλλοίωσις and τροπή, both of which are translated as 'change' in the same sentence (p. 341).

In short, in its present form, this translation can serve at most as a basic orientation in the thematic structure of the treatises and, of course, as a challenge to those who are not satisfied with this pioneering attempt, to take on the difficult task of conveying the intellectual richness of Galen's scientific writings to contemporary readers.

Despite all their shortcomings – whether minor, as in the case of the first two books, or serious, as in the case of the third – all three reviewed titles document a growing interest in Galen's work and an effort to make it accessible to a wider audience. That in itself is a good thing.[1]

Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences MATYÁŠ HAVRDA
havrda@flu.cas.cz

[1]Research for this paper was supported by the Czech Science Foundation, Grant No. 26-23465S.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25102059 Published online by Cambridge University Press