

Roberto Lo Presti, *In forma di senso. L'encefalocentrismo del trattato ippocratico Sulla malattia sacra nel suo contesto epistemologico*. (Aglaia 10.) Pp.xiv + 225. Rome: Carocci editore, 2008. Paper. ISBN: 978-88-430-4592-1.

A little over a decade into the twenty-first century, the brain is shaping up to play a starring role: cognitive science and neuroscience seem to be everywhere, boasting converts across the academy—not only in the sciences but also in disciplines such as anthropology, economics, and literary theory—and making daily appearances in the popular press. It is perhaps no surprise that the rise of the brain would eventually lead to renewed interest in the origins of encephalocentrism in the West.

L. P.'s study of the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease* (*Morb. Sacr.*), one of the most important documents for the early history of the brain, takes a step in just this direction. Exploiting the fresh perspective afforded by neuroscience, L. P. manages to open up an intriguing and original reading of a familiar text. He does so, admirably, without falling back into the old habit of reading the early medical texts for what they 'got right', a habit that has, in fact, been particularly pronounced in interpretations of *Morb. Sacr.* as a paragon of secular rationalism. While L. P. takes his cue from concepts at home in the new models of cognition—emergence, connection, epiphenomenalism, morphogenesis—he devotes most of his time to a patient, detailed examination of the text in its intellectual context, its internal logic, and its very constitution by philologists. If a kernel of difficulty persists in the Hippocratic author's account of the transition from physiological process to the emergence of sense, this is, perhaps, inevitable. The great virtue of L. P.'s approach is that he does not try to resolve this difficulty by positing a latent mind-body dualism. Rather, he makes a genuine effort to think his way into a pre-Platonic physiological model of mind. The value of the results warrants a wide audience for the book, not only among historians of ancient medicine, science, and philosophy but also among their counterparts in modern history.

In Chapter 1, L. P. lays out the evidence for Presocratic inquiries into perception, cognition, and consciousness, focusing on Alcmaeon, Empedocles, Diogenes, and Democritus. Anticipating his reading of *Morb. Sacr.*, he defends Alcmaeon's differentiation between perceiving (αἰσθάνεσθαι) and understanding (ξυνιέναι) as a significant moment in the history of mind while resisting readings that place these faculties in separate locations or otherwise sharply oppose them. Instead,

he sees Alcmaeon as theorizing a single cognitive faculty that manifests itself in various ways. As is always the case with the Presocratics, the evidence is tough to parse, and L. P.'s analysis at times verges on special pleading. Nevertheless, he makes a good case for reading Alcmaeon as part of a larger intellectual effort to make both biological life and knowledge subject to the same explanatory principles—above all, *physis*.

In Chapter 2, two early medical treatises are given pride of place: *On Breaths* (*Flat.*) and *On Regimen* (*Vict.*). Discussing the latter, which has at times been seen as Orphic-Pythagorean in its pairing of *sōma* and *psychē* (anomalous for the Hippocratic Corpus), L. P. unsurprisingly follows those who have argued for the unity of the work and its strongly materialist conception of the *psychē*. At the same time, he credits the treatise for recognizing the *specificity* of cognition as a physiological activity. This recognition is formalized in the author's concept of a *psychē* that, while embedded in the *sōma*, constitutes a particular dimension of its physicality. *Flat.* has less new to offer L. P.'s main thesis, although it does provide further evidence of a medical interest in the physiological conditions required for reliable perception and cognition.

Chapter 3 kicks off the discussion of *Morb. Sacr.* proper with an acute critique of what L. P. calls the 'instructionist' reading of the text's encephalocentrism. The reading, which has dominated contemporary interpretation, sees the brain as gathering or filtering intelligence from the 'purest' part of the air and then dispatching orders to the rest of the body. By insisting on a fundamental cut between the intelligent activity of the brain and the mechanical activity of the body, such a reading, L. P. argues, harbours an insidious dualism. He deftly demonstrates how the 'instructionist' reading has insinuated itself even into the choices made about the text, notably by its most recent editor Jacques Jouanna.¹ L. P. favors instead the interpretative model developed by Jackie Pigeaud, who describes the brain's activity in terms of the constitution of sense.

It is the concept of sense that L. P. pursues in the following two chapters. The primary task of Chapter 4 is a reassessment of the term *hermēneus*, usually translated as 'interpreter'. L. P. leans on Glenn Most's iconoclastic reading of Pindar's second *Olympian* to shift the connotation of the word away from 'explanation' to something more like 'translation', with an emphasis on making manifest what was previously

¹ Jouanna, Jacques, *Hippocrate, La maladie sacrée* (Paris: 2003).

latent.² Drawing, too, on the usage of the term in Aristotle and the medical writers, L. P. adopts the idea of a shift from invisibility to visibility as the key to what he calls a ‘teoria biologica del senso’ (146).

But what does it mean to create sense? L. P. begins the final chapter by trying to articulate a model where the body or one of its parts ‘senses’ changes or qualities, where sensing is not intellectual or even conscious but in some way ‘impersonal’, a physical reaction that registers discontinuities in the perceptual field. How does this explain the brain’s encounter with the air? L. P. rejects a reading wherein the brain receives information already constituted by the air (or its *akmē*) in order to argue that sense *emerges* in the encounter between the air and the brain. The brain here is not a mere receptacle but responds ‘morphogenetically’ to the air, adjusting itself to the qualities inherent in the *akmē* (coldness, dryness). How does this lead to sense? L. P. homes in on the author’s casting of the brain’s activity in terms of discernment, arguing that the selection involved in cognitive behavior ‘replica o...semplicemente si genera dall’operazione fisiologica di separazione e secrezione’ (184). Sense, then, is the flip side of a physiological operation, irreducible to that operation and yet inextricable from it. The brain’s response to the air goes on to ripple through the rest of the body, manifesting itself in diverse ways—hence, the author’s remark that the whole body participates in *phronēsis*, something like ‘consciousness’. The brain, then, no longer sends down orders from on high. In L. P.’s provocative challenge to the ‘instructionist’ reading, the brain’s priority lies in its position at the interface between outside and inside, where its encounter with air facilitates the production of sense.

L. P.’s reading of *Morb. Sacr.* is insightful and original. By putting pressure on long-held assumptions about mind-body interaction, he forces us to take the Hippocratic author on his own terms. It’s true that he might have profitably spent more time exploring the idea of ‘mimicry’, which bridges physical separation and intellectual discernment in his account. Indeed, having systematically built up the case for his own model, he spends surprisingly little time fleshing it out once the parts are in place. It would have been interesting, for example, to see him apply the same kind of semantic analysis he offers for the concept of interpreting to the concept of separating out, which has both therapeutic and pathological implications elsewhere in the *Corpus*. The fragments of Anaxagoras may also be worth revisiting in this

² Most, Glenn, ‘Pindar, *O.* 2.83-90’, *CQ* 36 (1986), 304-16.

context. Nevertheless, the achievements of this slim volume should not be underestimated. L. P. has persuasively advanced a new understanding of *Morb. Sacr.*'s encephalocentrism, preserving the ancient strangeness of that theory while making it resonate with contemporary struggles to grasp the biology of sense-making.

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