Lecture Notes
Hippocrates, “Oath”
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1. Who was Hippocrates? Circulate the images, one of which depicts Hippocrates warning against the use of a serpent in healing. Hippocrates, a Greek physician, was born on the Aegean island of Cos (Kos) about 450 BCE (the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2d ed., says 460), which makes him a contemporary of Socrates (born about 470 BCE), Plato (born about 429 BCE), and the historian Herodotus (born about 484). He died about 380 BCE, at the age of 70 (or thereabouts). His family claimed descent from the mythical Asclepius (the Greek god of medicine or healing), son of Apollo, both of whom are mentioned by name in the oath (together with Asclepius’s daughter Panacea, who symbolizes all-healing). (Pause to discuss the rod of Asclepius, using the short essay by Nathan Klinge.) Hippocrates, who was not the first physician but who was the first whose works survive, appears to have traveled widely to supplement his medical training and may have helped end an Athenian plague at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. One of his aphorisms is:

Life is short, and the Art [medicine] long; the occasion fleeting; experience fallacious, and judgment difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.

Just as Socrates is considered to be the ideal philosopher, Hippocrates is considered to be the ideal physician, the “father of medicine.”

2. The Corpus Hippocraticum. Plato refers to Hippocrates by name in the Phaedrus. Most of the 70 or so writings that make up the Corpus Hippocraticum (Hippocratic corpus, body, or collection) were probably not his, but those of his school or guild. (There were different medical schools—as in schools of thought—at the time.

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1 Timeline: 484 BCE, Herodotus born; 470 BCE, Socrates born; 450 BCE, Hippocrates born; 429 BCE, Plato born; 380 BCE, Hippocrates died; 0, common era begins.
There were also the equivalent of sophists, to whom the oath may have been a reaction.) The Hippocratic writings were “intended to instruct medical students or practitioners” (W. H. S. Jones, Hippocrates, vii). According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “On the biomedical methodology side, these writings provide the most detailed biomedical observations to date in the Western world. . . . On the ethical side, their code of professional ethics is so well structured that it continues to stand as a model for other professions.” R. J. Hankinson writes:

[T]he main innovation of the Hippocratic authors . . . seems to have lain in their desire for systematicity (although the Corpus contains several, evidently incompatible, such systems) and the related drives toward diagnostic precision, prognostic knowledge, and nosological [study of disease] explanation. For the Hippocratics . . ., medicine is about understanding: understanding the nature of health and disease and the measures needed to maintain the former and cure the latter. And they are, fundamentally, physical phenomena, to be approached from a physical point of view. (Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2d ed., 4:374)

3. What is the origin of the Hippocratic oath? Jones describes the oath as “a landmark in the ethics of medicine” (291). Little is known about its author, purpose, use, or date of composition. “Some scholars regard the Oath as the test required by the Asclepiad Guild” (293), but Jones says there is no support for this contention. “We may suppose . . . that no respectable physician would act contrary to most of the Oath, even if he were ignorant of its existence” (296). “Here we have committed to writing those noble rules, loyal obedience to which has raised the calling of a physician to be the highest of all the professions” (296).

4. What is the content of the Hippocratic oath? Discuss the oath, sentence by sentence (this is the Jones translation of 1957; my comments are in brackets):

- I swear by Apollo Physician, by Asclepius, by Health, by Panacea [Apollo was the father of Asclepius; Asclepius was the father of Panacea] and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my abil-
ity and judgment, this oath and this indenture. [An oath is a type of commitment; an indenture is a legally binding agreement to serve as an apprentice or servant.]

- To hold my teacher in this art equal to my own parents; to make him partner in my livelihood; when he is in need of money to share mine with him; to consider his family as my own brothers, and to teach them this art, if they want to learn it, without fee or indenture; to impart precept [“written rules of the art”—Jones], oral instruction, and all other instruction to my own sons, the sons of my teacher, and to indentured pupils who have taken the physician's oath, but to nobody else. [Note the guild or cult aspect.]

- I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. [Primum non nocere—first, or most importantly, do no harm. This is the principle of non-maleficence.]

- Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course. [Physician-assisted suicide; active voluntary euthanasia. Compare the AMA's policy.]

- Similarly I will not give to a woman a pessary [a medical device inserted into the vagina] to cause abortion. [Read the AMA's policy on abortion: Opinion 2.01 – Abortion The Principles of Medical Ethics of the AMA do not prohibit a physician from performing an abortion in accordance with good medical practice and under circumstances that do not violate the law. (III, IV) Issued prior to April 1977.]

- But I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. [Compare monastic vows of chastity.]

- I will not use the knife, not even, verily, on sufferers from stone [kidney stones? gallstones?], but I will give place to such as are craftsmen therein. [Surgery, a physical rather than an intellectual task, was considered degrading for a physician.]

- Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bond or free. [Primum non nocere, again.]

- And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets. [Confidential-
ity; fidelity; from Latin *fides*, faith; *fidere*, trust.

- Now if I carry out this oath, and break it not, may I gain for ever reputation among all men for my life and for my art; but if I transgress it and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me. [Medicine is an honorable calling and its practitioners honorable people.]