

Brooke Holmes

The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2010.

355 pages

US\$46.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-691-13899-2)

This book is a synoptic effort aspiring to trace the physical body as it developed in ancient Greece. In a substantial introduction, Holmes outlines her two main theses. First, she seeks to establish that the physical body (*soma*) emerges through the category of the symptom. Symptoms require interpretation and Holmes situates the locus in the transition from daemonic to naturalistic explanation. Second, she claims that the emergence of the physical body enabled a ‘new kind of ethical subjectivity centered on practices of caring for the self’ (4). This focus on the body is particularly controversial given that ancient ethics is usually anchored in the soul (*psyche*) or the mind (*nous*).

The book is organized both chronologically and thematically. In other words, beginning with Homer in the 8th century, Holmes draws on myriad sources as she maps the progression of the physical body down to the fourth century. One obvious danger of this approach is to neglect the constraints of different literary genres, but for the most part, Holmes is methodologically judicious.

Chapter 1 examines Homer and the notion of *soma* prior to its identification with the physical body. The impetus for the analysis is Snell’s controversial claim that Homer does not hold a concept of the physical body. Granted, Homer’s world is far different than that of the world in the fifth and fourth centuries. Nevertheless, Holmes claims that we can see embryonic potential for later developments. Holmes formulates a distinction between the seen and the felt categories of the person. The former is defined as ‘a three-dimensional, penetrable object’ (42) that is distinguished by its ‘breeding’ (*phue*) and a ‘particular look’ (*eidos*). The weakness of this approach is that by focusing on our physiological continuities with the archaic Greeks, we run the risk of overlooking the particularities of their embodied experience, which constitutes the felt. It is the felt that unifies the self as a conscious being; it includes features of the daemonic. Accordingly, the caveat to the felt is that we must resist the temptation to think that the Greeks had the same idea of embodied experience that we do. More concretely, for the Greeks, the gods were not only real but also regularly involved themselves in human affairs. This counters what Holmes takes to be the scholarly tendency to interpret the gods as ‘simple projections of what the person is feeling or thinking’ (43). The distinction between the seen and the felt is utilized in order to investigate the way immortals affected mortals. The symptom constitutes the conduit between the divine world and the embodied person.

The second chapter generalizes from the physical body to the broader conceptual context of physicality. There are two salient aspects. First, there is the transition from ‘unseen social agents to impersonal forces’ (86) in the explanation of change in composite objects. Second, such composite objects are conceptualized objectively rather

than according to subjective experience. Chapters 3 and 4 build on this analysis as it pertains to the physical human body. For instance, chapter three explicates how the symptom was often used as an access point between the visible and invisible parts of the body. Indeed, as is made clear in *On the Techne* ‘hidden diseases are in the majority’ (121), thereby making the symptom particularly rich. There was, after all, a conviction that the physical body, if unmediated by medicine, would naturally develop sickness. This lends support to the idea that the physical body was conceived of as being fundamentally alien.

The notion that medicine informs ideas of autonomy, especially its ethical implications, is explored in the fourth chapter. Consider proper and improper health regimens, which Holmes and others think arrived fairly late in the development of medicine. *On Regimen* constitutes the basis of her argument; one noteworthy feature of this text is the amount of effort involved in warding off disease. Holmes points out that such recommendations could only ever be fulfilled by the wealthy. Insofar as the health of the body is taken to be a virtue, wealth ‘translates into the freedom to learn about one’s nature and manage its care’ (180). Plato, for one, seems ambivalent on this topic. In the *Republic*, for instance, he is altogether antithetical to extreme measures in the care of the body. By the same token, in the *Laws*, he distinguishes between the free patient and the slave. The doctor, to the best of his or her ability, will educate the free patient so that patients themselves will be able to understand both diagnosis and treatment. This demonstrates the way in which care of the physical body informs the broader notion of autonomy.

Holmes claims that ‘physiological approaches to human nature guarantee not simply living but living well’ (183) and that this informs the normative dimensions of the subject. While differences in nature can help explain the indeterminate nature of medicine, they can also generate a hierarchy of human natures. In other words, physical features mirror character traits, which yield praise or blame. Holmes’s principal example of this is the female body, where the weakness of the female nature was believed to stem from the disproportionate wetness present in the female body. Granted, it is not the physician who originally formulated the inferiority of the female sex. Rather, he is responsible for ‘reconceptualizing this inferiority’ (186) via the unique physiological aspects of the female. Insofar as women do not have control over their natures, they lack responsibility for them. Accordingly, human nature itself becomes a topic of care. This crystallizes with the rise of medicine as well as techniques of self-mastery.

In the fifth chapter, Holmes analyzes the distinction between *soma* and *psyche*, specifically as the two emerge in the late fifth century BCE. One development is the subordination of the physical body to the soul. Insofar as the soul is the site of desire, agency, and judgment, it constitutes the essence of the person. Consequently, the physical body is deemed expendable and denigrated to secondary status.

A second development occurred when the physical body became the paradigmatic model for the soul. For just as the *techne* of medicine enables doctors to treat the physical

body, so too is there a *techne* for the soul. Indeed, the notions of bodily health and disease proved invaluable to those writers who sought to replace divine explanations for naturalistic ones. One notable feature of this naturalistic turn is the idea that the body, left to its devices, would veer toward death and destruction. This idea was imported to the soul, which means that the ‘very faculties of sensation, perception, agency, cognition, and judgment’ (226) could be contaminated if uncared for.

Both events might seem to conflict. In the former, the soul becomes the site of intelligent agency and in the latter it develops a natural tendency to be sullied. For Holmes, this is precisely why practices of care, akin to those of physical body, emerged. It is illuminating as well to see both developments on display in Plato’s early dialogues. While the Platonic Socrates often seems to subordinate the body to the soul, he often develops medical analogies in pursuit of ethical wisdom, which is located in the soul.

In the final chapter, Holmes extends her analysis to tragedy in order to demonstrate the fundamental polysemy of the symptom. As Holmes states, ‘tragedy displays the potential of the symptom to generate meaning’ (229), especially when the symptom itself is theatrical. The focus is exclusively on Euripides—*Hippolytus*, *Heracles*, and *Orestes*—because he best represents the complex development of medicine in relation to magico-religious interpretations. Indeed, sometimes the two function in tandem, often with an ethical dimension that tracks the normative requirements of both personal health and harmony with external factors.

As previously stated, the book spans a variety of genres, and is to be commended for its ability to synthesize the evidence in a way that is not overly expedient. Inevitably, a few minor lacunae remain. For instance, to my mind, Holmes does not adequately confront the intimate relationship between medicine and technical divination, and indeed sometimes appears to gloss over the ubiquity of divination in archaic and classical Greece. That said, the book is a remarkable example of scholarship, and ought to be welcomed by ancient philosophers, particularly those who work in moral psychology and embodiment.

Aaron James Landry
York University