HISTORY OF MEDICINE − OPEN ACCESS

Ethics in Mental Disorder Treatment: How Ancient Greece Contributed to Modern Psychiatry

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ABSTRACT

In the early 19th century, the French physician Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) propagated a humane treatment for the care of mentally ill patients, thereby founding the field of psychiatry. Pinel rejected the popular notion that mental illness was caused by demonic possession/other magical forces and unchained patients, subsequently proving that they could positively respond to a humane treatment. However, the humane treatment for mentally ill patients was introduced by ancient Greek physicians and philosophers. In the writings of Alcmaeon of Croton (5th century BC), Hippocrates (460–377 BC), Aretaeus of Cappadocia (c. 2nd century AD), and Soranus of Ephesus (98–138 AD), a rational approach can be found for mental illness and its treatment focusing on patients.

Keywords: Philippe Pinel, Hippocrates, moral treatment, history of psychiatry

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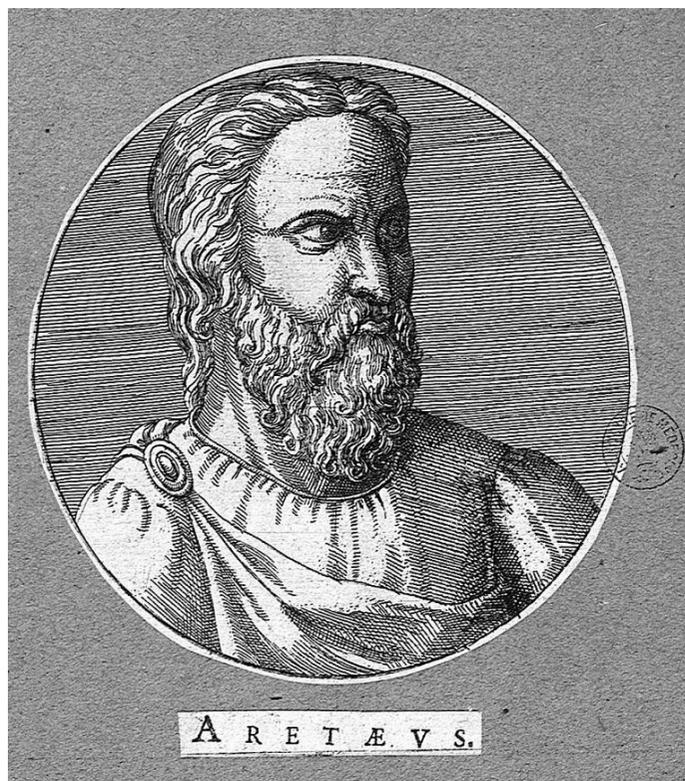Phone: +90 30-6973606804
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At the beginning of the 19th century, through the pioneering work of the French physician Philippe Pinel (1745–1826), mentally ill patients began to be understood, from a clear medical point of view, as individuals suffering from a disease of the mind. Rejecting the prevailing idea that attributed mental illness to supernatural theories and demonic possession, Pinel insisted on humane treatment of the sufferers instead of the use of chains, whips, darkness, and solitude. In his landmark work, published in 1801, entitled "Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale; ou la manie" (Medicophilosophical treatise on mental alienation or mania), Pinel introduced moral treatment in psychiatry pointing out respect for patients and trusting patient–physician relationship (1, 2) (Fig. 1).

However, long before Pinel's humane treatment was introduced, ancient Greek physicians provided a rational approach for mental illness and its treatment. In the 5th century BC, the philosopher and medical theorist Alcmaeon of Croton was the first to believe that the brain was the seat of the senses and the central organ of intellect (3). During his turn, Hippocrates (460–377 BC) adopted this notion of the brain as the center of intellectual activity and that mental illness was due to brain pathology. In his work, he stated that "it is the brain the seat of madness and delirium, of the fears and frights which assail us …," and in his book entitled "On the Sacred Disease," he supports this notion: "I do not believe that the sacred disease (epilepsy) is any more divine or sacred than any other disease … it is my opinion that those who first called it sacred were the sort of people we call witch-doctors, faith-healers, quacks and charlatans" (4). Aretaeus of Cappadocia (c. 2nd century AD)
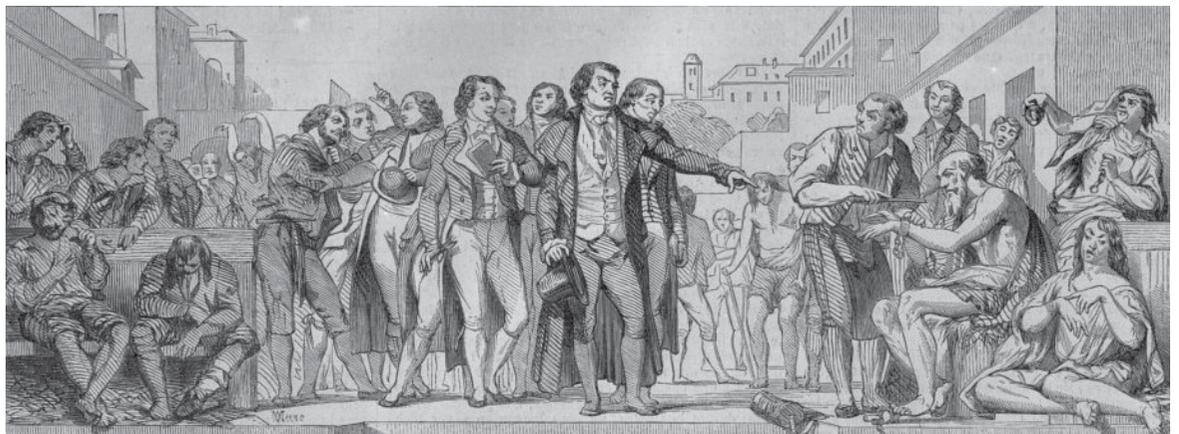
Figure 1. Philippe Pinel ordering the removal of chains from patients at the Bicêtre Hospital; the wax painting was done by Charles-Louis Müller [Source: Bium, Paris]

works, it is mentioned that the physician should never do harm or harm anyone, and confidentiality is emphasized, i.e., "whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men … I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets," which is still essential to psychiatric treatment, part of the traditional ethical relationship between physician and patient (4).

The realistic insight of Greco-Roman philosophers and physicians into mental illness did not prevail in medieval and renaissance periods; in fact, physicians relapsed to superstitions and ignorance till the early 19th century. Pinel indeed reformed psychiatry; however, the famous "moral treatment" based on humane psychosocial care was influenced by Aristotle's theory on mental health, which emphasized the influence of social environment on psychopathology (9).

Figure 2. The distinguished physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia, 2nd Century AD [Source: Bium, Paris]

assembled mania and melancholia while recognizing both psychopathological states as part of the same disease (Fig. 2). In the treatment of patients with mania, Areateus mentioned that patients should be taken care of to ensure that they do not become dangerous to themselves or others. The text makes no mention of restrictive measures (5, 6). Moreover, the Latin translation of the work of Soranus of Ephesus (98–138 AD), as preserved by Caelius Aurelianus (5th century AD), emphasizes that mentally ill patients must be kept in a calm and quiet room with gentle colors and tranquil music and must have access to having a bath (7). This recommendation can also be observed in the therapeutic approaches cited in ancient Greek medical works on mental illness. There is no mention of beating, forcible restraint, or banishment of mentally ill patients. Conversely, these texts recommend using medicines derived from plants to induce a soothing, sedative, or hypnotic effect (8). Finally, in the "Hippocratic Oath," we could find parts that are applied to mentally ill patients. Among other

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