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Arikha, Noga

PASSIONS AND TEMPER:

A History of the Humours

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A scholarly examination of the persistence throughout history of thinking that personality and body type are linked to the presence in the body of four “humours.”

Warm moist blood; cold, moist phlegm; warm, dry yellow bile; and cold, dry black bile were the humours identified by ancient Greeks, most famously the physician Hippocrates. The system he formulated was spread beyond Greece by Galen, a Roman physician and scholar living in Asia Minor in the first century. Galen’s writings were preserved in the Arab world and then translated by Christian monks during the Middle Ages. As the medical philosophy of ancient Greece was adopted in the West, the humoral tradition guided medical practice and provided a sense of self-understanding. Tracing the history of ideas about the relation between mind and body from ancient Greece to the present day, Arikha shows how the idea of humoral balance offered not just medical guidance but moral guidance. By living a balanced life, people could control their passions, their bodies, their fate. This system linking moral vigor and physical health also contained elements of astrology and magic, helping to explain how material humours could affect an immaterial soul. Just as the old humours provided useful images for understanding our insides and our tempers, the author suggests, their contemporary equivalents—hormones, enzymes, neurotransmitters, etc.—provide a partial picture of the same psychological and physical realities. Scientists are still struggling to bridge the gap between what is known and what is not known about the body, the brain and the mind. As Arikha puts it, the humoral system reminds us that the best scientists and doctors are those who recognize how little they know; its history is “the underside of our present perplexities.”

A dense, challenging work, drawing on philosophy, the cognitive sciences and the histories of science, medicine and psychology. (Agent: *Deirdre Mullane/Spieler Agency*)

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