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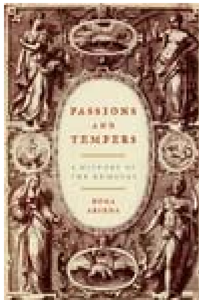
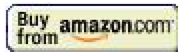
Rediscovering the Embodied Self

A review of





Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours

by Noga Arikha

New York: HarperCollins, 2007. 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-0607-3116-8. $27.95

Reviewed by
Simon Boag

Understanding the relationship between body and mind has proven to be no easy feat. Descartes' philosophy extricated the mind from the body and created what appears to be an unbridgeable gap between mind and matter (Leahey, 1997). Only relatively recently, or so it seems, has modern psychology come to grips with our bodily existence. However, even here the precise relationship between body and mind remains uncertain. What is perhaps less well known is the vast intellectual tradition associated with the theory of bodily humors that attempted to explain this complex relationship. Noga Arikha's book traces the development of this theory and provides an absorbing examination into an intellectual heritage that has, either directly or indirectly, shaped our

present-day beliefs concerning the functioning of the body and its relationship to the mind.

The humors were conceived of as fluids circulating throughout the body—phlegm, yellow bile, black bile, and blood—and while not actually visible in themselves, were believed to emerge from the apparent bodily fluids. Each humor was associated with various properties and elements (e.g., cold, hot, moist, dry), and the theory appears to have emerged with Hippocrates during the fifth century BCE. The humoral position was later developed by Galen within the second century ACE and prevailed throughout the Renaissance and into the modern scientific era.

In *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours*, Arikha demonstrates the refined appreciation of the interaction between mind and body developed within the humoral system. As she notes, this theory "allowed for the development of a remarkably sophisticated theory that took into account not only inborn temperaments but also the environmental context within which each person lived" (p. 12). The humors were implicated in health and illness, emotion and cognition; their interaction or dominance within any given individual was believed to explain individual temperaments. For instance, the fiery and aggressive choleric temperament had an excess of yellow bile, while a predominance of black bile was associated with the gloomy melancholic. The humors themselves were also influenced by environmental situations and specific foods, and the humors acted as key explanatory concepts, providing a mechanism for understanding the interaction between body, environment, and psychological processes.

Arikha's thesis concerns the continuity between the past and present in understanding our psychosomatic nature. Even though the postulated bodily fluids and the mechanisms of explanation have been shown to be incorrect in detail, Arikha argues that the general approach of the humoral system has been vindicated. The humors are still with us in spirit and have simply been replaced by new physical entities:

> The awareness that our states of mind are sensitive to external factors and pharmacological substances is not new... and it has always been clear that our minds and bodies influence each other... .Today one may investigate neurotransmitters, enzymes, hormones, and ultimately

> genes; but while humors reigned, they provided a solid account of our profoundly psychosomatic nature. (p. 117)

Hence, Arikha writes that "This book concerns itself primarily with our capacity to make mistakes even when our questions are right" (p. xx). Indeed, although the humoral account is demonstrably wrong, its theoretical basis presented quite a sophisticated picture: "The humoral system... was broadly deterministic. It assumed that all emotional as well as cognitive faculties had a physical basis; and it purported to explain why animals—and people behaved as they did" (p. 28). The acknowledgment of a physical basis of emotional and cognitive life and the overturning of the Cartesian position have only relatively recently gained widespread attention (e.g., Damasio, 1994), and are still by no means fully accepted today.

Furthermore, in providing a mechanism for understanding cause-and-effect relationships between organism–environment relationships, the humors arguably provided the first great attempt at understanding ourselves as embodied creatures. Here the humors provided "a form of self-understanding in a broader sense" (p. 121), since the bodily conception of persons meant that the humors mediated self-knowledge: "if one believed that our humors determined us, then to know one's humoral self was, in effect, to know oneself" (p. 173). In fact, the sanguine, melancholic, choleric, and phlegmatic temperaments of the humoral system are still found today within modern personality research, albeit in modern forms (e.g., Buckingham, 2002).

Is Our Relationship With Our Bodies So Rational?

Arikha does well to capture the heterogeneity of views concerning the humors that both coexisted and competed throughout the various historical epochs. The reader is provided with a sense of the lively discussion and debate that flourished surrounding the humoral account, and Arikha casts the development of the humoral system within a framework of scientific discovery and pursuit of knowledge about the body. Indeed, it appears that the humoral theory did emerge with the birth of medicine, philosophy, and what can be considered scientific

thinking. The symbolic father of medicine, Hippocrates, appears to have been attempting to distance himself from beliefs about supernatural causes of disease (e.g., wrathful gods) and instead looked to nature for causal explanation. Here Arikha provides descriptions of early vivisection and brain studies, as well as "experimental" and naturalistic attempts to discover the physical bases of psychological functioning. This research, in turn, led to developments in our understanding of anatomy and surgical instruments and procedures. In some respect, then, the humoral theory can be seen as one of the first great scientific endeavors, providing a focus on the body and away from witchcraft and superstition.

Furthermore, theory was put into practice, and treatments were informed by humoral diagnosis. While some recommendations were relatively benign, including eating specific foods or seeking or avoiding specific environments, others "tended to be harsh, painful, and dangerous" (p. 15). The book describes phlebotomies or "bleedings" (using, for instance, leeches or heated cups to create vacuums), and various other means of purging excesses of harmful bodily fluids (e.g., vomiting). However, while Arikha's analysis here appears generally sound, it might be wondered whether it is too one-dimensional and ignoring deeper psychological motives. For instance, Arikha is proposing that "The humoral system provided a rational scheme that encompassed passions, illness, blood, and guts, ordering the darkness and disorder of inner life" (p. 9).

However, while one can look at the theory as a development in scientific thinking and the treatments as a logical extension of practice from theory, there might be reason to suspect that there is more to it. After all, humanity's relationship with its bodily existence has not always been amicable: The early Christian monastics despised and punished the body as a source of evil (Ward, 1981), an attitude that appears to bear similarities to modern-day eating disorders (Banks, 1996). Furthermore, humanity's "passion to purge" (Agnew, 1985, p. 241) also suggests much greater psychological significance than is recognized by Arikha's analysis. Indeed, the evocative notion of bodily fluids, as well as the rich symbolism found within the humoral account, also indicates that any comprehensive analysis should consider this. Of course, the "rational" basis of the humoral system is not necessarily incorrect (since there is

no reason to suspect that there cannot be multiple causes of any one event), but the question here is whether there is more to the humoral account than meets the eye.

Persisting Philosophical Issues

Arikha demonstrates the continuity between past and present thinking, and one can see from her analysis how little change there has been in many aspects of human mental life. For instance, astrology retains appeal, people still believe in miracles, and the dietary advice that circulates today reflects numerous prescriptions for health based upon humoral theory. More important, however, this book draws attention to the continuity of the difficult philosophical issues that still persist within modern-day accounts. Arikha demonstrates that conceptual difficulties grappled with for over 25 centuries remain unresolved. In particular, the most important questions still remain disputed: the relationships between mind and body, determinism and free will, vitalism (or life forces) and mechanism, passion and reason are all still debated issues. By demonstrating how such themes continually emerge and re-emerge throughout our investigation of the mind/body relationship, Arikha points to the need to squarely address these issues.

Arikha's discussion demonstrates an appreciation for the complexity of the issues, and she draws attention to some difficult philosophical questions about mind and body. At the same time, however, it is somewhat disappointing that more is not said here concerning the specific interaction between mind and body. After seemingly promoting the position that the body is the basis of the mind, she falls back upon the sheer mystery of it all and simply indicates that there remains a gap between what we know about the functioning of the body and our experience of it: “The `explanatory gap' between a scientific theory and actual experience remains identical through time, whether the scientific theory is based on humors or on hormones” (p. 286).

Furthermore, while acknowledging the interaction between mind and body, the age-old dualism between the two is reinvoked: “Our innate temperaments can still turn on us, while reason, the rational mind

whose highest functions remain as mysterious as the rational soul once was, observes the chaos" (p. 273). Rather than having the situation clarified, we are instead simply left back where we started from. Although explaining the interaction between mind and body is of course by no means simple, it is not insurmountable; mind defined as cognitive relations can be distinguished from the physical brain (a term standing within that same relationship), and so both exist in the one spatio–temporal universe (see Anderson, 1962). Admittedly, too, reconciling the mind/body dualism is not the book's intention, but, given the book's theme, such discussion appears apposite and would have provided a greater intellectual contribution. At the same time, by drawing attention to how little we still know about the physical causal underpinnings of ourselves and experiences, Arikha is helping us to appreciate what is still yet to be explained. Perhaps given that we do not have sense receptors in our brains to allow us to know directly the biological occurrences underlying our acts of knowing, we can bridge the gap only by concocting an explanatory rationalization of why we think and act as we do (see Wegner & Wheatley, 1999).

To answer this question requires some clarification of what is meant by mind and matter in the first place. Arikha helps us to recognize that philosophical assumptions exist in all forms of inquiry, whether they are neuroscientific, biological, or psychological, and that these problems cannot be simply swept away as mere theoretical unpleasantries. The book also presents us with a reminder of the fine line that sometimes exists between rigorous scientific inquiry and magical thinking, as well as demonstrating how our theoretical assumptions can interfere and bias our interpretation of the world around us.

Further Strengths and Weaknesses

A lot of historical ground is covered, and Arikha's book is rich in content. The reader is transported through the worlds of Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Galen, to then discover the later Arabic contributions to developing and maintaining this classical intellectual heritage. Arikha's book then follows the theory of humors through the medieval scholastic period and

into the scientific revolution and modern era. However, while the early material is well covered, the same cannot be said for the modern-day psychological literature. Although major contributors to the study of brain and bodily processes, such as those of the Damasios and LeDoux, are discussed, as well as Kagan's and Eysenck's contributions toward understanding temperament and personality, there are other notable omissions of some of the more obvious contributors within modern psychology who would be relevant to any discussion of humoral theory (e.g., Zuckerman, 1995).

This book is, however, generally well written and will have broad appeal. Any researcher interested in the intellectual traditions that have shaped the way we envisage ourselves today and specifically learning about our discovery of our embodied selves will find this book of interest. Furthermore, anyone interested in the history and philosophy of mind, science, and medicine will also find this book valuable. For instance, Arikha discusses early accounts of psychopathology, such as the theory of melancholy (the forerunner of our modern-day conception of depression) and the origin of the concept of a "nervous breakdown."

In summary, Arikha's book provides a fascinating journey through a major intellectual tradition that has influenced the way we understand ourselves today. As the author notes, "We have barely begun to comprehend the processes underlying psychosomatic phenomena" (p. 291). This book highlights both how far we have come in our understanding of our bodily existence and how little we still in fact know of ourselves.

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