

*Plutarch on whether
the passions of the soul or
diseases of the body are worse*



Train of thoughts

- Man is the most unhappy of all creatures.
- The body has many diseases, and they are readily perceived.
- But the soul does not readily perceive its own maladies; it even mistakes them for indications of soundness.
- The man diseased in body willingly yields to the care of the physician.
- The unruly passions of the soul resist a cure, and are therefore more fatal.



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1 Homer, having contemplated the various kinds of mortal animals, and compared them one with another in respect to their lives and habits, cried out:

What wretched creature of what wretched kind,
Than man more weak, calamitous, and blind!¹

attributing to man that unhappy primacy of having the superiority in miseries. But we, considering man as having already gained the victory for infelicity, and being publicly declared the most miserable of all animals, will compare him with himself in a contention about his own calamities, not unprofitably but even altogether necessarily dividing his soul from his body; that we may thence learn, whether we live more miserably on account of Fortune or of ourselves. For sickness is indeed engendered in the body by Nature; but vice and malice in the soul are first its own work, afterward its passion. Now it is of no small advantage towards content of mind, if that which is the worse is curable, and lighter and less violent in its attacks than we feared.

2 The fox in Aesop, disputing with the panther for the superiority in beautiful variety — when this latter had shown his body, and its superficies curiously stained and spotted, whereas the fox's tawny skin was ill-favoured and unpleasant to the sight — said thus: "But if you, sir judge, will look within me, you will find me much fuller of variety than this leopard"; manifesting the nimble subtlety of his natural disposition, frequently changing as occasions require. Let us then say also to ourselves: Thy body, O man, naturally of itself breeds many diseases and passions, and many it receives befalling it from without; but if thou shalt open thy interior, thou wilt find a certain various and abundantly furnished storehouse and (as Democritus says) treasury of evils, not flowing into it from abroad, but having as it were their inbred and original springs, which vice, exceedingly affluent and rich in passions, causes to break forth. Now, whereas the diseases in the flesh are discerned by the pulses, and the flushings in the colour of the skin, and discovered by unusual heats and sudden pains, and these maladies of the soul lie hid from many who are affected with them; these are therefore worse, as removing from them the sense of the patient. For if the reason is sound, it is sensible of the body's diseases; but being itself diseased with those of the soul, it has no judgment in what it suffers; for it suffers by what it judges. We ought therefore to account, that the first and greatest of the soul's diseases is folly, by which vice being rendered incurable cohabits, lives, and dies together with

¹ *Iliad* XVII, 446

most men. For the beginning of the cure is the sense of the disease, leading the patient to the use of what is helpful; but he who, through his not believing himself sick, is ignorant of his own necessities, though a remedy is presented him, refuses it. For also amongst the diseases of the body, those are indeed the worst which are accompanied with a stupefaction of the senses — as lethargies, headaches, epilepsies, apoplexies, and those burning fevers which, carrying on the inflammation even to the loss of the wits, and disturbing the senses, as it were in a musical instrument, “move the heart-strings till then untouched.”

3 Wherefore the physicians do in the first place indeed desire that a man should not be sick, and next, that being sick he should not be ignorant that he is so; which nevertheless befalls all the diseases of the soul. For neither those who are mad, those that are lascivious, nor those who act unjustly, think that they sin; nay, some of them are on the contrary persuaded even that they do well. Never yet did any man call a fever health, a consumption a good constitution of body, the gout swift-footedness, or the wanness of the face a fresh colour; but many there are who term anger courage, unchaste love amity, envy emulation, and cowardice cautiousness. Moreover, those who are troubled with corporeal sickness send for physicians, for they are sensible what they stand in need of for the cure of their diseases; but these who are sick in mind shun philosophers, because they think themselves to act excellently in those very things in which they most offend. For making use of this reasoning, we affirm that the bleariness or soreness of the eyes is a less malady than madness, and the gout in the feet than a frenzy in the brain; for in the one a man is sensible of his distemper, and crying out calls for the physician, to whom, when he is come, he shows his eye to be anointed, stretches out his vein to be opened, and gives up his head to be cured; but on the contrary, you hear Agave, when seized with madness, through the violence of her passion not knowing the dearest pledges of her womb, to cry out:

From the hill's top into the plain,
Bring me this young fawn, newly slain,
Which happily's become our prey.¹

For he who is sick in body, presently yielding and betaking himself to his bed, lies there quiet, till he is cured; and if the accession of some violent hot fit makes him a little tumble and toss his body, any one of those who are by saying to him,

Lie still at ease, poor wretch, keep in thy bed,²

easily stays and retains him; but those, on the other side, who are surprised with the passions of the soul are then most active, then least at quiet; for the impulses of the mind are the principal causes of actions, and passions are the violent fits of such impulses. Wherefore, they suffer not the soul to be at rest; but when a man has most need of patience, silence, and retirement, then is he drawn forth into the light, then is he chiefly discovered by his choleric humours, his eagerness in contending, his dishonest loves, and his heart-breaking sorrows, which force him to commit many irregular actions, and speak many words unfitting for the times.

¹ Euripides, *Bacchae* 1170 [405 BCE]

² Euripides, *Orestes* 258 [408 BCE]

4 As therefore that storm which hinders a ship from entering into the port is more dangerous than that which suffers it not to sail; so the tempests of the soul are more difficult, which permit not a man to restrain himself, nor to settle his disturbed reason, so that, being without pilot or cables, he is through tumult and deceit hurried headlong by rash and pernicious courses, till he falls into some terrible shipwreck, where he casts away his life. So that also for these reasons it is worse to be sick in the soul than body; for to the one it happens only to suffer, but to the other both to suffer and do amiss. And what need is there to reckon up the greater number of our passions? This very nick of time is a sufficient remembrance. Do you see this vast and promiscuous multitude, here crowding and thrusting each other about the tribunal and forum? They are not assembled to sacrifice to their country Gods. nor to participate together in the sacred ceremonies. They are not come to offer up to Jupiter Ascræus the first of the Lydian fruits, nor to celebrate the solemnities of Bacchus by the observance of festival nights and common revellings; but a mighty pestilence, as it were by yearly revolutions irritating Asia, drives them hither to manage their processes and suits at law; and a multitude of affairs, as it were of impetuous torrents, fall into one market-place, where they grow hot and are eagerly prosecuted both by those that destroy and by those that are destroyed. Of what fevers, of what agues, are these the effects? What lodgements, what irruptions, what distemperature of heat, what superfusion of humours produces them? Should you ask every suit at law as if it were a man, whence it had its original, whence it proceeded; you would find, that audacious anger generated one, furious obstinacy another, and unjust covetousness a third. . . .

