Review Article

An Introduction and Historical Background of Concept of Akhlat (Humour)

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Abstract

Humoral theory, also known as theory of akhlat is a key concept in Unani System of Medicine. It was originated in Ancient Greece and later developed by Galen and Arabic Physicians. The theory was central to the teachings of Greco Arabic medicine and it became the dominant theory in Europe for many centuries. It remained a major influence on medical practice and teaching until eighteenth century. The theory was first postulated by Hippocrates in his treatise On the Nature of Man. The method of approach of these early thinkers was to look for natural explanations for human physiology and disease causation with the help of logical reasoning and observation. In this theory, humors existed as liquids within the body which are known as blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. The humoral theory evolved over millennia and finally became the dominant explanation of human physiology. This was in contrast to the supernatural theories for disease causation and also attempt to explain that disease instead is a naturalistic event and it can be understood by natural causes. This short review will mainly focus on the understanding and historical background of the theory of akhlat.

Keywords: akhlat; humour; history; unani medicine; humoral theory.

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Introduction

The humours are generated naturally in an individual through digestion. Consequently, changes in diet, or anything that could impact the particular state of the body, such as age, season, exercise, weather, etc., could severely impact the quantity and quality of akhlāt. Moreover, the Unani physician recognized that people had different dispositions, physiques and general lifestyles, all of which affects a person's 'healthy' humoral balance. For that reason, patient profile was essential in getting to the root cause of the disease or causative factor of imbalance. A particular humour might on occasion metamorphose into one or another sort of humour according to age and diet. For example, in summer there is predisposition towards yellow bile, especially among young and adults.¹ The fundamental principle of curing a disease in humoral pathology is to correct the imbalance through contraries (opposites). Thus, an imbalance resulting from repletion is cured by depletion; and those that arise from depletion are cured by repletion; and in general, diseases are cured by their contraries.² Imbalances could also

result from food, weather and other activities such as occupation. Sometimes the imbalance is a result of Khilqi sū-'i-mizāj a'dā' (hereditary distemper in organs).³ Foodstuffs and drugs were thus prescribed to counter the imbalances. Various kinds of exercises and regimen in combination with food and drugs were prescribed by Unani physicians to restore the khilti e'tadal (humoral balance) of the body using this principle of contraries. Unani physicians also employed techniques to evacuate excessive, unhealthy humours and undigested food that had the potential of further corrupting the humours. The evacuations were undertaken using purgatives, emetics and fasd etc.

Historical Background

Ancient philosopher had been engaged in discussion about the origin of life and universe. From 600 BC the ancient physicians and philosophers became more and more inquisitive about things around them. They focussed mainly on why things exist, why they happen, how they came into existence. The method of approach of these early philosophers was to look for natural explanations for that phenomena.⁴ They were

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interested in causes, and in explaining what they perceived around them. They were profoundly interested in the natural world and the search for explanations of how and why the world and human beings came to be formed and organized as they were.⁵ By using reason and logical argument they believed that they could penetrate behind the visible to observe the invisible. They were curious about the material cause of the world and considered how its visible component came into existence. Various theories have been put forth by ancient philosophers regarding origin and material cause of the world, which were totally based on their excellent observation, rational and logical reasoning. When a scientific discipline or hypothesis is proposed, a variety of different schools or opinions eventually coexist until one discipline or hypothesis dominates. There are different theories about the prime matter (material cause) of the universe. Some scholars like Thales and Anaximander believed that living creatures were arose from moist element⁶ i.e. water, while others insisted on air or fire or earth. It was Empedocles who postulated the theory of Arkan Arba viz; air, water, fire and earth as the material cause of the world. According to him everything of the world was made from these elements in a particular proportion. This theory of Arkan Arba is one and first of the seven Umoore tabiyah (seven basic principles).

Along with the material cause of the world they also enquire about health and diseases of human body. It was always the task of medicine to trace the true causes, as well as the probable course of a disease to prevent or, if not that, to control and cure. Various theories and preposition were explained regarding health and disease in ancient time. The historical record shows the view that diagnostic processes as well as the concepts of health and disease vary from one medical tradition to another. In ancient era there was no any particular theory or hypothesis regarding causes of health and diseases. The Homeric poem gives us a glimpse of medical ideas and practices long before any of our available medical literature.⁷ There is description of autumnal malaria in Iliad, also references can be seen about drugs and wounds in his epic poem.⁸ As all events must have a cause either visible or invisible. Therefore, diseases for which there were no obvious immediate causes were attributed to supernatural agent like Gods, ghosts, spirit etc. They ascribed disease to evil influences of soul, ghost, devil and magic. While others believed the diseases as a punishment for sin.⁹ Thus, diseased

person consulted those who had the power to control the supernatural agents of disease i.e. priest, sorcerer.⁶

By around 500 BC Greek doctors became more interested in using scientific observation and logic to figure out what caused diseases and what you could do about them. Slowly they worked out a logical system for the understanding of disease. The Greek philosophers and their physician lent more towards rational thinking when dealing medicine. Pythagoras is supposed as the first Greek philosopher with a special interest in medical subjects.⁵ The Pythagorean approach was based on mathematical inquiries. According to him the number forms two categories i.e. odd and even, so all things could be divided into pairs of opposites. The harmony, or proper balance of pairs of qualities, such as hot and cold, moist and dry, was especially important in matters of health and disease.⁵ Alcmaeon is considered as one of the most famous medical theorists and philosophers in ancient history. The medical theories of Alcmaeon had some similarity with those of Pythagoras. He also believed that pairs of opposite are the first principle of existence. According to him health was the result of harmonious blending of opposite qualities which he termed "dynamics", such as moist and dry, cold and hot, sweet and bitter etc, whereas dominance of any one of them creates disease. He also put forward the idea that illness may be caused by environmental problems, nutrition and lifestyle.^{5,7} Many of the early Greek philosophers and medical writers have largely been forgotten, but the name Hippocrates has been known as "Father of Medicine" until now. The establishment of medicine as an art, a science, and a profession of great value and dignity has been associated with the life and work of Hippocrates. Hippocrates rejected superstition, divination, and magic by assigning explanations for the phenomena of health and disease to nature. One of the most important and characteristic expressions of Hippocratic medicine is found in the text known as on Ancient Medicine. In this section he not only criticized previous medical theory of opposite dynamics but also led the foundation for theory of four fluids. It is here he insisted that the hot, the cold, the moist and the dry are not substances; they are only "powers," (dynamics) and, they are of secondary importance. He insisted that diet has a greater influence upon health than this dynamics.¹⁰ He clearly demonstrated that the food which is suitable for a man in health may not be proper for

him when he is ill. In this section there is a glimpse for the basis of theory of four Akhlāt, which he clearly mentioned in his treatise "On the Nature of Man". He showed that diseases are caused by a disturbance in the composition of the constituents of the body i.e chymoi. This disturbance has also relation with atmosphere and climatic conditions.¹⁰ However the theory did not reappear in the philosophical tradition of the fourth century, neither in Plato's Timaeus nor in the works of Aristotle. Aristotle mentioned only black bile, the only humor related to character while there is no discussion of the other humors. Later the development of anatomy in Alexandria, draw the attention towards "solidist" view of the body which replace the Hippocratic humoral theory.¹¹

It was Galen who, in the second century AD, gave the theory of four akhlāt its prestige and importance by commenting on Hippocrates and his work. He admires the works of Hippocrates and makes several references in his treatises. Galen's main progress was theory of mizāj (temperament). He showed various possible combinations of qualities viz; hot, cold, dry and wet, to describe mizāj of an individual in his treatise De Temperamentis. He also ascribed the qualities of hot, cold, wet and dry to akhlāt and creates a relationship between the elements (fire, air, water and earth) and akhlāt. Because of relationship between elements and akhlāt he mentioned that yellow bile corresponds to fire, black bile to earth and phlegm to water. However, according to him blood does not correspond to air, but comprises a balanced mixture of the four elements.¹¹

After Galen there was no improvement in theory of akhlāt until it was appreciated and preserved by Muslim world. Islamic scholars and philosophers not only translated Galen's work and Greek medical text into Arabic but also improved their work. Arab Physicians combined Galen's tenets with their own medical literature; producing encyclopedic works that greatly influenced Western medicine in the latter middle Ages.¹² Medical practices of most Arabic physician was mainly based on theory of akhlāt. In doing so they also developed a comprehensive outline of a etiology, prognosis and treatment of diseases.

The evolution of earlier theories and expansion on them was exemplified by Arab physicians, mostly by Raban Tabri, Zakaria Razi, Avicenna and Ali Abbas Majusi. They gave more importance to Hippocratic Humoral theory and Galen's theory of temperament. They not only translated those texts but also organized them in systematic way. They further defined akhlāt, their types and classification in more comprehensive way. The physicians of that time not only added their own observations and experimentation but also converted it into a flourishing practical science. Interestingly, the theory of four akhlāt remained unchallenged in Europe for many centuries. It was Paracelsus who in 16th century rejected the theory of akhlāt. He led the foundation for modern medicine. According to him outside forces, not akhlāt, are causes of disease. He explained that chemicals are found in nature which provides cures for the diseases.¹³ He was so against the ancient medical theory, that he burnt several medical texts of that time.¹⁴ In later years establishment of germ theory of disease by Pasteur and Koch and the role of these microscopic pathogens in causing ailments and disease played crucial role in replacement of humoral theory.^{15-16.}

Conclusion

To modern ears, the humoral theory sounds odd, but contextually it possessed a great deal of conceptual and explanatory coherence. Under modern medicine such a concept would be unacceptable or at least untenable, because in modern medicine causation of disease is related to etiological agents or factors like virus or bacteria. Such a theory was misunderstood and even ridiculed and criticized by the scientists of west. Yet the same scientists have now begun to look at the human organism from different insights, because the applications of this theory have shown practical results which would otherwise be unexplainable by modern principles of anatomy and physiology. Principles of Unani medicine are comprehensive and capable of proving most advanced and update theories. Its principle of diagnosis and treatment like mizāj and akhlāt are comprehensive enough to understand the most complicated disease and treat them satisfactorily.

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