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The Sacred Disease

When someone is having an epileptic seizure, it can look as if a god or demon is taking control of the body during that seizure. Before the scientific studies behind epilepsy and other diseases, people often thought that the cause behind them was a supernatural one. This came to be apparent when the practice of religion intertwined with medicine, and medicine was reasoned to be related to the mystical world. In the times before common knowledge of basic medicine were known, priests were typically a villager’s doctor as well. These Shaman believed that when someone was sick, it was because the person committed a sin or God made them sick for one reason or another. Hippocrates in his work “The Sacred Disease” not only argues against this but hypothesizes an alternative and more scientific reasoning behind the causes of these diseases. Through detailed reasoning, Hippocrates conveys how epilepsy and other diseases are not caused by the divine but are caused by humans and by the dysfunction of the brain.

Scientific study often prevails from doubt, and Hippocrates’ skepticism led him to a more scientific reasoning behind diseases. Medicine was mostly conducted by the Shaman during these times in Ancient Greece, and Hippocrates’ doubt of the “sacred” work these Shaman performed led to his alternative reasoning. These Shaman often did not administer any food or drink as medicine and if the patient were to die they would “have a certain defense, as if the gods, and not they, were to blame…” (SD 67). Hippocrates argued against this and came up with the theory of the four humors. This more scientific theory (even though we are aware it is incorrect today) was the basis point of his reasoning behind sicknesses, and he argued that when one of the four humors is out of balance, people get sick. In “The Sacred Disease”, Hippocrates refers frequently to the phlegmatic humor and its off balance as well as that most diseases are curable.

Hippocrates was greatly skeptical of the Shaman in “The Sacred Disease”. He often criticized magic and the Shaman’s connection to the “mystical world”.  Hippocrates illustrates how absurd it is that they appear to him to practice “impiety, and either to fancy that there are no gods, or, if there are, that they have no ability to ward off any of the greatest evils” (SD 92). Hippocrates argues that if diseases are caused by gods and the Shaman believe that, why do the Shaman (being mortal humans) think they can do anything about the sickness and overcome God’s will. Hippocrates doubted the ability in the Shaman’s performed rituals to make someone’s illness vanish.

The main basis point for Hippocrates’ argument is that diseases are caused by the dysfunction of the brain and are often hereditary. He states how if parents carried a disease, “certain of their offspring should be affected also?” (SD 138). This alternative reasoning behind illnesses such as epilepsy became a more scientific reasoning behind the cause and refuted the well-known “mystical” reasoning behind it. He argues that “the brain is the cause of this affection” (SD 144) and he gives anatomical evidence to support his argument. He states how “the man becomes speechless when the phlegm, suddenly descending into the veins, shuts out the air, and does not admit it either to the brain or to the vena cava, or to the ventricles, but interrupts the inspiration” (SD 203). Hippocrates describes in great detail the physical aspect of the cause of the disease and starts to disband the belief that sickness is supernatural.

We know today that Hippocrates’ work was incorrect, but for the time period he hypothesized these theories, they could make much more sense. Hippocrates sparked the scientific mindset and curiosity that has allowed us to come so far in science today.

Your introduction should be shortened by taking out some of the societal/historical commentary. The paper should be very text-based. Giving some external context for the text is not bad, but your introduction is a little too much.

Your reading of Hippocrates is on the right track, but keep analysis rooted in the text and conceptually driven. What is the significance of human responsibility in Hippocrates’s argument? How is it related to divinity, in terms of disease and otherwise? Avoid extrapolating to modern times or leaving the text to argue over universal truths.

Minimize summary and continue to use quotes as examples for deeper concepts. It would help to bring in another text and compare/contrast them on related ideas.