

Paul U. Unschuld, *Was ist Medizin? Westliche und östliche Wege der Heilkunst*. München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 2003, 296 pp.

Paul U. Unschuld, *What is Medicine? Western and Eastern Approaches to Healing*. Translated by Karen Reimers. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009, 236 pp.

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Here we have a book of real maturity. Professor Unschuld, recognized for over thirty years as one of the few specialists in the history of Chinese medicine, has in this brief and substantial work produced an exercise in intellectual expertise which will undoubtedly be appreciated by professionals in the exciting branch of knowledge that is the history of medicine. Indeed, even though the appearance of the book leads us to expect a work of popular science, especially its index, laid out in no fewer than 99 very brief chapters, some with rather "journalistic" titles, the fact is that he becomes thoroughly involved in the theoretical debate both of the history and the philosophy of medicine, not only in the field in which Professor Unschuld is an authority but, as the subtitle indicates, also – and perhaps particularly – in Western medicine.

The book begins by answering the question posed in the title: What is medicine? A response that will not please everyone, but which I find eminently sensible: not all healing strategies can be called "medicine"; only those which lie within a theoretical system based on laws, and more specifically on the laws of nature, however much the different concepts of such laws may ultimately be proved wrong. In this sense, both Chinese and Western medicines are fully acceptable, because they respond to this model; and the philosophical and historical problem posed is where their respective laws emerge from and, as a preliminary question, what makes some people, at a certain point in both their histories, feel a pressing need for them.

Paul Unschuld's response to this issue is fascinating, intelligent and credible: the psychological desire for order, and more particularly political and social order, is what (certainly unconsciously) leads to the formulation of the alleged regularities that should govern the healthy body. The radical nature of his proposal is what gives it its originality, and yet protects him against likely criticism based on the antiquity of the familiarity of historians of medicine with certain politico-anthropological metaphors: the human being as microcosm among the Pre-Socratics; the heart as the sun of the body from Harvey; Virchow's "Zellrepublik" ... These metaphors are certainly well known, but never before, to my knowledge, have they become an interpretative key in the way they do in this book. This undoubtedly has much to do with the author's deep knowledge of medicine and Chinese culture, for we get the impression that it was the birth of Chinese medicine based on the constitutive elements in the period of the formation of the first Empire that set him on track to create and develop his hypothesis.

In any case it should be noted that, at least for a Spanish reader, it is somewhat frustrating to read the part on the "discovery" of the correlation between early Western—Greek—medicine and the model of society that is the polis. Unschuld declares that he came to establish this correspondence thanks to H. D. F. Kitto's book *Die Griechen* (1960), a fact which I would not presume to question. But the fact is that this issue was developed in great detail in the specific context of the history of medicine by Pedro Laín Entralgo in his work *La medicina hipocrática* (1970), which would undoubtedly have provided invaluable arguments for Professor Unschuld if he had had access to it. No doubt this is one of the tragedies of a language spoken and read by hundreds of millions of people, but which does not possess the international status enjoyed by others. A novel interpretation of Unschuld is, however, his departure from the traditional line, also supported by Laín, according to which the new medicine had its beginnings in the work—albeit difficult to attribute—of the historical Hippocrates. In Unschuld's opinion, the treatises attributed to this doctor are still too empirical, and even critical to speculation and lacking in plausibility. The latter is what, in his view, distinguishes medicine in the strict sense from other healing strategies. Precisely for this reason he allows himself to ridicule the widely-held belief that Western and Chinese medicine may be "alternative" or "complementary", since in essence both respond to the same logical and pragmatic will.

In fact, his argument is convincing, and allows us to reconsider not only historical but also, as I have said, philosophical and methodological issues. In this sense, I admit to have felt great satisfaction in reading the title of one of the chapters in this book: "There are no revolutions in medicine", because he contradicts something that, at least for a while, became

fashionable or even orthodox among many historians of medicine, especially in my country: the application of T. S. Kuhn's model of "scientific revolutions" to medicine. I opposed this from the start, feeling that it was inappropriate and that it not only had consequences, in my view erroneous, for the field of the philosophy of medicine, but also in the way that the history of medicine is understood as a mere history of science; something which, fortunately, few now argue; since, as Unschuld himself says in his book, medicine is not just science. If it is, this is a recent development and, however you look at it, it will never stop being an "impure" science. And this in turn affects medicine itself: we are all familiar with the universal complaint about its "dehumanization", ever since the moment when doctors chose to be recognized as scientists rather than as individuals dedicated to the care and, if possible, the cure of their afflicted fellow-beings.

As is only to be expected, not everything in the book under review is good. Specialists (who, on the other hand, may enjoy this work most) will probably miss a more abundant selected bibliography; a feature which, along with the structure of the book I mentioned above, might lead more than one person to think that this is simply a work of popular science. Moreover, the chosen line of argument leaves out other considerations that might be important in a reflection of this scale; but neither of these two points should be criticized, because the intentions of the study are clear from the start. Its aim is fundamentally epistemological, and it seeks to offer an overview, and not a detailed analysis.

Bearing this in mind, it is a valuable work, especially because of the general lack of serious analyses of medicine and its history with similar aspirations. For the same reason, it can be used as a weapon against the prophets of the end of history (of science), for it shows how far research into the past is still able, from time to time, to offer new insights for helping us better understand the richness and complexity of the human in a field which, like this one, has great implications for the welfare of individuals and societies (and never can both subjects be so closely associated as here).

Finally, a brief note on the English translation: Karen Reimers' work is excellent, giving readers who cannot read the original German a totally faithful version. It is just a little unfortunate—or something to be accepted with a melancholical smile, as in the case of the author of this review, who has long crossed the Equator of life—that a "politically correct" style of writing has been imposed: that style which obliges any generic man from the original to be translated as "he or she", at times with humorous effect: for historical and cultural circumstances would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to become the subject or object of the content of the sentence in question.