

Consilium LXXX

Translated by Daryn Lehoux

On Miracles

The Claim:

From a young age until his fifteenth year, Michael N. N. was frequently troubled with epileptic symptoms and starting from his childhood, the disease was prone to worsening to such an extent that at successive new moons, or else just before or after, he would be seized by the symptoms. The doctor in whose care he had been put, having worked diligently for a number of years, made no headway. Because of this, when the prognosis was made that it would not be further treatable by human art, the parents entrusted the boy to a certain devout servant of God, while [that man] was still alive (the same man as in my previous *consilium*). This man, when he visited the boy, offered him a blessed apple he had brought, to be eaten while fasting and after reciting a Hail Mary, which he ordered the boy to do. Meanwhile, the boy had dallied with a maidservant and fallen prey to a bad case of the French pox, on account of which swellings appeared on both sides of the groin and they, having been opened, emitted a great deal of putrid fluid for a long time. Afterwards, for many years in a row, he was not bothered with an epileptic seizure. A priest, who was advancing a case for the beatification of that servant of God, steadfastly held that what happened should be credited to a miracle, given the testimony put forward by the doctor who had scarcely helped [the boy]. I on the other hand have proved from what follows that it happened purely naturally.

Key Points:

1. *A chronic disease (morbus in habitu) is the same as an innate (connaturalis) disease.*
2. *Chronic diseases are not removable, because they are like natural states of the body.*
3. *Natural dispositions to contracting some disease are not possible to overcome.*
4. *When epilepsy lasts a long time it is largely untreatable.*

5. *According to many, epilepsy tends to go away at puberty.*
6. *Facts that apply to epilepsy in its essence do not apply to epilepsy by the affection of other parts (per consensum).¹*
7. *One disease is a remedy for another, as with quartan fever, by which epilepsy is sometimes cured.*
8. *When a cause stops the effect stops; in the same way when the cause lingers it is not possible for the effect to be alleviated.*
9. *The frequency of paroxysms sometimes makes a disease chronic.*
10. *A disease cannot be called chronic in the strict sense until it is fixed in its part [of the body].*
11. *Epilepsy is cured by aging, unless there is a great fault in regimen.*
12. *A chronic disease occupies the solid parts [of the body].*
13. *Habit and nature appear to be one and the same thing.*
14. *Epilepsy that is the effect of an external cause can never be said to be chronic.*
15. *When nature works on its own, we cannot suppose a miracle.*

Before I come to the truth that is to be uncovered in the matter, it is best to set out the reasons by which the priest, and the doctor who testified, were persuaded that this event was to be firmly believed and the case closed that there was a miraculous rather than a natural cure of the aforementioned epilepsy. The doctor therefore in the testimony that was given, swore that because of the frequency of its paroxysms and its duration over time, this disease had become chronic (and, in so many words, the disease was now innate) and for this reason was in no way curable by a natural process.

In spite of it being a common [claim] canonized by much experience, this [argument] has not been proved incontrovertibly: that, diseases of this sort (ones that have sudden onsets and paroxysms attacking the main parts [of the body] and especially the heart and the head), are, from just the frequency of the attacks, fixed in those parts and take hold of their owner, nature being altogether driven out, [so that they are] afterwards in no way removable by natural means (in which case these diseases are appropriately said to have become chronic).

Concerning the frequency of the bothersome paroxysms: although he was affected for such a long time by the disease and it was at its worst when he was close to puberty (which is to say in his

¹ See, e.g., the OED under *consensus*, med. or physiol.

twelfth year and the next, in which he suffered paroxysms at each new moon, as is acknowledged) it is agreed that the disease was not so terrible that it deserved the designation *serious*, although it was hardly trivial and the frequency of the return was becoming even worse, such that after an attack there remained digestive trouble, depression, a certain difficulty of movement, headache, and visual impairment, never mind that during the paroxysm itself he was disturbed by convulsions of the arms, legs, and the rest of his body and that at the end of the attack he vomited a great deal of bloody and phlegmy material, not for a short time; usually it went on for a quarter of an hour or more.

It is therefore not doubtful how this case (*morbus*), having its beginning in childhood, strength as the years progressed, and an increase in the number of symptoms, most clearly demonstrates also a natural disposition to the illness, which [disposition] cannot be dispelled by the art [of medicine]. Indeed, at the smallest provocation it made him easily susceptible to another onslaught of the disease, as the effect itself proved. Whence Hippocrates, in *The Sacred Disease* ch. 14, said that this disease, when it has lasted a long time, is hardly curable and Aretaeus, *On the Causes and Symptoms of Chronic Disease* 1.4 rightly affirmed that when it has established deep roots, the doctor cannot shake this same disease with treatments, nor can nature through [the patient's] aging. Instead the disease lives and dies with the patient.

To these things we must add that this youth began to be afflicted by the disease before the age of seven, and neither in the seventh year itself nor thereafter had he made any change for the better as ought to happen with aging if it were curable by nature. Indeed, not only did the disease continue but, as is reported, it got worse as he aged and so by the universal agreement of the doctors, confirmed by the authority of Hippocrates in the *Aphorisms*, 5.7,² this disease was untreatable; with aging (which happens in seven-year periods), it did not admit a change nor did it

² I don't see anything in this aphorism, but perhaps 3.28 is relevant?

get better. What seems especially important to consider in our case, in which the disease did not relent at seven years old nor after seven and not even in puberty itself, is that in most cases it will tend to continue, as Avicenna in the *Canon*, book 3, part 1, tract. 5, ch. 8: certainly by the fourteenth year, in which, because of the coming forth and emission of the seed, and because of the signs in the body and the change of temperament, diseases that are curable are usually cured and those that are truly incurable never leave a person after this. Thus when this youth, his puberty being complete and he having passed some months into his fifteenth year, was thus troubled by the symptoms of epilepsy as we said above, it is abundantly clear that his epilepsy had become a chronic disease and one hardly curable by treatments or aging, but only by divine virtue.

That being said, the opinion of the priest stands on a very weak foundation while at the same time trying to support itself with the doctor's testimony which, however, is a double mistake and indeed [the argument] suffers on both counts.

First, it takes epilepsy caused by a sympathetic affection from the stomach (*per consensum a stomacho*) as effectively in the head by nature of its essence, and supposes no difference between the one and the other. But the things that apply to epilepsy aroused by a state specific to the head in no way apply to epilepsy caused by sympathetic affection. And this patient's epilepsy was caused by a sympathetic affection from the stomach rather than by a state specific to the head. Indeed, what is so much more pressing: the rapid onset of this epilepsy always took its original cause above all from an outside source, which derives from what was said by various witnesses testifying: this youth was extremely voracious, a wonder to behold in his usual diet and seriously irresponsible, whence when he would gorge himself incessantly, his over-stuffed stomach would be full of bad humours and so for three or even four days before an epileptic attack he would be overcome with stomach aches and nausea and he would have to vomit uncontrollably until the onset of the [epileptic] symptoms, and finally he would continue to vomit a great deal while being weakened by the symptoms. Whence it is

not true that he was taken by the disease ‘at some new moon’ simply because it happened either long before or sometimes long after; he was attacked by it instead because of partaking in some greater or lesser violation of good regimen and because of a greater or a lesser overfilling of his stomach.

Secondly, the doctor’s testimony amounts to nothing for proving that this youth was miraculously cured, because of another fault with which it struggles which is of course the failure to consider the onset of the new disease, on account of which the body was able through such copious evacuations of rotting humours, to be at the same time cleansed of the malignant humours stimulating the epilepsy. For it is a common experience that one disease is a remedy for another, thus Avicenna in the *Canon* book 1, part 2, thesis 1, ch. 8³ and which concerning epilepsy itself Galen reaffirms in his *Commentary on Epidemics 1*, 3.4:⁴ it is sometimes cured by an intervening quartan, for no other reason than that the epilepsy-causing humour, which is melancholic, abandons the head because of the quartan onsets and is purged through vomiting and other evacuations, just as happened in our case, where such volumes of pus came from the swellings that arose in the groin for forty days and beyond that the surgeon himself, a great expert, was not able to stop it; instead he was struck with considerable amazement.

³ Gerardus trans.: *est una egritudo alterius egritudinis medicamentum sicut quartana ex qua multotiens sanata epilepsia et podagra et varices et articulorum dolores* “one disease is the treatment for another, such as a quartan, by which sometimes epilepsy is cured, and gout, and varices, and pain of the joints.”

⁴ Galen quotes the Hippocratic *Epidemics* 1.24: ὁ τεταρταῖος ... καὶ νοσημάτων μεγάλων ἄλλων ῥύεται, “the quartan ... also fends off other serious diseases.” Galen comments (K17a 227.10 f.): παυσασμένους γοῦν ἐπιληψίας ἴσμεν ἐπὶ τεταρταίῳ χρονίως ἐνοχλήσαντι, καὶ μεμάθηκας ἤδη περὶ τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ κατὰ τε τὰ Περὶ διαφορᾶς πυρετῶν ὑπομνήματα καὶ τὰ Περὶ κρίσεων, “we see epilepsies stopping when quartans are attacking for a long time, but you know already about how this happens from what is written in *On the Differences of Fevers* and *On Crises*.”

It is interesting that Galen parses the Hippocratic passage about “other serious diseases” (νοσημάτων μεγάλων ἄλλων) as just “other diseases” (καὶ ἄλλων νοσημάτων) in this section (although he immediately talks about epilepsy specifically), whereas when he discusses a very similar passage in *Epidemics* 6, he tells us that “the serious disease” is a technical term for epilepsy specifically (K17b 341). Cf. also Smith’s translation of the *Epidemics* 6 passage as “People seized with quartan fevers are not seized with epilepsy. If they have it already and a quartan fever supervenes they are cured” (Loeb *Epidemics* 6.6, p. 249).

Based on this, then, it is in no way surprising that this youth became free of epilepsy by a natural process, which began from the stomach itself. And the cure shows that it was not specific or endemic to the head, [which cure was] the complete cessation of the constriction or pain of the stomach by which he was bothered before an attack of epilepsy; by stopping the cause, the effect stops, as is obvious, in the same way as it is not possible to be cured when the cause remains present, as Galen in *On the Method of Healing* 7.12 [says]:⁵ when the cause is taken away, the disease stops, from which healing follows naturally just as in the present case. Therefore if epilepsy has stopped when the overfilling of the stomach stops, then the epilepsy was an effect of the overfilling of the stomach.

And this must be thought to be very much consistent with the truth since (notwithstanding that he withheld from filling himself up while still secretly snatching bits of food when he thought no-one was looking) this youth was abstinent, so that according to the account from his family he was attacked neither by stomach trouble or vomiting, nor afterwards was he bothered by epilepsy, because nature expelled all the superfluities through the open sores, whence both the stomach and head had escaped the trouble those caused.

From this it must be concluded as fact that the health of this youth is to be altogether credited to nature, and that one cannot detect in the matter any semblance of a miracle.

And to those things which might be said against this [account], it is not difficult to reply since they fall apart under their own weight on examination and close consideration.

First, to that which was asserted in the doctor's testimony, that this disease had become chronic and therefore hardly treatable rather than it having its origin in nature itself. It must be pointed out that it is altogether false that, just because it is possible for the frequency of attacks to turn a disease chronic, that it has been proved when the disease is specific to the head; but whenever

⁵ = K10 521.4 f.

[the disease] is sympathetic and an affection from other parts of the body, the [argument] is no longer relevant. And the proof is clear that because the parts are suffering by their own proper affections from this disease and the violence of its attacks, as well as the presence of morbid substances without any interruption and [the parts] being incessantly overpowered, they are never able to correct themselves, but are overcome by this disease because of a necessity of nature, [their?] nature itself surrendering altogether. But really, when they are ill because of an exterior cause [the parts] do not suffer so violently nor, as in the other case, are they unceasingly impaired by the disease. Instead, by means of particular changes such that nature regains her strength while she has a respite, rising up against the morbid cause she defeats it, and does not allow herself to be conquered. Thus one can never say that a disease 'has been made chronic,' so long as it happens to this extent by affection from other organs and is not fixed in the suffering part. And so when this [case of] epilepsy, as has been clearly shown, was always incited by affection from the stomach, it was not chronic but was instead curable by natural remedies and in a natural way.

On this account, because the disease began to attack in childhood [and] showed its tenacity by always increasing, this defense for its elimination did not eventuate until the disease had stopped by means of the removal of an external cause, which could have happened easily if he had obeyed the orders of his doctor. But because, as it is reported, this patient repeatedly and continuously stuffed himself and gorged on every kind of food indiscriminately it was necessary that so long as the cause remained, the effect—the disease itself, of course—would persist, as I noted in Galen, above. When one uses the correct regimen, the overfilling of the stomach will be easily avoided, and the attack of epilepsy that is stimulated by that [overfilling] is also avoided, as has been demonstrated. For, aging aside, diseases of this sort are instead removed by a suitable protective regimen. Galen wanted to teach us this in his *First Commentary on Epidemics 6*, 1.26, as did Avicenna

p.1, tract. 5, ch. 8.⁶ They both consider these diseases curable, unless there is a great fault in [the patient's] regimen.

On the other hand, therefore, when there is a great fault in regimen, as in our case happened unceasingly, it is in no way removable nor will it see a change for the better with age. Instead it mocks both nature and the doctor, and falls daily into a worse state. This should have happened to our young man in just this way, except that nature, roused by the supervention of a new disease, freed him from that serious and long-settled ailment to be blamed on the lower parts [of the body] and equally on the excess secretions of the natural balance and on the foul humours, whence vapours were carried up to the head from the stomach and the epileptic symptoms stimulated. Therefore because this disease was not the effect of any intrinsic cause, ailment of the brain, or natural disposition of the head, it was therefore completely removable, whereas if the same [disease] had intrinsic and natural causes, then the testimony of the doctor would have been correct, that the disease was not removable by human art nor by the work of nature, once it had become chronic because it was resident in the solid parts just like any disease that typically becomes chronic. Thus Galen in his *Second Commentary on Epidemics 1*, ch. 46:⁷ this is the same as if you were to say that such a disease has destroyed the substance and the form itself of the solid parts, because in the same way as nature, when the animal is doing well, governs its body and its parts by its own accord, so does a chronic disease, for the condition and nature alike work in bodies and seem to be one and the same thing. Thus Galen in the *Medical Definitions*.⁸ And so truly, because the epilepsy in this youth himself, as has been repeatedly said, was the effect of an external cause, it could at no point be called chronic, since a chronic disease not only has an internal cause by necessity but also one that is fixed and

⁶ I can find the referenced passage in Galen's commentary on *Ep. 6*, but it is not relevant. I also note that one of my edd. of Zacchia says *Epidemics 6*, and the other *Epidemics 8*, the latter of which makes no sense. The Avicenna reference is opaque to me.

⁷ =K17a 144 f.

⁸ Perhaps Def. 129?

rooted in the solid parts, as is clear from the passage of Galen just cited. Therefore this disease could be overcome by means of medical—which is to say *natural*—assistance and by nature itself, not requiring a divine power intervening specially for its removal. And so vanishes every hint of a miracle; for when nature works by itself, the effect is never to be reckoned as miraculous, as is plain, because a miracle is an effect independent of a natural cause, either in itself or in the chain of events.