



Empedocles.

A seventeenth-century engraving of the fifth-century BCE Greek philosopher Empedocles, who hypothesized that the universe was composed of four primary elements—air, earth, fire, and water.

In the fifth century BCE, the Greek philosopher **Empedocles** hypothesized that the universe was composed of four primary elements—air, earth, fire, and water. Because the microcosm reflected the macrocosm, it followed that the human body was composed and controlled by the same four elements, making the body an ideal model to understand the larger forces of the universe. According to the theory of the four elements, disease was a state where one element in the body was wielding an outsized influence over the others; healing then was restoring balance to the body by counteracting that element.

Though Empedocles thought everything in the universe was composed of those four elements, different objects would have differing amounts of each elemental influence. Medicine, then, was a major means to investigate the essential properties

of the elemental substances because it was in patients that physicians could observe how foods or medicines associated with a given element could produce therapeutic effects (like heating, moistening, drying, or cooling) in the body.

The Hippocratics too saw the human body *as* the natural world, albeit on a smaller scale. Where they differed from other philosophies of the body was in their decidedly empirical and practical outlook. In *Tradition in Medicine*, for instance, the author rebukes the elemental theories of Empedocles for being too speculative. For the Hippocratics, exact observation of the individual patient—their symptoms, their response to treatment, and the course and outcome of their disease—was the proper object and purpose of medicine, not abstract theory. Therefore, Hippocratic medicine emphasized that the body was not directly composed of the four elements, as Empedocles had argued; rather the Hippocratics ascribed to the **theory of the four humors**—they thought the body should be understood to be controlled by four elemental fluids or **humors** (**blood**, **yellow bile**, **black bile**, and **phlegm**), which were readily observable and measurable.

For the Hippocratics, as with Empedocles, a state of health represented a balance of humors within an individual. As we will see in Section II, the theory of **humoral medicine**, which originated in the Hippocratic writings, was truly first systematized and organized by later scholars, especially **Galen of Pergamon** in the second century CE. From the point of view of the Hippocratics themselves, however, humoral medicine was a way of thinking about the **constitutional health** (the usual physical condition) of each individual patient and what they, as physicians, might do to help restore it in the case of illness.

In order to restore humoral balance, the healer needed to know what health looked like for that individual before they fell ill. Daily lifestyle habits (especially with regard to diet and exercise) and the environment (such as climate) were thought to greatly influence the state of constitutional health—and could also restore it, if practiced properly. Thus, the place of the individual patient, in all their specific situations and habits, was central to the theories and practice of humoral medicine.