



APHORISMS, HORIZONS, AND THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION: FROM NIETZSCHE TO HIPPOCRATES

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Abstract

In his reflections on philology, Nietzsche explicitly situates himself within the tradition of Schleiermacher and Boeckh. For Nietzsche, philology is first and foremost “that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*” (Daybreak, preface). Philology thus emerges not simply as a methodological discipline, but as an ethos—a way of approaching language with slowness, precision, and interpretive care.

Introduction

Curved Lines of Meaning: Aphorisms and the Horizon of Intelligibility

Etymologically, the word aphorism derives from the Greek apo- (“from, away from”) and horizō (“to bound”). A horizon, in turn, is defined as “a: the apparent junction of earth and sky; b: the great circle on the celestial sphere formed by the intersection of the celestial sphere with a plane tangent to the earth’s surface at an observer’s position” (Merriam–Webster). The horizon is, by definition, unattainable—forever receding, always both immanent and imminent. Transcendent and ungraspable, it is a line without beginning or end, marking the boundary between the visible and the invisible. Classically, the Hippocratic Aphorisms represent one of the earliest systematic uses of this form. Their function is epistemic: they seek correlations between theoretical principles and observable phenomena. Because the inner body cannot be seen, the physician must interpret external signs, becoming an exegete of symptoms.

The horizon promises hope: it beckons, guides, and orients. Yet in Greek lexicography, particularly in Liddell and Scott's Greek–English Lexicon, the verb *aphorizō* leans toward limiting, bounding, or bringing something to a halt (Liddell & Scott 1996). An aphorism thus asserts a boundary, demarcates a conceptual space, establishes a limit. At the same time, any good definition is aware of what lies within and without. To define is to delimit. Like the curvature of the earth, the shape of thought itself ensures that our field of vision—and thus our conceptual grasp—is always limited. An aphorism, in this sense, marks our finitude: it approaches a horizon that is always visible yet never tangible. As Nietzsche observes, “wisdom sets bounds even to knowledge” (Nietzsche 1881/1997). One cannot totalize the world within conceptual frameworks. The curvature of thought, like that of the earth, ensures that visibility always ends in a horizon. To define anything is to limit it; to know anything is to confront the boundary of knowing. The aphorism presses thought to the edge of intelligibility. It gestures toward the *je ne sais quoi*—what exceeds articulation. Beyond the horizon of language, thinking cannot move further. As a vector that points both inward and outward from the boundary (*horos*) of discourse, the short saying traces the very limits of thought (Nietzsche 1882/2001).

The Earliest Aphorisms: The Hippocratic Corpus

Although the origins of aphoristic expression certainly predate Homer—whose epics are filled with perceptive utterances—the first attested use of *aphorismos* appears in the title of the Hippocratic Aphorisms (430–330 BCE). Containing approximately 457 concise statements, the Aphorisms begin with one of the most famous lines in the history of medicine:

- “Life is short, science is long; opportunity is elusive, experiment is dangerous, judgment is difficult. It is not enough for the physician to do what is necessary; the patient and the attendants must also do their part, and circumstances must be favorable”.
- “The physician should cure sometimes, relieve often, and comfort always.” (Ambroise Paré)
- “He who knows only medicine does not even know medicine.” (Paracelsus)
- “It is much more important to know what sort of patient has a disease than what sort of disease a patient has.” (William Osler precursor)

Although these insights may seem commonplace today, as the opening of a medical treatise they carry remarkable force. The parallel syntax and the density of key Greek terms—*bios*, *tekhnē*, *kairos*, *peira*, *krisis*—disclose a world of conceptual richness. Even as Hippocrates juxtaposes human life with human science, he simultaneously undermines the authority of *tekhnē*: biomedical power is itself subject to the same contingencies it seeks to master.

As the Aphorisms unfold, they reveal a spectrum of epistemological functions:

- “Desperate cases need the most desperate remedies”.
- “Menstrual bleeding during pregnancy indicates an unhealthy fetus”.
- “Dysuria is cured by bleeding, and the incision should be in the inner vein”.
- “Hard work is undesirable for the underfed”.
- “Everything is at its weakest at the beginning and at the end, but strongest at its height”.

For any science, medicine included, a stable correspondence between theory and observation must exist. Diagnosing illness presupposes that phenomena are repeatable, predictable, and ultimately rational. Because the inner workings of the body remain hidden, the physician must infer from visible symptoms. The doctor is thus foremost an interpreter of signs. As Galen writes in his Commentary on Hippocrates’ *On Fractures* (18b318): “The power of exegesis is to make clear (*saphē*) everything that is unclear (*asaphē*).”

Conclusion

Aphorisms, like philology itself, require the slow, careful attention that Nietzsche describes as the goldsmith's art of reading. Approached through this ethos, the aphorism becomes more than a stylistic device: it is a way of thinking that reveals the boundaries within which knowledge must operate. Rooted in *aphorizō*-to mark off or delimit-the aphorism points toward the horizon of intelligibility, the place where thought meets its limit. As Nietzsche says, "wisdom sets bounds even to knowledge," and the aphorism makes those bounds visible.

This function is unusually clear in the Hippocratic tradition. Because the inner body is unseen, the physician must interpret signs through concise statements that enable practice while allowing for uncertainty. Hippocratic and Galenic aphorisms are, therefore, epistemic markers, tracing the line between what can be known and what is obscure.



Recognizing this, we see the aphorism as a compact intellectual tool—one that orients thought without claiming completeness. It preserves the horizon as a horizon: always in view, never fully reached. In so doing, the aphorism teaches us to think at the threshold of understanding where meaning emerges precisely through the limits which shape it.

References

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4. Анжелика В. Королькова “Язык как концепт русской афористики” (Language as a Concept of Russian Aphoristics) Analyzes how aphoristics functions as part of Russian language and culture: studies the conceptual field (e.g. “LANGUAGE”) in Russian aphoristic corpus across 18th–21st centuries.