

EINSTEIN CENTER CHRONOI

Time and Awareness of Time in Antiquity

Workshop “Kairos, Krisis, Rhythmos: Time and Time Awareness in Ancient Medicine”

Galen on Pulse, Perception and Time

Peter N. Singer (Einstein Center Chronoi)

The Graeco-Roman physician Galen (2nd c. CE) devoted a large body of work to the analysis and discernment of the human pulse – a body of work which was also of great influence on medieval and Renaissance medicine and philosophy. The presentation highlights some key conceptual issues explored by our research project, which inform the historical understanding of diagnostic systems, and, more broadly, of time perception and measurement in antiquity. The following central themes will be illustrated by short text extracts:

(1) Questions of quantification and measurement

Measurement of the pulse – its size, depth, vehemence, and in particular its speed – were thought essential to accurate diagnosis. How is such measurement approached in a pre-modern medical culture, and how is the relevant diagnostic experience (sometimes characterized by Galen as ‘inexpressible’) communicated? What underlying concepts are employed, and how do these interact with sensory experience?

(2) Theoretical analysis of time in relation to space and motion

Galen explores in a distinct and original way the nature of time in relation to our perception of it, employing the notions of minimal perceptible units of time, space and motion, and discussing the relationship between these and the underlying reality.

(3) Pulse, rhythm and music

One ramification of ancient pulse theory is its relationship to rhythm and music. Both Galen and his predecessors analysed the pulse in terms of beats, intervals and metre. This analysis, related to others in ancient music theory, is of considerable value for our understanding of time perception; there is also a connection here to the broader area of ‘times of life’ in antiquity, where each distinct age may be related to a particular modality of the pulse.