

Can we trace medical concepts in the Philosophy of Plato?

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Health seems to be an issue of prominent importance since classical antiquity to the 21st century AD. Back in the 4th century BC, the renowned philosopher Plato stated that “attention to Health is life’s greatest hindrance” [1]. Even if this statement sounds ambiguous to people who consider health a blessing, this essay serves two precise points: to examine such a claim in relation to Plato’s philosophical worldview while discussing it in relation to contemporary attitude.

Plato has been one of the first scholars to - attempt to - provide a definition of health. His definition focuses on mental health. According to Plato’s tripartite theory of the soul, the soul consists of three different parts: the *logistic*, the *high spirited* and the *appetitive*. “Health” is defined as a kind of harmony that regulates the three parts of human soul. Provided that the *appetitive* is controlled by the *high spirited* and both of them are ruled by the *logistic* part of a man’s soul, the man is healthy [2]. For Plato, morality equals health. This kind of health is inherent in human nature as a power (*potentiality*) and man is meant to cultivate this charisma to reach actuality and therefore become a moral and consequently a healthy person. For Plato, a moral man should always be cautious of his words and deeds and this is why he has characterized health/morality as “hindrance” [1].

The aforementioned quote appears to be an allegoric argument that Plato used against the “sophists”, a category of scientists of his days. The sophists claimed that “morality is a set of social conventions” and in that sense “is contrary to nature” [3,4]. Plato compares (mental) health to physical wellbeing so as to defeat the theories of his opponents. In fact, he holds that an immoral person is a diseased person. In the same way that physical wellbeing is a natural state of the human being and physical disease is “contrary to nature”, morality, the mental health, is a natural state, too. Immorality,

according to the philosopher, equals to mental disease and as a result, immorality “is contrary to nature” [1, 5].

Nevertheless, there might be additional interpretations of Plato’s approach. Putting the philosopher’s words in the context of the modern perception of health, it is possible to identify potential connections with contemporary concepts of individual and population health. Since 1948, health is perceived as a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing [6].

Essentially, a reiteration of Plato’s approach would emphasize on mental health and its social determinants. Mental health disorders can disrupt social wellbeing at individual and community level. On the other hand, suppressive social norms stemming from irrational social structures can fuel a number of mental health disorders from depression and anxiety to anorexia nervosa [7]. Currently, it has been established that the connection between mental and social wellbeing and physical health is more than allegoric. Stress has been recognized as a risk factor for numerous health conditions affecting the cardiovascular, the gastrointestinal, the immune, the musculoskeletal and the nervous system. An individual experiencing stress in their workplace or family life can develop both depression and sleep disorders leading etiologically to obesity and hypertension among others [8]. Such concepts expand the rationale of Plato on the basis of epidemiological evidence indicating that philosophy might provide modern biomedical researchers with hypotheses to investigate.

Plato’s call to pay attention to health remains relevant not only in terms of individual wellbeing and integrity, but also as a public health issue. Scientific literature has built upon this concept from the early 20th century until today [9]. Contemporary scientists and healthcare workers advice people to take good care of their nutritional habits, to abstain from smoking, to engage in physical exercise in an effort to prevent the onset of diseases. In case this level of prevention is overwhelmed, healthcare workers use a number of conservative and interventional therapeutic means to sustain health. The existence of healthcare systems suggests that civil authorities are committed to uphold health, for the sake of human rights, but also for the sake of maintaining a thriving workforce [10]. Constructing an efficient system of public health with highly educated professionals and adequate medical equipment, launching campaigns against smoking, teaching a healthy *modus Vivendi* in schools are nothing but the frame of a satisfactory state policy concerning public health [11].

Therefore, the need for rational health planning on behalf of the state, imitates the tripartite soul, where reason spearheads the wellbeing of the other components. Implementing the

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health goals at individual and civil level resembles the effort to turn potentiality into actuality.

Certainly, the connection between Plato's theory and contemporary public health concepts might appear loose. On top of this, the contribution of reinterpreting health concepts by means of ancient philosophy to the implementation of health policy is equivocal. In spite of these limitations, approaching Plato as a physician philosopher can still be beneficial. His concepts can be analyzed with an eye on potential hypotheses explaining health by means of ethical and civil dynamics. For instance, the myth of the cave, where people are expected to escape from misconceptions and discover the truth, has a major potential in the understanding of misinformation and in the efforts to tackle it [12]. This has also served as a call for self – reflection in biomedical research [13] and might be able to advance the relevant epistemology. The analogy of the Soul and the city provides a number of lessons with regard to rational governance [14]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing public health restrictions over the market and the economy generated controversy and in many occasions increased morbidity and mortality. Part of these hardships might have been prevented if decision makers were aware of the consequences of prioritizing resources and materials over reason [15].

In the long term, revamping philosophy in health policy could motivate philosophy scholars to engage in health literacy. Their reasoning skills could change the tide in the fight against misinformation by means of challenging conspiracy theories and educating people not to become prey to them [16, 17]. To reach this stage a new working culture is essential, a culture enabling humanities scholars to work with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and life sciences scholars on an equal basis, with each party setting and understanding its boundaries and limitations.

Considering the above, one realizes the diachronic and multidisciplinary impact of health. It is a fact that such a short word as “health” is able to raise, and up to an extent bridge, a plethora of concepts and practices ranging from ancient Greek philosophy, to governance, health policy and individual wellbeing. Plato's call to pay attention to health proves to be an inexhaustible challenge, that humans ought to handle wisely at individual, community, state and beyond-state level.

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