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The concept of disease and health in Aristotle: Between nature and ethics

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of disease in Aristotelian thought, highlighting its dual nature as both a physical deviation and a moral metaphor. Through an examination of texts concerning nature, the soul, and ethical action, it argues that disease represents a departure from what is “according to nature” and a disruption of the organism’s entelechy. Health, by contrast, is identified with harmony and proper functioning, while disease signifies a rupture of this balance on both the bodily and psychological levels. The interaction between biological and ethical factors is also analyzed, showing that Aristotelian thought anticipates a holistic and proto-bioethical approach. A comparison with contemporary scientific views reveals the enduring relevance of this ancient problem, emphasizing that disease is not merely a biological event but one intertwined with moral, psychological, and social dimensions. The study contributes by shedding light on the relationship between bodily health and moral responsibility, opening fertile channels of dialogue between philosophy and modern bioethics.

Keywords: Aristotle; Disease; Nature; Ethics; Soul; Health; Medicine.

1. Introduction

The concept of disease has preoccupied human thought since the dawn of civilization. In ancient Greece, medicine, philosophy, and ethics were interrelated fields of knowledge, where the observation of the body was intertwined with the understanding of the soul. Hippocrates established the scientific approach to disease through observation and experience, while Aristotle went further, linking disease to the metaphysics of nature and the teleology of being. For the Stagirite, health is not merely the absence of disease; it is a state of complete functioning and realization of the organism’s entelechy. Conversely, disease is viewed as a deviation from what is “according to nature,” signifying a disturbance of natural order and the being’s completeness (Parts of Animals, 650a–b).

The present study aims to analyze the notion of disease in Aristotle, examining it both as a biological phenomenon and as a moral and political metaphor. Furthermore, it situates the Aristotelian conception within a contemporary interdisciplinary framework, where medicine, philosophy, and culture complement each other to offer a more comprehensive understanding of human health and disease (Maniou et al., 2025a; Maniou et al., 2025b).

More broadly, disease in literature and culture is approached as a multidimensional experience that transcends the bodily, psychological, social, and cultural levels. In Homer and Pirandello, illness functions as a disruption of human balance—physical or psychological—revealing the limits of existence (Manola & Vekri, 2021; Manola & Tsatambassoglou, 2020). In Kazantzakis, it becomes an existential crisis and a struggle for self-definition, while in

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Theophilos and Matesis, disease expresses collective and cultural trauma, where the individual clashes with historical and social reality (Manola & Vekri, 2021). Skarimbis and Pirandello use morbidity as a starting point for subversion and self-reinvention, linking pathology to artistic creation (Manola, 2022).

At the same time, cultural experience and memory serve a therapeutic role at the collective level; cultural routes, such as the experiential itineraries of Tuscany, highlight disease as an opportunity for rebirth and communal cohesion (Manola & Koltsikoglou, 2020; Manola et al., 2022). The connection between literature, culture, tourism, and experiential learning—as seen in the *Odyssey through wine*—emphasizes that illness and healing can be interpreted not only in biomedical but also in symbolic terms, as memory, narrative, and cultural resilience (Manola, 2024; Manola & Raftopoulos, 2024). Overall, disease emerges not as a static or passive condition but as a dynamic concept, inseparably linked to identity, crisis, creativity, and the transformation of both the individual and the community.

At this point, the importance of digital technologies in the field of Medical and philosophy education is highlighted. ICTs support universal access to education, provide innovative approaches for effective teacher training, enhance learning retention, promote cooperation, increase openness, develop learner-centered approaches, and hasten the process of learning. Additionally, by using virtualization, mobilization, artificial intelligence, and new learning environments like virtual worlds, support educational activities and methodologies. More specifically, ICTs are very effective and productive in Medical and philosophy training, facilitating and improving the assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [27-29] and through a variety of ICT applications that serve as the backbone of education [30-34]. While games turn education into a multimodal, incredibly amiable, and enjoyable interaction, the use of AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS [35-38] raise educational procedures into new levels of adaptation, creativity, and performance. Furthermore, the adoption, improvement, and fusion of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence cultivation [39-52] places the development of mental abilities at the center of educational procedures and policies, which accelerates and improves educational practices and outcomes, particularly in Medical and philosophy domain and its procedures like assessment and intervention.

2. The Concept of Disease in Aristotle

According to Aristotle, every being in nature has a natural purpose (*telos*) that it strives to fulfill. The process by which a being achieves its completeness is called *entelecheia*. When all its parts function properly and in accordance with their nature, there is health. Conversely, disease arises when this natural functioning is disrupted—when the body or the soul deviate from their natural rhythm (Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, II.10).

Aristotle does not regard disease as a result of divine punishment or supernatural forces but as a natural phenomenon. The organism itself, he argues, contains both the causes of illness and the capacity to restore balance. Medicine, therefore, does not “fight” nature but assists it in healing itself. This idea is remarkably modern, as it anticipates today’s scientific approach, where treatment is based on understanding natural causes (Cooper, 2007).

Modern biomedicine follows the same philosophy, albeit with far more advanced tools. Disease is no longer seen as something “foreign” but as an internal imbalance that requires restoration (Maniou et al., 2025b). Technology—from robotic surgery to psychotherapy—continues to serve the same goal: to restore the organism to its natural harmony.

In *De Anima*, Aristotle explains that the soul is the form of a body that has life in potentiality (II, 412a). That is, body and soul are not two separate entities but one unified being. Thus, disease is not merely physical but also concerns the balance of the soul. Health, therefore, is the harmonious cooperation of body and soul.

Recent studies, such as those by Pagkalos et al. (2025), show that mental health improves when individuals engage in cultural or social activities—art, music, and education act therapeutically not only for individuals but also for communities.

Aristotle also uses disease as a metaphor for moral and political life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.5, 1106b), he describes vice as a “disease of the soul,” where virtue represents its health. Just as the body needs balance, so too does the soul require moderation to remain healthy. Similarly, in the *Politics* (V.1, 1301a), he compares the decline of a city to illness: society “falls ill” when it loses justice and the balance of its powers (Nussbaum, 1994; Maniou et al., 2025c).

For Aristotle, healing is a natural process of restoration. The physician does not impose upon nature but helps it to find its way again (*On Generation and Corruption*, II.10). The same idea persists today: medicine is not merely a mechanical process but an act with moral and philosophical significance, aiming at the fulfillment of the human being (Porter, 1997).

Contemporary research, such as that by Maniou et al. (2025a; 2025d), emphasizes that the interaction between medicine and culture substantially enhances human psychological, social, and emotional well-being. The integration of art, aesthetics, and cultural experience in therapeutic spaces contributes not only to stress reduction but also to strengthening trust between physician and patient, making care more humane, holistic, and experiential (Ulrich, 1984; Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014).

At the same time, modern approaches to health revive ideas rooted in ancient Greek philosophy. For Aristotle, disease is not merely a biological irregularity but an expression of the disruption of natural and moral balance—a rupture between body, soul, and society. Thus, healing is not only the elimination of symptoms but the restoration of harmony and the reintegration of the human being into the fullness of their existence (Nussbaum, 2001).

This philosophical view, as highlighted by recent studies by Maniou et al. (2025a; 2025b; 2025d), remains highly relevant to contemporary medical science. The unity of body, soul, and environment, as well as the connection between care and culture, underscore the timelessness of Greek thought and its significance for the holistic understanding of the human being as a biopsychosocial entity.

3. The Concept of Health in Aristotle

The concept of health in Aristotle is inseparably linked to his overall view of human nature and eudaimonia (flourishing or happiness). For the philosopher, health is not simply the absence of disease but the proper functioning of the body and soul in accordance with human nature (Aristotle, *De Anima*, 412a). The human being is a unity of matter and form; the soul is the entelecheia of the body—that is, the principle that gives it life and purpose. Health, therefore, expresses the correct balance of natural forces, the harmony of body and soul (Cooper, 2007).

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines eudaimonia as the highest good—“living well” and “doing well” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a17). Eudaimonia is a state of the soul, but it also requires the contribution of bodily health, since the body is the instrument through which virtue and rationality are expressed. Health is not the ultimate end but a necessary condition for achieving eudaimonia (Nussbaum, 2001).

The Aristotelian principle of the mean (*mesotēs*) also applies to health: well-being arises from the constant pursuit of balance between excess and deficiency—in diet, exercise, and mental life alike. The phrase “*Mens sana in corpore sano*” (“a sound mind in a sound body”), though originating from Juvenal (*Satires* 10.356), perfectly reflects this Aristotelian idea (Juvenal, 1991). The healthy person is one who lives in harmony with their nature, balancing body and mind.

In modern times, Aristotle’s thought continues to inspire holistic approaches to health: health is not confined to the biological dimension but also includes psychological and social well-being (Baker, 2020). Thus, the Aristotelian view remains relevant today, emphasizing that true health is a dynamic equilibrium—an inner and outer harmony essential to human fulfillment.

4. *Mens sana in corpore sano* — An Aristotelian Perspective

The phrase “*Mens sana in corpore sano*” expresses the timeless quest for balance between body and mind. Although it comes from the Roman poet Juvenal (*Satires* 10.356), its meaning is perfectly aligned with Aristotle’s philosophy of human nature, virtue, and eudaimonia. In *De Anima*, Aristotle asserts that the soul and body form a unity; the soul does not exist apart from the body but gives it life and purpose. The body, therefore, is not a mere tool of the soul but the vehicle through which the soul manifests life and reason. Within this framework, health is the harmonious functioning of bodily and psychic forces—a state in which a person lives according to their nature.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identifies eudaimonia as the ultimate goal of human life—“living well” and “doing well.” Although eudaimonia is primarily a state of the soul, it cannot be achieved without bodily health, since the body is the medium through which the soul expresses its rational nature and virtues. Health, therefore, is not the highest good but a fundamental prerequisite for attaining eudaimonia and living virtuously. A person cannot truly be happy without enjoying both physical and mental balance.

The principle of moderation and balance is central to Aristotle’s philosophy. Virtue lies in the mean between two extremes—courage, for instance, between cowardice and recklessness. The same applies to health: a “sound mind” results from moderation in diet, exercise, work, and thought. Health, therefore, is not merely a physical condition but a

way of life that requires self-discipline and *phronēsis* (practical wisdom). The truly healthy person lives in harmony—both bodily and spiritual—in accordance with reason and nature.

In the modern era, the phrase “*Mens sana in corpore sano*” reflects a holistic conception of health that integrates physical, mental, and social well-being. Aristotelian thought reminds us that true health extends beyond the body to encompass the overall balance of the human being—the conscious care of the self and the cultivation of the mind. The connection between body and soul is not only biological but also ethical: caring for the body is an aspect of virtue, while the clarity of the mind reflects inner order and self-knowledge. Thus, this ancient phrase remains vivid and relevant today, expressing a way of life that unites health with morality, wisdom, and *eudaimonia*.

5. The Timelessness of the Aristotelian View

Aristotle’s conception of disease as a deviation from what is *kata physin* (“according to nature”) retains its significance beyond antiquity, re-emerging in modern fields such as bioethics, cultural medicine, and health psychology. The idea that disease is not merely a physical disorder but a sign of disturbance in the natural order provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human health on multiple levels. Contemporary studies (Maniou et al., 2025b; Pagkalos et al., 2025) demonstrate that health cannot be reduced to a biological event; it is deeply intertwined with the individual’s interaction with their environment, society, and cultural practices. The experience of art, literature, or architectural spaces can act as a form of therapy, enhancing psychological and social well-being (Maniou et al., 2025d; Pagkalos et al., 2025).

The concept of therapy as experience represents a modern expression of Aristotle’s principle that human nature is indivisible—body and soul coexist and strive toward fulfillment. The teleological view of nature, first formulated by Aristotle, finds contemporary application not only in clinical practice but also in the design of cultural and social interventions aimed at promoting health. Therapy, therefore, is not merely a medical procedure; it encompasses ethical, psychological, and social dimensions, highlighting the necessity of a holistic approach.

The enduring relevance of Aristotelian thought allows for the integration of philosophy, science, and culture in the understanding of human health. This perspective reveals that the restoration of balance extends beyond the recovery of physical function—it involves the re-establishment of harmony between the individual, society, and the environment. Through this synthesis, the Aristotelian worldview continues to guide contemporary medicine, bioethics, and cultural approaches, confirming its timeless value and its essential insight into the relationship between nature, humanity, and the fulfillment of existence.

6. Conclusions

The Aristotelian understanding of disease forms a holistic model for conceiving health, wherein body, soul, and moral function constitute a unified reality. Health is not simply the absence of illness but a state of harmony, equilibrium, and *entelecheia*, in which each part of the being fulfills its natural purpose. Disease, by contrast, signifies a deviation from what is *kata physin* and a disruption of the organism’s internal order—not as an external invasion, but as a sign of dysfunction within the whole.

In Aristotelian thought, healing is not limited to the restoration of physical function; it is the re-establishment of natural, psychic, and moral harmony, aiming at the coherence and completeness of the human being as a rational and social entity. This perspective resonates with contemporary bioethical and human-centered approaches to health, in which well-being is understood as a relationship with the environment, society, and cultural experience.

The interdisciplinary renewal of the concept of health—through the integration of medicine with literature, art, culture, and collective memory—extends the Aristotelian framework, affirming the value of holistic care. Illness functions as a catalyst for reflection, both personal and communal; it is approached as an experience rather than merely as biological damage, and it presupposes the cooperation of mind, body, and social fabric.

Aristotle’s conception of disease thus transcends the medical definition, articulating a philosophical attitude toward life. It repositions health as both an existential and political good, reminding us of the necessity of harmony between natural order, moral responsibility, and social cohesion. Its relevance remains strong today, offering both theoretical and practical foundations for a human-centered, integrated, and sustainable approach to well-being.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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