

# Nietzsche vs. Aristotle:

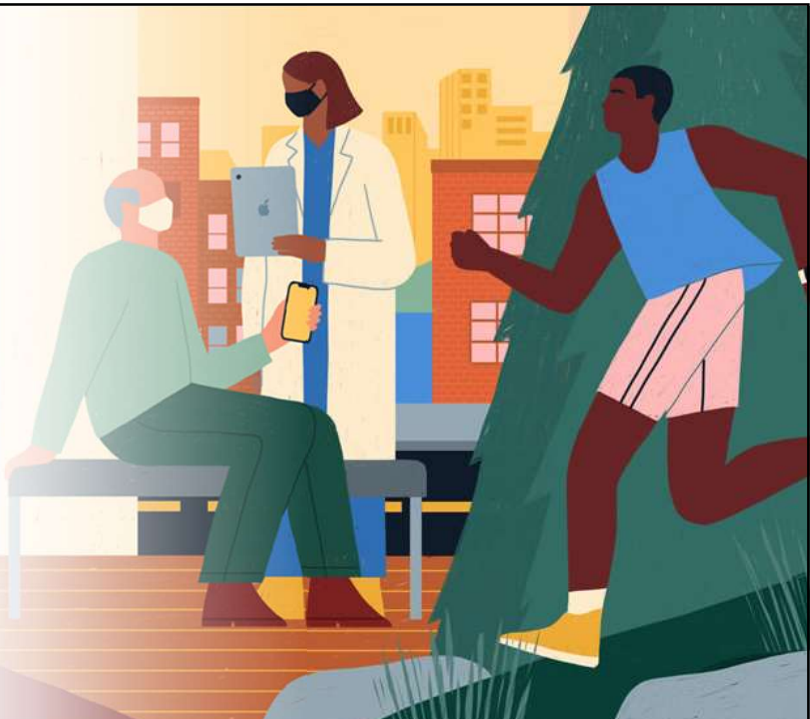
Philosophical contributions to  
the concept health and wellbeing

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## Overview

- The baseline: Brief exploration of the contemporary meaning of 'health'
  - And its problem
- Aristotelian conception of 'health'
- Nietzschean conception of 'health'
- Consider the transhumanism debate from both an Aristotelian and a Nietzschean perspective (if there is time)



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[illegible]

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## World Health Organisation

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Lovely, so what, exactly, is well-being?



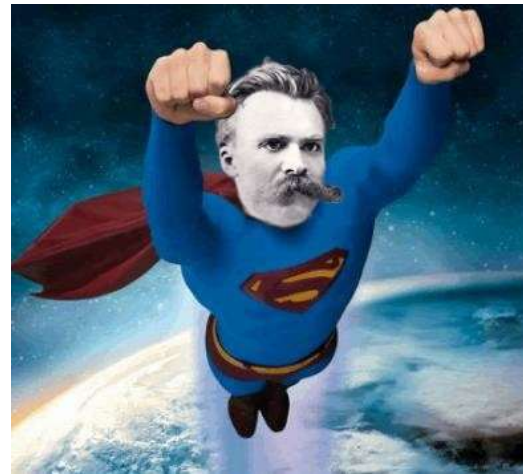
Oh, and  
'complete'?

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- There is lots of contemporary work on defining health and well-being.
- I've been asked to focus on two specific philosophers and explore their perspectives.

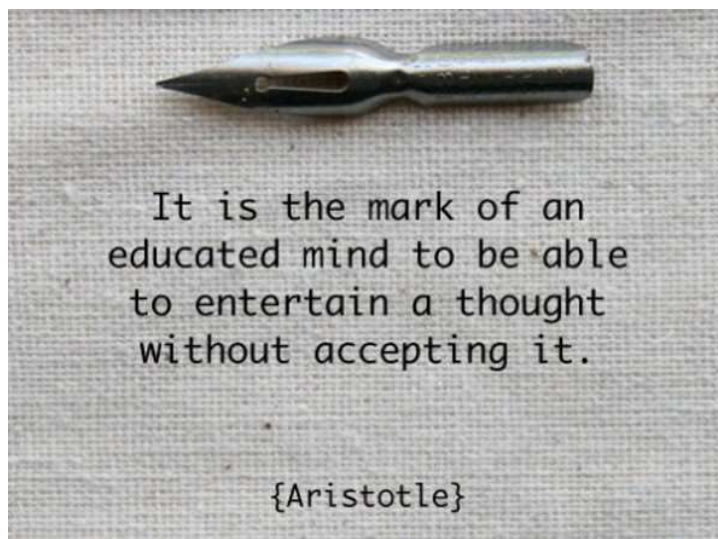
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## Introducing...



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## Some people get offended by Nietzsche...



Yes, this is a misquotation of Nichomachean ethics...

Aristotle did not in fact say this...

But this just proves the point about quotations...

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## A caveat

- I don't think that either Aristotle or Nietzsche really thought about health in the specific and direct way that we are going to today.
- What follows are my thoughts about how to apply their philosophies to the 'what is health' question.

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## Aristotle – core ideas

- <https://youtu.be/tbgHbzrL3d0>
- Matter; Form; Source; Function




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## A bit of background

Aristotle was concerned with identifying the highest good. He made three assumptions about the highest good:

1. It is desirable in and of itself.
2. It's desirability is not contingent any other desire.
3. All other goods are contingent on *it*.

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- Premise:
  - Everyone will agree that the highest good is “EUDAIMONIA”
    - happiness/living well/well-being/flourishing
- All other goods are sought because they promote eudaimonia.
- I am linking ‘eudaimonia’ to our modern (WHO) conception of health: ‘complete wellbeing’

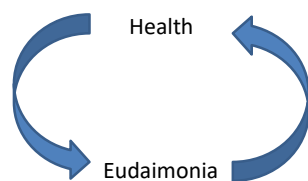
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- On the WHO's definition, to achieve health one has to be in a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing.
- This seems to require eudaimonia...

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This is a little bit of a cheat because...

- Aristotle did in fact say that one needed to have health in order to have eudaimonia.



= circular?

- But, by that he meant physical health (i.e. good functioning of the body).
- WHO = "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"

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Let's assume eudaimonia is a requirement for health (or that it helps us understand what it is to have a complete state of wellbeing.

Eudaimonia = well being

(More than simply physical....)

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## In what does eudaimonia consist?

- Aristotle approaches this by asking what the function (ergon) of a human being is.

"Presumably, however, to say that [eudaimonia] is the chief good seems a platitude, and a clearer account of what it is is still desired. This might perhaps be given, if we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the "well" is thought to reside in the function, so it would seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each of the parts evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these?" (NE 1.7 1097b22–33)

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“What then can this [function] be? Life seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking what is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, the life of nutrition and growth. Next there would be a life of perception, but it also seems to be common even to the horse, the ox, and every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle”. (NE 1.7 1097b3–1098a4)

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## The function of human beings is therefore to use reason well

- Human beings are the only species that has a rational soul.
- The ‘good’ (or ergon) of human beings must, therefore, be connected to the exercise of that rationality.
- “what sets humanity off from other species, giving us the potential to live a better life, is our capacity to guide ourselves by using reason. If we use reason well, we live well as human beings; or, to be more precise, using reason well over the course of a full life is what happiness consists in. Doing anything well requires virtue or excellence, and therefore living well consists in activities caused by the rational soul in accordance with virtue or excellence.”\*

\*SEP. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/#HumGooFunArg>.

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## So, health according to Aristotle might be something like

- 'a state such that one is able to exercise one's rationality and reason in accordance with excellence'.
- We can imagine that good physical condition may be required for this, but this Aristotelian conception of health is more connected to the rational and (consequently for Aristotle) the moral.
- Good physical condition is good solely because it enables us to perform our function as rational agents.
- This might imply that a condition that leads to deterioration of the brain would lead to poor 'health', but purely physical ailments would not (unless it impacts on exercising rationality)?

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Does this have implications for what medicine (or any endeavour to improve health) should be aiming for?

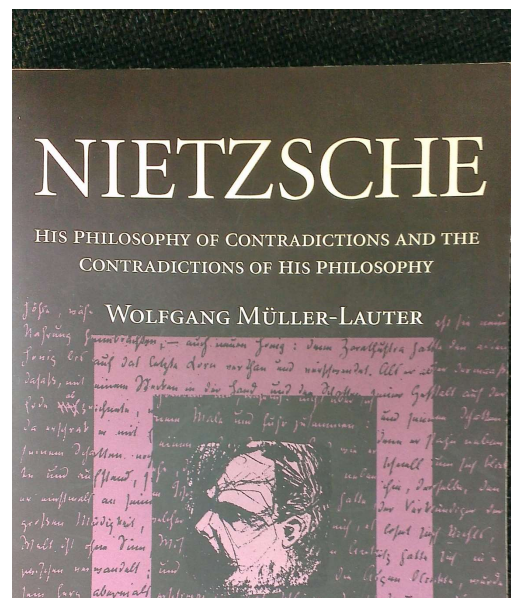
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## Nietzsche – core ideas

Er.....



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## The problem is

- Nietzsche had lots of ideas...
- They weren't presented in a coherent set of arguments, but as a collection of statements and aphorisms....
- Interpreting, and making sense of, Nietzsche, is a full time job... he didn't make it easy....
- You have to immerse yourself to get to grips with it, and we don't have time for that...

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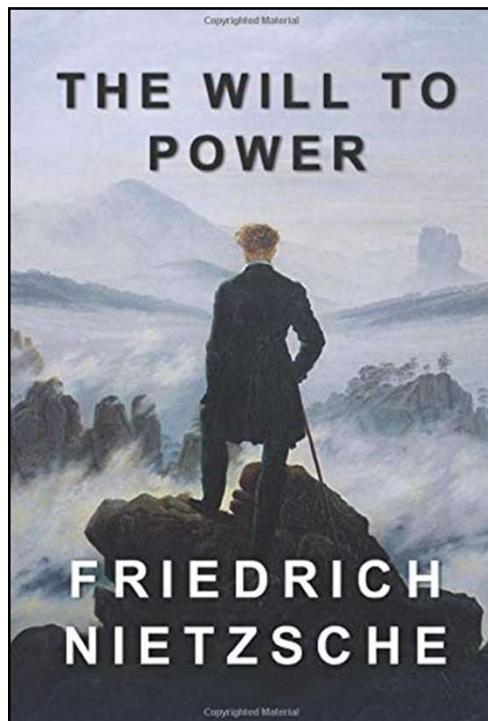
So I'll give you a few bits and pieces, and try to give you a sense of a few key ideas that shape my interpretation of his views on health...

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...because you have to start somewhere...

## A STARTING POINT

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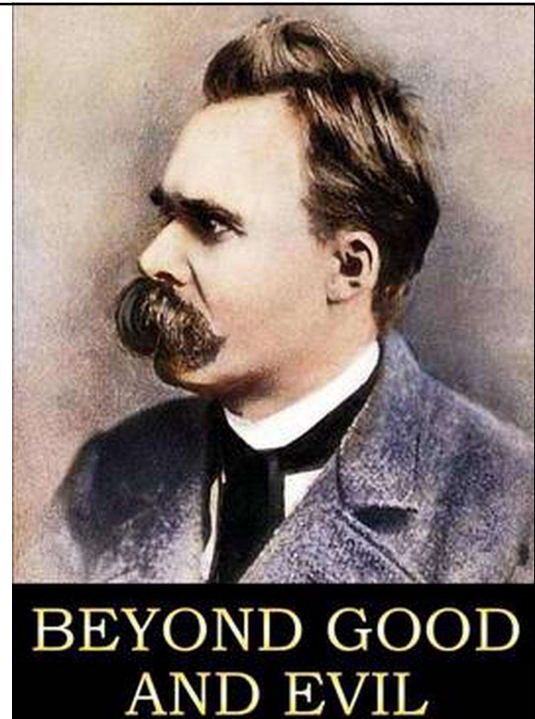
"To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities - I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished: I have no pity for them, because I wish them the only thing that can prove today whether one is worth anything or not - that one endures."

(The Will to Power)

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You want, if possible - and there is no more insane "if possible" - to abolish suffering. And we? It really seems that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever. Well-being as you understand it - that is no goal, that seems to us an end, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible - that makes his destruction desirable. The discipline of suffering, of great suffering - do you not know that only this discipline has created all enhancements of man so far?

(Beyond Good and Evil)



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## The Nietzsche motivational poster



Let's forgive the internet for the misattribution of this quote ...

This idea is often used to console those who are suffering....

Its central idea seems to be that we should be consoled in our suffering/ill health because by striving through it we become stronger and better.

The problem is, that's probably not what Nietzsche meant...

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## Nietzsche's was not about consolation for the suffering

- In fact, he scorned those who sought consolation; e.g. In the *Genealogy of Morals*:
  - He characterised the Judaeo-Christian belief in life after death as a weakness: a story told by the weak and the enslaved to find consolation from the struggles and injustices of this life in a perfect afterlife.
  - He saw Judaeo-Christian morality as a 'slave morality', that developed as a *post-hoc* justification for accepting one's (poor) place in this life, and turned it into affirmative action.

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- Nietzsche's was a philosophy of re-birth and overcoming
- He saw a 'sickness' in the tendency of human beings to form a homogenous mass and accept domination (although he also thought it was inevitable)
- It was not a backward looking philosophy of consolation, but a forward looking philosophy of overcoming. The difference is important for our attitudes towards health and the goal of health enterprises such as medicine.

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## Arguably...

He was explaining how human enhancement *has* occurred (through suffering) – not how it *should* do so...

He was not interested in helping people find consolation, or encouraging them to accept or embrace suffering in order to grow stronger.

Rather, Nietzsche's was a philosophy of overcoming....

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## Let's consider

### Consolation

- You are ill, you are suffering. You should not worry. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. You should see it as an opportunity to grow stronger and find your true value.
- You can use suffering to feel better about yourself.

### Overcoming

- You are human, and the human condition is a sickness. The ultimate goal is to overcome that sickness and become more than human (Übermensch).
- You should reinterpret the world – make it in your own image - so that it becomes the world you want.

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How might these different interpretations of Nietzsche lead to different views about health and well – being?

### **Consolation**

- Human excellence resides in developing oneself and becoming stronger through enduring trials.
- We should accept ill health and suffering because it gives us the opportunity to find value our lives

### **Overcoming**

- Health and wellbeing reside in overcoming what we are, becoming more than the human masses, and overcoming our sickness
- Not by embracing and accepting it, but by changing ourselves and the world.

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What might these mean for our attitudes about medicine and healthcare?

### **Consolation**

?

### **Overcoming**

?

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Now let's think about

## **ENHANCEMENT AND TRANSHUMANISM**

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The argument for physical and moral 'enhancement' has been made forcefully by Julian Savelescu, who argues that if it is possible to do so, we all have an obligation to enhance ourselves.



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- This idea is associated with 'transhumanism': a movement that seeks
  - "nothing less than to liberate the human race from its biological constraints...Humans must wrest their biological destiny from evolution's blind process of random variation....".

(Francis Fukuyama. Transhumanism. [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/09/01/transhumanism](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/09/01/transhumanism))

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## Can be used to support

- Genetic engineering
- Physical enhancement
- Cognitive enhancement
- Moral enhancement
- Selecting the 'best' children'
- Selecting out 'disability'

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## What might be the problem with this?

1. Against nature/Playing God?
2. Removes functional variation?
3. Takes the challenge out of life?
4. Discriminatory against disability/imperfection
5. Slippery slope to Eugenics?

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## Group work

Think about the transhumanism position, and possible objections to it, from an Aristotelean and a Nietzschean perspective?

How might Aristotelean and Nietzschean perspectives of health and wellbeing offer support to, or challenge, transhumanism?

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