

The Integrated Self: Aristotle's Hylomorphism and the Unity of Soul, Body and Mental Wellness

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Abstract

The contemporary separation of mental and physical health reflects, in part, a deeper philosophical fragmentation of the human person. Against this reductionist tendency, this paper examines Aristotle's hylomorphic conception of the human being as an integrated unity of soul (psyche) and body (sōma). For Aristotle, the soul is not an independent substance temporarily inhabiting the body but the form, actuality, and organizing principle of a living body. This understanding challenges simplistic mind-body dualism and provides a philosophical basis for conceiving human well-being as multidimensional and intrinsically integrated. The paper argues that mental, physical, emotional, and ethical dimensions of human flourishing cannot be adequately understood in isolation because they belong to the functioning of one embodied person. Drawing particularly from Aristotle's *De Anima*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and related works, the study explores the implications of hylomorphism for contemporary conceptions of wellness. It contends that genuine well-being involves more than the absence of disease or psychological distress; it requires the harmonious actualisation of human capacities through rational activity, virtuous character, embodied participation, meaningful relationships, and purposeful living. Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* therefore offers a valuable philosophical complement to contemporary holistic approaches to health. The paper concludes that recovering the integrated self can help overcome artificial divisions between body and mind and provide a richer philosophical anthropology for understanding human flourishing. Aristotle's hylomorphism thus remains relevant not merely as a historical metaphysical doctrine but as a framework for rethinking the unity, dignity, and well-being of the human person.

Keywords

Introduction

The question of what constitutes the human person has occupied a central place in philosophical reflection from antiquity to the contemporary period. Among the most persistent dimensions of this question is the relationship between the human body and the soul, or, in contemporary discourse, between physical embodiment and mental life. The history of Western philosophy reveals various attempts to explain this relationship, ranging from dualistic conceptions that distinguish mind and body as substantially different realities to materialist approaches that reduce mental phenomena to physical processes. These competing perspectives have significant implications for how human identity, health, illness, agency, and well-being are understood. In contemporary society, the increasing distinction between mental health and physical health, although institutionally and clinically useful, can sometimes reinforce an understanding of the human person as a collection of relatively independent dimensions rather than as an integrated whole (Damasio, 1994; Engel, 1977).

Aristotle's philosophy offers an important alternative to such fragmentation through his doctrine of hylomorphism, according to which material substances are constituted by the complementary principles of matter (*hylē*) and form (*morphē*). In the case of living beings, Aristotle applies this framework specifically to the relationship between body and soul. The soul (psyche) is not an independent substance that merely inhabits the body; rather, it is the form or actuality of a naturally organised living body. Aristotle consequently defines the soul as "the actuality of a body that has life potentially in it" (*De Anima* II.1, 412a27–28)

(Aristotle, 1984). This formulation is philosophically significant because it situates psychological and vital activities within the unity of the embodied organism. The human being is neither simply a body animated by an externally attached soul nor an immaterial consciousness temporarily associated with a physical organism. Rather, the human person exists as an integrated living unity.

Aristotle's account represents a substantial departure from a strict dualistic understanding of the person. Although Plato's philosophy itself is more nuanced than a simplistic mind-body opposition, Platonic anthropology frequently gives the soul a degree of independence from the body that becomes particularly pronounced in later philosophical traditions (Plato, 1997). Aristotle, by contrast, insists upon the intimate relationship between soul and body in the constitution of living beings. The soul is the principle through which the body performs its characteristic vital activities, including nutrition, perception, desire, locomotion, and, in human beings, rational thought (Aristotle, 1984). Consequently, the activities ordinarily associated with mental life cannot be adequately detached from the embodied organism in which they occur. Contemporary interpreters of Aristotle have therefore identified hylomorphism as a potentially significant resource for overcoming the limitations of both substance dualism and reductive materialism (Shields, 1999; Whiting, 1992).

The Aristotelian conception of the integrated person acquires further significance when placed within his ethical philosophy. For Aristotle, human beings possess a characteristic function (*ergon*) grounded in rational activity, and the good human life consists in the excellent exercise of that function. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he identifies *eudaimonia*—often translated as happiness, flourishing, or well-being—as the highest human good and describes it as activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 1984, I.7, 1098a16–18). *Eudaimonia*, therefore, is not merely a psychological state or transient feeling of pleasure. It denotes a mode of living in which human capacities are developed and exercised excellently across the course of a complete life. Human well-being consequently involves more than the preservation of bodily functioning or the satisfaction of immediate desires; it encompasses rationality, character, emotional regulation, relationships, social participation, and purposeful activity.

This conception resonates with contemporary attempts to move beyond narrowly biomedical definitions of health. The influential biopsychosocial model proposed by Engel (1977) challenged the dominance of purely biomedical explanations by arguing that biological, psychological, and social factors must be considered together in understanding health and illness. Similarly, the World Health Organization's broad conception of health recognises physical, mental, and social well-being rather than reducing health to the mere absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization, 1948). Contemporary research has further demonstrated the complex interactions between psychological states, bodily processes, behaviour, social relationships, and overall health (Mayer, 2011). Such approaches reinforce the intuition that human wellness cannot be adequately understood through a rigid separation of mind and body.

Nevertheless, contemporary holistic approaches require a deeper philosophical anthropology if their claims about human integration are to avoid becoming merely additive. It is one thing to say that physical, psychological, emotional, and social factors influence one another; it is another to explain why they belong to the same conception of human well-being. Aristotle's hylomorphism provides a potentially fruitful philosophical foundation for this integration. Because soul and body constitute one living being, the various activities of the human person can be understood as dimensions of a unified embodied existence rather than as unrelated components placed alongside one another. As Shields (2007) observes, Aristotle's psychology is fundamentally concerned with the capacities and activities of living organisms, thereby resisting interpretations that reduce the soul to an independent entity separable from embodied life.

This integrated understanding also has implications for the contemporary concept of mental wellness. Mental life is not experienced by an abstract mind detached from embodiment. Human beings think, desire, remember, perceive, suffer, rejoice, relate, and act as embodied persons. Bodily conditions can influence psychological states, while psychological and emotional conditions can affect bodily functioning. The contemporary recognition of psychosomatic interaction therefore has a philosophical analogue in Aristotle's insistence that the soul and body belong to one living unity (Damasio, 1994; Mayer, 2011). Aristotle's framework does not eliminate the distinction between psychological and physical dimensions; rather, it places those distinctions within a more fundamental unity.

Furthermore, Aristotle's account prevents wellness from being reduced to the absence of pathology. If the human good is eudaimonia, then genuine well-being involves the positive realisation of human capacities. Virtue, rational activity, friendship, appropriate pleasure, bodily well-being, and participation in the life of the community all contribute, in different ways, to a flourishing human existence (Aristotle, 1984; Kraut, 2018). Human wellness, from this perspective, is fundamentally developmental and teleological: it concerns not merely whether a person is free from illness but whether the person is becoming and living well according to the capacities proper to human existence.

The relevance of Aristotle's hylomorphism to contemporary wellness discourse is therefore both philosophical and practical. It challenges reductionist understandings of the person while providing a conceptual basis for integrating physical, psychological, emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions of well-being. It also encourages a shift from viewing health simply as the repair of dysfunction toward understanding wellness as the cultivation and actualisation of human capacities. In this respect, Aristotelian thought can enter into productive dialogue with contemporary holistic, biopsychosocial, and flourishing-oriented approaches without simply being identified with any of them.

Against this background, this study examines “The Integrated Self: Aristotle's Hylomorphism and the Unity of Soul, Body, and Well-Being.” It argues that Aristotle's hylomorphic anthropology offers a coherent philosophical framework for rethinking the fragmented conception of the human person that often characterises modern approaches to mind and body. By conceiving soul and body as principles of one living substance and by grounding the good life in the virtuous actualisation of human capacities, Aristotle provides an account in which physical and mental dimensions of existence are neither collapsed into one another nor artificially separated. The study consequently proposes that the Aristotelian integrated self remains philosophically relevant for contemporary reflection on wellness because it situates health and well-being within the broader horizon of human flourishing.

Literature Review

Aristotle's hylomorphic conception of the human person provides the philosophical foundation for understanding the unity of soul and body. Hylomorphism maintains that material substances are constituted by matter (*hylē*) and form (*morphē*). In living beings, the soul (*psyche*) is the form or actuality of the body, rather than an independent substance temporarily inhabiting it. Aristotle defines the soul as “the actuality of a body that has life potentially in it” (*De Anima* II.1, 412a27–28) (Aristotle, 1984). Consequently, the human being is understood as an integrated living unity whose biological, psychological, and rational capacity emerge from the relationship between soul and body. This position provides an important alternative to strict mind-body dualism. Unlike Cartesian dualism, which distinguishes thinking substance from extended substance (Descartes, 1985), Aristotle understands soul and body as complementary principles of one living substance. Shields (1999) argues that Aristotle's psychology should be interpreted within his broader theory of substance rather than through later categories of *mind* and *body*. Similarly, Whiting (1992) maintains that Aristotle's account of living bodies resists interpreting the soul as an

independently existing entity. Such interpretations make Aristotelian hylomorphism relevant to contemporary attempts to understand human beings as embodied persons.

The ethical significance of this unity becomes clearer in Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as flourishing or well-being. Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia* as the highest human good and defines it in terms of activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 1984, I.7, 1098a16–18). Human flourishing, therefore, transcends temporary pleasure or subjective satisfaction. It involves the excellent actualization of human capacities through rational activity, virtue, relationships, and appropriate engagement with the conditions of embodied life (Annas, 1993; Kraut, 2018). Well-being, in this sense, concerns how the whole person lives rather than merely whether the body is free from disease. Contemporary scholarship increasingly supports such an integrated conception. Engel's (1977) biopsychosocial model challenged the reduction of health to biological processes by emphasizing the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Damasio (1994) similarly demonstrates the significance of bodily and emotional processes for rational decision-making, while embodied cognition emphasizes the inseparability of cognition from bodily engagement with the world (Varela et al., 1991; Gallagher, 2005). The World Health Organization's broad conception of health as physical, mental, and social well-being likewise moves beyond a purely biomedical understanding of health (World Health Organization, 1948).

Nevertheless, contemporary holistic wellness models can sometimes treat physical, psychological, emotional and social dimensions as separate components that are merely added together. Aristotle offers a deeper metaphysical basis for integration: these dimensions belong to one embodied human being. The literature, therefore, reveals an important research gap. While Aristotelian scholarship extensively examines hylomorphism, psychology and *eudaimonia*, and contemporary scholarship investigates holistic and biopsychosocial wellness, comparatively less attention has been devoted to sustained dialogue between Aristotle's hylomorphic anthropology and contemporary understandings of integrated mental and physical wellness. This study addresses that gap by examining whether Aristotle's conception of the unified soul-body person can provide a richer philosophical foundation for understanding wellness as the holistic flourishing of the human person. The significance of this inquiry lies in its attempt to move beyond a merely additive model of holistic wellness. Rather than simply placing mental, physical, emotional, and social health alongside one another, the Aristotelian perspective asks what makes these dimensions expressions of one unified human life. The study consequently situates contemporary wellness within a broader philosophical anthropology in which the human person is understood not as a fragmented collection of functions but as an embodied and purposive whole.

1. Aristotle's Hylomorphism and the Unity of Soul and Body

1.1 Meaning and Philosophical Foundations of Hylomorphism

Aristotle's doctrine of hylomorphism constitutes one of the central principles of his metaphysics and provides the conceptual foundation for his understanding of living beings. The term derives from the Greek *hylē*, meaning matter, and *morphē* or *eidos*, meaning form. In its basic sense, hylomorphism holds that ordinary physical substances are composites of matter and form rather than metaphysically simple entities (Shields, 2007). Aristotle develops this framework partly in response to the philosophical problem of change: if things change, what accounts for both the continuity of what exists and the emergence of something new? Matter provides a principle of potentiality and continuity, while form accounts for actuality, determination, organisation, and what a thing is. Thus, hylomorphism allows Aristotle to explain how something can undergo change without requiring that change to be creation from nothing (Aristotle, 1984; Fine, 1999).

The distinction between matter and form should not, however, be understood as if Aristotle were simply describing two independent objects joined together. Matter and form are

principles of a unified substance. Form is what organises matter into the particular kind of thing that it is. A bronze statue, for example, is not merely bronze plus a shape accidentally placed upon it; its form accounts for its being a statue, while bronze constitutes its material basis. Aristotle extends this explanatory structure from artefacts to natural substances and, most importantly for the present study, to living organisms. The human being is therefore not a body to which a soul is subsequently added. Rather, the living human being is a hylomorphic unity in which body and soul are related as matter and form (Aristotle, 1984). This framework is inseparable from Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality. Matter possesses various potentialities, while form represents their actualisation. A living body is potentially alive in a particular way, while its soul constitutes the actuality through which those vital capacities are realised. Aristotle's hylomorphism consequently provides not merely a theory of physical composition but an account of organisation, activity, identity, and development. Contemporary scholarship continues to regard hylomorphism as one of Aristotle's most fundamental philosophical commitments, extending from his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* into his psychology and biology (Shields, 2007; Whiting, 2023).

1.2 Matter and Form in Aristotle's Metaphysics

Aristotle's distinction between matter and form becomes particularly significant in his analysis of substance. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that form is closely connected with essence because it is form that makes a thing the kind of thing that it is (Aristotle, 1984). Matter without determination does not adequately explain the identity or intelligibility of a substance. Conversely, form without an appropriate material context cannot, in the ordinary physical world, constitute the concrete individual substance. The two principles therefore belong together in the constitution of natural beings. Form has a unifying function. It explains why a multiplicity of material components constitutes one thing rather than merely an accidental collection of parts. A living organism illustrates this particularly well. The organs, tissues, limbs, and other bodily structures do not constitute a living human being simply by being physically juxtaposed. Their unity depends upon the organising principle that makes them parts of one functioning organism. Aristotle's hylomorphism therefore shifts philosophical attention from the mere inventory of physical components to the organisation and activity of the whole (Aristotle, 1984; Shields, 2007).

This is also why Aristotle's metaphysics cannot be reduced to materialism. Matter is indispensable, but it is insufficient as a complete explanation of a natural substance. Aristotle criticises earlier materialist approaches for explaining life predominantly through material constituents while failing to account adequately for the organising principle that makes those constituents the living thing they are. At the same time, his hylomorphism resists an excessively separate conception of form. Form is not simply an independent object existing somewhere beyond the material world. In natural substances, form and matter constitute the concrete entity (Shields, 2007). The importance of this point for an understanding of human wellness is considerable. If the human being is a unified substance rather than an accidental association of physical and non-physical components, then physical and psychological activities must be approached within the framework of the whole person. The body is not merely a biological instrument employed by a detached self. It belongs constitutively to the human person. Likewise, psychological capacities cannot be adequately understood without considering the embodied organism through which they operate.

1.3 The Soul (Psyche) as the Form and Actuality of the Living Body

Aristotle applies hylomorphism explicitly to living beings in *De Anima*. His definition of the soul is among the most important passages for understanding his anthropology. He describes the soul as "the actuality of a body that has life potentially in it" (*De Anima* II.1, 412a27–28) (Aristotle, 1984). Elsewhere, he calls it the "substance as form" of a natural body possessing life potentially (*De Anima* II.1, 412a20–21).

The implication is profound: the soul is not simply another object located somewhere inside the body. It is the principle by which the living body is actually alive and capable of performing its characteristic activities. A corpse may retain many of the physical characteristics of a living body, but it no longer possesses the organised activities characteristic of life. Aristotle's distinction thus illustrates his point that the identity of a living body cannot be adequately explained by its material constituents alone. What makes it a living organism is its organisation and capacity for life. Aristotle's concept of psyche is also considerably broader than the modern English word "mind." The soul includes the principles underlying nutrition, growth, reproduction, sensation, desire, movement, and rational activity. Plants possess nutritive capacities; animals possess nutritive and perceptive capacities; human beings possess these capacities together with rational capacities (Aristotle, 1984). The soul should therefore be understood as the principle of life and the set of capacities through which a living organism performs its characteristic activities.

This distinction is essential to the present study because translating psyche simply as "mind" may inadvertently impose a modern dualistic framework upon Aristotle. Aristotle's psychology is fundamentally a philosophy of the living organism. His concern is not merely with consciousness but with the complete range of capacities through which life is expressed. Contemporary interpreters consequently emphasise that Aristotle's psychology should be situated within his broader metaphysical and biological account rather than interpreted through the later Cartesian distinction between mind and body (Shields, 1999; Shields, 2007). The Aristotelian soul is thus an actualising principle. It makes possible the transition from the body's mere potential for life to its actual living activity. This provides an important conceptual bridge between metaphysics and psychology: the capacities of the organism are not accidental additions to the body but expressions of the form that constitutes the living organism.

1.4 Human Beings as Embodied Unities Rather Than Separate Soul-Body Entities

The Aristotelian conception of the human person follows naturally from his account of soul and body. If the soul is the form of the living body, then the human person cannot be adequately understood as a soul temporarily inhabiting a body. Soul and body constitute one living substance. Aristotle therefore approaches the human being through an integrated ontology rather than through the opposition of two independently existing substances. This position becomes especially important when compared with later forms of substance dualism. In a Cartesian framework, mind and body are conceived as distinct kinds of substance, generating the familiar problem of explaining how an immaterial mind interacts with a material body (Descartes, 1985). Aristotle begins from a different question. Instead of asking how two independent substances interact, he asks how the formal and material principles constitute one living being. The soul-body relationship is therefore constitutive rather than merely interactive (Shields, 2007).

This does not mean that Aristotle denies all distinctions between soul and body. The distinction is real and philosophically important, but it is a distinction between principles of one living substance rather than between two independently existing persons or substances. Whiting (2023) emphasises the importance of this hylomorphic relationship in understanding Aristotle's account of living bodies and individual organisms. For contemporary reflection on wellness, this integrated anthropology is particularly significant. If human beings are embodied unities, then psychological and physical conditions should not be regarded as completely isolated domains. Thought, emotion, perception, desire, movement, and bodily functioning belong to the activities of one embodied organism. This does not anticipate contemporary medicine or neuroscience in a simplistic way, but it provides a philosophical framework within which the interconnectedness of bodily and psychological life becomes intelligible.

1.5 Aristotle's Faculties of the Soul: Nutritive, Sensitive, Appetitive and Rational

Aristotle's account of the soul becomes more concrete through his analysis of its faculties or capacities. He distinguishes the nutritive, perceptive, appetitive, locomotive, and rational capacities, while recognising that different kinds of living beings possess different combinations of these powers (Aristotle, 1984, *De Anima* II–III). The nutritive capacity is concerned with nourishment, growth, and reproduction and is characteristic of plants as well as higher organisms. The perceptive capacity enables animals to sense their environment. Appetite concerns desire and motivation, while locomotion enables appropriate bodily movement. Human beings possess these capacities together with rational powers. These capacities should not be interpreted as independent “parts” of a person in the modern sense. They are powers of the one soul belonging to the one living organism. Aristotle's analysis therefore reinforces rather than undermines the unity of the person. Perception, desire, movement, and thought are different activities or capacities, but they belong to an integrated living being.

Aristotle's treatment of perception is particularly revealing. Perception involves the reception of sensible form without the matter of the perceived object (Aristotle, 1984, *De Anima* II.12). The perceiver does not literally acquire the material object but becomes perceptually informed by its sensible form. Aristotle's account therefore connects cognition with the organism's embodied engagement with its environment. Similarly, thinking involves the reception or actualisation of intelligible forms. His psychology consequently describes human cognition not as an isolated activity detached from life but as one of the characteristic activities of the living human organism. The rational capacity gives human beings a distinctive mode of existence, but it does not abolish their embodiment. Human rationality operates within an organism that also perceives, desires, moves, remembers, experiences pleasure and pain, and participates in a social environment. The human person is therefore simultaneously biological, perceptive, appetitive, rational, and relational.

1.6 Hylomorphism as an Alternative to Strict Mind-Body Dualism

The preceding analysis shows why Aristotelian hylomorphism can serve as an alternative to strict mind–body dualism. Aristotle does not solve the mind–body problem by claiming that mind and body are identical. Nor does he solve it by separating them into two independent substances. Instead, he reconceptualises the problem itself through the relationship of matter and form. Soul and body are distinct principles, but they constitute one living being. This middle position is philosophically important. Pure materialism risks reducing psychological and rational life to physical processes alone, while substance dualism risks making the unity of the human person difficult to explain. Aristotle's hylomorphism seeks to preserve both the material and formal dimensions of human existence. The human being is genuinely embodied, yet human life cannot be exhaustively described merely by listing bodily components.

Recent scholarship has shown renewed interest in precisely this aspect of Aristotle's philosophy. Whiting's *Body and Soul: Essays on Aristotle's Hylomorphism* (2023), for instance, demonstrates the continuing philosophical importance of hylomorphic approaches to questions concerning organisms, individuality, soul, body, and personal identity. The contemporary revival of hylomorphic thought indicates that Aristotle's framework remains capable of contributing to current metaphysical debates about embodiment and the unity of living beings. For the present study, the significance of this framework lies in its capacity to ground an integrated conception of the self. If the human being is fundamentally an embodied hylomorphic unity, then physical and psychological wellness cannot be regarded as wholly independent conditions. The health of the body, the functioning of psychological capacities, the exercise of rationality, the regulation of desire, and the development of human potential belong to different but interconnected dimensions of one human life.

Thus, Aristotle's hylomorphism provides the metaphysical foundation for the argument developed in the subsequent sections of this study: the human person is not a fragmented conjunction of soul and body but an integrated embodied self whose diverse capacities are

ordered toward the possibility of flourishing. This conclusion prepares the way for examining Aristotle's account of virtue and eudaimonia, and subsequently for bringing his integrated anthropology into dialogue with contemporary approaches to mental and physical wellness.

2. The Integrated Human Person: From Embodiment to Human Flourishing

Aristotle's hylomorphic understanding of the human person provides the metaphysical foundation for an account of human existence in which body, perception, emotion, desire, reason, character, and social relationships belong to one integrated life. The human being is neither merely a biological organism nor a disembodied rational subject. Rather, the person is an embodied unity whose various capacities are ordered toward the actualisation of human potential. This conception becomes particularly significant in Aristotle's ethical philosophy, where the question of what a human being is inseparable from the question of how a human being ought to live. The movement from embodiment to flourishing is therefore not a movement from two unrelated subjects but from Aristotle's anthropology to his ethics.

- **Embodiment, Perception, Emotion, Desire and Reason**

Aristotle's account of the human person begins with the recognition that human existence is fundamentally embodied. The capacities of perception, appetite, movement and thought are not activities of an abstract self-existing independently of the body but powers exercised by the living organism (Aristotle, 1984). Human perception, for example, involves the reception of sensible forms through bodily organs, while desire motivates action in relation to perceived goods and evils. Aristotle therefore does not understand human rationality as something completely detached from sensation and appetite. Reason operates within a living being that perceives, desires, experiences pleasure and pain, and interacts continuously with its environment. This integration is particularly evident in Aristotle's account of emotion. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, emotions such as fear, anger, desire, pity and pleasure are neither intrinsically irrational nor inherently destructive. Their ethical significance depends upon how they are experienced and regulated in relation to reason. A virtuous person does not eliminate emotion but develops appropriate emotional responses to appropriate circumstances (Aristotle, 1984). This position anticipates, in a philosophical rather than neuroscientific form, contemporary recognition that cognition, emotion and bodily processes are deeply interconnected (Damasio, 1994).

- **The *Ergon* and the Nature of Human Beings**

The movement from embodiment to flourishing is further illuminated by Aristotle's concept of *ergon*, or function. In *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, Aristotle argues that to understand the human good, one must identify the distinctive activity or function of the human being. He associates this function with activity of the soul in accordance with reason and virtue (Aristotle, 1984, I.7, 1097b22–1098a20). Human flourishing therefore consists not simply in possessing certain capacities but in exercising them excellently. This functional account is important because it introduces a developmental dimension to Aristotle's anthropology. To be human is to possess rational, emotional, social and embodied capacities; to flourish is to actualise those capacities appropriately. Human well-being consequently cannot be reduced to biological survival. A person may be physically alive and yet fail to realise important dimensions of human potential. Conversely, flourishing requires the cultivation of intellectual and moral capacities within the concrete conditions of embodied existence (Kraut, 2018).

- **Virtue, Habituation and the Development of the Whole Person**

Aristotle's account of virtue provides the practical mechanism through which human capacities become excellently actualised. Moral virtue is not simply a theoretical possession but a stable disposition acquired through habituation. Human beings become just by performing just actions, courageous by performing courageous actions, and temperate by repeatedly practising temperate conduct (Aristotle, 1984, II.1). Character is therefore formed through embodied patterns of action. This is particularly relevant to an integrated

understanding of the person because Aristotle does not locate moral development exclusively in intellectual knowledge. Desire and emotion must also be educated so that they can harmonise with reason. The virtuous person learns not merely to know what is good but to desire and enjoy what is genuinely good (Aristotle, 1984, II.3–6). Hence, virtue involves the integration of cognition, emotion, desire and action. Contemporary interpretations of Aristotle similarly emphasise that virtue involves the transformation of the agent's practical dispositions rather than the mere acquisition of abstract moral rules (Annas, 1993; Hursthouse, 2006).

- **Eudaimonia: Flourishing Rather Than Mere Pleasure**

The culmination of Aristotle's account is eudaimonia, conventionally translated as happiness, flourishing, or living well. Aristotle identifies it as the highest human good because human beings choose it for its own sake rather than merely as a means to something else (Aristotle, 1984, I.4). Importantly, eudaimonia does not mean a temporary emotional state of happiness. It describes a life that is successfully lived in accordance with human excellence. Aristotle's "function argument" connects flourishing with excellent activity: if the distinctive human function is rational activity, then the good human life must consist in rational activity performed excellently and in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 1984, I.7). Kraut (2018) therefore argues that Aristotle's conception of the human good is fundamentally about living successfully as a human being rather than merely experiencing positive psychological states. This distinction is crucial for contemporary wellness discourse. Modern conceptions of well-being sometimes emphasise subjective happiness, life satisfaction or emotional comfort. Aristotle's conception is more demanding. A person may experience pleasure while living poorly, just as temporary suffering does not necessarily mean that a person's life lacks meaning or flourishing. Well-being, in the Aristotelian sense, involves the objective quality of one's activities, relationships, character and overall way of life (Annas, 1993).

- **Bodily Well-Being, Friendship, Community and External Goods**

Although Aristotle places virtue at the centre of flourishing, he does not ignore bodily and external conditions. Human beings are embodied and socially situated, and Aristotle recognises that health, adequate material conditions, friendship and participation in community contribute to the possibility of a flourishing life (Aristotle, 1984, I.8–10; IX.9). The good life therefore cannot be conceived as the achievement of an isolated individual detached from society. Friendship receives especially extensive treatment in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle regards friendship as indispensable to human flourishing because human beings are inherently relational. Genuine friendship contributes to moral development, emotional well-being and meaningful participation in communal life (Aristotle, 1984). This relational dimension further strengthens the integrated character of Aristotle's anthropology: human flourishing involves not only the proper ordering of one's internal capacities but also one's relationship with others.

Toward an Integrated Conception of Human Flourishing

Aristotle's anthropology and ethics consequently converge in a comprehensive conception of the human person. Body, perception, emotion, desire, reason, virtue, friendship and social participation are not independent compartments but interconnected dimensions of one embodied human life. Hylomorphism supplies the metaphysical basis for this unity, while virtue ethics explains how the capacities of the person can be developed and harmonised toward flourishing. This conception offers an important philosophical resource for contemporary discussions of wellness. The Aristotelian perspective suggests that genuine well-being should not be measured solely by the absence of disease, psychological distress or bodily dysfunction. It should also include the positive actualisation of human capacities through rational activity, virtuous character, meaningful relationships, appropriate emotional regulation and purposeful participation in life. In this sense, eudaimonia represents a richer conception of wellness—one that integrates bodily existence with psychological, ethical and social flourishing.

The Aristotelian integrated person therefore provides the conceptual bridge between the metaphysics of soul–body unity and the contemporary search for holistic wellness. The next question is whether this ancient conception can meaningfully enter into dialogue with modern approaches to mental and physical health without being reduced to them. That question provides the basis for examining the transition from mind–body fragmentation to contemporary models of integrated wellness.

3. From Mind-Body Fragmentation to Contemporary Integrated Wellness

The relationship between the mental and physical dimensions of human existence has remained a persistent problem in the history of philosophy and has acquired renewed significance in contemporary health discourse. The modern tendency to distinguish mind from body has contributed to highly specialised approaches to medicine, psychology, neuroscience, and public health. Such specialisation has produced important advances, but it can also encourage a fragmented understanding of the human person when psychological, biological, social, and emotional dimensions are treated as essentially independent. The movement toward integrated wellness represents an attempt to overcome this fragmentation. Interestingly, many of the assumptions underlying contemporary holistic approaches resonate with Aristotle's earlier conception of the human being as an embodied unity, although the two frameworks arise from substantially different intellectual contexts.

- **The Historical Problem of Mind-Body Dualism**

The modern philosophical problem of mind and body is particularly associated with René Descartes, whose distinction between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance) established one of the most influential formulations of substance dualism (Descartes, 1985). For Descartes, the essential property of mind is thought, whereas the essential property of body is extension. This distinction provided a powerful conceptual framework for modern philosophy and contributed significantly to the development of mechanistic understandings of the physical world. The difficulty, however, is explaining how two fundamentally different substances can interact. If mental states are non-extended and bodily states are extended, what precisely accounts for their causal relationship? The so-called interaction problem subsequently became a major issue in philosophy of mind. Although later philosophers proposed alternative solutions—including materialism, idealism, behaviourism, functionalism, and various forms of dualism—the tension between mental experience and physical embodiment remained.

Aristotle's hylomorphism offers a fundamentally different approach. Rather than conceiving soul and body as two independently existing substances, Aristotle understands them as form and matter constituting one living being (Aristotle, 1984). The question consequently shifts from “How does the mind interact with the body?” to “How do the capacities of one embodied organism function as an integrated whole?” (Shields, 2007). This distinction is central to the present study because it provides a philosophical basis for approaching wellness as an integrated phenomenon rather than as the intersection of two independent domains.

- **Limitations of Purely Biomedical and Purely Psychological Approaches**

The modern biomedical model has been enormously successful in identifying pathogens, physiological mechanisms, anatomical abnormalities, and therapeutic interventions. However, Engel (1977) criticised the dominance of a strictly biomedical approach for failing to account sufficiently for psychological and social dimensions of illness. According to Engel, health and disease cannot be adequately explained by biological processes alone because human beings are simultaneously biological, psychological, and social organisms. The limitation is not that biological explanations are incorrect but that they may be incomplete when applied to the whole human person. A person's experience of illness involves beliefs, emotions, behaviour, relationships, socioeconomic circumstances, and cultural meanings. Similarly, psychological

distress may manifest through bodily symptoms, while chronic physical conditions can influence mood, cognition, identity, and social functioning.

Purely psychological approaches can experience a corresponding limitation when mental states are considered without sufficient attention to embodiment. Damasio (1994), for example, demonstrates that emotion, bodily states, and decision-making are deeply interconnected. His work challenges the conception of rationality as a purely disembodied process. Human reasoning occurs within an organism whose physiological states continually interact with cognitive and emotional processes. Consequently, neither biological reductionism nor psychological isolation provides an adequate account of the whole person. An integrated approach must recognise the reciprocal relationship between bodily processes, psychological states, behaviour, and social circumstances.

- **The Biopsychosocial Model and Integrated Health**

One of the most influential attempts to overcome fragmentation is Engel's (1977) biopsychosocial model. Engel proposed that illness should be understood through the interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. The model represented a significant conceptual departure from a purely biomedical approach because it situated disease within the broader life of the person. The biopsychosocial model is particularly relevant to the present study because it recognises that health cannot be reduced to one level of explanation. Biological processes interact with psychological states, while psychological processes occur within social environments. The model therefore encourages interdisciplinary approaches involving medicine, psychology, social work, behavioural science, and other fields. Nevertheless, the biopsychosocial model is not identical to Aristotle's hylomorphism. Engel's framework is primarily a clinical and scientific model, whereas Aristotle's is a metaphysical and philosophical account of the human being. The former identifies interacting dimensions of health; the latter explains the unity of the living person in terms of form and matter. The value of comparison lies therefore not in claiming historical continuity but in demonstrating philosophical convergence around the inadequacy of radical fragmentation.

- **Embodied Cognition and Brain–Body Interaction**

Contemporary research in embodied cognition has further challenged the idea that cognition can be adequately understood as a purely cerebral or disembodied process. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) argue that cognition emerges through the dynamic interaction of organism and environment. Human cognition is not merely something that happens inside the brain; it is shaped by bodily capacities and the individual's engagement with the world. Gallagher (2005) similarly demonstrates that bodily experience is fundamental to perception, action, agency, and self-understanding. The body is not simply an object possessed by the self; it is a medium through which the world is experienced and meaningful action becomes possible. This perspective bears an interesting resemblance to Aristotle's understanding of the soul as the actuality of a living body, although the theoretical frameworks remain distinct. Neuroscientific research also supports the importance of bodily processes for psychological functioning. Damasio (1994) argues that emotion and bodily states participate fundamentally in decision-making and rational behaviour. Mayer (2011), through research on gut–brain communication, demonstrates the complex physiological pathways through which bodily systems interact with emotional and cognitive processes. These developments reinforce the contemporary plausibility of treating the human person as an integrated organism.

The Interrelationship of Physical, Mental, Emotional and Social Well-Being

The contemporary concept of wellness increasingly recognises that physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being are interconnected. The World Health Organization's foundational definition describes health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being rather than merely the absence of disease (World Health Organization, 1948). This definition marks an important departure from a narrowly pathological conception of health. Mental and physical health are particularly interdependent. Physical illness may produce

anxiety, depression, fatigue, social withdrawal, or changes in identity, while prolonged psychological stress can affect physiological functioning and health behaviour. Social isolation can similarly influence both psychological and physical outcomes. These relationships demonstrate that the categories of “mental health” and “physical health,” while institutionally useful, do not represent completely isolated realities. However, an integrated approach should not simply collapse all distinctions. Physical illness remains different from psychological distress, and social circumstances cannot be reduced to biological processes. Integration should therefore mean interdependence within unity, rather than the elimination of legitimate distinctions. This is consistent with Aristotle's own approach: the soul and body are distinct principles, but they belong to one living substance (Aristotle, 1984).

Convergences and Divergences Between Aristotle and Contemporary Wellness

There are important points of convergence between Aristotle and contemporary integrated wellness. First, both reject an excessively fragmented conception of the human person. Second, both recognise the importance of embodiment. Third, both acknowledge that human functioning involves multiple interrelated capacities. Fourth, both understand human well-being as involving more than mere survival.

There are, nevertheless, important differences. Contemporary wellness discourse is largely empirical, clinical, psychological, and public-health oriented, whereas Aristotle's account is metaphysical, ethical, and teleological. Modern wellness often emphasises subjective well-being, life satisfaction, psychological resilience, or functional health. Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, by contrast, refers to objective human flourishing through excellent activity in accordance with virtue (Aristotle, 1984; Kraut, 2018). Aristotle's perspective therefore adds a normative dimension that is sometimes underdeveloped in contemporary wellness models. It asks not only whether an individual feels well or functions adequately but whether the person is living well. This introduces questions of character, purpose, practical wisdom, relationships, moral development, and meaningful activity.

Toward an Integrated Philosophy of Wellness

The movement from mind–body fragmentation to integrated wellness can therefore be understood as a movement toward a more comprehensive anthropology. Contemporary medicine, psychology, neuroscience, and embodied cognition have demonstrated the practical interdependence of bodily and psychological processes. Aristotle's hylomorphism contributes a deeper metaphysical account of why such integration belongs to the nature of the human person. The contemporary challenge is consequently not simply to combine mental and physical healthcare but to develop a conception of the person capable of grounding such integration. Aristotle provides one important philosophical resource for this task. His account suggests that the human being is an embodied unity whose capacities must be cultivated together, while his ethical philosophy adds that genuine well-being involves the flourishing of those capacities through virtuous and purposeful activity. Thus, the transition from mind–body fragmentation to integrated wellness is not merely a medical or psychological development. It is also an anthropological and philosophical movement toward recovering the whole person. In this respect, Aristotelian hylomorphism can contribute to contemporary discussions by providing a conceptual bridge between embodiment, psychological life, ethical development, social belonging, and human flourishing.

Conclusion

Aristotle's hylomorphic conception of the human person provides a compelling philosophical foundation for understanding human well-being as an integrated rather than fragmented reality. By conceiving the soul as the form and actuality of the living body, Aristotle rejects the idea that the human person is merely a combination of independently existing mental and physical substances (Aristotle, 1984). Soul and body are distinct but inseparable principles of one living being. This conception offers an important corrective to approaches that isolate psychological wellness from bodily existence. The study has further shown that Aristotle's

account of human flourishing extends beyond the mere absence of illness or the attainment of subjective happiness. Eudaimonia consists in the active realisation of human capacities through rational and virtuous activity, within the concrete conditions of embodied and relational life (Aristotle, 1984; Kraut, 2018). Virtue, practical wisdom, friendship, purposeful activity, and appropriate bodily conditions consequently belong to a comprehensive conception of human flourishing. Contemporary biopsychosocial and embodied approaches to health similarly demonstrate that biological, psychological, and social dimensions of human existence are deeply interconnected (Engel, 1977; Gallagher, 2005).

The significance of Aristotle for contemporary wellness, therefore, lies not in supplying a substitute for modern medicine or psychology but in offering a richer philosophical anthropology within which their insights can be integrated. Hylomorphism provides an ontology of unity, while eudaimonia supplies a normative vision of what it means to live well. Together, they challenge both reductionism and fragmentation by directing attention from isolated symptoms or functions toward the flourishing of the whole person. Contemporary wellness can thus benefit from an Aristotelian insight: genuine well-being is not simply feeling well or being free from disease, but the sustained flourishing of an embodied, rational, relational, and purposive human life.

4. Aristotelian Hylomorphism and the Contemporary Philosophy of Well-Being

The preceding discussion established that Aristotle's hylomorphism conceives the human person as an embodied unity and that his account of eudaimonia presents flourishing as the excellent actualisation of human capacities. The contemporary philosophy of well-being, however, operates within a considerably different intellectual landscape, shaped by medicine, psychology, neuroscience, public health, positive psychology, and social theory. The central task, therefore, is not to transplant Aristotle's ancient categories uncritically into contemporary healthcare but to examine what his integrated conception of the person can contribute to current debates about mental, physical, emotional, relational, and ethical well-being. Such a dialogue is particularly relevant at a time when increasing attention is being given to holistic health and human flourishing.

Applying the Integrated-Self Model to Contemporary Mental and Physical Wellness:

The Aristotelian integrated-self model begins from the proposition that mental and physical dimensions belong to one embodied human subject. Since Aristotle conceives the soul as the form and actuality of the living body, psychological capacities cannot be understood independently of the organism in which they are realised (Aristotle, 1984, *De Anima* II.1). This does not imply that psychological experiences are reducible to biological processes. Rather, it means that the mental and physical are dimensions of an integrated living reality. This perspective has considerable resonance with contemporary health sciences. The biopsychosocial model, for example, argues that biological, psychological, and social factors interact in the production and experience of health and illness (Engel, 1977). Similarly, research in psychosomatic medicine demonstrates that psychological stress, emotional states, behaviour, and social conditions can influence physiological functioning and health outcomes. Damasio (1994) has further argued that bodily states and emotions are integral to rational decision-making, thereby challenging the idea of reason as a purely disembodied faculty.

The Aristotelian contribution is primarily philosophical: it provides an ontology of integration. Instead of merely observing that mental and physical states interact, hylomorphism explains their belonging to one unified living subject. The person who experiences anxiety, pain, fatigue, hope, pleasure, or motivation is not a mind experiencing a body from outside but an embodied self undergoing these experiences as dimensions of one life.

From Treatment of Illness to Cultivation of Human Flourishing: A major contribution of Aristotelian thought to contemporary wellness is its movement beyond a purely pathological conception of health. Modern medicine necessarily focuses on diagnosing, treating,

preventing, and managing disease. Yet human well-being cannot be exhausted by the absence of pathology. The World Health Organization (1948) famously defines health in terms of physical, mental, and social well-being rather than merely the absence of disease. Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* provides an even more explicitly positive account. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he identifies flourishing as activity of the soul in accordance with virtue over a complete life (Aristotle, 1984). Well-being therefore involves what a person is capable of becoming and doing, not merely what illnesses the person does not have. Kraut (2018) emphasises that Aristotle's conception of the good life concerns successful human functioning and the excellent exercise of human capacities.

This distinction is important for contemporary wellness. A person may be free from diagnosed disease and yet experience meaninglessness, social isolation, lack of purpose, poor character formation, or an inability to develop important human capacities. Conversely, a person living with a chronic physical limitation may nevertheless experience meaningful relationships, purpose, virtue, agency, and significant flourishing. Aristotle therefore encourages a distinction between health as physiological condition and well-being as human flourishing, while recognising that bodily health remains an important component of the latter.

The Role of Virtue, Purpose, Relationships, Rational Activity and Embodied Living:

Aristotle's ethical philosophy provides several dimensions that can enrich contemporary approaches to wellness. First is virtue. Aristotle understands moral virtues as stable dispositions acquired through habituation (Aristotle, 1984, II.1–6). Courage, temperance, justice, generosity, and related virtues shape the manner in which a person responds to circumstances. From a wellness perspective, this suggests that well-being is partly a matter of character formation and not simply the management of symptoms. Second is purpose. Human beings flourish when their activities are ordered toward meaningful goods. Aristotle's *ergon* argument identifies rational activity in accordance with virtue as central to the human good (Aristotle, 1984, I.7). Contemporary positive psychology similarly places increasing emphasis on meaning, purpose, engagement, relationships, and accomplishment as components of flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Although positive psychology and Aristotelian ethics are not identical, this convergence indicates that well-being involves more than pleasure.

Third is relationships. Aristotle devotes substantial attention to friendship, arguing that friendship is indispensable to a flourishing life (Aristotle, 1984, VIII–IX). Contemporary research likewise recognises social connectedness as an important determinant of psychological and physical well-being. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010), for example, found a significant relationship between social relationships and mortality risk. Human beings are therefore not isolated units whose well-being can be achieved independently of social belonging. Fourth is rational activity. Aristotle does not equate reason with cold intellectual calculation. Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) enables individuals to deliberate appropriately about how to act in concrete circumstances (Aristotle, 1984, VI.5). Practical wisdom can consequently contribute to wellness by helping individuals negotiate competing desires, relationships, responsibilities, risks, and values. Finally, there is embodied living. Aristotle's *hylomorphism* makes the body intrinsic to human existence. Physical activity, nutrition, rest, sensory experience, and bodily functioning therefore belong within a comprehensive conception of human flourishing rather than being regarded as merely external concerns (Aristotle, 1984).

Aristotle's Contribution to Holistic Approaches to Mental Health and Physical Well-Being:

Aristotle's philosophy can make at least three important contributions to holistic approaches to wellness. First, it provides a philosophical anthropology of integration. Contemporary models often identify several interacting dimensions of health; Aristotle provides an account of why those dimensions belong to one human life. The human person is an embodied unity whose biological, psychological, rational, emotional, and social activity are interrelated. Second, Aristotle contributes a normative dimension. Modern health

discourse can sometimes define wellness in terms of functioning, subjective satisfaction, symptom reduction, or measurable outcomes. Aristotle adds the question of what constitutes good human functioning. His answer involves virtue, rational activity, friendship, meaningful participation, and flourishing (Kraut, 2018).

Third, Aristotle contributes a teleological perspective. Human capacities have characteristic ends toward which they can be developed. Wellness is therefore not merely a static condition but a process of actualisation. This resonates with contemporary flourishing approaches that understand well-being as positive human development rather than merely the absence of negative states (Seligman, 2011). Nevertheless, Aristotle's framework should not be romanticised. His ethical and political philosophy emerged within an ancient social order containing assumptions concerning gender, citizenship, slavery, and social hierarchy that cannot simply be accepted today. Moreover, Aristotle did not possess modern knowledge of neuroscience, psychology, infectious disease, genetics, or clinical medicine. His philosophy should therefore function as a conceptual resource rather than as a substitute for contemporary scientific knowledge.

Critical Evaluation: What Aristotle Can and Cannot Contribute to Modern Healthcare

Aristotle can contribute significantly to the conceptualisation of wellness, but his philosophy cannot provide the empirical mechanisms required by contemporary healthcare. Hylomorphism cannot diagnose depression, identify a pathogen, prescribe medication, explain the neurochemical mechanisms of disease, or determine clinical treatment protocols. Such tasks require modern scientific and medical methodologies. Nevertheless, Aristotle can address questions that empirical medicine alone cannot fully settle: What is a human being? What constitutes a good life? Is health merely the absence of disease? What role do virtue, purpose, relationships, and community play in well-being? What does it mean for a human being to flourish? This distinction between scientific explanation and philosophical interpretation is essential. Aristotle can complement rather than compete with contemporary medicine. His contribution lies particularly in preventing healthcare from becoming so specialised that the patient disappears behind the disease. The patient remains a person with embodied, psychological, relational, moral, and existential dimensions.

Toward an Aristotelian Philosophy of Integrated Wellness

An Aristotelian philosophy of integrated wellness can therefore be formulated around several interconnected propositions. First, the human person is an embodied unity. Second, physical and psychological capacities are dimensions of one living existence. Third, well-being is more than the absence of disease. Fourth, genuine flourishing involves the actualisation of human capacities through rational and virtuous activity. Fifth, relationships and social participation are constitutive elements of a good human life. Sixth, bodily conditions remain significant because human flourishing is embodied and situated. Such a model moves beyond a merely additive conception of wellness. It does not simply place physical, mental, emotional, social, and ethical well-being beside one another. Rather, it understands them as mutually related dimensions of the flourishing of one person. This is arguably the strongest contemporary relevance of Aristotle's hylomorphism.

The Aristotelian integrated self consequently offers a philosophical corrective to both reductionism and fragmentation. Against reductionism, it maintains that human existence cannot be exhausted by biological mechanisms. Against dualistic fragmentation, it maintains that mental and bodily life belong to one embodied subject. Against purely subjective accounts of wellness, it maintains that flourishing involves objective dimensions of excellent human activity. And against purely individualistic accounts, it emphasises friendship, community, and social participation.

Conclusion

Aristotle's hylomorphism provides a powerful philosophical framework for reconsidering contemporary understandings of human well-being. Its central insight—that soul and body constitute one living unity—offers a conceptual foundation for understanding the interconnectedness of mental and physical existence. His ethical account of eudaimonia further expands this unity into a comprehensive conception of flourishing that includes virtue, rational activity, bodily well-being, friendship, purpose, and participation in community. The contemporary significance of Aristotle, therefore, lies less in providing a ready-made theory of modern healthcare than in recovering an integrated conception of the human person. In an age increasingly concerned with mental health, physical wellness, emotional resilience, social connectedness, and human flourishing, Aristotle's philosophy reminds us that these should ultimately be understood within the horizon of the whole person. The integrated self is neither simply mind nor merely body; it is an embodied, rational, relational, and purposive being whose well-being consists in the flourishing of the whole.

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