

HEALTH – AS SEEN BY PHILOSOPHY OF H.-G. GADAMER

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***Abstract:** The article tries to express Gadamer's understanding of health and change of his view of in the course of almost 30 years, in the time he has been interested in this topic. In the term **health** Gadamer discovered many levels, aspects or layers. This article tries to categorize the views of health - disease and to preserve various levels of abstraction as seen by Gadamer.*

***Key words:** health, disease, equilibrium, appropriateness, well-being*

Introduction

The book *The Enigma of Health* with the subtitle *The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age* (Cambridge, Polity Press 1996) is a set of essays written by Hans-Georg Gadamer on problems of health. The aim of this paper is to express Gadamer's understanding of health and to follow change of his view of health in the course of years (the book comprises essays written within the space of about 30 years), based on English translation of original essays¹.

Starting points

Gadamer choose the topic of health because he supposed taking care of own health to be an original manifestation of human being. By Gadamer, people learn their restrictions and limits by means of disease and death.

Time development

Although Gadamer's topic was health, he built his perspective of view on health from position of its opposite – disease. Disease can not exist without health. Health is an **opposite** of disease (1987: 111). This view he left in 1990 with the statement:

¹ For a better time overview the individual essays are quoted separately in the above given list of literature.

“If we wish to discover difference between health and disease we must understand that disease can not be defined as an **contrast** to health and this can not be further defined on basis of some standard values.“ (1990: 160). Our wish is not to prepare here a disquisition if opposite means the same as contrast; it was done competently by Lloyd (1996, quoted by Marková, in print). For our need we can start with presumption that the both terms mean opposites. In 1990 Gadamer closed with “We have to ask what disease really is and where it is localized in a **continuum** which is anchored on one side with a flexibility used in handling our daily tasks and on the other side with what happens when we drop out our normal formula. Difference between health and disease is pragmatic and the only person who can enter it is a real person that feels ill, the person who can not more handle every day life demands and **decides** to visit a physician.“ (1990b: 162, emphasized by Šolcová.) In this modified interpretation, equilibrium is represented by flexibility.

Views on health

In the following text we present views on health by their stepwise appearance in the anthology. Those views are not made from the same level. In our discussion we try the different views to designate and slightly to sort them:

1. Health is a part of a being in his/her completeness (a whole of being). Disease (as a particular item) goes against this whole, it is confronted with this whole and it is an opposite of it.
2. Health as nature: It is simply health what results from application of art of healing i.e. **nature** itself (1965, p. 34).
3. The mostly represented Gadamer’s view: Health is connected with a vision of **equilibrium**.. Health can be characterized as “natural equilibrium“ (1965: 34). In this connection, disease represents a fall from self-keeping equilibrium to the state of disbalance. Disease is a loss of equilibrium, which deforms other equilibria. (1963: 58). For a patient, disease is an absence² of something (1963: 52).

Gadamer pointed out that equilibrium had been an important institution already in Hippocrates works. Equilibrium is not the only natural condition of health. Equilibrium is also an institution which helps us to understand nature as entity that holds to its

² By Gadamer a patient “perceives his/her disease as an absence of something“ (1963: 52). I consider this opinion to be a polemical one; the patient takes his/her disease as an extra addition. Here Gadamer was influenced by language; in German (and formerly also often in Czech) physician asks his patient what is him missing (also the patient can formulate his question for his physician similarly. More frequently in our country we hear the physician’s question: What brings you in? – or influenced by English: How can I help you? By Gadamer the identification of patient problems is connected with an idea of equilibrium restoring. It seems to be disputable; by my opinion the patient looks for his/her physician to quit himself of disease. However, in his later speculation (1987) Gadamer concluded that disease imposes itself on us as something threatening and disruptive and we make an effort to get rid of it.

own order or course and makes it in and of itself (1965). Health is equilibrium granted by nature.

In 80ies of the last century Gadamer elaborated the original concept of the equilibrium by using the term *adequacy* (1989:133). He picked up the treads of the ancient Greek philosophy, namely two different kinds of measurement by Plato: the first measurement is made from outside of an object (*metron*). The second one is a measure that must be found in the object itself (*metrion*). In German it is *das Angemessene*, in Czech probably *přiměřené*, in English appropriate or fitting. To be appropriate – it is linked with the inner measure which is suitable for a self-keeping live being. Equilibrium is “appropriate“. For health is characteristic that it keeps its own suitable equilibrium and proportion.

By Gadamer each disorder of equilibrium, a trouble, an infection, is understood as a symptom saying that the appropriateness (equilibrium) must be established again (1989: 137).

4. Disease as a loss of health, loss of undisturbed freedom, includes always also an exclusion from life (1963). So health is **freedom** (of activities) and **integration into life, a place in the world**. It is a state of integration into the surrounding world, “being in this world, being in this world with other human beings, a state of an active and rewarding participation in everyday duties (1991: 113). Disease is a state of social disruption.“ (1987).

5. Disease, the loss of equilibrium, is not only medical but also historical (in frame of an individual life) process. When a person is sick, he/she is not identical with the corresponding previous person. He/she “fell out” from everyday matters, from his/her place in the world. (1965). Health as a **part of identity**.

6. In Gadamer’s essays, health is demonstrated as a state of **inner accord (harmony with oneself)**, which can not be cancelled or overridden by another external control form (1987). Health can be understood as an astonishing example of a strong but hidden **harmony**. When we enjoy good health we are completely absorbed by our activities³. It happens in accord with our natural and social environment (1989). In fact we **enjoy** health in this way as a state of harmony or an appropriate state of internal measure. (1990).

In experiences **appropriateness is manifested** as harmony. By contrast, disease is taken as a failure of harmonic interplay between feelings of personal well-being and capacity to be engaged in our world (1990: 99).

³ It seems that here Gadamer anticipated the term *flow*, which is – mainly in literature connected with positive psychology – frequently discussed. It means a full immersion, engagement in a certain activity being performed. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The content sense meaning of the word *engagement* is near; however its meaning is limited for working effort or working activities (Bakker, Demerouti, Schaufeli, 2005). Here Gadamer prefers the term *adequacy*.

7. Health is manifested in general feeling of **personal well-being**⁴. It appears mostly when we - in our feeling of personal well-being - are open to new things, are ready to start new business, without considering demands made on us (1987).

Attempt to summarize

Each theory is being developed and also Gadamer's view has been changed in the course of years. The slightly mechanistic view of 60ies, which considered health as **equilibrium given us by nature and kept in us by nature** has been changed in 90ies to the view of health – disease as a **moment of choice or decision** made by a man who feels that he does not meet needs of everyday life. Here Gadamer approached modern concept of subjective health that is in high measure enjoyed by handicapped and chronically ill people⁵. Elaboration of this concept started in 90ies of the last century.

⁴ Among contemporary terms often used in connection with health we find the term well-being which belongs to Gadamer's interpretation. He has not worked with the term quality of life. He says it can only characterize something that was lost in meantime (1987).

Well-being is one of terms and phenomena whose primary disposition is rather psychological but it is reaching many other branches of social and natural sciences (philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, medicine and all its subdisciplines) and is used in common language, too. Denotatively it is explained mostly periphrastically, in relation to other similar terms: in Anglo-Saxon terminology it is mostly related to "satisfaction", also "welfare", "pleasure", "prosperity" or "happiness", often in relation to health, the substantive "health", or various collocations "state of being healthy" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1995; Merriam-Webster, 1992; Random House Webster's College Dictionary, 1991).

We can see a tendency to confusion and substitution of the terms well-being and happiness not only in common and technical Czech but also in literature sources from abroad. E.g. W. D. Ross (1947) translated Nicomachean Ethics by Aristotle to English and used happiness for the term eudaimonia. However, by N. Bradburn (1969), W. D. Ross used the term well-being for eudaimonia in his other work on Aristotle (1949), which he considered to be more suitable and "neutral".

⁵ Subjective health is a generally used indicator of an individual health state. Predictive strength of this indicator for using medical care and especially for mortality was demonstrated in many prospective studies.

The reason for such a broad using of subjective health in research works is not only simplicity of monitoring this indicator. A human has remarkably high ability to use internal and external information for evaluation of his own health. Results of many studies show that the subjective view of an individual is irreplaceable, also in connection with health. It can be seen that a simple answer to the question How are you? can reflect some aspects of health status that can not be registered by other measures. Physiological measurement can not catch subjective dimension of health, e.g. because they can not catch dimension of health as a value. To be healthy, to be well – it means more than only a good working organism.

Subjective health represents a broader evaluation; besides symptoms and their functional consequences it comprises also positive aspects of health – condition, health supporting behaviour and personal well-being.

However, it is difficult to recognize what aspects are reflected. When people evaluate their own health they say not only how they feel themselves but also inner experience with their individual egos. By evaluation of own health, people evaluate not only physical state but also their emotional, social and spiritual personal well-being.

Health is a multilevel term. It is not surprising that philosophical interpretation of health has discovered a lot of levels, aspects or layers. Further, we would like to make an attempt of categorizing those views on health–disease, with keeping various levels of abstraction that Gadamer used in his works:

Philosophy level: health means **responsibility** which implies a broader responsibility for common values, nature, civilization.

Phenomena level: health is a primary **manifestation of existence**, flow of life whose inflow and outflow are accompanying our true feeling of existence.

Level of terms: (health as) **opposite of disease versus continuum**

Methodology level: Disease can be measured; its norms can be defined; it can be described by scientific methods. Health defies objective scientific methods of measurement.

Being level: health is a **part of a being as a whole**, comprehensiveness, fullness

Disposition versus present level: at disposition level we are equipped with health; disease can appear at a present level.

Organism level: **equilibrium**, life rhythm, permanent process, nature itself, **appropriateness**

Experience level: **well-being, harmony**, internal accord – absorption by our doing

Ego level: a part of **identity** versus a loss of a part of identity (disease)

Social level: **freedom** (to activities), integration in life, **integration versus disintegration**

Conclusion

Gadamer has paid his attention to health problems for more than 30 years. Probably better than from position of another discipline dealing with health, he successfully captured from the position of philosophy how health is sealed into different structures, levels and layers of a human being. His view has been consistent and relatively unchanged for 30 years, in 90ies of 20th century a development could be registered, to perception of health as individual choice.

It has been shown that an individual can experience personal well-being on deeper level of his/her ego – even if he/she is ill or handicapped. Therefore even very seriously ill people can evaluate own health positively and this phenomenon is evidently not a consequence of negation or disaffirmation of a painful (Šolcová, Kebza, 2006).

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ZDRAVÍ Z POHLEDU FILOSOFIE H.-G. GADAMERA

Souhrn: Stať se snaží postihnout, jak H.-G. Gadamer chápe zdraví a jak se jeho pohled na zdraví event. mění v průběhu bezmála 30 let, po který poutal jeho pozornost. V pojmu zdraví Gadamer objevuje řadu rovin, aspektů či vrstev. Stať se pokouší o jakousi kategorizaci těchto pohledů na zdraví - nemoc a zachovat přitom různé úrovně abstrakce, na kterých Gadamer zdraví uchopuje.

Klíčová slova: zdraví, nemoc, přiměřenost, equilibrium, rovnováha, duševní pohoda