

Philosophy *of* Medicine

Letter

A Perspective on the Discussion About Health from a Spanish Speaker

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One of the most discussed issues in philosophy of medicine is whether health is merely “absence of disease” or if it is something else (Saborido 2020, 53–65; Sisti and Caplan 2017). Health as absence of disease is mainly defended by so-called health naturalists, who believe that the concept may be defined as an objective or natural property of organisms (Boorse 1977, 1982), whereas health as something else may refer to (1) health as biological, psychological, or social *well-being* (Nordenfelt 1986, 2006; WHO Interim Commission 1948, 100), a posture sometimes referred as health constructivism, or (2) the degree to which an organism adapts to its environment, a position that may be mainly attributed to Georges Canguilhem (1991) and that has recently been reexamined by Laura Mennati et al. (2022). Of course, there are counterarguments to each of these positions (see, for example, Hausman 2017; Nordenfelt 2006; Saborido 2020), which I shall not entertain here.

However interesting this debate may seem, as a native Spanish speaker I cannot help but notice that it may be a consequence of the polysemic character of the word *health*. In Spanish, “being healthy” may be translated as either “*estar sano*” or “*ser saludable*.” These two expressions are closely related but are not the same. For instance, “*estar sano*” is defined as a perfect state of health, and its antonym is “*estar enfermo* (having a disease).”¹ “*Ser saludable*,” on the other hand, can be defined as being in a state where all functions are working normally, or as the physical or mental condition in which the organism is at a certain moment.²

With these definitions in mind, certain relationships between “*sano*” and the definition of health as absence of disease, and “*salud*” with the definitions of health as *well-being* or *adaptation-to-the-environment*, may be extrapolated. On the one hand, as “*estar sano*” is opposite to “*estar enfermo*,” it can be argued that “*sano*” means absence of disease. On the other hand, as “*salud*” refers to a certain state in which an organism may be at a certain moment, it could fit the definition of health as *well-being* or *adaptation*. If such conventions are adopted, the main discussion about the definition of health, at least in Spanish, is dissolved.

¹ Real Academia Española, <https://dle.rae.es/sano?m=form>.

² Real Academia Española, <https://dle.rae.es/salud?m=form>.



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This could be utilized as a strategy to make progress on the issue of the definition of health, as recognizing the polysemic character of the word may compel philosophers to distinguish between two different properties—namely, the property of *not having a disease* (healthy, *sano*), and the property of how well or how adapted and organism is (healthy, *saludable*). Hence, rather than discussing which of the two may be better as a definition of health, we might recognize that these two concepts can be further analyzed separately.

Analytic philosophy may benefit from extending its conceptual analysis to the use of certain concepts in non-English languages, as they may offer evidence of polysemy for certain concepts, such as the case of “health.” This strategy has the potential to contribute to progress beyond stagnant discussions about which meaning of a polysemic word should be preferred.

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