

Can Philosophy Help Us Create the Best of All Possible Worlds? Introducing Global Philosophical Health

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Abstract

While physical and mental health are widely recognized dimensions of human well-being, this article introduces philosophical health as a crucial third dimension that addresses our fundamental orientation in life and our deeper sense of purpose. As we face unprecedented global challenges, from environmental and political crises to technological disruption, philosophical health offers practical wisdom for creating what Leibniz called ‘the best of all possible worlds’: one where individual fulfilment and collective flourishing become complementary, offering ‘compossible’ rather than competing goals. The article concludes by suggesting how philosophical health can be cultivated through regular practice, suggesting that this development is essential for addressing our most pressing contemporary challenges.

Imagine waking up one morning to discover that everyone on Earth suddenly shared the same deep purpose: to make our world the best it could possibly be through a profound understanding of how individual flourishing can harmonize with collective good. What would that look like? Would we all agree to think alike? Or could we maintain our differences while working towards a common horizon?

These questions touch on philosophy’s most enduring concerns: How should we live? What gives life meaning? How do individual interests relate to collective flourishing? While we often hear about physical and mental health, there’s a crucial third dimension of human well-being that’s been largely overlooked: philosophical health. This isn’t about mere abstract

theorizing – it’s about our fundamental orientation in life, our deeper sense of purpose and meaning, and how aligned they are with our actions. While psychology helps us behave normally or achieve goals, philosophy addresses the more profound questions: What are we ultimately trying to achieve? What contribution do we want to make to the world? How do our individual aspirations connect to larger meanings and shared values?

As our planet faces mounting challenges, from environmental crises to social and political divisions, these philosophical questions take on new urgency. The traditional focus on individual happiness or personal growth isn’t enough anymore. We need a more comprehensive vision of what it means to be well, not just as individuals,



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but as earthlings who constitute an interconnected whole. This is where philosophy, with its long tradition of examining fundamental questions about meaning, purpose, and the relationship between individual action and collective good, becomes essential.

Consider how different philosophical health is from other forms of well-being. Physical health focuses on the body's functioning – its comparative strength, resilience and freedom from disease. Mental health addresses our psychological normalcy and emotional well-being – our ability to cope with stress, maintain relationships and adjust our emotions. But philosophical health goes deeper, examining the fundamental questions that shape how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. It's about developing the wisdom to ask not just 'How can I feel better?' but 'What makes a life worth living?' Not just 'How can I succeed?' but 'What kind of success truly matters?'

Think about someone who is physically fit and mentally stable but feels their life lacks

meaning or direction. Or consider an executive who is successful by conventional standards but can't shake the feeling that they're contributing to problems rather than solutions. These people might be healthy in traditional ways but still lack something essential: a coherent philosophical framework for making sense of their place in the world and their relationship to the bigger picture. This is like having a powerful computer with fast hardware and well-functioning software, but no clear purpose for using it.

When we say someone is philosophically healthy, we don't mean they've reached some end destination or perfect state of enlightenment. Rather, they've developed what philosophers since ancient times have recognized as practical wisdom: the ability to see connections between different aspects of life and make choices that create positive ripple effects. Think of it as a kind of ecological thinking applied to all aspects of existence – understanding how our choices create patterns that either enhance or diminish the possibilities available

to others. This goes beyond psychology's focus on emotional well-being or behaviour modification. It's about understanding the fundamental importance of meaning and purpose in human life.

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The evidence is clear: when we pursue individual well-being without a coherent philosophical foundation, we often end up undermining both personal and collective flourishing. The pursuit of personal comfort through excessive consumption ultimately makes everyone worse off through environmental degradation and social inequality. What we need is a philosophical framework that helps us see how personal and collective well-being can reinforce – rather than compete with – each other. This framework must draw on philosophy's rich tradition of examining how individual flourishing relates to the common harmony, while addressing the unprecedented challenges of our global age.

At the core of philosophical health is an idea first explored by philosopher Gottfried Leibniz that speaks directly to these challenges: compossibility. This concept addresses one of philosophy's most enduring questions: how can we maximize individual freedom while maintaining collective harmony? In developing this idea, Leibniz wasn't just making an abstract point. He was trying to solve a practical problem of optimization that is more relevant today than ever: how do we create a world that allows for both individual flourishing and collective good?

Compossibility refers to the way different possibilities can exist together harmoniously. Just as not every combination of musical notes creates a pleasing chord, not all possible actions or ways of life can coexist without creating discord. The challenge is to look for combinations that work together – that are ‘compossible’. True freedom, Leibniz realized, isn't about doing whatever we want, but about finding ways to expand everyone's possibilities simultaneously. It's like designing a traffic system: the goal isn't to give each driver complete freedom, which would lead to chaos, but to create patterns that maximize everyone's ability to move freely.

Here's a simple example: you might have the possibility to play loud music in your apartment in the middle of the night. Your neighbour has the possibility to sleep peacefully. Both are possible individually, but they aren't compossible – they can't exist together harmoniously. This basic scenario illustrates a profound philosophical principle: true well-being requires us to think beyond what's merely possible for us as individuals to what's compossible for everyone. We must move from asking ‘What can I do?’ to ‘What can we all do together that creates global harmony?’

This principle extends far beyond noise ordinances and neighbourly consideration. It applies to how we design our cities. For instance, can we create spaces that allow both cars and pedestrians to move freely? It shapes economic decisions – can we develop business models that generate prosperity while preserving fairness and environmental resources? Even in education we face compossibility challenges: how do we foster individual excellence while ensuring equal opportunities for all? The key is to stop seeing these as either/or choices and start looking for intercreative solutions that expand possibilities for everyone involved.

The power of philosophical health becomes especially clear when we examine today's most pressing challenges. Take the current debate about artificial intelligence (AI). From a purely technical perspective, we might focus on making AI systems as powerful and efficient as possible. But philosophical health helps us ask deeper questions: How can AI development be compossible with existential flourishing? What

kind of AI would enhance rather than diminish our domain of possibility in the longer run? Consider the specific case of AI in healthcare. An efficiency-maximizing approach might create systems that make all decisions for doctors and patients, reducing them to passive recipients of algorithmic instructions. This might be possible, but it isn't compossible with what philosophers have long recognized as essential to human dignity: our capacity for meaningful choice and dialogue. A philosophically informed approach would instead design AI to augment human judgement, providing insights while enriching rather than replacing the doctor-patient relationship. The AI would enhance the sense-making elements of care, creating a virtuous cycle where technology and human wisdom strengthen each other.

This is where philosophical health becomes crucial. It helps us think through these relationships before we build systems that might be difficult to change later. Just as ancient philosophers emphasized the importance of examining assumptions before acting, philosophical health helps us consider the deeper implications of our technological choices. We learn to ask not just 'What can this technology do?' but 'How will this technology shape our ways of being and relating?'

The same principles apply to environmental challenges. We could continue expanding our material consumption and common unsustainable practices, but this isn't compossible with the health of our planet's ecosystems. Real solutions must enhance both human and environmental well-being simultaneously. To understand this better, let's look at sustainable agriculture as an example. Traditional industrial farming might maximize short-term crop yields, but it depletes soil health and biodiversity, eventually undermining its own foundations. In contrast, regenerative agriculture shows how human food production can enhance ecosystem health, slowly improving soil quality, increasing biodiversity, and sequestering carbon while eventually producing abundant food.

This agricultural example illustrates a key insight from philosophical traditions about the relationship between humans and nature. Just

as ancient philosophers saw humans as part of nature rather than separate from it, regenerative agriculture demonstrates how human activities can work with rather than against natural systems. When we respect our deep interconnection with nature, we can create virtuous cycles where human and natural systems strengthen each other. The same thinking can be applied to urban design, energy systems or economic models.

These examples point to a deeper truth about philosophical health: it helps us move beyond simple either/or thinking to find creative solutions that expand the system of possibilities in which all beings are involved. Consider how this applies to economic systems. Traditional economics often poses a trade-off between economic growth and environmental protection, or between business profitability and worker well-being. But philosophical health, with its focus on compossibility, pushes us to ask: How might we design economic systems that generate prosperity while enhancing rather than depleting natural and human resources? What business models create meaningful value for shareholders while also enriching communities and ecosystems?

Some groups are already exploring these questions, developing more compossible forms of transaction. They're finding ways to generate comfort by solving rather than creating problems, demonstrating that economic success can be compatible with social and environmental flourishing. There are already today many practical examples of what becomes possible when we apply philosophical engineering to real-world challenges.

Recent work in philosophical practice has identified six key elements that contribute to philosophical health. These elements form what's called the SMILE_PH method (Sense-Making Interviews Looking at Elements of Philosophical Health). Each element addresses fundamental questions that philosophers and humans have grappled with throughout history, providing a practical framework for developing wisdom in our daily lives. By examining these elements through dialogue – either with a philosophical counsellor or through careful self-reflection – we can cultivate deeper

understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world.

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The first element is the bodily sense, which might initially seem strange in a philosophical framework. Isn't the body the domain of physical health? But this reveals a profound philosophical insight that goes back to thinkers like Merleau-Ponty (if not to the ancient Greeks who praised a 'healthy mind in a healthy body'): we are fundamentally embodied beings, and our understanding of the world is shaped by this embodiment. Our thoughts and values aren't floating in some abstract realm – they're grounded in our physical existence. Consider how different the world appears when we're tired versus energized, or how our posture or emotions affect our mood and thinking. The bodily sense in philosophical health means being attuned to this embodiment without being dominated by it. For instance, an athlete interested in philosophical health doesn't just train for performance – they develop a deeper understanding of how their physical practice relates to their broader life purposes and values.

The second element, the sense of self, engages with one of philosophy's most enduring questions: Who am I, really? This goes far beyond psychology's focus on personality traits or behavioural patterns. It draws on philosophical traditions from ancient Greece to modern existentialism that examine the nature of human identity and authenticity. Think of how a river remains itself while constantly changing. This

paradox of identity and change has fascinated philosophers for millennia. In practice, someone with a philosophically healthy sense of self might navigate career changes not by asking 'What job suits my personality?' but by examining how different paths align with their deeper understanding of who they are, what deep orientation they believe in and who they might become.

The third element, the sense of belonging, builds on human sociality and interconnection. From Aristotle's view of humans as political animals to Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue, thinkers have long recognized that human flourishing requires meaningful connection with others. The philosophical health mindset considers well-belonging in a distinctive way. Unlike psychological approaches that might focus on social skills or attachment patterns, it examines how we can maintain authentic individuality while recognizing our essential connections to others and to the larger world. This can be about finding a balance between independence and dependence, but first and foremost it is about discovering what philosophers call 'reciprocity', where individual uniqueness and collective belonging strengthen rather than oppose each other. For example, someone with a strong sense of belonging might engage in community projects not just to feel included, but because they understand how their individual gifts can contribute to collective flourishing while being enriched by the contributions of others.

The fourth element of philosophical health, the sense of the possible, connects to one of philosophy's most dynamic aspects: its power to imagine, reveal or create new possibilities. This goes beyond both positive thinking and pragmatic planning to engage with what philosophers call 'modal thinking' – understanding different ways things could be. Consider how a chess master sees not just the current board position but a rich web of possible moves and their consequences. Similarly, someone with a well-developed sense of the possible sees beyond immediate circumstances to deeper patterns of potential and goodwill. Beyond daydreaming, this is grounded imagination, an intuition that philosophers from Aristotle to contemporary thinkers have recognized as essential to

practical wisdom. For instance, when facing a challenging situation at work, someone with this capacity might see possibilities that others miss, not because they're more optimistic, but because they can think more idealistically about how different elements could be reconfigured to create new solutions.

The fifth element, the sense of purpose, addresses what might be philosophy's most fundamental question: What gives life meaning? While psychological approaches often focus on setting and achieving goals via willpower, philosophical health is concerned with something deeper: our fundamental orientation in life. What are we ultimately trying to achieve? What contribution do we want to make? What is our higher purpose? What universal ideal attracts us? Think of how a navigator needs both a compass for immediate direction and the stars for broader orientation. Similarly, philosophical health helps us connect our daily choices to larger purposes and values, examining not just how to live but why – from ancient investigations of the good life to modern explorations of what paradise on earth might feel like. Someone with a philosophically healthy sense of purpose might choose their life's work not just based on competitive skills or market demand, but through careful reflection on how their capabilities could contribute to meaningful human flourishing, even if that demands some form of tenacious persistence.

The sixth element, the philosophical sense itself, represents our capacity for what the ancient Greeks called *phronesis*, a form of practical wisdom that combines deep understanding with effective action. This is the ability to think clearly about fundamental worldviews and apply those insights to real situations. It's like developing a new sense organ – one that perceives patterns of universal meaning in the way our eyes perceive patterns of light and colour. This capacity grows through practice, just as musicians develop their ear through careful listening and playing. Through philosophical reflection, creative criticism and dialogue, we learn to recognize deeper patterns in life, to see connections others might miss, to understand how different aspects of experience

fit together into meaningful wholes, or even a cosmology.

These six elements of philosophical health work together in dynamic ways, each supporting and enriching the others. Our sense of self shapes what we see as possible, while our sense of purpose influences how we configure our belonging. Our bodily sense grounds our philosophical thinking. Think of it like an ecosystem where each element nourishes the others. For example, when facing a career decision, these elements might work together as follows. Our bodily sense tells us what kinds of work energize or drain us. Our sense of self helps us understand our authentic capabilities and aspirations. Our sense of belonging shows us how we might contribute to a certain community of practice. Our sense of the possible helps us actualize creative steps forward. Our sense of purpose keeps us aware of what the meaningful choices are. And our philosophical sense helps us weave all these insights into coherent wisdom for action. In the end, this prunes and eases our life, avoiding the superfluous and rarefying the unfruitful.

This integration of existential elements demonstrates a key principle of philosophical health: true wisdom comes not from developing any one capacity in isolation, but from nurturing the dynamic interplay between different aspects of our presence in the world. Just as a healthy ecosystem requires diversity and interconnection, philosophical health flourishes through the rich interaction of these different ways of making sense of our experience.

The ancient Greeks spoke of *eudaimonia*, a state of human flourishing that combines happiness with virtue and meaning. But they mostly thought about it in terms of the individual or the city-state. Today, we need to think about *eudynamia*: favouring compossibility and flourishing on a planetary scale. Beyond individual wellness or even collective survival, this is about creating conditions where human civilization enhances rather than diminishes the good potentials of Earth's living systems. Philosophical health becomes essential for this task because it helps us think deeply about what genuine flourishing means in the long term and how we might achieve it together, as earthlings.

Developing philosophical health doesn't require becoming a professional philosopher. Think of it like learning music: while not everyone needs to become a concert pianist, everyone can develop musical appreciation and musical abilities. Similarly, we can all cultivate our capacity for philosophical thinking through regular practice. This might involve setting aside time for reflection, perhaps starting each day by considering our deeper purpose via a motto, and how our planned activities align with it. It might mean engaging in philosophical dialogue with others, not to win arguments but to explore ideas and expand our understanding. Some people might engage in a regular conversation with a philosophical counsellor, a new profession emerging in various parts of the world. Philosophical practitioners can help guide this thoughtful development, much as a music teacher helps develop musical capabilities.

When making decisions, we might pause to consider not just their immediate effects but their wider implications – how they might expand or limit possibilities for us and others. We might examine our daily routines, asking not just whether they're efficient but whether they're meaningful for our future self and compossible with the flourishing of future generations. In conversations, we might practice listening not just for information but for deeper attempts at meaning and value. These practices gradually develop our 'philosophical sense', which is our capacity to perceive and respond to the deeper dimensions of life, while unveiling our intercreative destinies.

As this capacity develops collectively, we will become better equipped to address complex challenges. For instance, climate change: while technical solutions are crucial, we also need philosophical health to think clearly about our relationship with nature outside and in us. Or take technological development: while technical expertise is essential, philosophical health helps us ensure that innovation serves genuine

existential flourishing rather than undermining it. In economics, philosophical health helps us imagine and create models that generate deep prosperity while enhancing rather than depleting human and natural resources.

Philosophical health also transforms how we think about education. Beyond teaching skills or transmitting information, education is about developing wisdom – the capacity to understand wisely and act accordingly. Education is not just a preparation for making a living but a preparation for living well. In our global age, this means helping people develop the wisdom to navigate complex challenges while contributing to their sense of the possible and of the compossible.

The good news is that we don't have to wait for everyone to develop philosophical health before making progress. Each person who cultivates this enduring capacity becomes like a performative node in a network, helping others see wider possibilities and make better connections. When we make decisions with philosophical health rather than impatience in mind, we create small ripples that can grow into larger changes. When organizations begin considering compossibility in their planning, they create new patterns that others can recognize and adopt. The philosophical health process is not artificial. Its demands may appear to be modest. Its growth may seem slow. But remember that, as less is more, slower will be faster.

As we face intertwined global challenges and signs that humanity is not yet becoming wiser, philosophical health is what we need above all. Not just robust bodies and resilient minds, but the wisdom to use these well. Not just individual well-being, but the philosophical understanding needed to cooperate towards collective flourishing. Not just the ability to survive, but the wisdom to help create a world worth living in. This is the promise of philosophical health: helping us develop the wisdom needed to create the best of all compossible worlds.

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