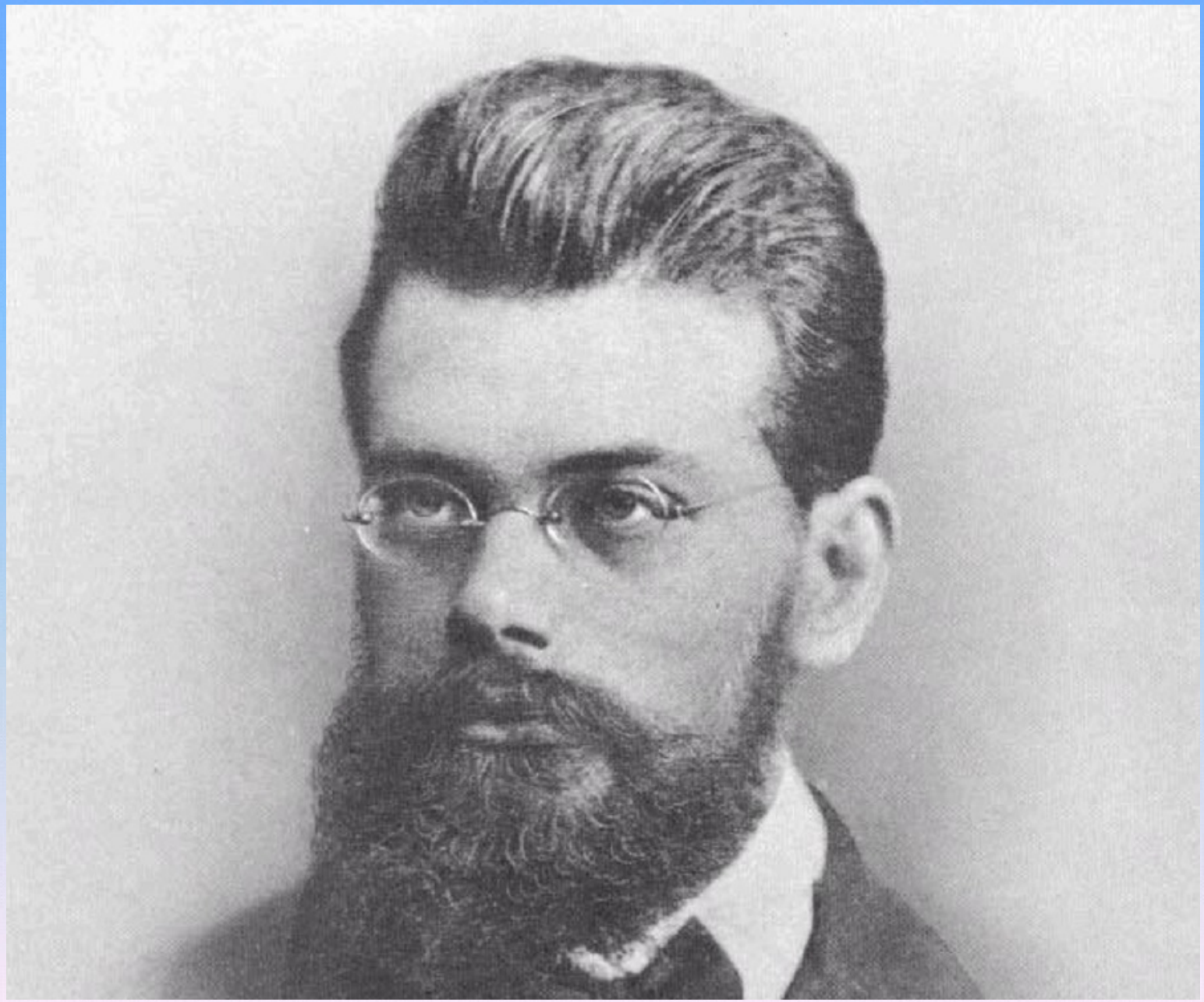
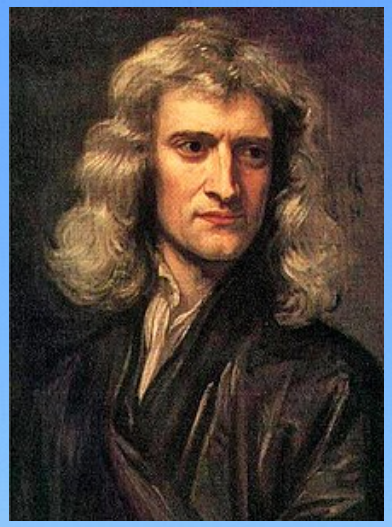
Mental Health in Academia

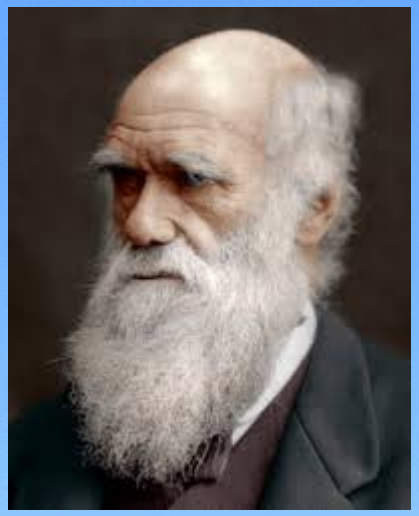
Peter Watson

Ludwig Boltzmann

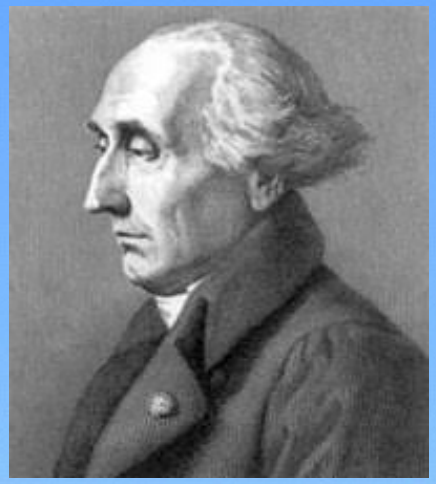




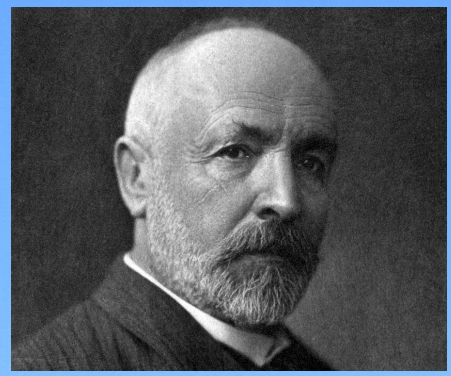
Newton



Darwin



Lagrange



Cantor

Pauli

Godel

Eady

Nash

The present day

- 51% of PhD students had at least two symptoms of psychological distress vs 25% of general highly educated employees (in Belgium; Levecque et al., 2017).
- “Graduate students [90% PhDs] are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population” (survey over 26 countries; Evans et al., 2018).
- Many examples of post-PhD researchers with problems (articles in Guardian, Nature etc.).
- (Of course, the majority in research probably enjoy it!)

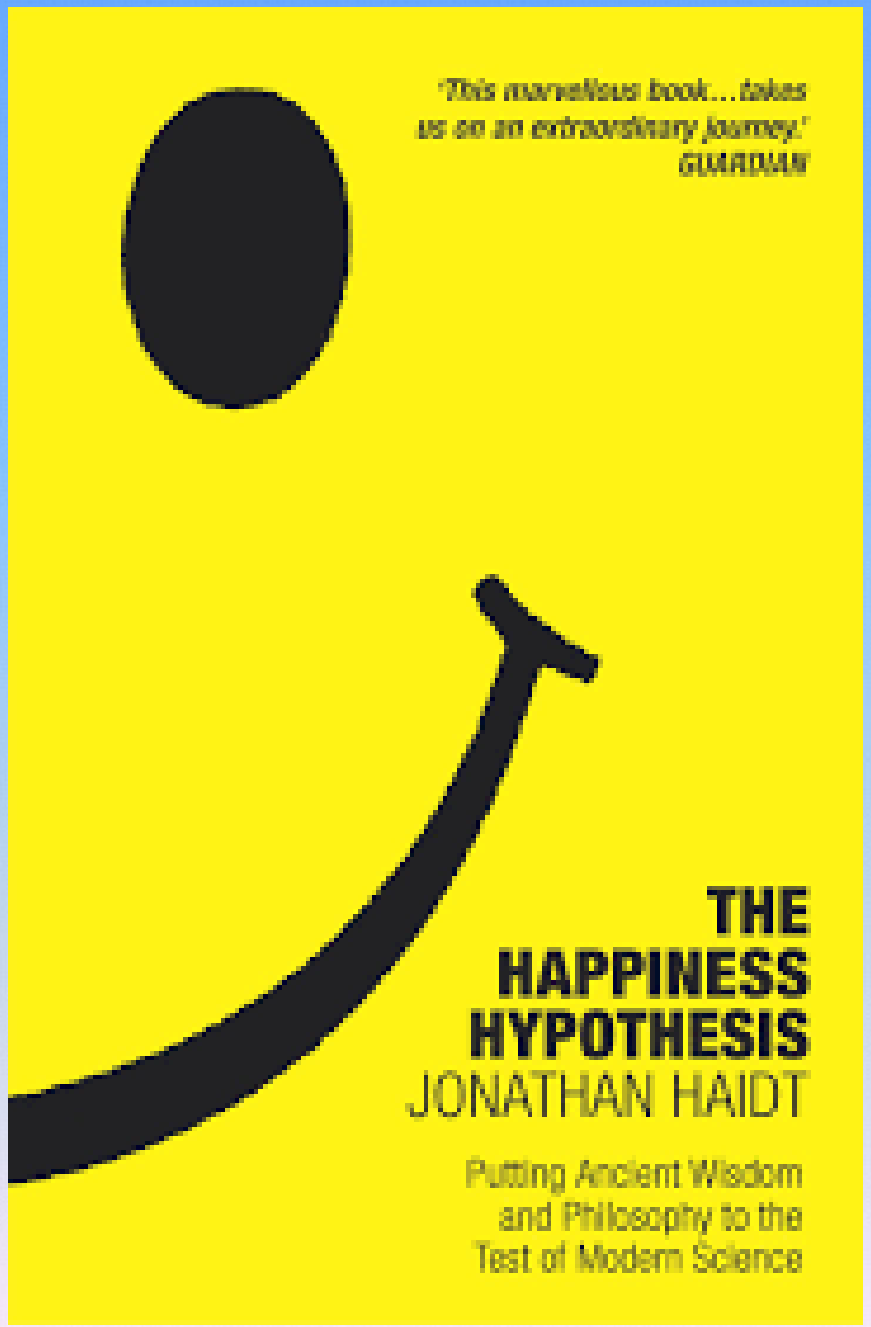
Factors in academic environment

- Top three factors from Guardian 2014 survey:
  - Heavy workload
  - Lack of support
  - Isolation
- Career prospects identified as most important by UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly (2014) and NERC Early Career Researchers Evaluation 2017.
- Impostor syndrome
- Infrequent feedback
- Frequent criticism and rejection

Solutions – individual resilience

- Sleep
- Diet
- Exercise
- Breaks
- Hobbies

- Three categories of treatments:
  - Meditation
  - Cognitive therapy
  - Medication



Solutions – sources of support

- NHS (GP, counselling, guided self-help e.g. Talking Space)
- University counselling (student counselling service and Occupational Health Services)
- Charities e.g. Education Support Partnership, Mind
- Friends and colleagues (86% of HE staff with mental health problem said colleagues who knew were sympathetic [Guardian, 2014])

Solutions – supervisors

- Give clear and regular feedback on both strengths and weaknesses (constructively) and directions for progression
- Be engaged with research
- Allow fair degree of autonomy

Solutions – departments

- Training for supervisors
- Prevent harassment
- Monitoring and measurement of impacts of policy changes
- Destigmatisation e.g. make the issue an important priority
- Better information for career development

Solutions - universities

- Increase access to mental health support
  - Make it possible for staff to self-refer without going through manager or HR
  - Offer counselling to post-PhD staff, by specially trained staff.

Solutions - systemic

- Reduce pressure to move for its own sake
  - Breaks up social support networks.
  - NERC moving towards not considering moving as being important indicator of independence for fellows.
- An “Athena SWAN” for mental health.
- Measure impact of trialling different structures for research organisations e.g. more stable funding for groups, recognition of early career achievements.

Presentation on my department web page:
https://www2.physics.ox.ac.uk/contacts/people/watson