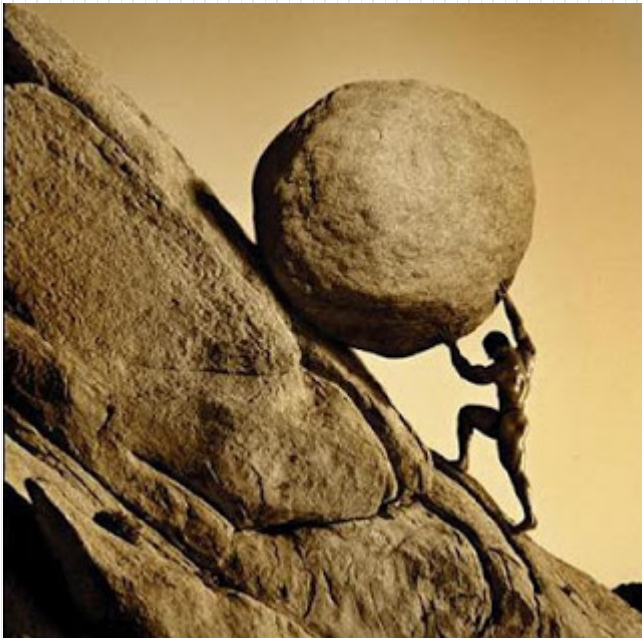


Ethics of finitude: mortality, natality and vulnerability



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Social Science Research Group launch event:
Vulnerability, Resilience and Resistance

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Why was king Sisyphus punished?



Ethics of finitude

- Mortality, natality and vulnerability
- Temporally finite on both ends
- Existentially finite
- Vulnerable (illness and affliction)
- Three consequences:
 1. Freud – dare to love the ephemeral
 2. Hadot – live in the present
 3. MacIntyre – reconfigure ethics

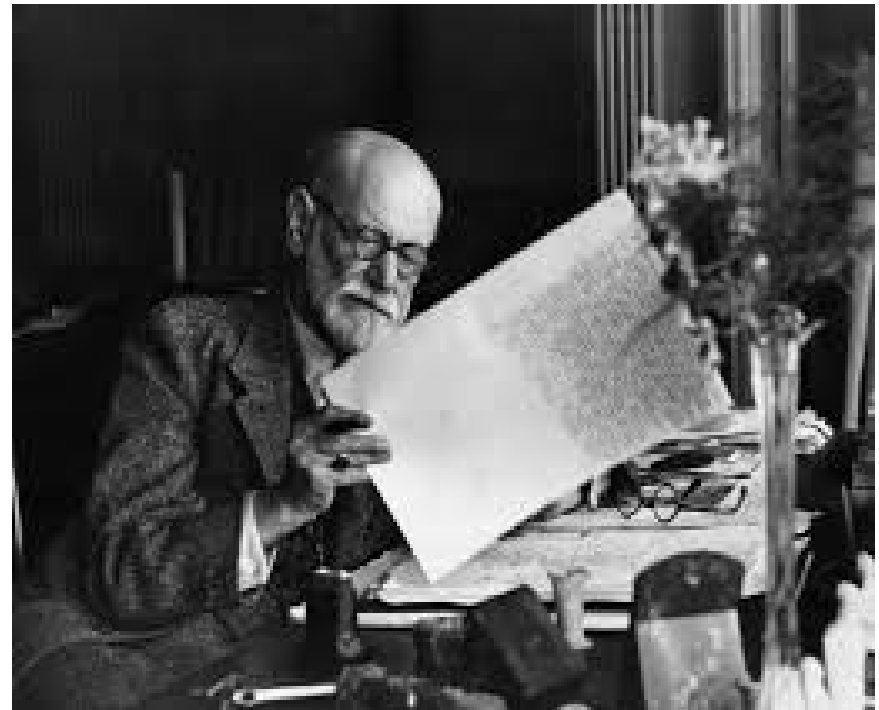
“Why, then, must we still be human?”

Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,
just once. And never again. But to have been
this once, completely, even if only once:
to have been one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.

Rilke, 9th Duino Elegy

Freud: transience as source of value

- Written in 1915 – WWI
- The poet “admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it”
- Disturbed by the thought of this beauty’s extinction “like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create.”
- “All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom”



On Transience

- Proneness to decay gives rise to two reactions:
 1. Aching despondency (young poet)
 2. Rebellion (demand for immortality)
- But “what is painful may none the less be true”
- Freud disputes the pessimistic view that transience involves loss of worth



On Transience

- “On the contrary, an increase!”
- “Transience value is scarcity value in time”
- Limiting the possibility of enjoyment raises its value
- “A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely”



On Transience

- But the poet remains unconvinced!
- A revolt against mourning
- Ephemeral beauty gives a foretaste of mourning its loss
- Certain capacity for love – libido
- We invest libidinally in objects
- When these are destroyed or lost, we mourn
- War



Goethe

- Living in the present = saying ‘yes’ to the world
- The ‘healthiness of the moment’
- Being content with the present, with earthly existence
- Knowing how to utilise the present – recognising and seizing the decisive instant (*kairos*, as opposed to *chronos*)
- Attention to the present has aesthetic and moral meaning
- We no longer know how to live in the present
- We privilege the future
- Present considered trivial and banal
- Everydayness and transcendence



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(1749-1832)

Stoic philosophical therapy

- Freeing oneself of regrets about the (fixed) past and anxiety about the (unknown) future, to be in the present moment
- “Delimiting the present” – only the present belongs to us and depends upon us
- Happiness can only be found in the present
- One instant of happiness is equivalent to an eternity of happiness
- Happiness can and must be found immediately
- Attention, vigilance and continuous tension, concentrated upon each and every moment
- Marcus Aurelius: “this is enough for you”!

Epicureanism

- We are tormented by vast, hollow desires which cannot be satisfied in the present
- We must learn to enjoy the pleasure of the present without being distracted from it
- Only thoughts about what is pleasurable are allowed into the present
- The quality of pleasure does not depend on the quantity of desires satisfied or its duration
- The best pleasure is that infused with the least amount of worry and which ensures peace of mind
- The satisfaction of natural and necessary desires

Epicurus

We are only born once – twice is not allowed – and it is necessary that we shall be no more, for all eternity; and yet you, who are not master of tomorrow, you keep putting off your joy? Yet life is vainly consumed in these delays, and each of us dies without ever having known peace.

Vatican saying #14

MacIntyre

- We are vulnerable to affliction
- How we cope is only partly up to us
- We often owe our survival to others and our flourishing
- Childhood and old age
- But also period in between
- But the history of ethics contains only passing references to vulnerability and affliction, connection and dependence
- What would moral philosophy be like if these facts were taken as central to the human condition?



Thank you



- Phenomenology and its contribution to medicine (*Theor Med & Bioethics* 2010)
- Philosophy as a resource for patients (*J Med & Philosophy* 2012)
- Bodily doubt (*J. Cons Studies* 2013)
- “How do you feel?”: oscillating perspectives in the clinic (with J. Macnaughton, *Lancet* 2012)
- Illness, phenomenology, and philosophical method (*Theor Med & Bioethics* 2013)
- Seen but not heard: children and epistemic injustice (with G. Gyoffry, *Lancet* 2014)
- The philosophical role of illness (*Metaphilosophy* 2014)