

## The Happiness of Burnout

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[Essay]

## The Happiness of Burnout

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### Abstract

In the novel *A Burnout-Out Case*, Graham Greene argues for an intimate relationship between burnout and happiness. The novel claims that a life worth living is a continuous balancing between something painful, e.g. burnout and something desirable, e.g. happiness. In this essay, I try to make a case for the happiness of burnout. By examining the case story of a young artist, who suffered from burnout, I describe how such suffering might open up for a necessary reevaluation of the values that actually make sense. Such creation of new values is what eventually leads to more happy moments, not happiness per se. This essay provides a philosophical reflection regarding the relationship between happiness and burnout in order to say something regarding which life is worth living.

### 1. Introduction

A proper philosophical question is: Which life is worth living? The question invites a plurality of answers from different perspectives. This plurality leads to an affirmative practice that asks: How might one live a flourishing and happy life without any transcendent guidance?<sup>1</sup>

This essay deals with these questions. It tells the case story of artist Jeppe Hein's (JH) burnout.<sup>2</sup>

The essay falls into five parts. First, I present burnout as illustrated in Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt-Out Case*. This serves as a foundation for later parts. Then, I present JH case story in two parts. I will relate this story to Greene's thoughts and to theories within psychology and philosophy. In the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Deleuze (2002: xi & 76) where, with reference to Nietzsche, he shows how the platonic question (What is truth, beauty ...) presupposes an ideal form of thing (i.e. the metaphysics of being). Nietzsche's question, "Which one is true, just ..." opens up to a pluralistic empiricism.

<sup>2</sup> The work is based on more than 100 hours of interviews with JH. Most interviews were unstructured. In addition, I interviewed his family and closest friends. Interviews with the latter were more structured in order to check for accuracy; however, I also left a part of these interviews open to see whether I could obtain new knowledge or perspectives on the process. I would like to thank Jeppe Hein, Silke Hein, Jørgen Hein, Ilse Hein, Kirsten Plett, and Betina Fusch.

fourth part, I will present a more broad discussion of burnout. Finally, I will try to place these thoughts within the concept of happiness.

The main aim is to create a broad site where certain experiences can fold, unfold, and refold in order to share thoughts related to how one might better flourish.

## **2. The beauty of burnout**

In December 2009, JH was diagnosed with burnout. Three years later, he said: “Burnout is the worst thing that ever happened to me, but it’s also been one of the most beautiful things.”

## **3. Between pain and mutilation**

One of the first novels that specifically refer to the term burnout is *A Burnt-Out Case* by Graham Greene published in 1960. In this novel, burnout refers to the victims of leprosy who can no longer be cured because the disease has gone too far. The leprosy has eaten fingers, toes, ears, etc. The victims who burn out, however, don’t suffer from the terrible pain of losing body parts. They are beyond pain but not beyond mutilation. However, those victims of leprosy who receive a cure when their bodies are more or less intact suffer tremendously. The novel places itself in between these two unattractive alternatives: pain versus mutilation.

The moral of the novel is that living a life—any life—is a form of mutilation. No one passes through life without scratches whether physically or mentally. This emphasizes that without any emotions, such as suffering from pain, loving, or laughing, life is not worth living.

The novel tells the story of Querry, a world-famous architect, who is the victim of an attack of indifference or apathy. He no longer finds pleasure or meaning in life, whether it be work, women, or people in general. He is a burnout case. To cure himself, he tries to run away. He leaves Europe to ends up in the Congo in Africa. Querry describes his own state as: “I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to an end of all that too” (p. 16).

How does one suffer nothing? If Deleuze (2002) is right, one always has the thoughts and emotions one deserves. So, one suffers because one apparently has

been affirming a form of life that is not worth repeating. One feels nothing, because one has been doing nothing. The consequence is a form of resentment that a person will have to overcome through the will to power, i.e., will to create a form of life worth repeating. Yet, emotions are important because one can use these as a continuous evaluation of one's actual life as it takes place in a specific moment.<sup>3</sup> The evaluation, therefore (if we follow Deleuze), is not made in the light of already given ideals or norms, but solely on how a life is lived right here and now.

Still, one might ask: How do I move on?

For Query, the solution is to lose himself (in the end, he actually disappears). In other words, he has been too attached to a certain idea of his self, e.g., his own importance, etc. Through this ego-focus he has also neglected to interact with life. He has lived his life as if it were already determined, like he has been playing the role of a world-famous architect.

So, how does one lose oneself? Query begins to interact; he becomes involved in the work of the leper village. "And so from the first morning he set himself to build a routine, the familiar within the unfamiliar. It was the condition of survival" (pp. 25-26). He returns to what he knows, in this case architecture, as a practical art that illustrates how one has to live in what is created. He organizes the unfamiliar in a familiar fashion. He adds some context to what happens. This illustrates an important point. Query is not afraid of using his capacity and skills as an architect. He is afraid of returning to Europe. The form of life that he needs to live in Europe, or the form of life that he can't resist even though it drains him, makes him afraid. The problem is the situation or culture in which he lived made him feel and do nothing. Thus, in the first part of the novel, Query adopts the classical defense strategy: I suffer, therefore I run. He changes location. Unfortunately, an escape strategy is never enough. The problem of the past emerges if one doesn't transform.

For Query, his problem is related to his profession. "I don't deny my profession once meant a lot to me. So have women. But the use of what I made was never important to me." He emphasizes: "Your vocation is quite a different one, doctor. You are concerned with people. I wasn't concerned with people who occupied my space—only with the space" (p. 44).

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ferssizidis *et al.* (2013: 102) where it says: "Emotional experiences influences how we think and act ... Recent work of emotion and self-regulation suggest that a person's approach for managing anxiety influences positive experiences."

Query doesn't acknowledge that people need a space to stand out, to live. The people are missing in his project. He has been too obsessed with himself. He lacks a higher purpose in life that serves something beyond himself.<sup>4</sup> This is not necessarily a transcendent or religious purpose but a wish or an urge to pass something on to the next generation or to do something meaningful or important.

Later, Query puts his finger on his problem (perhaps, even a more general problem regarding being a human being). He says: "They use the phrase 'make love,' don't they? But which one of us are creative enough to 'make' love? We can only be loved—if we are lucky" (p. 114).

It echoes Nietzsche's "will to power," a concept that means power as a will to create, e.g., create a space where love can breathe freely, where one can *make* love. Query didn't do that during his career as a famous architect. Rather, he deceived himself into believing that he was capable of loving, of *making* love. However, he was only capable of creating rooms for himself where he could love himself and see his self reflected in itself. He burnt himself out. A healthy human being reflects because he or she stands among other human beings. Query, on the other hand, was standing in his own space where the reflection became a reflection of a reflection and so forth. He became a reflection of an idea, not a practice, or a life. He relates this "selfishness," as it is termed in the novel, to having a vocation; he says people with vocations have more to lose.

A vocation is an act of love: it is not a professional career. When desire is dead one cannot continue to make love. I've come to the end of desire and to the end of a vocation. Don't try to bind me in a loveless marriage and to make me imitate what I used to perform with passion. And don't talk to me like a priest about duty. A talent—we used to learn that lesson as children in scripture lessons—should not be buried when it still has purchasing power, but when the currency has changed and the image has been superseded and no value is left in the coin but the weight of a wafer of silver, a man has every right to hide it. Obsolete coins, like corn, have always been found in graves .... What I have built, I have always built for myself, not for the glory of God or the pleasure of a purchaser. Don't talk to me of human beings. Human beings are not my country. And haven't I

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<sup>4</sup> Studies within positive psychology have stressed how having a purpose in life is crucial for one's general well-being, see Chizsentmihalia or Seligman for example.

offered anyway to wash their filthy bandages? (pp. 50-51).

Querry is later confronted with this idea when someone says: “Liking is a great deal safer than love. It doesn’t demand victims. Who is your victim, Querry?” (p. 82).

It might sound vague: replacing love with liking. However, the question is not love *per se*. Rather, Querry is the victim of being Querry. He loved himself and only himself; therefore, he was too afraid to lose himself, to get carried away with life, to create relationships. He lacked the ability or will to expose himself to the outside and ability to connect with other human beings. Therefore, he was only making love with himself. He wanted to be loved, not make love.

A doctor in the leper village told Querry that one doesn’t choose his or her profession, rather one is chosen. “Oh, I don’t mean by god. By accident” (p. 121). Relationships are external to their terms; they don’t belong to an owner or represent an identity. If one is open and paying attention to what takes place right under one’s nose, eyes, and ears, then one comes in contact with life. One becomes “a mixed body,”<sup>5</sup> formed by the relationships that emerge. This is illustrated by the distinction between suffering and discomfort, which is a replay of the distinction between pain and mutilation; e.g., one might feel discomfort when one feels embarrassed. Suffering is “quite a different matter,” the doctor says, “sometimes I think that the search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering are the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the whole human condition” (p. 122).

Unconscious suffering activates certain emotions in the person, which are gradually translated into a conscious feeling. The statement, “I feel uncomfortable once I realize that the other person is suffering” tells us two things. First, attention and awareness hang together; second, we learn unconsciously. In other words, we don’t learn when we are too conscious about doing, seeing, or hearing the right word. This form of attentiveness is an *ethical practice* because by paying attention one is capable of unfolding different kinds of reality within the reality of thought.

The point of recovery is a metaphysical point. For example, the doctor doesn’t live by the metaphysics of being but by the metaphysics of change or becoming. Thus, the problem emerges when life is viewed as being eternally

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres (1997) uses the term “a mixed body” when he describes how the observer and the observed becomes indistinguishable.

fixed and unchangeable. It affects one's level of openness. Therefore, the novel ends up suggesting a rhizomatic type of thinking that emphasizes how things only exist because of their relationships or connections. Everything becomes or speeds up in the middle. Hearing this, Query can't help asking the doctor:

“Are you a happy man?” Query asked.

“I Suppose I am. It's not a question that I've ever asked myself. Does a happy man ever ask it? I go from day to day.” “Swimming on your wave,” Query said with envy. “Do you never need a woman?”

“The only one I ever needed,” the doctor said, “is dead.”

“So that's why you came out here.”

“You are wrong,” Colin said. “She's buried a hundred yards away. She was my wife” (p. 125).

Are you a happy man? Does a happy man ever ask this question?

#### **4. What really happened?**

JH was 35 years old when he burned out. At that time, he had already gained an international reputation as an interesting and playful artist. This reputation, however, didn't just come from obvious artistic talent, but also from hard work and strategizing. The last point is crucial when the issue is burnout.

JH has often defined art, his art, as communication, which doesn't limit art from marketing or management. Still, for JH, communication is understood as something more basic: to touch, to affect, to relate in a curious, playful, or amusing way. It is placed in between. The main difference between his art before and after the burnout is that it became more existential. There is something at stake: a life. Through his art, he practices what many people dealing with stress and burnout forget. Instead of valuing people who can do a lot, it encourages the valuing of people who can balance their lives. For instance, instead of designing mostly huge installations, he is now working more with small watercolors and conducting small workshops where visitors can paint their own paintings.

His problem was that he almost exclusively strategized to fulfill certain ideals and norms that weren't really his. He was doing what was expected or what was needed without asking the question: Do I really want this?

In 2010, his therapist asked repeatedly: “What is your motive?” “Why are you doing what you are doing?”

JH answered: “I wanted to be loved.”

“Why?” the therapist asked.

“My parents got divorced when I was five years old. I went to live with my father and my new mum. I didn’t see my mother a lot, but I wanted her love. Since then, everything I have been doing has been a way of compensating for this. I wanted people to love me. I had this desire to be loved.”

His strategic thinking and behavior was not driven by joy but by the achievement of one goal—a goal JH didn’t realize what was until too late—to be loved! He was not aware that joy exists in the pursuit more than the realization. He shares this unawareness with millions of people. Several psychology studies show how people can easily become ego-involved in an activity and its outcome. It’s a fair description of what happened with JH. He became an activity himself. He became the outcome of an extent where it was difficult to tell the work from the artist. Ego involvement is when a person’s “feelings of self-worth can become hinged to their performance such that they do the activity to prove to themselves that they are good at the activity and thus worthy individuals.”<sup>6</sup>

“I was constantly out there ‘selling’ my ideas,” JH told me. This behavior can be contrasted with “task involvement in which people are more involved with the task itself rather than with its implication for their own feelings of worth.”<sup>7</sup> The process that JH now is part of is—among other things—dealing with the shift from ego involvement to task involvement.

Instead of seeing why he was doing what he was doing, he was simply seduced by seducing people and getting to know the “right” people, connecting, and smiling. “I was constantly on and accessible,” JH says. The “right” people are the people that could bring him forward or up in the artist hierarchy. They are “right” because they lead to what has already been defined as right, i.e., success. Success in the art world, like everywhere else, is a matter of money, status, and recognition. All of this can be measured in exhibition, catalogues, articles, etc. “I was counting exhibitions more than focusing on what to exhibit,”

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<sup>6</sup> Deci & Ryan (2002: 13).

<sup>7</sup> Deci & Ryan (2002: 13). This distinction (ego versus task involvement) is also related to the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is focused toward and dependent on contingent outcomes that are separable from the activity, whereas intrinsic motivation is a self-determined activity, i.e., people engage in activities freely because this is interesting and enjoyable (ibid.: 10).



JH told me. Everything that could make his performance visible to someone else was valuable. If a random person asked him what he was doing, then he would reply: “JH. Google me!”

Let us step back. What happened? What was JH doing all this time? Apparently not what he really loved—being creative. He was still creative but not creative enough. Too many compromises hindered him from flourishing creatively. Striving for recognition and love drained him. He was an artist who increasingly became a businessman doing too many things that weren’t good for him: strategizing, preoccupied about a future outcomes, behaving tactically. It was all so inartistic.

A thing like burnout doesn’t arrive overnight. It erodes, one step at the time, until one can’t get out. The only possible form of resistance left for the body is to burnout. Burnout is a survival strategy; it’s something healthy – or the first step towards recovery.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari repeated the question that Austrian psychologist Wilhelm Reich asked: Why do we love what oppresses us? One might reframe it and ask: Why did JH seduce himself for so long into believing that this form of life was good?

The problem (as also suggested by Greene) is a metaphysical problem of being and becoming. It is a conflict between the metaphysical concept of becoming, which acknowledges life as movement, change, and transformation, versus the very dominant metaphysic (at least in the Western world) of being, which elevates stability and order. This problem was reflected eight years later in *A Thousand Plateaus*, when Deleuze and Guattari asked: Why is transcendence a conceptual error?<sup>8</sup>

The error goes back to the distinction between ego involvement and task involvement, between being involved in a pure and glorious idea about oneself and being involved or committed to what happens. When one is too busy being or doing something specific, one is less busy becoming, augmenting, and growing.

The problem with both questions is that they presuppose an intellectual capacity as if a person can step outside the flow of life and evaluate it from a lucrative and untouchable position, as if the right form of being is an unchangeable and certain ideal against which everyone can be benchmarked. A

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<sup>8</sup> The two questions from *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* respectively, I am quoting from Welchman (1997: 212).

more fruitful evaluation of a life takes place within the realities of this life.

JH faced the challenge of learning how to bring his senses into the process of how (and what) he was thinking, feeling, and doing instead of relying on certain generic rules that hindered a free and unconscious flow.

For JH, the first step was a place called *Odsherred Terapihave*.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Pay attention

Before entering the garden of therapy, let us recapitulate.

Burnout is not something that can be treated by pharmacology. It is not a headache. It is something that can be difficult for other people to relate to, feel compassion for, or sympathize with since people can't see it. Burnout is not like having a visible bruise or a broken arm. "Many just told me to pull myself together, or it felt like that," JH says. Burnout is not solely considered the result of working too much, e.g., being too busy preparing one's next move instead being moved by what actually happens. No, it is more complicated.

Psychotherapist Barry Farber calls burnout "the gap between expectation and reward."<sup>10</sup> This definition might shed some new light on JH's case.

An unavoidable question pops up: Was JH expecting more from his exhibition *Sense City* at *ARoS* in 2009? It was his first major solo-exhibition in Denmark. At least one of the people close to him dragged him aside and said: "Jeppe you need to relax. You are not here." Later, she told me (others confirmed this picture in interviews) that he was "hyped and euphoric." One described him as "constantly dealing with other people's wants." Others said that "he said weird things, for instance, he held a beautiful speech at *ARoS*, but he was not there when he delivered the speech. It was just words." All of the people that I spoke stressed that the "exhibition seemed very important for him." One added that "he looked pale."

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<sup>9</sup> This is a place of recreation and rehabilitation for people who suffer from burnout and stress.

<sup>10</sup> Actually Farber's (1991) definition is a bit more complicated. He does *not* see burnout as a single phenomenon. Instead, he proposed differentiation of the syndrome based on the description of three clinical profiles: frenetic, under challenged, and worn-out. All three can be seen as having different results due to different ways of responding to stress. The frenetic type works harder until he or she is exhausted and seeks satisfaction to equal the stress or frustration caused by the invested efforts. The under challenged type is presented with insufficient motivation and must therefore cope with monotonous and unstimulating work conditions that do not provide satisfaction. The worn-out type gives up when faced with too much stress or very little gratification at work. Listening to JH's story, it is possible to see some frenetic behavior as well as being worn-out.

So, yes, his expectations were high regarding *ARoS*, perhaps too high to match what the critics thought.

The bottom-line is whether he was expecting too much? It is difficult to answer, but there is no doubt that JH wanted to become a great and important artist from the beginning. “I want to be big,” he told others (and myself) on various occasions. He worked hard to achieve it. He resembles many other burnout cases in the sense that people with more modest goals seem less prone to burnout.<sup>11</sup>

What could he do when 2009 turned into 2010?

He had just realized that he needed to go offline. The psychologist had just ordered him do so. “Cut with everything. Now.”

“I felt relieved when she told me but also scared. I didn’t know how to do nothing,” JH told me.

The first two weeks of 2010, JH spent at Odsherred Terapihaven. It was here he learned how to think, feel, and be again. He learnt how to slow down; he learnt how to organize; he learnt how to train his capabilities of attention; he learnt what it means to be present. He became aware of his surroundings. It was here that he learned what would later become a mantra for him: right here, right now. He needed a space without interruptions. Equally important, he was lucky to be in a position where he could do what he needed to do: take the time off work to focus solely on himself. His business was going well. He was lucky to be in a situation where his wife was already taking care of the house and the two kids. His wife was seeing the man she loved falling apart and worrying about what might happen while trying to keep everything together.

In Terapihaven, he met other people like him, other people who were suffering from stress, burnout, and angst. “I realized that I was not alone. All the people there were feeling awful, just like me,” he told me. “It was good for me.” If Greene was right, then the memory of suffering is “the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the whole human condition.”

“I learned how to structure my day. Everything was scheduled. I learned how to be attentive. I would walk around in the garden, look at trees, and follow the branches. I would look at each one of those. All the way from the bottom to the top of the tree and back again. I would listen to the wind. I would sit on a bench and look. Then I would sleep a lot. Taking naps during the day. I still do

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Farber (1991) and Kottler (2003).

that.”

A typical day was described as follows. “I would get up at nine. Then the therapist would give me some awareness exercises. I would have some tea. Perhaps talk with some of the others. Talk with the therapist who worked there. It helped a lot. I would go for a walk and play a puzzle. The puzzle I was doing was the ones for three-year-old kids. I would relax. I began to do simple watercolors, small statements of how I felt. I remember getting tired so easily. I was afraid of [feeling] angst again when I felt any kind of pressure.”<sup>12</sup>

“In that period, I walked a lot. When I got home to Denmark, I continued to walk. I basically followed the schedule that [Terapihaven] did. I needed new structures in my life. Then, after all the walking in heavy snow, I remember, I began to stretch when I got home, because I had sore muscles. It was actually for this reason I began with yoga and Buddhism . . . . Yoga can change your life. It is so crazy. I really believe that.”

Back in Denmark, he underwent psychotherapy. At one point, he was doing five hours a week. “He became obsessed with psychotherapy,” one tells me. The main question that he focused on here was: “Why?” “Why do you do what you do?” And, as already mentioned, the answer was to be loved.

Placing burnout in the gap between expectation and rewards might be too simple to really capture a term like love. For example, is one loved in an appropriate way according to one’s effort? Ask any parent, and then they know that to love someone is not a mathematical equation that needs to be balanced. Like the psychologist Eric Fromm once said: “Immature love says: *‘I love you because I need you’*. ‘Mature love says: *I need you because I love you.*’”<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, love put even more pressure on his expectations because JH wanted to become a big artist in order to be loved, recognized and, in some way, be compensated for something he lacked. However, could the galleries, the art critics, the collectors, and the visitors to his exhibitions love him in a way that really would make him feel loved? No. If “love” is the right word, then these people loved his work for various reasons, such as the questions it raised, the issues it debated, the visions it presented, the relationships it created, the statues it created as pieces of JH, etc. For some, this love affair might not be anything

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<sup>12</sup> Later, JH exhibited these personal notes and drawings as a first step toward integrating himself more with his work. He became more aware of exposing himself as a way of making his art more powerful.

<sup>13</sup> Fromm (2006: 38).

other than a profitable return on investment; after all, art is—like everything else—a part of the global financial market. The point is that love is not just a feeling among others; it is not even just a passion like fear, anger, or hate. It is the principle that makes life worth living and gives life purpose and meaning. With this understanding of love, being a commercial success is worth nothing.

During the first year of his recovery, he learned how to pay attention, to become aware. He literally learned the benefits of walking away from illness toward something better, something more energetic. His sore legs led him straight into the arms of the Buddha. It was also this discovery, which later led him to say: “I have stopped with psychotherapy. I have spent too much time in the past. I need to be present.” This appeared to be a healthy decision for him.

He was beginning to live closer to his thoughts. He was minimizing the artificial gap between body and mind. “Half an hour of yoga can clear my mind. I feel so good afterwards,” he told me several times. His was getting closer to living a life in balance. This definition resembles most philosophies definition of a life worth living: a harmonic life in balance, i.e., a life where love is the guiding principle.

Still, it does not stop here. It is the next question that makes wise men and women quarrel: How does one find balance? The quarrel, in some sense, is due to the two approaches that I already mentioned: pure ideals versus changeable practice and a transcendent code of morality versus pure immanence. Take, for example, the question: Can life be judged from outside? Some say yes, because they will refer to something transcendent, e.g., God. Here the balance is something stable. Others say no, because they claim we are always in life. Instead of referring to an ultimate referent in order to find meaning, one actually has to create meaning. Here balance is needed. Balance, however, is not something stable. Rather, one is always *balancing* because of life’s movements of becoming.

How does one do that? It starts with allowing oneself to become one with all the potentialities with which a life is filled, being attentive toward that which is in the midst of becoming, and actualizing the being of becoming. Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return achieves that by asking: “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?”<sup>14</sup> Deleuze reformulates it as “whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche (1974: 274).

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze (2002: 68); see also Deleuze (1994: 7).

This ethical norm stresses how a force is “what can,” that is, a force can do something or affect someone, whereas the will to power is “what will.” In other words, do what you *will*, but only insofar as you *can* at this specific moment. “The eternal return teaches that becoming-reactive has no being,” Deleuze writes: “The man of *ressentiment* does not know how to and does not want to love, but want to be loved.”<sup>16</sup>

Anger or frustration is connected with such feeling because, due to one’s lack of attention and awareness, one doesn’t notice what one can. Instead, one (falsely) assumes that freedom is to do what one will, rather than to will what one can. The problem, to put it simply, is that JH did not pay sufficient attention to what he also *could*. He was just following the rules of the game, which he did so well that it was comfortable easy to neglect what it did to him.

JH told me in Berlin 2013: “Now, I am in a phase where I need to accept. Accept what I can do, what I will do, and what I can’t or won’t do.”

This is the last phase of the process, but it is a phase that will never finish. What one can do and would like to do constantly changes due to one’s growth as a human being. In other words, one constantly needs to accept and challenge the relationship between can and will.

## 6. Adding perspective

Perhaps it is time to step aside to add some context regarding the term “burnout.” It is a psychological term that refers to long-term exhaustion that leads to a lack of interest in what normally matters, e.g., work. One becomes drained.

Many see it as intimately related to stress. Stress is often described as the correlation between “a *stressor* [which] is anything in the outside world that knocks you out of homeostatic balance, and the *stress-response* [which] is what your body does to establish homeostasis.”<sup>17</sup> The word “homeostasis” refers to the process that keeps the body in balance despite outside changes. A homeostatic balance is equivalent to the body’s optimal balance regarding level of oxygen, level of acid, level of temperature, etc. It is a crucial term, but not a term without problems. For example, the distinction between the body’s internal environment and external conditions is debatable. Some theorists draw a

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<sup>16</sup> Deleuze (2002: 69 & 188).

<sup>17</sup> Sopolsky (2004: 6).

distinction between the inside versus outside in a way that parallels the subject versus object debate or the outdated mind and body dualism. The body thinks as it folds or mixes with the world. The body encounters the world. The life is the mind (or constitutes the mind) due to the forces in life that makes us think. “Thinking depends on forces which take hold of thought,” Deleuze writes. “We are awaiting the forces capable of making thought something active, absolute active, the power capable of making it an affirmation.”<sup>18</sup>

The main issue is related to metaphysics, i.e., between being and becoming. This also affects the idea of stressor as something outside, at least to the degree that it is possible to define what caused something to appear to be a stressor. Take, for example, the norms and ideals that many live by. Are these initiated by society, by one’s disposition, or a mix of the two? To make it even more concrete: the past can stress, so can the present, and the future. In spite of different psychological and philosophical theories, the point of having a stress-response is to establish a balance. Such balance is never static or the same for all human beings. As Aristotle wrote in *Ethics*, the professional athlete needs to eat more than a writer who sits down most of the day, in order to obtain a good digestive balance.

The challenge with stressors is that if they go on for too long, that they can make a person sick. It’s fun to be on the rollercoaster for a certain amount of time, but if one exceeds that, the result is stress. Yet, stress is not just a time issue; it is also related to one’s energy resources, which determines if there is a balance between one’s effort and reward. Levels of intensity also play a role. For instance, it might not be that people are working longer hours today than 50 years ago, but work might have become more intense in the sense that it is always there, potentially at least.

What is interesting, however, is that when one burns out it is not because the stress-response runs out. Rather, that the “stress-response can become more damaging than the stressor itself, especially when the stress is purely psychological.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, this illustrates the problem of living every day as an emergency, as if one’s whole career or life was at stake, or as a final deadline.

For JH, every day was a deadline. He was always attending an opening, meeting a collector, doing an interview, sending out material in order to do the

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<sup>18</sup> Deleuze (2002: 108).

<sup>19</sup> Sopolsky (2004: 13).

before mentioned, etc. He was constantly mobilizing energy regardless the activity. “I couldn’t say no,” he admits. Thus, he used up his store of energy. He was never going to store energy for a rainy day. So, if projects didn’t receive the desired feedback, if his body began to ache, he had already used up all of his resources to fight back because he was busy following the rules of the game. He would just work more (i.e. frenetic).

“I was doing many things that didn’t really matter. The funniest thing is now, when I say ‘no,’ then people get more interested in my art and not in me,” he told me. One of JH’s closest friends told me “it was very difficult for him to say no. ‘No’ was a new word. He thought that ‘if I am friendly to all, all will love me.’” But they didn’t love *him*.

In 1997, Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter published *The Truth About Burnout*. They wrote that “people are emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausted. The daily demand of the job, the family, and everything in between erode their energy and enthusiasm” (p. 1).

Being an artist is no less a job than being a business consultant and no more of a vocation than being a business consultant. Still, burnout says more about the conditions of the job than it does about the individuals suffering from burnout. The situation in which people are placed affects them because of values, norms, and ideals. So, if people work in a strategic and competitive culture, this atmosphere affects them.<sup>20</sup>

How does no one see this until it is too late? The answer is that burnout erodes; it is a gradual process. Often it is a process in which the victim can’t see the change because it happens so slowly. Several people with whom I have spoken mention how they tried to address “certain issues” with JH. “It just passed right through him.” JH’s case-story is a textbook example.

The majority of cases start from a position of strength and success rather than one of weakness. Maslach and Leiter talk about engaging in one’s life. The two psychologists say that engagement is the cure for burnout. Engagement is characterized by energy, involvement, and efficacy, which is the opposite of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. The solution that they propose in order to enhance energy, involvement, and efficacy is an on-going process. It begins when it ends, i.e., when the person burns out. Then, it moves from the person to a group project by involving family, friends and, in JH’s case, his

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<sup>20</sup> This is a well-known observation within social psychology.



workforce. From there, it connects to the culture or organization (one can apply “organization” to the art-scene). This leads to the process of accepting, i.e., the acceptance that the outcome of this change causes mismatches and makes conflicts unavoidable. The outcome itself is a process.<sup>21</sup>

Each step in the process (which aren’t really steps but variations of intensity) is trying to bring the individual back to life. Gradually, it looks at how potential change in the person’s life will affect the three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. The aim is to move toward more engagement. It is processes of balance, of getting to know what one is capable of and taking better care of oneself, for instance, by stretching in a useful way. Some of the phases are more critical in the sense that the person is aware of potential and actual mismatches between workload and pressure, feelings, control, recognition, sense of community (are we together), fairness, respect, and meaningful or purposiveness.

The challenge is to create a balance or harmony between the individual and what he or she is doing. For instance, JH is hardly ever in his studio, doesn’t attend all of his openings, and tells collectors to wait before he comes to visit them. The point is to change the culture or environment where he spends most of his time, i.e., with his work and family, as well as the expectations of the people working with him, e.g., his employees, the galleries, the collectors, etc. Before he was doing something that he couldn’t handle. This mismatch was caused by himself, i.e., his desire to be loved more than focusing on being loved for who he is and by whom, and also by the environment, culture, or structure under which he worked.

The guiding questions are:<sup>22</sup> Does this feeling increase our power to act or not? Does this feeling help us to come into full possession of that power to act, to create?

Happiness might serve as a concept that can help to answer these questions.

## **7. Happiness**

It is customary to distinguish between two types of “happiness.” For example, “to describe someone as happy is to make a value judgment; it is to say that that

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<sup>21</sup> Maslach & Leiter (1997: 80).

<sup>22</sup> The questions are taken from Deleuze (1997: 269).

person has a *good* life, a *valuable* life, a life *worth* living.”<sup>23</sup> In *Ethics*, Aristotle said that a happy life is the kind of life that parents want for their children. It’s obvious that not all parents want their children to succeed in life the same way, but they all want their kids to succeed or live a life worth living.

This form of happiness is often categorized as philosophical.<sup>24</sup>

The other way of understanding the term “happiness” refers to a psychological state that defines “happiness as the frequent experience of positive emotions” (or roughly the opposite of depression).<sup>25</sup> From this point of view, to describe someone as happy is not to make a value judgment about that person or about that person’s life in general. Using the term “happiness” in this psychological state is value-neutral. As the saying goes: Whatever makes you happy.

The psychological understanding of happiness amounts to “feeling good.” Still, such feeling is not free. As a Buddhist monk writes: “Yet, happiness does not come simply because we wish to, or because we pray for it. It is not a gift that chance bestows upon us and a reversal of fortune takes back. Happiness is a skill that requires effort and time.”<sup>26</sup>

Leaving the philosophical understanding aside, happiness is something we experience; e.g., there are certain things that make one feel like being happy.

As a preparation for his exhibition in Stockholm 2013, JH asked people: “What is happiness? What color is happiness? This line of research is part of the psychological understanding of happiness. He asked how people experience happiness. Similarly, the answers he received were: “riding a bike,” “smelling a flower,” “seeing my kids sleep,” “walking barefoot on the beach,” etc. All in all, it was a collection of experiences that people experienced as positive, perhaps not as happiness, but rather as enjoyable feelings.

The psychological understanding of happiness seems to miss a spiritual or philosophical approach. It’s as if the weather plays a role as one’s ability to think and act under certain circumstances, e.g., the question becomes whether one is

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<sup>23</sup> Fink (2013: 137).

<sup>24</sup> Still, one should be careful not to turn happiness into a norm; rather it is a way of evaluating a life while it is lived. Other concepts can serve in a similar way, e.g. whether one’s life is “interesting” or “passionate” as Kierkegaard (1983) suggested. Last, Baumeister *et al.* (forthcoming) have shown how happiness without meaning “characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life.” A meaningful life is more generous, where happiness can be seen as a side-effect hereof.

<sup>25</sup> Bao & Lyubomirsky (2013: 120).

<sup>26</sup> Richard (2013: 345). Also, see Fink (2013), who relates the psychological understanding to the Buddhist, however, this appears to neglect the hard work that happiness requires.

able to make the picnic enjoyable even if it rains.

Instead of viewing the two approaches separately, I think it is fruitful to mix the philosophical approach with the psychological as Camus did when stating: “Judging whether life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”<sup>27</sup>

The claim that Camus makes is that any organism that doesn’t kill itself must be living a life worth living. Next, one might ask: Can life flourish more? Is it possible to enhance the frequency of happy moments and enjoy life more even though it is filled with routines and boring assignments?

The importance of being alive is to feel alive. Suffering from burnout is actually to feel the opposite: indifference, apathy, nothing. My claim is—if we take Camus seriously—that being alive is always joyous; otherwise, we would kill ourselves. Life might be nauseating (notice the balance metaphor), meaningless, or absurd, but at least these emotions make us aware that we are alive. In that sense, I believe, there is a philosophical and psychological overlap. For example, becoming more alive is related to the approach taken, i.e., how well one allows oneself to be affected in order to create new meaning. This openness makes one aware of one’s capability of actualizing what is in the midst of becoming. An on-going evaluation is measured by feelings, i.e., when one becomes conscious of positive or negative emotions, which—if we relate it to Nietzsche—is a matter of having the power to act, to make sense. It is the eternal return, because one affirms the livable in life and passes it on. It is a generous ethic, which preserves the useful formation of experiences.

So, even the happy man might ask about happiness once in a while. A life worth living is meaningful because if one is able to actualize what is becoming, for instance, by creating new meaning or values.

## **9. Conclusion**

Which life is worth living? A meaningful life that flourishes, i.e., a life that often awakes feelings of being happy, is worth living. How might this be accomplished? Using feeling as an immanent reminder of how free one is to act, particularly in way that makes one’s life meaningful. This requires paying careful attention to what is in the midst of becoming and acknowledging what

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<sup>27</sup> Camus (2005: 1).

might be possible, what other relationships might emerge, what could become, etc.

It seems that the hegemonic ideals and norms of a modern capitalistic society make it difficult for people to have both the courage and the imagination to live a different and more joyful life. There is a constant almost normative pressure to perform according to an ideal. The story of JH is an example of how one finds courage and imagination out of necessity. Living is about having the courage to explore what one can become, using one's will to facilitate this capacity the best possible way. Accepting this is the first step toward a life where one is free to make room for love and free to let love become the guiding principle of meaning, of what makes sense.

There is no single universal truth regarding how one should live life. People would never philosophize, experiment, and expose themselves if they knew all the answers beforehand. Perhaps, that is why philosophy teaches us to question what is.

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