Learning to Feel Stress
by Robert Kugelmann

I remember when I first used the word "stress" to name what I was feeling. Somehow, I caught on that what I was feeling had a particular name, and it was not anxiety, depression, worry, inadequacy, etc. It was stress. When I said to others that I was under stress, they expressed acknowledgement. It seemed that they too were under stress. It was obvious that we were experiencing the same thing. Stress has not always been obvious. There was a time when people did not use the word "stress" in the ways we use it. People faced all the trials and tribulations of their lives, all the agonies, all the sufferings, and the challenges of existence. But not "stress." Stress has a history.

To enter this strange word, I will ask of "stress" the questions Ludwig Wittgenstein raised about pain: "how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word 'pain' for example."[1] With pain, the answer seems straightforward: "A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior."[2] How does a human being learn the meanings of "stress"?

Learning to use the word "stress" is more difficult than "pain" since the word is vague, at best. Any situation that demands change can be stressful. It stresses me out if my car won't start, if I get sick, if I lose my job, if my party loses the election, if I realize how big the cosmos is. Here is

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 244.

2 Wittgenstein, 244.

an example. Someone tells me: I was bringing dinner to our daughter and her family, because she had just given birth. I was in the express lane of the freeway to avoid a backup in the regular lanes that was miles long. Then, the express lane stopped too. An accident ahead. The minutes crept by, and there was nothing I could do nothing to escape from the situation. Surrounded by cars and trucks, with no exit in sight. Getting later and later. Who knows how long it will take to clear up. Was anyone hurt or killed in the accident? It was stressful.

Appropriately for this example, "the appearance of stress in modern lives thus appears to be one of the consequences of living in the fast lane."[3] Living in the fast lane does not mean you are going anywhere! What is the fast lane and how does one live there? The literal meaning of "fast lane," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: "A lane of a dual carriageway, motorway, highway, etc., typically positioned adjacent to the central reservation and intended for vehicles which are overtaking or travelling at faster speeds than the rest of the traffic." Metaphorically, it means "a lifestyle which is fast-paced, glamorous, hectic, or highly pressured, esp. one considered excessive or reckless."[4] The person who told me this story did admit to feeling sorry for the people stuck in the slow lanes, until the fast lane screeched to a stop.

What can this instance tell us about stress? About the experience of stress? First, the "world" of stress is uninviting. Sitting in a car stuck in traffic, there is nowhere to go. You can't abandon your car (except in extreme circumstances). There is nobody about, outside. Everyone around you is also stuck. People surround you, and all of whom are isolated, except for the fact that most of them have cell phones

3   Mark Jackson, *The Age of Stress: Science and the Search for Stability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

4   "Fast lane." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed March 1, 2023: https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/88252294?redirectedFrom=fast+lane#eid 22 February 2023.

and can make calls to explain a delay, etc. You are not where you want to be, and you would never voluntarily stop in the fast lane and have a picnic. You should be moving fast to your destination. Your legs are useless, in the sense that you can't leave your car and jog to where you want to be. There is a helplessness to the situation, and you feel it bodily: tense, angry, frustrated, anxious. This is no place to be.

How do I learn to say, in such a situation, that I am "stressed," "stressed out," or "under stress"? There are probably innumerable answers to this question. Here is one possibility, assuming I am ignorant of the word: I speak with someone who tells me that they are dealing with something unpleasant. Anything. The person says that this situation causes them "stress." I reply that I don't know what that word means. Let me assume that my interlocutor doesn't look at me with disdain, and she proceeds to tell me the basic story. I might hear something like this: It's like the fight or flight response, which works well for brief emergencies, but with stress, it endures too long. There are serious neurological, biochemical, and psychological consequences to this prolonged response. It can lead to illness, to depression, to PTSD even. Of course, instead of someone telling me, I may learn this account from a television program or even an online post. We learn to view ourselves through this explanation. And that is just the beginning, as this account leads us, perhaps, to try to do something to cope with stress. Perhaps we can even learn some stress management techniques. In the end, stress comes to be an important way we understand our very existence.

Stress "is both an experience and a discourse,"[5] a view supported by Mark Jackson who argued that stress "is both a condition and a metaphor."[6] These formulations indicate that

5   Robert Kugelmann, *Stress: The Nature and History of Engineered Grief* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 3.

6   Jackson, 2.

stress, real enough for all of us, is also a historically contingent phenomenon. What we experience was un-experienceable in times past (at least before sometime in the nineteenth century). There is nothing radical in such a contention. Someone from 1650 could not have experienced life in the fast lane and could have felt jetlag either. Just as jetlag is contingent upon long-distance air travel, so stress is contingent upon living in our industrialized and technologically complex society.

For Jackson, "we need to acknowledge the manner in which our obsessions with the relationship between stress and disease are the product of broader historical concerns about the preservation of personal and political, as well as physiological, stability."[7] By stability, Jackson meant a balance, on both the biological and the social level, in the face of rapid change, which destabilized existing structures:

> Scientific knowledge has unsettled assumptions about the stability and regularity of nature. … Uncertainty and instability are not confined to the material world, but also color perception, experience, and meaning. Configured by the principles and processes of individualism, secularization, and religious skepticism, even time, memory, and identity have become unreliable.[8]

Change is a constant, but Jackson notes that accelerating change, felt as stress, characterizes "our time," from the mid-nineteenth century, finding significant examples of the use of "stress" earlier than I had. However, the destabilizing that stress denotes is not simply negative. Stress "also embodied the exhilaration and achievement of perilous lives."[9] Instability is here to stay: "The modern delusion or

7   Jackson, 2.

8   Jackson, 265.

9   Jackson, 267.

myth may not be the conviction that we are unstable and stressed, but the belief that we can do anything about it."[10]

Stress Descriptive and Prescriptive

When we speak of stress, we typically do so in terms of describing circumstances of life, usually in negative terms. In more detailed discussion, the concerns are what stress causes (illness, negative emotions) and what causes stress. In terms of how we use "stress," we can look at how it orients us in a situation and how "stress" directs attention to particular beliefs and actions and not to others. Above all, stress has an ideological structure: "In the ideological background of stress lies the assumption of an essentially asocial atomistic individual."[11] Moreover, stress "naturalizes the social world."[12] Because it naturalizes the social, we can perceive stress as inevitable, one of the facts of life. At the same time, we can use stress to criticize the social. I can complain that the new work conditions—staff and budget cuts mean I have more work—are needlessly causing me to stress out. The critique, of course, is in terms of "stress." It is not a value-free critique. "Stress" orients us to the world in particular ways.

Stress is a particular discourse, a collection of "language games," that co-constitute or construct experience, action, our selves (especially the body), and the world, along set pathways. Let's say that stress is a script that is socially available to give form to experience. Let me give two examples. The first one occurs in a scientific study of stress and the immune system:

> One model states that *stress* occurs when *demands tax* or *exceed* available *resources* … Another conceptualizes

10   Jackson, 269.

11   Kugelmann, 21-22.

12   Kugelmann, 22. See Allan Young, "The Discourse on Stress and the Reproduction of Conventional Knowledge," *Social Science and Medicine*, 14 (1980): 133-46.

stress as any resource *loss*, whether or not it is excessive
… It is important for well-being to *minimize losses* in re-
sources such as social integration that are strongly posi-
tively associated with human *health*. Therefore, when re-
sources are *threatened*, it could be *adaptive* for organisms
to direct *energy* away from the *immune system* and toward
protecting or restoring their resources—that is, resolving
the stress. Where might such energy go? One possibility
is that *resource protection* involves *physical activity* (e.g.,
fighting), so the muscles would need additional glucose.
However, in *modern life*, humans are more likely to use
mental and motivational mechanisms such as *planning*
and persistence to *cope* with *stressors*; such strategies also
require glucose, but by *the brain rather than the muscles*.[13]

This passage is rich with the discursive terms and arguments
that characterize the stress script. We can link the terms togeth-
er as a string of associations: stress-demands-tax-exceed-re-
sources-minimize-losses-health-threatened-adaptive-ener-
gy-immune system-protecting-restoring-fighting [fight or flight
alluded to]-modern life-mental and motivational mecha-
nisms-planning-cope-stressors-brain rather than muscles.
    Stress entails "demands" that consume "resources;"
indeed, stress may be a "resource loss." In this case, stress
pulls energy from the immune system to other systems of
the organism, such as the muscular system. But wait! That
is largely an archaic response, since threats to our resourc-
es typically do not benefit from the "fight or flight" response
so useful to our primitive ancestors. The uselessness of fight
or flight in the face of stress is the representation of the "ar-
chaic body." Our bodies are archaic, designed to face physi-
cal violence. However, in the world of stress, direct conflicts

13   Suzanne C. Segerstrom, "Stress, Energy, and Immunity: An Ecological View." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16 no. 6 (2007): 327-28; italics added.

are rare. We divert energy from the immune system to mobilize "mental and motivational mechanisms" for purposes of "coping." Use of the mind means use of glucose in the brain. Here is yet another directive of stress: it especially affects "brain workers," a truism since the nineteenth century. In Jackson's terms, here is an example of the response to stress in terms of stability. In other terms, "stress occurs when a situation evokes a response of energy production for the purposes of maintaining an individual's integrity."[14]

Here is another account, drawn from a self-help website, *Psychology Today*:

> *Stress* generally refers to two things: the psychological perception of *pressure*, on the one hand, and the body's response to it, on the other, which involves *multiple systems, from metabolism to muscles* to memory.
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> Some stress is necessary for all *living systems*; it is the means by which they encounter and respond to the *challenges* and *uncertainties* of existence. The perception of danger sets off an *automatic response system, known as the fight-or-flight response*, that, activated through *hormonal* signals, prepares an animal to meet a threat or to flee from it. A stressful event—whether it's the sudden appearance of a snake on the path or the fear of losing your job when the boss yells—triggers a cascade of hormones, including *adrenaline and cortisol*, that surge through the body.
>
> These hormones increase heartbeat and the circulation of blood to support quick action, mobilize fat and sugar for immediate energy, focus attention to track the danger, *prepare muscles for movement*, and more.

14   Kugelmann, 23

But this lifesaving response was meant to solve *short-term*, life-threatening problems, not *extended difficulties such as daily traffic jams* or marital problems—a few of the many challenges that can hijack the stress response today.

Many people today feel they perpetually struggle with stress and anxiety. Society's obsession with *productivity*, the steady stream of digital *information* we consume, increasingly sedentary lifestyles, and *feelings of overwhelm* may contribute to the stress that so many are feeling. …

Plan and organize your time, reflect on your values and strengths, and practice *relaxation* techniques such as deep breathing. Additionally, reframe negative thoughts about a situation to neutral or *positive thoughts*.[15]

In this passage, the associations are as follows: stress-living systems-challenges-uncertainties-fight-or-flight-hormonal-adrenaline and cortisol-prepare muscles for movement-extended difficulties-daily traffic jams-productivity-information-feelings of overwhelm-plan-relaxation-positive thoughts. There is overlap in the two chains of associations, although in the second, there is more emphasis on "systems," "productivity," and "relaxation."

These associations are not in any particular order. They are like Legos; one can arrange them into any account of stress in various sequences. However, these terms and others like them tend to cluster in higher order discourse sequences: there is energy, trauma, control, loss, and grief. Here are some examples.

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15   "Stress," *Psychology Today*, accessed March 14, 2023, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/stress. Italics added.

Energy

Stress, as ordinarily portrayed, is a bodily and mental response to demands. That response entails the consumption of energy. We feel energy in the efforts we make and in the fatigue that follows. It is important to note that we feel the sensations as energy consumption. That is, they are felt abstractions, felt as "energy," not as sensations used to be felt, each having its own *quale*. Consumption of energy, demands placed on our "systems," and fatigue lead to the ever-present risk of disease, especially chronic diseases, which are the ones most associated with stress. Disease is a breakdown, a threat to atomistic individuality, an exceeding of adaptive measures.

As important as "energy" is for the world of stress, even more important are "patterns of energy—that is, information."[16] Stress provides us with information, which we feel in terms of fatigue and other symptoms of instability. This aspect of stress discourse ties us into "risk management" whereby we analyze our situation in terms of the various demands that place our lives and health at risk.[17] We understand risks in terms of probability. And within the stress-structure, one way to cope is to seek out information. Information gives us know-how. In one sense, information is not knowledge, since information does not belong to experience that would entail self-understanding or contemplation. Information comes in bite-size chunks, which may lead to better coping with stress.

Trauma

Since the nineteenth century, stress and trauma have coincided. At first, it was "shock" that caused stress and disease. Then there was "railway spine" and "shell shock," and most of

16   Kugelmann, 25.

17   Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity, trans. M. Ritter (London: Sage, 1992).*

all neurasthenia, which paired together stress (or its predecessors) and trauma. As conventionally understood, trauma is an event that transgresses the structures of our experiences and lives. A trauma is thus meaningless. Traumatic events are stressful, as the demands of the event disrupt our homeostatic systems. I suggest that the ubiquitous presence of trauma, and the ways that traumas of the past shape our lives today, our depressions and anxieties, occur because, under stress, we cannot subsist, in the way that Illich used the term, borrowed from a Scholastic conception of the human being.[18] To subsist is to be independent and autonomous in dependence.

As Levinas described it: "living from … delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness, which is the original pattern of all independence."[19] Without explicitly invoking "stress," Levinas differentiated it from what he called "enjoyment": "The contents from which life lives are not always indispensable to it for the maintenance of life, as means or as the fuel …necessary for the 'functioning' of existence. … Nourishment, as the means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment."[20] Enjoyment is the appropriation of what is other, a making of ourselves. Under stress, we do not joyfully make ourselves, but instead we strive for stability,[21] we seek to balance our various systems, biological (such as the immune system and the nervous system), the psychological (coping in its various forms), and the social (support groups). This balancing act takes place within the mandates of the economy.

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18   Ivan Illich, "Subsistence," in *Powers that Make Us Human: The Foundations of Medical Ethics*, ed. Kenneth Vaux (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

19   Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 110.

20   Levinas, 111.

21   Jackson, 11-4.

In our technological society, we are all in "intensive care," all on "life-support." How would I survive if not for the economic and technological systems that support our living (at least those of us who have the wherewithal to be so dependent on them). "One's living is not sustained from within, but … from without."[22] Events tend to traumatize us because we have become ungrounded from the symbolic structures of culture, so that we have fewer ways of comprehending what is happening. The stress-discourse is one framework we can use, but that plays into trauma because of its abstract form.

Control

Taking control of one's life is a mandate built into stress discourse. It contrasts with "being a victim," also prominent in stressful situations. While "control" of one's life may be largely an illusion, the pursuit of control gives us the sense of coping well and making progress against the demands and loads we face.

Three metaphors recur in the stress discourse when it comes to control: "engineering, administration, and the military" metaphors.[23] Stress entails an engineering approach to living: How much can I handle? Am I at the breaking point? What kinds of supports do I need? In the nineteenth century, the already existing word, "stress" acquired a precise engineering definition, and later, that engineering sense informed biological and psychological conceptions of stress. We enter into an engineering mentality when we are concerned with "strength, resilience, … hardiness, [and] flexibility."[24] Breaking points beyond flexibility belong here, and we tend to be aware that we all have our limits of coping and meeting demands and loads.

Military metaphors abound, particularly in the work

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22   Kugelmann, 27.

23   Kugelmann, 28.

24   Kugelmann, 29.

of Hans Selye, the physiologist who investigated stress in the laboratory and who helped to popularize stress. He described a "General Adaptation Syndrome" "in terms of attack, defense, coexistence, resistance, exhaustion, defeat."[25] When we "cope" with stress, we often find ourselves in combat: "The earliest usage of *cope* meant 'to strike; to come to blows, encounter, join battle, … meet in the shock of battle or tournament."[26] That literal usage is obsolete, but to "cope *with*," meaning "to contend with, face, encounter (dangers, difficulties, etc.). Often implying "successful encounter" is current, even if this definition is narrower than other uses of "cope."[27]

Here is an example: In "Stressing About Stress" we learn about "combating stressors in a stressful time." The information piece continues: "Whatever the type of stress one experiences, recognizing, acknowledging, and ultimately combating it is crucial in order to maintain one's mental health and in some cases even physical well-being. Here are some practical things we can do to fight, or at least relieve stress." Stress "is a huge factor that threatens our mental well-being.[28] Some tips for combatting stress are addressed. In these military depictions of stress, we face a hostile world that threatens to cause havoc.

Administrative metaphors "proliferate in scientific literature" (Kugelmann, 1992, p. 29). The depiction of stress in terms of instrumental reason and efficiency make stress a manageable problem. Stevan E. Hobfoll (1989) developed a "conservation of resources" theory of stress. With stress, there is "the threat of a net loss of resources" or "a lack of resource gain following the

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25   Kugelmann, 30.

26   "Cope," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed March 14, 2023, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/41131?rskey=XgawuS&result=6&isAdvanced=false#eid

27   "Cope."

28   "Stressing about Stress," *The <u>Real</u> Yellow Pages: Norman \ Moore area* (Therealyellowpages.com, 2022), n.p.

investment of resources," etc.[29] These administrative or managerial metaphors imply that instrumental rationality is the way to counter stress. We can see how much of this managerial approach occurs in the quotation from Segerstrom, cited earlier.

These three types of metaphors—engineering, military, and managerial—conspire together to present stress as a danger to an existing order of things. The discourse of stress entices an instrumental approach to difficulties in living. It objectifies experience, and the subject retreats from the world to gain mastery over threats to resources.

Loss

The loss of a job, of a relationship, of good health are common stresses. A sense of loss pervades the world of stress. Beyond the everyday losses that we encounter, however, is a real sense that the "modern world" in which we live is incompatible with the kind of being that we are. Often, this incompatibility appears in evolutionary terms: the changes in living in the modern world have outstripped our ability to adapt to them. This meaning of loss comes through the endocrinological accounts of stress. Walter B. Cannon's "fight or flight" reflex plays a leading role in this account. Here is an account from a National Institute of Health web site. The plot of this description is that we are not living in conditions in which we are at home:

> A *threat* to your life or safety triggers a *primal physical response* from the body, leaving you breathless, heart pounding, and mind racing. From deep within your brain, a chemical signal speeds *stress hormones* through the bloodstream, *priming your body to be alert and ready to escape danger*. Concentration becomes more focused, reaction time faster, and strength and agility increase.

29   Stevan E. Hobfoll, "*Conservation of Resources. A New Attempt at Conceptualizing Stress,*" *American Psychologist, 44, no. 3, (1989): 516.*

> When the stressful situation ends, hormonal signals switch off the stress response and *the body returns to normal.*
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> But in our *modern society*, stress doesn't always let up. Many of us now harbor anxiety and worry about daily events and relationships. Stress hormones continue to wash through the system in high levels, never leaving the blood and tissues. And so, *the stress response that once gave ancient people the speed and endurance to escape life-threatening dangers runs constantly in many modern people and never shuts down.*[30]

We come to suffer especially chronic diseases because we are living in an "unnatural" world. In other words, our bodies are archaic, ill-designed for our rapidly-changing technological society. This, then, is "stress."

Our Archaic Bodies

Because we cannot escape from our primitive organism, we need to manage this archaic body in order to prevent our incompatibility with modernity to lead us to disease and death. To deal with stress requires a disciplining of the flesh: diet, exercise—exercise machines are wonderful symbols of how we harness ourselves to high-tech systems to combat and cope with stress—learning relaxation and mindfulness in order counter the anxiety of modernity, and finally, subscribing to stress management.

The Exile

The incompatibility of our bodies and modern living is one trope in the discourse of stress, repeated endlessly. It is largely an evolutionary perspective: change happens faster

30 "Stress System Malfunction Could Lead to Serious, Life Threatening Disease", *Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development*, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.nichd.nih.gov/newsroom/releases/stress.

than our bodily systems can adapt. There is a second account of stressfulness of contemporary life: in the modern world, the myths and traditions that made life meaningful no longer speak to us, even in the midst of terrible events—earthquakes, war, epidemics, and other "acts of God," as we say. Anton Antonovsky, a sociologist, has captured what is going on: We have lost a "sense of coherence" in our lives: a sense of coherence "is a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected."[31] "Hardships become stressful only when they lack meaningful context."[32] Although Antonovsky did not think that the modern world has lost a sense of coherence, except in "the extremes of totalitarian regimes or societies of 'normless libertarianism,'"[33] the motif of the exile asserts that a sense of coherence is eroding. As an example of our being exiles in this modern world—again, an assertion that somehow we do not "fit" into this new world and so experience "stress"—comes from a landmark book in the stress literature, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart*:

> In times past, belief in the protective presence of a powerful God (or group of gods) allowed man to feel that he was being singled out and protected as a unique personage. Trust and pride in his particular group of fellow men, living and dead, gave him a feeling of emotional unity with them. These forces of religion and … patriotism, supported by myth and ritual, have been

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31 Anton Antonovsky, *Health, Stress and Coping (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1979), 125.*

32 Kugelmann, 38.

33 Antonovsky, 38.

waning relentlessly even as the forces making for au-
tomaton-man have been waxing.[34]

Exiles from the shelters of religion and patriotism can
become Type A individuals, objectifying others, making enor-
mous efforts to be "productive," and this behavior seems all
too often to lead to heart disease in this narrative. Moreover,
"it is not simply the loss of tradition and community that pro-
duces stress; it is their replacement with relationships without
known … norms and rules."[35] As Joshua Meyrowitz wrote, we
have lost a sense of place in modernity.[36] Some of this loss
is liberating. Compared to earlier times, women no longer
"know their place," and the same is true of ethnic minorities.
"Their place" was under the heel of oppression. At the same
time, loss of a sense of place means that we do not know where
we are. That is stress. Certainties decay. Stress "originates in
the ambivalence between the isolation and loneliness of the
loss of tradition and the heady liberation that views myth as a
set of barriers to be replaced by a 'dazzling array of choices.'"[37]

We now live in a "post-truth" society, defined as "re-
lating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts
are less influential in shaping political debate or public opin-
ion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[38] Ours is a
time where fake news — "news that conveys or incorporates
false, fabricated, or deliberately misleading information, or
that is characterized as or accused of doing so"— abounds,

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34   Meyer Friedman and Ray H. Rosenman, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1974), 196.

35   Kugelmann, 39.

36   Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Be-havior, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).*

37   Kugelmann, 40.

38   "Post-truth," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58609044?redirectedFrom=post-truth#eid.

the presumably solid ground of fact dissolving.[39] The blurring of lines between the real and the fictional, truth and lie, is the latest incarnation of being-in-stress. We are exiles, increasingly cut off from the mode of existence of people even recently deceased. "Fact" has dissolved into "construct."

Marshall Berman borrowed the title to his book, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*,[40] from Marx, in a passage that sheds light on our current situation:

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.[41]

We too have melted into air; we have become angelic and demonic. All has melted into air, into airy words, words with no anchors in the real, because there is nothing but air.

Grief

Stress has a family resemblance to grief: "Stress is grief in which losses are not mourned but adapted to."[42] I had pro-

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39 "Fake," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67776?redirectedFrom=fake+news#eid1264306660,

40 Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

41 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in M. Eastman, ed., *Capital, The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings of Karl Marx*, (New York: Carlton House, 1923), 324.

42 Kugelmann, 41.

posed in 1992 that stress is grief that has no resolution of the conflicting desires that grief entails: "grief … is the expression of a profound conflict between contradictory impulses—to consolidate all that is still valuable and important in the past, and preserve it from loss; and at the same time, to re-establish a meaningful pattern of relationships, in which the loss is accepted."[43] This conception of grief dovetails with stress in significant ways: stress occurs in our modern world with losses that demand adaptation, with a sense that we live in a brave new world where nothing is any longer familiar. Instead of mourning our losses—for which there is no time and no rituals—we adapt to them if we can. We manage stress, cope with it, employ instrumental reason to control it. What we cannot do is mourn the losses. Stress names a type of not-mourning, a not-mourning that takes the desires to hold on to the past and to let it go and experiences the desires as "energy." Stress is a kind of transformer, forestalling grief and promoting productivity and consumption. Stress is "engineered grief."[44]

In 1992, I saw all stresses as engineered grief. I now question that conclusion, because it assumes that there is something stable that runs through all our stress. Given the plasticity of the term, its vagueness, I would revise my earlier conclusion and say that one type of stress is engineered grief. There are other kinds. Stress is engineered fatigue. Stress is engineered rage. Stress is engineered anxiety. The "engineering" is the rational (instrumental rationality) transformation of any of these passions into "energy" as the drive behind our adaptation to a stressful world. Any passion taken as a resource is "stress." Just as we view the world as a "gas station" (to use an expression from Heidegger), so when we are stressed, we take our very being as a resource: "The world now

43   Peter Marris, *Loss and Change* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 31-2.

44   Kugelmann, 44.

appears as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is believed able any longer to resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry."[45] Our nature, too.

Where Did Stress Come From?

Stress belongs to our world, our "modern world," with its accelerating changes fueled by technological innovations and social and political upheavals. This is the place of "stress." Before our modern world took shape, there was no stress. This is because stress is itself a technology. And technologies belong to specific times and places. I take my cue here from Bruno Latour (2000), who argued that an Egyptian pharaoh could not have had tuberculosis, because nineteenth century medicine constituted that disease. Latour argues:

> For technology, objects *never* escape the conditions of their productions. An isolated machine gun in the remote past is a pragmatic absurdity—and so, by the way, is an isolated machine gun in the present without the know-how, bullets, oil, repairmen, and logistics necessary to activate it. Another advantage of a technological artifact is that we have no difficulty in imagining that it rusts away and disappears. Thus, it always remains tied to a circumscribed and well-defined spatiotemporal envelope.[46]

Stress and its discourse arose with our technological society. There is no one source of this discourse, and many social institutions contributed to it: medicine, especially military medicine, endocrinology, psychiatry, psychology, engineering,

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45   Martin Heidegger, "Memorial Address, in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J. M. Anderson & E. H. Freund. (New York, Harper & Row, 1966), 44.

46   Bruno Latour, "On the Partial Existence of Existing *and* Nonexisting Objects," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 250.

management, mass media, and education (Psych 101 courses, for instance). Stress is a product of efforts to understand and to address what is happening. Latour's *askesis* directs attention to the relationships between a technology and its historical-social environment. So also, with stress. The plagues of the fourteenth century did not cause stress. Our pandemics do.

Stress as a Recognized Topic

When did the discourse on stress begin? World War II seems to have been when it came into its own, although Jackson found abundant evidence of stress as a cause of chronic diseases going back into the nineteenth century, and the year 1983 as the moment when "stress emerged as the archetypal disease of civilization."[47] Probably the most significant moment in the constellation of stress as a disease and as a symptom of disease was the incorporation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*) in 1980. I am not going to survey the history of the emergence of stress but will concentrate on the changes that this "modern certainty", to use Illich's term, has shaped how we see our lives. Stress arose in endocrinological laboratories and in psychiatric treatment of soldiers with psychological wounds of war. It now permeates existence in a specific way: it describes and prescribes what it means to be groundless: "to have life sustained by machines, to survive by means of a complex network or system that can be operated only through one's own participation."[48] Hudson Hoagland (1899-1982), a physiologist, studied the responses of military personnel to modern warfare, wrote significantly about stress. Hoagland wrote:

47   Jackson, 3.

48   Kugelmann, 61.

In recent years, with the development of aviation, man has desired to be free in an environment for which his evolutionary history could not possibly have fitted him. In high-speed airplanes he is assailed by new and formidable stresses. … He must adjust to severe and unaccustomed accelerations and rapid changes of atmospheric pressures which, together with the peculiar emotional stresses of modern aviation, may be exacting in the extreme.[49]

Hoagland captured the difficulties we have in adapting to unprecedented circumstances. Taking aviation as a metaphor for our situation, we find here that "stress accompanies a desire to be no longer tied to the limitations of corporeal existence … This desire for transcendence is not new, insofar as aspirations for immortality … are perennial. What is novel is its achievement in physical terms."[50] This is the structure of our world.

Stress and Luxury

All that is solid has melted into air. "Stress" belongs to a family of concepts that includes, of all things, luxury. Before the eighteenth century, luxury was a vice. Adam and Eve's great fault was not pride; it was luxury. Luxury meant "not knowing one's limits, materially or socially."[51] Luxury signified unfettered growth; we still speak of plants, those that grow beyond their normal limits as luxuriant. Luxury, until the eighteenth century, weakened "both morals and the body, making its victims susceptible to illness."[52] The accusation of the luxurious behavior of others could be a charge made by the upper classes about the lower classes in repressive ways,

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49   Hudson Hoagland, "Adventures in biological engineering," *Science,* 100, (1944) 63-64.

50   Kugelmann, 61.

51   Kugelmann, 158.

52   Kugelmann, 158.

to be sure. Luxury belonged to a discourse about limits and the dangers of surpassing them. However, during the eighteenth century, luxury became seen as good: the desire to surpass one's limits became the aim of the new commercial class, which pushed back against the aristocracy. Bernard de Mandeville's 1721 *The Fable of the Bees* was an early defense of luxury. Mandeville wrote: "if the wants of Man are innumerable, then what ought to supply them has no bounds."[53] In the early nineteenth century, Jeremy Bentham praised luxury:

> Luxury is not only an inseparable accompaniment to opulence, but increases in proportion to it. As men rise one above another in the scale of opulence, the upper one may, without excess, give into expenses which those below cannot give into without prodigality. It is therefore no more desirable that luxury should be repressed, than it is that opulence should be repressed—that is, that security should be diminished. If it were desirable that luxury should be repressed, it could be done no otherwise than either by depriving the more opulent classes of a part of their property in this view, or coercing them in the use of it. It would be less unreasonable to restrain prodigality wherever it is to be found than to restrain the highest imaginable pitch of luxury on the part of those whose expense does not exceed their income.[54]

The pursuit of luxury had, by then, become almost a mandate. Around the same time, however, in addition to luxury being something to encourage, came warnings that the pursuit of luxury caused disease. The political thinker and correspondent with Darwin, William Rathbone Greg (1853), wrote: "the

53 Quoted in John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 115.

54 Jeremy Bentham, "Manual of Political Economy," H. Bowring, ed., *The works of Jeremy Bentham* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1843), 38.

excessive toil and the severe struggle for life which we all unite to deprecate and deplore is, in truth, a self-imposed necessity," because few really valuable "objects of earthly existence require wealth for their attainment."[55] Here we see a reversal of values in the past three hundred years. In Greg's warning, "luxury" is on its way to becoming "stress." Whereas "luxury" had, at first, warned about the ethical dangers of striving but became a good when this striving was good, "stress" warns about not coping and adjusting to this striving, which is the lifeblood of our contemporary, groundless existence.

Stress and Disembodiment

To what end does experiencing ourselves as under stress lead? It may lead to better health, to managing our anxieties in a fast-paced demanding world. It may do us some good. However, stress has its shadows, and we see them imaged in popular culture in the figures of the vampire and the zombie. There are all sorts of variations on these two figures, but it is essential to them that they are already dead when they begin causing havoc to the non-vampires and non-zombies in the population. While vampires tend to the glamorous, zombies are decidedly ugly. Despite their differences, vampires and zombies have one essential thing in common however: they never get stressed. They have solved the problem of stress by being, in comparison to the rest of us, relatively disembodied. Vampires and zombies have managed their stress, they are stress-free because they are un-dead.[56]

Stress management entices us to perceive our bodies and our selves in particular ways. "Management" in this

55   William Rathbone Greg, "England as It Is," in *Essays on Political and Social Sciences*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1853), 326-27.

56   Robert Kugelmann, "Stress management: A twentieth century western disease?" in Lola Romanucci-Ross, Daniel E. Moerman, and Laurence R. Tancredi, eds., *Anthropology of Medicine: From Culture to Method*, 3rd ed. (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 1977).

context means that stress has objective qualities that allow us to handle it. I learn to manage it. "It" is not "me," and so I am somewhere other than where stress is. Management puts distance between me and stress. Felt stress is in "the body," which is at a distance from me. To manage stress, we "work on our bodies,"[57] as well as on our relationships and our responsibilities. One way of working on our bodies to reduce stress is to learn about the neurological, endocrinological, and psychological aspects of stress. This is when we learn, above all, that we have archaic bodies ill-suited for the modern world. I can begin to feel and talk about bodily changes in these terms, in a way analogous to how a child learns the meaning of "pain." I sense my bodily feelings in stress-related terms, which mediate between me and stress. The technology of stress, with its endocrinological, neurological, and psychological explanations, mediates between me and my body, me and my world. Stress becomes real.

One particular way of learning to experience the body under stress is to learn to relax. Since the 1970s, relaxation has been a counter to stress[58] (Benson, 1975; Jackson, 2013, p. 233). In learning to relax, we get "in touch with" your body. The Mayo Clinic has this advice about relaxation: "As you learn relaxation techniques, you can become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control and decreasing your quality of life."[59] Anoth-

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57   Kugelmann, 1992, 168.

58   Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: Avon, 1975). See Jackson, 233.

59   Mayo Clinic Staff, "Healthy lifestyle: Stress management," *Mayo Clinic*, Accessed February 2, 2023, https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045368.

er source lists 18 ways to relax, including deep breathing, which "reduces cortisol levels. Increased cortisol is linked with stress, and reducing your cortisol can help you relax."[60]

At the basis of these ways of describing our experiences of the body is the anatomized body: "This body is … an alienated body, since it is no-body … It derives originally from the study of corpses … Through emblems omnipresent today, … we come easily to accept the corpse as the real body. Stress management is a form of training which further instills in consciousness a corpse-like body image"[61] (Kugelmann, 1992, p. 170; see van den Berg, 1961; Romanyshyn, 1989). Stress management teaches us that we are living corpses. That is how we can thrive in a stressful world, by managing our stresses at the cost of becoming un-dead. We thrive in a stressful world as disembodied beings. Now we are at home in the fast lane. In these ways we answer Wittgenstein's question as applied to stress: "how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?"[62]

60   S. Barkley, S, "18 ways to relax your mind, body, and soul," *PsychCentral*, accessed February 5, 2023, https://psychcentral.com/blog/healthiest-ways-to-relax-your-mind-body-and-soul

61   Kugelmann, 1992, 170; see J. H. van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962); Robert Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989).

62   Wittgenstein, 244.