

The Immortality Hypothesis

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That immortality is wonderful, but what do we do in the meantime?

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"I sit on the beach by the river," Jeffrey says, "where it flows into the sea. I look very far over the sea and I am imagining what it will be like on the other side. There's my father. I am still young, I think two or three years old, and my father is gone. I think about how important I will become later as I endlessly let the sand pass through my hands. I forget time. Every day I come there, I watch the big sea boats come in and go out again." After a pause, he continues: "The feeling I had when I was so small, it's like the feeling I had when I used heroin. I lay on my bed, alone. I could lie there endlessly. I fantasized about the great deeds I would accomplish in my later life. I had just arrived in the Netherlands, but things had gone completely wrong. My father was nowhere to be seen and the dream I had in Suriname did not come true. It was a big disappointment, but when I was in bed and I had taken heroin, I dreamed that I was important. I would make a lot of money, albeit in the criminal sphere. I would set up a large organization. I would function at the top of it."

Most people know tomorrow that today has become yesterday. For people who have experienced horrors for a long time, yesterday has often remained today and it will be no different tomorrow. Time, as it were, solidified at the moment of the trauma. Forgetting, as in psychotherapy, for example, a previous session can be forgotten, is not so much an expression of a mechanism as repression, but rather an expression that there are experiences that are not and have not been included in a previous experience of time. Discontinuity and various time tracks are the result.

The early development of timeliness, continuity and one time track has to do with a good embedding in the original relational world. In **'The forgotten time'** I will discuss the influence that disturbances in the primary relationship have on the development of a sense of time.

People whose existence is insufficiently rooted have a strong need to control everything themselves; borders in general and death in particular confront them with impotence, isolation and insignificance, which are difficult to bear. One way of surviving is through reversal: impotence becomes omnipotence. One important aspect of this alleged grandiosity is often forgotten. That is the associated experience of timelessness and immortality. The idea of immortality compensates for the true lack of continuity (Lifton, 1971). In **'The here and now'** we see how the use of consciousness-altering means connects to this. Means serve the denial of the transience of time and of mortality. Past and future are erased by intoxication experiences that promise eternal duration.

In the treatment of addicts in whom time has left deep traces due to traumatization, the restoration of one trace of time is therefore important. Psychotherapy can be thought of as the place where the broken thread of life can be woven back into an ongoing story. In **'The woven time'** the importance of stories, as they can restructure time, is discussed.

Only a few building blocks for the development of a new story in the treatment are presented under **'Warp and weft'**. They mainly concern the re-installation of past tense. This can be made bearable when the testimony of the trauma is given its place in the continuity of the traumatized person's life and when this takes place in a safe present. Only then opens the possibility of a future, in which supposed immortality is superfluous.

The forgotten time

Being able to distinguish between past, present and future characterizes a well-functioning ego capacity. This ensures that it is a single track of time, within which the experience of time can expand or contract. Good enough mothering means that the mother will and must fall short of the child's needs but never the child's ego. The foundation of the ego's early mode of integration is made possible by proper attunement to the child's needs, which brings about "going on being." This continuity promotes the process of personalization of the child (Winnicott, 1958).

If there is no proper attunement to the needy child, discontinuity in the perception of time can arise. Temporary or permanent disruption in this can be seen as a deficiency in the ego function. Responding too late or not at all to what the young child needs throws him back on himself. Because he cannot yet form a continuous image of mother – out of sight, out of mind – a hole forms, as it were, a breach in time. This emptiness is filled with unpleasant feelings, which the child expresses with screaming, kicking or falling asleep. And finally with silence. Beyond waiting time stands still. Mother is not there and mother is not good enough becomes: 'I am not good enough, I am not here'. The birth of depersonalization (De Blécourt, 1991). Separation becomes isolation. It is the psychological burial of the child.

Psychodynamic defense mechanisms are not yet available to the pre-symbolic child, only defensive measures.

A characteristic of basic distrust is a time diffusion (Erikson, 1972). Trust is the foundation for the development of a healthy sense of self. The child is mirrored in the mother. This promotes a sense of continuity; experiences of distrust increase the chance of regressing to primarily narcissistic feelings.

The ego-ideal, heir to primary narcissism, incorporates the earliest good experiences of the ego (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985). Then it gives ground to the feeling that it is worth living on and striving for something. The ego-ideal implies the idea of a project and of hope. This, in turn, implies a postponement and therefore also a temporal perspective. Carefully measured frustrations and gratifications serve to encourage the child and give up certain satisfactions.

The ego-ideal can therefore follow two paths:

- The long and difficult path of maturation and development is full of obstacles, in which the child is confronted with its own helplessness and dependence. Growing and gaining a sense of oneness take place not by denying separation, but by overcoming it by establishing a temporal perspective through the pursuit of an ideal. So, by hope.
- The short, direct, and regressive path is dominated by the nirvana principle. The nirvana principle, still associated with primary narcissism (Freud, 1914), implies an indifference to the possibility of one's own extinction and to bodily demands and needs. It conjures up the illusion of everlasting life, to mask the desperation. The desperation is what empty eyes reflect in the mirror stage.

Holes in what Masud Kahn (1986) calls a mother's "protective shield" result in premature ego development. Instead of the disillusionment associated with separation, an ego attitude is developed that implies that the child conforms more to the mother's needs than the mother to the child's. On the other hand, an excessive craving for a mother's care develops.

When attempts at autonomy are not recognized, the child ceases to act independently and flees into symbiosis (Dornes, 1994). The longing for oblivion that lasts forever, to cover being forgotten.

My thesis is that the addict takes this latter shortcut. The path of regression bears no delay. I want dope and I want it now. My body is invulnerable. Put it in my body, do what you want with my body, it doesn't touch me; I endure a thousand needles. No future but immortality. To forget the time and the pain of being forgotten.

The here and now

Perhaps it is not possible to draw a direct comparison between the perception of time in the youngest years of childhood and the intoxication experienced by adult addicts. Nevertheless, there are striking similarities.

Because we see things happening one after the other, the value of the moment is put into perspective. We always see what happens at one moment in relation to what happened or will take place at another moment. In the present is retained what has been and we anticipate what is yet to come (Mooij, 1991). Through this continuous holding and reaching forward, a sense of continuity and memory is created. Because we are bound to time in this way, the moment is robbed of its absolute self-worth.

There are two ways to make the moment regain its value, corresponding to the two ways the ego-ideal can take. The first is that of self-realization and the other is that of giving up oneself by losing oneself in the eternal moment. The path of addiction reduces the time track to a moment. What is sought in the intoxication experience is a change of state. Change in the perception of time forms part of this change of state.

Substances can, as it were, stop time and make them 'forget', as happens with opium and morphine. Opium was and is the remedy for complete forgetting and for forgetting the pain. Under the influence of morphine, no worries, no sins, no karma, no judgment, no memory, no thoughts, no feelings, no I (Dunselman, 1993). The nirvana feeling is even more intense with the heroin injector. The flash releases you from all fear and puts you in the heart of the now. Your body is pure bliss.

Substances such as hashish, weed, LSD, mescaline slow down time (Benjamin, 1974). John Cashman (Dunselman, 1993) ends his description of his LSD experience with: 'My body melted away in waves, my mind was freed from me, from life, even from death. In a crystal-clear moment, I saw that I was immortal.'

Experiences under the influence of these drugs resemble depersonalization symptoms. Arlow (1984) relates the time sense disorder to depersonalization and to the feeling of timelessness. The erroneous perception of the lengthening of time serves to negate possible danger by referring to the future.

Time is sped up, as it were, by substances such as cocaine and amphetamines. Coke gives a momentary sense of superiority. Thought associations are accelerated. Uncertainty is dissipated. The ego is, as it were, inflated (Hellinga and Plomp, 1994).

After the moment of immortality, the fall into impermanence irrevocably comes. After the kick the hangover. The hangover is accompanied by all kinds of unpleasant physical symptoms and feelings, comparable to the former screaming and kicking. The deprivation can be called dead, and this period should be kept as short as possible. Scoring is a defensive measure. The addict can be seen as an acrobat jumping from peak to peak, but without the safety net of maternal nurturing. He is the negative hero who competes with the divine in intoxication (Zoja, 1985), and, like Icarus, crashes into vomiting and waking up sick.

The eternal return of the same is the other side of the coin. The same cycle every day, disregarding the fact that time also goes on.

Increasingly larger doses must be taken and faster and faster to avoid the fear of dying. Paradoxically, this leads to the approach of literal death. In this here and now, the afterlife is lurking.

The contemporary hero hides emptiness and vulnerability under his mask. He keeps himself going by falling back on a substance-enhanced proprioceptive body experience. "I am invulnerable" is accompanied by mottos such as: "I raised myself", "I don't need anyone". "Now I am someone" is experienced. Intoxication experiences that stimulate this can serve to counteract the experience of the isolation of not being rooted in historical time. The transient time is denied. The continuation of the well-known inscription 'Know thyself' at Delphi: 'Know that thou art not a god but a man, not an immortal but a mortal', fades away.

This hero figure forms the tragic interpretation of the ego-ideal. Addicts search in vain, desperately, and narcissistic for their reflection, but all mirrors are silent. "They present themselves before the mirror of memory and they do not find it. They turn to the future, and it continues to elude them. They call their names in bewilderment and no answer comes from the void" (Van der Does de Willebois, 1987).

The woven time

The red thread is a metaphor for the progress in and of life: the red of blood indicates life in connection with mother earth from beginning to end. On the one hand, continuity can be seen as the unwinding of a role: death comes ever closer. On the other hand, it is also a continuous winding up, like that of a thread on a ball. Because our past follows us and becomes more and more full of the present that it picks up along the way. Consciousness means, among other things, memory (Bergson, 1989). Memory means the existence of the past tense.

In the story of Ariadne and Theseus (Thomson, 1980) the thread plays an important role. Entering the Minoan labyrinth, Theseus unwound a ball of wool given by Ariadne. He managed to kill the monster, the Minotaur.

The Minotaur is often associated with the Dionysian. Dionysus is the god of excess, an important characteristic of addiction. He is endowed with magic and blurs the lines between the real and the fantastic, a characteristic of intoxication. Using the unwound thread, Theseus managed to find his way out of the labyrinth.

The labyrinth can be seen as a symbol of the complexity of existence. It is said that we live in a time where every center is missing, where great stories have been lost. Every ideology has collapsed. It is a maze of isolated moments, without connecting links. Characteristic is the experience of fragmentation and uprooting, and life in the plural. There are many worlds and in each of those worlds, one is someone else. Meaning is often lacking. We have forgotten (Lyotard, 1992).

Psychotherapy as Ariadne's thread is an aid against forgetting. The thread implies a reference to weaving, to the production of fabric, and ultimately to the production of a fabric of words, a text, which is intended to extract something from oblivion and to keep it in memory (Ysseling, 1994).

Stories are a tool to shape time, develop cohesion, and thus restore continuity (Olthof and Vermetten, 1994). They construct a past tense so that it does not have to be repeated in deeds.

Fragmentation in people with problems, as it manifests itself in the missing pieces of time, repressed memories, and split-off parts, can be provided with coherence and meaning with the help of stories. These can be woven into larger stories; for example, that of the family roots, and that of the classes. A connection can be made in this with the experience of: 'This is about you', of being unique. The development of your own story.

Addiction doubles forgetting in the primary relationship and is the denial of a story on a local level. Addiction strips people of their story and turns it into dope or alcohol.

Once addicted, one addict is socially hardly distinguishable from the other. An undifferentiated mass of junk. All this waste can be recycled into the first building blocks for a new story, a counter-story.

Warp and weft

Early traumatization can be regarded as the warp, consisting of weak threads, through which later traumatization is woven as a weft. The warp is weak due to pedagogical and affective neglect. The level of the 'basic fault' has been translated as 'an early flaw in the texture of the personality' (De Jonghe et al., 1994). Then the traumatization of incest, abuse, and violence intervenes all the more deeply. Wounds that occur later in life cause holes in the already fragile tissue. Experiences of low continuity have become loose pieces of fabric. It is therefore important for the restoration of cohesion and continuity to pay attention to the context of the early traumas in the treatment.

Normally, life becomes more and more full and populous (Berkhouwer, 1991). With the traumatized, life and its story ends at the moment of the trauma and with the people who then populated it. Other people, later in life, seem like mere copies of it. This shows the power and influence of trauma on later life. Essential to the experience of time in traumatization is that time has stood still at the moment the wound was inflicted. An unfinished story with the same ending every time, a broken voice. In the holes of continuity, there is little memory, rather re-experiencing. Where the world ended for you, it is difficult to give finiteness its own place.

How then to pick up the thread again? A "structure" in Pesso-psychotherapy or a session in verbal therapy can be seen as a kind of time machine that the individual controls through his observing ego and his "pilot" function (Pesso, 1991). In trauma, different time traces arise that cannot be brought under a single denominator. The helpless individual often escapes the traumatic situation through a change of state of consciousness and, as a result, an altered sense of time. Events take place in slow motion, while the experience does not seem to take place in normal reality (Herman, 1993). Not only the past is painful to endure, but also the future. After all, there is no hope. Recognition of this despair is a necessary condition for the emergence of hope. Validation of the inconsolability is initially more appropriate than a consolation.

In a structure, it is the turn of a slightly older man of well over fifty. He resists it because a turn evokes the association with his brother, who sexually abused him every day from the age of seven to twelve. Upstairs in the house where no one heard them. Besides, what's the point of doing that? After the clinical admission, he will drink again and then die, he says. I have a hard time reaching him, as he may not have been able to reach anyone at the time. In desperation I pick up on the liters of semen he had spoken about earlier: 'Litres you call it. That has something endless. You may have experienced your brother's abuse as endless. Maybe you also thought then: the only thing that will stop this is death.' Touched by this, he cries briefly. Then he stares straight ahead. It seems as if he is trapped in the timelessness of his then experience. He seems imprisoned,

doomed to live in a never-ending present, even though he has resumed life after that time. Change in time perception has, as it were, erased the hope of a different future. If waiting lasts too long, death offers solace. I feel how he has given up and says, 'If you were to put someone in the role of witness figure, he could possibly say that he senses, feels or smells, sees how inconsolable you felt then, and that it seems as if you still feel this inconsolation now.' His face relaxes, softly. It then feels as being really present.

Another requirement is closely related to this first requirement of valuing inconsolability, namely that of creating security in the present, in order to establish continuity from there. This is about literal safety in the therapeutic situation.

A woman wants the door of my room to be left open during therapy, for about two months, in order to escape in case of emergency.

In the beginning, the therapist is often seen as a copy of unreliable figures who populated the trauma, and thus as a potential perpetrator who needs to be controlled and tested.

A sense of safe continuity is derived from appearing again and again in the same literal space (Groen, 1980). In the first instance, safety is often not derived from people, but from objects. The same chair repeatedly. This awareness also arises from appearing at the same time each time. Changes in this cause commotion. It should not be forgotten that something as simple as: 'See you next week' is said. A long-term contact with a therapist, who takes the time for you, is important to be able to literally counterbalance experiences of disruption. Dissociating, literally becoming socially disconnected, can only be counteracted by entering a connection with another, who is one and the same continuous.

If the mentioned conditions, which prove valuable during the whole therapy, are met, the telling of the traumatic story can be started; a start with the aim that trauma becomes memory. Ultimately, it's about awakening the story of the buried child in us. Working psychotherapeutically with the child in us is useful for that reason alone because it fosters an awareness of the difference between past and present. This diminishes the power of early trauma on the adult.

To get to this point, words are needed to tell the trauma. However, traumatic memories often lack a verbal narrative structure and context. Images and physical sensations predominate. Moreover, these images are often more slides than a film. With the therapist as a witness figure, words can be found in these slides. Using timestamps such as: 'How abandoned you must have felt', 'What has happened in the meantime', 'At such a young age already', and 'How do you prevent it from happening again next time', attempted to place the slides in a time perspective. This is the beginning of a story structure. In addition to paying attention to the meaning of words, it is also important to pay attention to their rhythm, tone and sound (Stern, 1985). The feedback at the end of a Pesso group was that the rhythm and sound in the sentence "If I had been there then..." was so pleasant to the ear.

A good attunement to the sound of words sets the first tone for telling the traumatic story. This telling can become a testimony that does justice to a loss for which there is no adequate compensation. Not even through revenge impulses and fantasies, which maintain the bond of fate with the perpetrator, at least when these are permanent. A witness figure should see how difficult it is to leave the familiar methods of survival. A witness figure should see how much it hurts to give up magical solutions. These are often linked to an old, hidden ego-ideal (Kahn, 1986) and maintain a co-attachment to suffering. One then speaks of a desire for inconsolability (De Martelaere, 1993). Mourning is the processing of something that has passed (Freud, 1917) and thus a start of recovery and continuity. A continuous story that allows the alleged greatness to be put back within the skin of a person, and in which a seemingly endless trauma can find a place in a finite life, not flattened by means that promise eternal life. Even though the horrors often leave a traumatic core behind (Mooy, 1993), the thread of life can be taken up again with a sense of one's own mortality. This is done by connecting with people in the present. Traumatization and its influence no longer have to be commonplace but can become scar tissue.

'Until next time.'

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