



Melancholy and the Somatic Subject of Stress Management

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abstract

This article explores the curious relation between the Aristotelian concept of melancholy and the contemporary concept of stress and stress management in organizations. Through a symptomatological reading of the most important Aristotelian text on melancholy, *Problems XXX, I*, it identifies the *mélaina cholé* – the black bile – as the somatic subject of a higher order of self-management among extraordinary individuals and discusses how the conceptualization of this somatic subject has been popularized in the contemporary presentation of stress and stress management in popular literature. It discusses this popularization and its effects on three levels: the individual, the organizational and the managerial, suggesting that the properties, which used to be reserved for the extraordinary in character among politicians, poets, philosophers and artists has been popularized under the assumption of an anthropology, which subsumes the great, culturally constructive achievements under a general idea of *Arbeitskraft*, of labour power.

I neither have the scholar's melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician's, which is fantastical; nor the courtier's, which is proud; nor the soldier's, which is ambitious; nor the lawyer's, which is politic; nor the lady's, which is nice; nor the lover's, which is all of these; but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects. (Shakespeare, 2007: IV, 1)

Introduction

What can the ancient Greek conception of melancholy tell us about stress management in contemporary organizations? Not much, it seems. Through most of Western European history melancholy was a central cultural theme; it organized, focussed and explained how people saw the world. As an epistemological category it not only framed questions of personal happiness, but also of social and moral norms (see e.g. Lepenies, 1998). Today it has been reduced to an insignificant category that does not signify much more than a pensive mood. Stress, on the other hand, has a much shorter history. When the history of melancholy culminated in Freud's 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', which introduced a whole new type of theorizing and representing the symptoms related to it, stress as a concept about emotional response had not yet even been suggested. It wasn't until the 1930s that Hans Selye, an Austrian-born

endocrinologist, came up with the term, borrowing it from the field of physics and engineering. Today, although a few studies have been made of melancholy as a cultural phenomenon in organization theory (Pelzer, 2001; ten Bos, 2003), stress seems to have replaced melancholy as the lens through which the age is viewed. As was true of melancholy in earlier centuries, there is today an enormous amount of research and writing about stress and stress management. The situation should remind us of Robert Burton's famous statement in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621): "The Tower of Babel never yielded such confusion of tongues as this Chaos of Melancholy doth variety of symptoms" (Radden, 2000: 5). Our confusion about the meaning of the nearly epidemic levels of stress in Western societies is just as rampant. Indeed, the only consistent relation between the two concepts seems to be their shared lack of consistency.

Yet I believe that this shared lack has more to offer than meets the eye. For one, it seems to be the result of the way both concepts relate to the individual body and *what it can do*. Or as the first words of *Stress Management for Dummies* spell it out: "Everybody has it, and everybody talks about it, but nobody really knows what stress is. Why? Because stress signifies different things for each of us, and also really is different for each of us" (Elkin, 1999: xxvi). While the Classical conception of melancholy is less ambiguous when it comes to defining which melancholics it is interested in – namely the extraordinary in character – it asserts the anomaly as an individual problem in a similar way. Furthermore, and this is what makes the text revolutionary in its own time and so interesting to a contemporary perspective, the author of *Problems XXX, I* insists on an individual somatic balance *in* the anomaly, a sort of *eucrasia*, which is not primarily pathological, but is the source of great achievements. This 'great balance' is what I paradoxically paraphrasing Nietzsche's *Gay Science* (2001: 246ff.) call the "great health" of melancholy and it is what will occupy us in what follows. By reading the two cultural phenomena of melancholy and stress alongside each other, I would like to ask whether there is such a thing as a *great health of stress and stress management?*

Let me just make a few methodological comments. I specifically make a point of saying alongside and not in comparison to each other, because the point here is not to reduce one phenomenon to the other. It is neither my aim to claim the prevalence of one over the other, along the lines of 'stress is a contemporary form of melancholy', nor is it my point to assert that the Greek capability for precise diagnosis is outdated by our medical technologies, along the lines of 'melancholy is an inferior form of stress'. Rather, I suggest looking at Greek melancholy and contemporary stress as phenomena that are intimately related, both with important implications for their respective ages, but with roles to play, which can best be distinguished by setting them apart *in* their relation. My approach is inspired by a passage in Michel Serres' *Statues* (1990). Here Serres assumes a dictionary that allows translating between two very different events. On the one hand the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in midair on 28th of January 1986 and on the other the worshipping of Baal, the Lord of the Flies, in Cartago 600 years B.C.

Serres' description of the ritual in which a giant statue was warmed up to red heat and children were sacrificed in the fire is taken from Flaubert's *Salambo*. The idol was constructed with an ingenious mechanism that allowed the children to be transported to a landing from which, one by one, they were hurled onto the outstretched and red hot hands of the metal colossus, where they evaporated like drops of water on a frying pan,

while the crowd shouted: they are not human, they are oxen! (Serres, 1990: 11). The two events have similarities and dissimilarities, conduct and rituals in common and differences so profound that even the mentioning of them together provokes anger. What Serres is interested in is the black box they erect in unison, the locus around which the actions, habits and conducts are organized and distributed (Serres, 1990: 12). The black box is a sort of third space, in which the exchange between the two events occurs. This space itself is erected by some thing, which mediates the relationship between them (Brown, 2005: 220); in this case the metal containers full of human beings.

If we look at this from the point of view of Gilles Deleuze, we might also label this mediation or translation of events in a third space of convergence a *symptomatology* (see e.g. Butler, 2008). When in *Coldness and Cruelty* Deleuze likens the great literary writer to a doctor, it is because the medical doctor is also an inventor, not of illnesses, but of styles of thought.

The doctor does not invent the illness, he dissociates symptoms that were previously grouped together, and links up others that were dissociated. In short he builds up a profoundly original clinical picture. (Deleuze, 1991: 15)¹

Flaubert, in Serres' hands, becomes exactly that; in his treatment of the cultic rituals in Cartago he connotes signs and creates a clinical image that he then relates to another – that of the *Challenger* catastrophe.

In the case of two such disparate concepts as melancholy and stress the task will be to ask the proper question, which sets the concepts apart in their relation in this manner. I will attempt to do this by asking the question of the position of the individual body, and what it can do, in both concepts and let that question constitute the space in which they cross over and into each other (Serres, 1990: 13). The individual body, in both ages, acts as that something which resists being put in place, and to the following it will be what Bruno Latour terms our matter of concern (Latour, 2004: 231). It is very important to take this guiding principle seriously. The somatic relation, which surfaces and acts as a guideline for great achievement in both melancholy and stress, involves discursive and non-discursive practices that emerge around the phenomena, but should not be thought of as an attempt to answer the metaphysical question about what man is capable of. It really is a question of the singular body and its individual capabilities. As we shall see, both the ancient conception of melancholy and the contemporary conception of stress involve dynamic conceptions of balance, although with very different teleological implications. The historical inconsistency of both concepts mentioned earlier may be the best indication of this. Because both melancholy and stress (although not exclusively) have been thought of as results of a disproportionate relation to the

1 To the reader familiar with the classical distinction between a symptom-based and a sign-based diagnostic reflected in clinical medicine, the Deleuzian understanding of a symptomatology might seem confusing. In a classical sense the *symptom* refers to the patient's complaint, a description of inner states; a *sign*, in contrast, is an outwardly observable feature of behaviour or bodily condition: a *pain* is a symptom, a *rash* is a sign (Radden, 2000: 33). When Deleuze treats the symptom as a sign, this distinction seems to collapse. The key to this should be found in a discussion of the Deleuzian conceptualization of the subjective states, for which this is not the place (Deleuze, 1991; Smith, 2005)

individual body, both resist clinical conformation and seem relative not only to the human beings, which they are set up to describe, but also to the times of which they are products.

To present the concept of melancholy as a background for further discussion I will begin the following with a description of the Aristotelian understanding of melancholy as it is presented in *Problems XXX, I*. The description will not be exhaustive, a task that would demand more space than is available here. I will take my point of departure in the Hippocratic theory of the *Quattuor Humores* in order to demonstrate the revolutionary status of the treatment of melancholy in *Problems*. Again, I will draw attention only to certain themes in the text, which are relevant to the further analysis. These themes are specifically framed by the question that opens the Aristotelian treatment of melancholy: “Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, or are infected by the diseases arising from black bile?” (Aristotle, 2000: 57). The question is interesting in a contemporary perspective, because it presents us with the non-pathological idea of melancholy as the foundation for a class of achievements instead of treating it only as a result of it. In extension to this I will be able to discuss the Aristotelian theory of balance and the personal somatic relation it involves, implicated in the theory of a natural melancholy. I will also discuss what kind of achievement it is that the exceptional melancholic can hope for and how this sets him apart from a pejorative middle, which might be more balanced – but is not destined for true greatness according to *Problems*.

This will lead me to the discussion of the contemporary conception of stress in organizations. I will present this discussion along three lines: in relation to the individual, in relation to the organization and in relation to management. Again the discussion will not be exhaustive of its subject; rather my choice of literature representing the three themes will be exemplary.

In relation to individual stress management I have chosen to work with the popular and easily accessible *Stress Management for Dummies* (Elkin, 1999), which is as it says “Packed with stress-busting advice and exercises” (Elkin, 1999: front page). I will primarily show here how something similar to the Aristotelian conception of *eucrasia*, which in relation to melancholy was reserved for the extraordinary in character, in the contemporary conception of stress is popularized and generalized to include everybody.

In my discussion of stress management in organizations I primarily draw on Quick, Quick, Nelson and Hurrell’s *Preventive Stress Management in Organizations* (1997). My aim here will be to show how the popularization of the extraordinary balance implicated earlier is related in the organization to a certain type of achievement. Where the great achievement in the Aristotelian conceptualization of melancholy was socially constructive and bound to transcendental qualities, in the organization it is bound to the concept of productivity.

This will lead me to my discussion of stress and management. In *Lederen som stresscoach* or in English *The Manager as Stress Coach* (Andersen and Kingston,

2007)² the task of the manager as a coach for his employees is bound, not to the achievement of a balanced middle, but rather to the 'great' and dynamic middle, which also to Aristotle was the eudemonic goal of mankind and in *Problems* signifies the great health of melancholy.

The Conception of Melancholy in *Problems XXX, I*

In Hippocratic medicine the *mélaina cholé* – the black bile – was one of the four 'humours', which could be found and identified with the four elements in the human body. Next to the yellow bile, the blood and the phlegm, it was assumed to be a concrete and physical fluid, which determined the individual character of a human being through its mixture with the other fluids. But the right mixture (*krasis*) of the fluids in the body not only influenced the human character, it was also crucial for a healthy life. Illness, it was believed, was the result of a misbalanced relation between the bodily fluids (Klibansky et al., 1992; Theunissen, 1996).

The short treatise on melancholy in *Problems XXX, I*, which marks the historical source of the topic by liberating melancholy from the Hippocratic paradigm, is a part of the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, but its author is believed to be Theophrastus, a later follower of Aristotle (Radden, 2000; Theunissen, 1996). It links up with the Hippocratic theory of the humours by asserting melancholy to a physical substance. But what makes the text so revolutionary in its own time, and interesting in a modern perspective, is the way it also breaks with the theory of *the* four humours. Instead of asserting the question of balance to a relation between the different bodily fluids, it seeks to locate the right mixture in the black bile itself. Thereby it breaks with the natural essence of the Greek cosmology and alters, not only the status of the black bile, but also the conception of illness as such (Theunissen, 1996: 5). In a modern perspective, of course, what is interesting is the *typology*, which became a central theme in Western European history from then on. The epochal thesis that *Problems* puts forth asserts a kind of melancholy that *in itself* is not pathological, but is intimately related to pathological symptoms. In *Problems* we witness the birth of the Melancholic as a character.

The question which opens *Problems XXX, I*, why all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, should be understood along this line. It has generally been agreed that the question introduces an examination of the source of great achievements and genius (Klibansky et al., 1992; Theunissen, 1996; Radden, 2000). But what is really surprising to a modern perspective is the interest in a *negative* that makes a *positive* conceivable. As the German philosopher Michael Theunissen points out, the question displays an astounding naturalness in its assumption that melancholy is the source of great achievements. It never asks *if*, but *why* (Theunissen, 1996: 9). This should not be taken to mean that all melancholics are natural geniuses. The author of *Problems XXX, I* specifically points out that melancholics in whom the black bile is too cold will turn out lethargic weaklings or idiots, while those in whom it is too warm will become manic and easily irritated

2 All quotes from Andersen & Kingston, 2007 are my own translation.

characters (Aristotle, 2000: 59; Klibansky et al., 1992: 79).³ But it points to the normative demand for a balance in melancholy, which remains the source of great achievements. While the author seems to indicate that everyone has some of that which makes a melancholic in them (Theunissen, 1996: 10), it is only those who live with a higher sort of melancholic anomaly or inequality that are capable of meeting this demand.

Theunissen distinguishes three ways in which the melancholic in *Problems* is unequal: in relation to others, in relation to himself and in relation to the black bile, which is ultimately the subject of his character (Theunissen, 1996: 12). In relation to others the melancholic is primarily unequal, because his character sets him apart from the mass or 'the majority' as the author of *Problems* points out (Aristotle, 2000: 59). The non-pathological or 'natural' melancholy is reserved for the exceptional.

For the melancholic the inequality with himself is a more precarious matter. To the contemporary reader the Greek text here comes very close to the notion of a conflictual subject, which we have known through most of the twentieth century, especially from psychoanalysis (see e.g. Ehrenberg, 2004: 230-280; Hoedemaekers, in this issue). It would seem, at least from a modern perspective, that the natural melancholic (and hence exceptional in character from a Greek perspective) is characterized by a peculiar self-relation that is constituted by the conflict between its elements. The splitting of the self is constitutive for the melancholic personality (Theunissen, 1996: 13). What shall primarily interest me here is how the third inequality finds its expression in this splitting of the melancholic self. As Theunissen points out, the real subject of the melancholic self is the *mélaina cholé*. The black bile is the unequal *somatic subject* of which the conflict in the melancholic's relation to himself is the individual expression (Theunissen, 1996: 13). In a very lucid example the author of *Problems XXX, I* explains how this inequality is manifested in the individual body.

For just as men differ in appearance not because they have faces, but because they have a certain type of face, some handsome, some ugly and some again having no outstanding characteristics (these are of normal character), so those who have a small share of this temperament are normal, but those who have much are unlike the majority. (Aristotle, 2000: 58-59)

Of the black bile itself the author only says that it can be too cold or too warm. But as the somatic subject of the melancholic, it expresses itself individually as that which sets him apart from the majority and also lends him the ability for outstanding achievement. It is the balancing of this *somatic relation*, in which the natural melancholic must seek that which enables him to achieve what is in his nature. The melancholic temperament in itself is variable to those who have it; and it is the task of every melancholic to strive for an individual balance in it. Only when he fails to do so does his natural melancholy become pathological and he falls prey to the illnesses inherent to his temperament (Theunissen, 1996: 18). Because of this "all melancholic persons are abnormal, not owing to disease, but by nature" (Aristotle, 2000: 60).

3 All references to *Problems XXX, I* is from the translation of the text found in the anthology *The Nature of Melancholy* (Radden, 2000).

We are beginning to see an outline of what I called the great health of melancholy. The natural melancholic who is prone to great achievement must invest himself in a dietetic relation to his body, in order not to fall ill. The diseases related to the black bile are results of a disproportionate relation to the self. But one decisive factor remains to be explained. For, contrary to what one might think, this does not mean that the Aristotelian concept of the medium or middle applies to the melancholic. In fact, what characterizes him and sets him apart from the *mésôi* – the mediocre – is his inability to attain anything like a balance in his nature. Paradoxically the melancholic is condemned to strive to achieve an unachievable middle or balance and simultaneously this striving beyond his immediate situation is what enables his great achievements. As Theunissen points out this self-transcendent trait in the melancholic temperament not only sets the course for the rediscovery of melancholy in the dietetic Renaissance philosophy of the genius, but also for the Freudian (and modern) theory of sublimation as the cause for cultural emergence (Theunissen, 1996: 18). Further it points towards the discussion of the organization of self-transcendence and subjectivity as a productive factor in contemporary management (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1992). While mediocre normality is neither capable of the great artistic and intellectual power, nor subject to the suffering that inheres in the anomalies of the temperament, the melancholic constitution according to the author of *Problems* is the foundation both of diseases like mania or depression and of the great cultural achievements, which characterize philosophers, artists, poets, politicians and the like. The great health of melancholy then is a dynamic balancing of a somatic subject that is the locus of great achievements and great suffering, both individual and social.

Melancholy and Individual Stress Management

In the following I will turn to the contemporary description of stress in literature on stress management in order to discover a similar concept of ‘great health’. In other words, I will look for a typology of stress in the light of melancholy. As I have already pointed out we should be careful not to conflate melancholy and stress with each other; rather, we should ask what the symptomatology developed in the Aristotelian conception of melancholy can tell us about the contemporary phenomenon of stress. Hence I will begin this discussion by turning to a popular book, *Stress Management for Dummies*, which treats stress as a practical problem to be solved individually and suggests an array of tools for doing so. My discussion will follow two leads. First I will turn to the *popularization of the extraordinary*, which simultaneously relates stress to melancholy and sets the two apart. Secondly, I will discuss how this popularization is an expression also of a *denaturalization* of what it means to be human in stress management.

Most of what can be said about the popular concept of stress if we look at it from the perspective of the balance implicated in Aristotelian melancholy is contained in the following lines from the foreword to *Stress Management for Dummies*.

Stress is an unavoidable consequence of life. There are some stresses you can do something about, and others you can't hope to avoid or control. The trick is learning to distinguish between the two, so that you're not constantly frustrated like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills. This book teaches

you how to use your time and talents effectively so that stress can make you more productive, rather than self-destructive. (Elkin, 1999: xxv)

Several things are interesting here. First of all, stress is asserted to be a natural phenomenon, a result of life itself, which there is no way to avoid, but which on the other hand can be controlled by fervent self-discipline. Stress is not a pathology in itself, but something that can lead to self-destruction if you are not careful. Taking care, on the other hand, means being more productive. In short, the perception of stress in this relation is much like the Aristotelian perception of melancholy among the exceptional, which implied the assertion of a productive *eucrasia* in the anomaly – a positive on the basis of a negative. In successful stress management “the right amount creates a beautiful tone” (Elkin, 1999: xxv). Stress, much like melancholy, is the somatic subject of achievement, which must be managed so as not to become pathological.

This is perhaps nowhere more lucid than in the pseudoscientific concepts of eustress and distress that were originally coined by Hans Selye, but are now popular in use – also in *Stress Management for Dummies* (Elkin, 1999: 21). The idea of a good stress and a bad stress, a positive and a negative force in life, employs stress, not merely as a result of strain, but as the subject also of achievement. There are “the kinds of stresses that add to the enjoyment and satisfaction of our lives. We want *more* of this kind of stress, not less” (*ibid.*). As the somatic subject of both achievement and illness, stress finds its expression, again much like melancholy, in the individual body and creates individual character. If to the Greeks the concept of a conflictual self, which goes beyond itself, was only a character trait of the exceptional melancholic, to our age it is the popular trademark of success. Stress is not something to handle in order to be able to live; stress enables a life out of the ordinary, because “effective stress management really comes down to effective lifestyle management” (*ibid.*: 2). Stress management promises better health, a longer life, more fun and more energy.

Here we touch upon the place that really sets the ancient concept of melancholy and the contemporary concept of stress apart. If the natural melancholic was an exceptional character and melancholy the somatic subject that enabled his great achievements, then stress applies this exceptional ability to everybody. If melancholy was that which created characteristic individuals, then the popularization of stress and stress management expresses the normative demand for everyone to be something special. Seen from the perspective of Aristotelian melancholy, stress is a symptom of a contemporary *popularization of the extraordinary*. What used to be reserved for only the extraordinary in character in the conception of melancholy, applies to everyone in the conception of stress. The normative demand for a balance that works to release the individual powers of character becomes part of a general anthropology.

The character of this balance becomes increasingly clear if we think of it as a *denaturalization*. I suggest we look through the lens of melancholy at stress, in order not to describe a phenomenon of a natural balancing of things, but in order to describe the phenomenon of a dynamic balance, which is never actually present, but presents itself in the individual body as an actualization of a continuous process. In melancholy, as we have seen, the concept of nature was at least ambiguous. With the black bile as the somatic subject that was the source of individual character, the Greek cosmology came apart and the counter-natural found its way into Nature. The thesis of the

melancholic nature of the exceptional human being, whose temperament, relative to himself only, was the source of both the outstanding achievement and of illness, destabilized the concept of nature. In the contemporary conception of stress a similar denaturalization is generalized to become an anthropological category, through which we recognize ourselves.

How this denaturalized, somatic subject is constitutive of individual character is clearly visible in the practical ‘stress-busting advice and exercises’ that are offered in *Stress Management for Dummies*. Most of these tests, tables, hints and scales are designed to tell the reader “how [his] body reacts” (*ibid.*: 25) and how stress can make him sick with individual somatic reactions. Paradoxically, stress is both assumed to be something that defies general definition (*ibid.*: xxv) and a hormonal reaction, which works in a straightforward causal relation: perceived stressor – hormones – body organs and muscles (*ibid.*: 18). Muscles are prime targets for stress, but also the circulatory systems and sexuality and the immune system (*ibid.*: 18-21). Stress needs to be balanced, because “finding your stress balance is one of the best ways to find out if you are overreacting to the stress in your life” (*ibid.*: 38). The somatic subject acts as a cause for an individual psychological profile, which is the result of a hormonal balance asserted to *you* as an individual.

Your sympathetic nervous system, one of the two branches of your autonomic nervous system, is producing changes in your body. Your hypothalamus, a part of your brain, is activating your pituitary, a small gland at the base of your brain, which releases a hormone into the bloodstream. This hormone (it’s called ACTH or adrenocorticotrophic hormone) reaches your adrenal glands, and they in turn produce more adrenalin (also known as epinephrine) along with other hormones called glucocorticoids (cortisol is one). This melange of biochemical changes is responsible for an array of other remarkable changes in your body. (*ibid.*: 26)

The imaging of stress on a molecular level that constitutes a character of the individual body, which we can identify, isolate and manipulate, but also mobilize, recombine and intervene on, denaturalizes the somatic subject in a way similar to melancholy, because it underlines how stress management is no longer constrained by the apparent normativity of a natural vital order. Nikolas Rose calls this contemporary process a *molecularization*, thereby hinting that the way we relate to ourselves as somatic individuals is changing (2007: 6). This process is not only visible on an individual stress management level, but also in the way organizations handle the challenge.

Stress Management in Organizations

In the following I will turn to stress management in organizations as it is presented in Quick *et al.* (1997). What I would like to do here is show how the denaturalization of stress affects the organizational ability to mobilize, intervene in and manipulate the somatic subject of stress, which is both the subject of achievement and of suffering. The conception of a higher balance in the anomaly, which I first identified in the Greek conception of melancholy and discussed above in relation to individual stress management, is also a part of the organizational imaging of stress, but here it is more exclusively tied to productivity. What I will argue is that the ability for self-transgressive action, which in the Greek conception of melancholy was specifically tied

to the artistic and intellectual achievements of thinkers, politicians and artists, in the contemporary conception of stress is generalized as an idea of productivity as such.

In *Preventive Stress Management in Organizations* the imaging of stress is fairly similar to the one described above, but with a central emphasis that is interesting to the present perspective. Stress is defined as “a creatively ambiguous word with little agreed-on scientific definition” (Quick *et al.*, 1997: 2), but simultaneously as a mobilization that “occurs through the combined action of the sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine (hormonal) system” (*ibid.*: 3). Also, stress has an individual character defined by a somatic subject similar to the one described above, because “some individuals see a specific demand or stressor as a threat, whereas other individuals see the same demand or stressor as a challenge or opportunity” (*ibid.*: 9). Organizational stress management is also concerned with the management of a higher balance in the anomaly, because stress management is “concerned with how individuals and organizations adjust to their environment; achieve high levels of performance and health; and become distressed in various psychological, medical, behavioural, or psychological ways” (*ibid.*: 2ff). But what sets organizational interest in stress apart from the individual perspective is above all the productive convergence between the two: “the individual’s and the organization’s unique vulnerability become important ingredients in understanding the experience of stress” (*ibid.*: 6). From this perspective the mobilization of stress in an individual might provoke a threat reaction in the mind-body system; to the productive organization this “is also a challenge and opportunity” (*ibid.*: 17). The task of organizational stress management is to manage the convergence between the individual dynamic *eucrasia* in the somatic subject and the interests of the productive organization. The management of stress in organizations is a matter of reaching not only a great health in the denaturalized individual convergence between achievement and illness, but also of conforming it to productivity (Pedersen, 2008).

From the point of view of melancholy this is mainly interesting because the nature of the melancholic’s great achievement was of culturally formative character. The ‘mixing’ of the somatic balance, which ultimately was unattainable to the melancholic, was not only that which set him apart from the *mésos*, the mediocre, but also that which kept him in a conflictual relation to himself, the effect of which was continuous self-transgression. It was the self-transgressive character of his constitution, which led to his great and culturally formative achievements. In the dynamic somatic relation, to which organizational stress management challenges the employee, artistic and intellectual self-transgression has been replaced by a generalized concept of productivity. What the character of the Greek melancholic tells us about stress management in organizations is that the idea of the self-transgression of an extraordinary and socially beneficial character has been subsumed under the idea of *Arbeitskraft*, under the concept of a general labour power asserted to every individual. Seen through the lens of melancholy, the goal of organizational stress management is not the achievement of balance, but the setting of the stage for, the intervention in, the organization and management of the precarious somatic relation in stress, which is self-transgressive and potentially productive. This “great health” of stress management is what the productive organization must seek to manage.

Coaching and the Higher Balance of Stress Management

Let us turn to the illustration of a higher balance in *The Manager as Stress Coach* (Andersen and Kingston, 2007) in order to cast a light on the role the manager plays in making the somatic relation in stress productive. I emphasize two things. First, I want to show how stress coaching aims not at a balanced middle but rather at the dynamic elevated middle that the discussion of Aristotelian melancholy has revealed to us. It is the self-transgressive character of this condition that not only ensures productivity but also brings *change* to the organization. This leads me to my second point. As a role model, the manager must become a representation of a way of looking at the world, the nexus of a shared set of assumptions that enables the employees to understand or predict behaviour. In stress coaching, the manager's own behaviour must become a model or a pattern – what the Greeks called *paradeigma*. The paradigm of the manager as stress coach illustrates the desubstantialization of human nature; it illustrates the paradoxical way in which the *natural* becomes desubstantialized when related to productivity.

The Manager as Stress Coach presents the change from growth to stress in order to illustrate how the anomaly itself is the foundation of productivity. In *The Manager as Stress Coach* 'The Stress Ladder' (Andersen and Kingston, 2007: 14) is presented as a tool to measure the proportions between effectivity and stress. Interestingly, the tool shares its basic somatic imagery with the Aristotelian assumption of heat as the dynamic foundation of growth (Klibansky *et al.*, 1992: 81), which the author of *Problems* also subscribes to. On the high end the "temperate employee... feels effective – not busy – and on top of the situation" (Andersen and Kingston, 2007: 14). At the bottom of the ladder the result of too extreme temperatures come together in the distressed and non-productive employee, who has 'burned-out' (*ibid.*: 18). The way from top to bottom, *The Manager as Stress Coach* maintains, is not a question of either-or. Rather it is "a process, where your employees experience a gradual change, which might take place at such a slow pace that they don't register the change" (*ibid.*: 20). Stress is defined as what happens "when a person experiences conditions and demands in the surroundings as straining and exceeding personal estimates of abilities, competences and possibilities" (*ibid.*). As a result the cultivation of a sense of *inner control* as opposed to a sense of *outer control* among the employees is decisive for effectivity in the organization (*ibid.*: 35). From the point of view of Aristotelian melancholy established above, the effective employee represented in *The Manager as Stress Coach* must maintain a 'temperate' balance in the somatic subject of stress, which contributes to her sense of character and provides the ability for effective achievement. As I have argued above, stress is constituted, not only as a source of illness, but also as the denaturalized foundation of achievement.

Another model presented in *The Manager as Stress Coach* may be illustrative of how management in the organization must keep this balance at an elevated and dynamic level to maintain an optimal effectivity. The authors term this the 'optimal level of conflict', where "conflicts function as constructive interruptions, which create good change" (*ibid.*: 17). Measuring the proportions between the level of conflict and the temperature of the somatic subject, the model suggests that this level is placed just above the 'normal' temperature in order to foster and effect progressive change in the team. Comparing this to what we found in the discussion of *Preventive Stress*

Management in Organizations, this underlines the assumption of a self-transgressive dynamics, which has been subsumed under a general idea of labour power in stress management. This power is retained in the individual to be set free by management in a productive manner. The task of the manager as stress coach then is not only to intervene in and mobilize the somatic relation, which is constitutive of individual character in the employee, but also to organize it in such a way that it becomes a productive factor of change. In other words the coaching process effectuated by *The Manager as Stress Coach* does not have as its aim to maintain a stable balance, but rather to facilitate the sort of conflicts that mobilize the dynamics of self-transgression. Stress management is not about the attainment of balance, but about the attainment of a conflictual and productive self-relation to a denaturalized somatic subject, which used to be reserved for the extraordinary in character. The Aristotelian conception of melancholy was characterized by exaltation and a will to the “outbidding of what it means to be human” (Szilasi, 1946: 291). In stress coaching this characterization is elevated to the status of a general anthropogenetic potentiality that is actualized only in individual character through the management of a somatic subject.

This is reflected also in the role of the manager as stress coach. In *The Manager as Stress Coach*, the primary task of the manager is to be a *role-model*. It is the personal effort of the manager that becomes the measure for the achievement of the employees, because they “reflect themselves in you, your effort and your style of work” (Andersen and Kingston, 2007: 40). The simultaneous dilemma and task implicated in this becomes clear, when the authors of *The Manager as Stress Coach* maintain that management in its purest form is the opposite of coaching.

Traditional, authoritative management consists in the execution of the right to point in a direction and set demands – *as a manager I can make absolute decisions: I decide!* In its purest form coaching produces the right of the other to decide: *as a coach I can help you to make the best decisions for you independently: You decide!* (*ibid.*: 44, emphases in original)

It is the task of the manager as stress coach to manoeuvre in this convergent space between the best interest of the organization and the best interest of the employee. Coaching is a way of mobilizing and appropriating the employee’s generic capabilities to the best interest of the organization, through the paradigm of action which the manager creates. As a *paradeigma* the managerial character functions as a desubstantialization of nature, where any position outside of the anomaly measured in stress is unthinkable. In *The Manager as Stress Coach* the anomaly itself is not only the generalized foundation of achievement, it is also the authority through which any understanding in the organization of what a human being can think, can do or can hope for, must be seen (Kristensen, 2007; Pedersen, 2008).

Stress and the Sovereign Individual

So what, finally, can the ancient Greek conception of melancholy tell us about stress management in contemporary organizations? My symptomatological reading of Aristotelian melancholy emphasizes the idea of *eucrasia* in the anomaly, a dynamic and self-transgressive balance, based on the assumption of a somatic subject – the black bile

– which for the extraordinary in character is both the source of great achievement and of illness. I also argued that the dynamics of this *eucrasia* attained through the disciplined but conflictual handling of the somatic subject was that which created individual character in the melancholic and set him apart from mediocrity.

In the individual handling of stress I found the assumption of this *eucrasia* in a popularized form, with stress as the somatic subject through which the individual would recognize his own character. Stress, in this perspective, is not something to be handled in order to live, but is itself something which *enables* life. This denaturalization of what it means to be human, I argued, constitutes an anthropology, because the somatic subject of stress is no longer constrained by the apparent normativity of a natural vital order and is valid for everyone.

In relation to stress management in organizations I found the dynamic and self-transgressive character of this conflictual self-relation to be related to an idea of productivity. I also found that this idea absorbed and subsumed the thought of the culturally formative achievement, inherent to the Aristotelian melancholic character, under the general idea of a productive labour power to be set free by management. To the organization, I argued, stress management is not a question of balance, but of the setting of the stage for the intervention in, the organization and management of the precarious somatic relation in stress, which is found to be potentially productive.

I developed this argument in my discussion of the manager as stress coach. Here the dynamic character of the self-transgressive somatic relation was found to be what brings *change* to the organization. Coaching meant the cultivation of an inner control of the somatic subject in the employee that enabled effective achievement through dynamic change. The role of the manager as a stress coach, then, was that of a *role model*, whose paradigmatic action would mobilize the potential generic qualities of the employee in an anthropogenetic fashion. This, I argued, could be seen as a desubstantialization of nature. If the assumption of stress as a somatic subject would denaturalize the higher balance in the anomaly, then the role of the manager as a stress coach and *paradeigma* would desubstantialize any idea of a nature outside of it.

When Nietzsche, himself a great scholar of melancholy, in 1882 assumed the need for a health for the “nameless, hard to understand”, the being he could not yet name bear a striking resemblance to the one I have tried to describe in this article. These “argonauts”, like Nietzsche’s, “sail around all the coasts of this Mediterranean⁴ of ideals”, the unattainable middle, and like Nietzsche’s argonauts the health they seek to acquire is “*the great health* – that one doesn’t only have but also acquires continually, and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up!” Theirs is also a dangerous ideal, “the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often enough appear *inhuman*” (Nietzsche, 2001: 246f.). In Nietzsche’s sovereign individual his power over himself, his destiny and his nature has grown so instinctual that he calls this instinct his conscience (Nietzsche, 1967: 60). If it

4 I have retained Nietzsche’s original intention to hint at the ancient Greek conception of a ‘middle’ by keeping “Mediterranean” as a translation for the German *Mittelmeer*, instead of Nauckhoff’s ‘inland sea’.

is true, as it has been suggested (Ehrenberg, 2004: 262), that these values have been realized in modern individuality, then the pervasive nature of stress-related illnesses in contemporary Western societies suggest to us that the sovereign individual lacks the strength that Nietzsche imagined him to possess. Maybe it is true after all that this individual is exhausted by his sovereignty and laments his exhaustion (Ehrenberg, 2004: 262). But the concept of melancholy, so long one of the central cultural images of the West, also tells us another story about the intimate relation in our culture between passion and suffering. If the ancient Greek conception of melancholy can teach us anything about stress management in contemporary organizations it is that stress is not merely the *result* of personal or managerial demands; paradoxically the suffering it speaks of is also the *foundation* on which the conceptualization of value, effectivity and achievement is based and flourishes. In the contemporary conceptualization of stress as a somatic subject to be managed productively, the melancholic's relation between passion and suffering, which lasted for nearly two millennia, is reflected. That the Arabic word for black or melancholic after the first centuries of our era developed into a synonym for passion is not a coincidence (Klibansky *et al.*, 1992: 85). The melancholic passion was a gift or a condemnation for the few and extraordinary in character; Greek heroes like Bellerophon, who ended up hated by all immortals, wandering alone about the plain of Aleios, eating his heart out. In the contemporary conception of stress the somatic relation, which characterized these chosen few, has been generalized to involve everyone in the drama of productivity. To take this seriously in the academic debates about value-production in contemporary organizations and the pathologies related to it is important. Maybe understanding that we are the contemporaries of those who came before makes this possible. After all Nietzsche's *great seriousness* emerges, not with the end, but with the beginning of the tragedy (Nietzsche, 2001: 246), which we can call the 'great health' of stress management.

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