'Creatures of a Day': Contingency, Mortality, and Human Limits

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Abstract
This paper offers a nexus of terms – mortality, limits, contingency and vulnerability – painting a picture of human life as marked by limitation and finitude. I suggest that limitations of possibility, capacity, and resource are deep features of human life, but not only restrict it. Limits are also the conditions of possibility for human life and as such have productive, normative, and creative powers that not only delimit life but also scaffold growth and transformation within it. The paper takes a less known interpretation of the term '*ephēmeros*', to mean 'of the day', rather than 'short-lived' and suggests that as ephemeral, human life is contingent and mutable, subject to events beyond our control. However, virtue can still be exercised – indeed, can be exuberantly displayed – when we respond to contingent events marked by adversity.

1. Introduction

Death is not the only worrisome limit that plagues human life and demands reflective coping. There are, as philosophers have suggested, different kinds of finitude that characterise human existence. Heidegger (1962) points out how we can die not only biologically (an event he calls 'demise', *ableben*) but also die existentially, by becoming 'unable to be' (Carel, 2007a). Benatar (2017) has pointed out the futility and limitations of both life *and* death – death because it annihilates us and deprives us of pleasure; life because it is inherently bad. MacIntyre (1999) has laid out the 'facts of life' as vulnerability to affliction, dependence on others, and subjection to powerful external forces (cf. Carel and Kidd, forthcoming).

Limitation – of possibility, of capacity, of resource – marks human life in deep and unsettling ways. And yet, although these limits have been tackled as a practical challenge, insofar as they have been addressed they have been seen as a negative feature of human life to be rejected, revolted against, or got rid of.[1] The reason for this may be our positive stance: embracing technological advances, hopes for

[1] There are, of course, notable exceptions to this, such as the philosophy of illness and the philosophy of disability, some existentialist work and feminist philosophy, but these are notable for being viewed as specialised areas

doi:10.1017/S1358246121000369 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2021

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246121000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a transhumanist future, or the view of humanity's trajectory as that of potentially unlimited progress, that drives us to overlook or reject limitations. Psychological reactions – denial, idealisation, wishful thinking – also cause our 'sensitive minds', as Freud puts it in *On Transience*, to 'recoil from anything that is painful' (1957). Psychic pain interferes with our possibility of enjoyment, says Freud, so we push thoughts about transience aside, in favour of a more palatable focus on progress, achievement, and success.

That we are transient, fleeting visitors to this world – that we are *temporally* finite – has been a time-honoured philosophical theme for millennia, from Epicurus to Heidegger. As part of this engagement, Michael Hauskeller offers the ancient Greek term for humans: *ephēmeroi* which he translates as 'the short-lived ones', or 'those who live only for a day (*epi hemera*)' (2019, pp. 11–12).

The term 'ephemeral' can also be understood in another way. We are also ephemeral in that we are subject to the ever-changing days, to the variable, mutable world we inhabit. We are *ephēmeros* – *day creatures*, to use Pindar's elegant term, in our phenomenal world.[2] We are subject to change: change can engulf us, swallow us whole and spit us onto a raft crossing the channel, into the midst of a civil war, subject to social and political upheaval, pandemics, wars, coups, and other events over which we have little control. We can express this sense of *ephēmeros* – our vulnerability to external events and the changes of the phenomenal world in which we exist – by stating that we are temporally finite but also existentially finite, with finite abilities and possibilities (Carel, 2007a). These kinds of limit – not finitude of time but finitude of choice and possibility – are no less philosophically rich than temporal finitude.

This essay resists the recoiling of our 'sensitive minds' against transience, death, and what is painful, suggesting instead that what we have taken to be our limits is simply our way of being. The essay examines in what ways limits are philosophically pertinent and suggests that limits and boundaries are transcendental conditions of human life as we know it. Death is a major, but by no means the primary, limit of human life. We are limited in other ways too, that are important and profoundly shape human existence.

I propose a dual understanding of finitude, seeing it both as temporal finitude and as existential finitude. By existential finitude I

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of philosophical work (see Carel and Kidd (forthcoming) for further discussion of this).

[2] An alternative translation is 'creatures of a day'. See Lefkowitz (1977).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246121000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mean that we have finite possibilities, are subject to the contingencies of life, and have finite capabilities. This broad view, emphasizing our mortality, also often includes the claim that not only is life finite, it is also short (Nagel, 1970).[3] However, following Fränkel's (1946) philological analysis, I want to suggest that life is ephemeral not because it is short, but rather because it is long, and as such susceptible to the effects of contingency and limitation which shape and delimit our existence in ways analogous to, but importantly different from, death. We are both mortal and existentially finite.

2. Being towards death: Heidegger on temporal finitude

In the 1929–1930 lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* Heidegger writes: 'Finitude is not some property that is merely attached to us, but is *our fundamental way of being*' (1996, p. 6). Death defines and shapes Dasein's existence as its limit. It is 'the limit-situation that defines the limits of Dasein's ability-to-be' (Blattner, 1994, p. 67).[4] This limit becomes existentially significant because of Dasein's unique capacity to anticipate it, a capacity that structures human life as 'being-towards-death'. Death limits life not only as an end point towards which we progress each day, but also as imbuing our actions and decisions with singularity and unidirectionality (Carel, 2006a). We live each moment once only because of our temporal finitude. Therefore, Heidegger's analysis focuses on how Dasein's existence is shaped by mortality and how life is a process of dying (*sterben*). Finitude shapes the projects and plans we make and is therefore implicit in our self-conception. As Stephen Mulhall writes, 'Phenomenologically speaking, then, life is death's representative, the proxy through which death's resistance to Dasein's grasp is at once acknowledged and overcome' (2005, p. 305).

Being towards death is therefore an active and practical stance: 'Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is'

[3] Although not all philosophical traditions lament life's shortness. Against the contemporary consensus that life is short, other views can be found in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, some emphasising phenomenal life's insignificance relative to the permanent world of the forms (Plato) to a view of life as being long enough 'if you know how to use it' (Seneca).

[4] In this section I will use Heidegger's term, Dasein, to denote the human being.

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(Heidegger, 1962, p. 288).[5] Dasein's way of being towards death reveals itself in its choices of possibilities towards which it projects itself, which constitute Dasein's movement towards its future. When Dasein *anticipates* death it frees itself, because death illuminates all other possibilities as part of a finite structure. Seeing itself as a finite structure enables Dasein to see itself as a whole. This understanding is not theoretical but enacted. Therefore Dasein not only understands itself as a finite whole but *exists* as one.

There are two ways for Dasein to respond to its mortality: authentically and inauthentically. Dasein can choose to respond authentically to death by resolutely anticipating it. This opens the possibility for Dasein to authentically engage with its existence, since it has now grasped it as finite. Dasein can also flee from death by dismissing it as irrelevant to the present. Heidegger calls this attitude 'inauthentic'. The two attitudes to death underlie everyday practical concerns and engagement with the world because our actions are performed within a temporally finite horizon. As a result, no one is exempt from having some sort of attitude towards death. Whether Dasein assumes an authentic attitude towards death or flees from its mortality, it is always death-bound. Death determines Dasein's relationship to its future and its conception of itself as finite and temporal.

Returning to the theme of limits, Heidegger defines Dasein's death as a possibility [*Möglichkeit*] which can occur at any time, and hence death is an ever-present condition of every one of Dasein's possibilities. Every possibility one considers is shadowed by the possibility of death: of not having any more possibilities, or as Heidegger puts it: 'Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein' (1962, p. 294).

Both the possibility of being unable to be (or what Blattner calls 'existential death') and temporal finitude are conditions for the meaningfulness of all other possibilities, and both are limit cases that define the boundaries of meaningful experience. In this sense there is an affinity between the two types of finitude (Carel, 2007a). Existential death is a state of being unable to press into any possibilities – existential paralysis, if you like, in which one's very ability to exist is put in abeyance, in a clear parallel to death, in which one's ability to exist is permanently annihilated.

But in what sense is death a possibility? Being-towards-the-end defines Dasein as finite temporality, as a constant movement

[5] Hans Jonas, too, defines life through its constant struggle against falling back into nothingness. So in a way, for Jonas, Dasein is not towards death, but away from it. I thank Michael Hauskeller for drawing this contrast.

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towards its annihilation. Beyond all possible projections into the future lies the ultimate anticipation [*Vorgriff*] of shutting down Dasein's temporal trajectory. Consequently, Dasein's end is something that is only ever impending, but can never be made actual, that is, be experienced by Dasein, because death is simply its annihilation. Moreover, whereas other things are possible only at certain times, Dasein's end is possible at any moment. Our end is 'always and only a possibility' (Mulhall, 2005, p. 303). But as such a possibility, it foregrounds every possibility, choice, and action we take.

We can now see how finitude of possibility and temporal finitude are conceptually related. Both define the end or limitation of life, and as limit concepts they assign significance to life by delineating its confines. Being-towards-the-end expresses temporal finitude; death is the finitude of possibilities, in both senses: temporally and existentially. The concepts are further linked through the concept of *Angst*, or anxiety. Anxiety is the state of being existentially dead because one is too anxious to be able to act. One is effectively paralysed by anxiety and thus in a state of existential death (Blattner, 1996). *Angst* is also the affective state that discloses Dasein to itself as temporally finite, as being-towards-the-end, so both kinds of 'inability to be' are experienced through anxiety.

The question that emerges with respect to these two types of finitude is not how one ought to die, but how one ought to live knowing that one will die, taking into account both mortality and existential finitude. Our relation to our death is not something that is realized when we die, but something we either realize or fail to realize in our life (Mulhall, 2005). Confronting life as Dasein's ownmost possibility requires Dasein to acknowledge that its being is always an issue for it, that 'its life is something for which it is responsible, that it is its own to live (or to disown)' (ibid., p. 306). Because death could come at any moment, the radical contingency of each individual life becomes apparent, and to acknowledge this is to acknowledge finitude, 'the fact that our existence has conditions or limits, that it is neither self-originating nor self-grounding nor self-sufficient, that it is contingent from top to bottom' (ibid.; see also Hatab, 1995, p. 411). I now turn to these limits and contingencies, to continue building the picture of what Ian Kidd and I call the 'facts of life'.

3. Finite possibilities and the 'facts of life'

Grounded in Heidegger's analysis of being towards death, we have secured the understanding of life as temporally finite and also

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begun to see how existential death foreshadows and formally mirrors death. The previous section has articulated the duality of finitude for Heidegger: it is both temporal finitude *and* existential death, i.e., being paralysed by anxiety and unable to press into any possibilities, and hence unable to *exist* in Heidegger's sense. There are other forms of finitude we now turn to: finitude of possibility, contingency, and finitude of our capacities.

Our limits are the ways in which we are restricted. We may be restricted in our freedom, our possibilities for action, our choices, or constrained by what Heidegger called our 'thrownness' [*Geworfenheit*]: the historical, social and existential context into which we are 'thrown', or in which we find ourselves when we come into existence. These limits restrict us but are also what enables us to live as human within a world that both affords possibilities and threatens their closure. Our limits can therefore be interpreted as positive – as opening vistas of possibility and experience – or as negative: as restricting or delimiting our being in the world. One way of reconciling the two is by stating, like Freud, Hauskeller, and others, that the risk and possibility of injury and disappointment are a necessary price – indeed, one worth paying – to have beauty, value and love. As Hauskeller asks: 'And what kind of adventure would [life] be if we couldn't be hurt, if nothing could be lost?' (2019, p. 20).

It is because we invest libidinally in others (and more generally in external objects and values) – or love them, more simply – that we make ourselves vulnerable, says Freud. With love comes the threat of disappointment, rejection, desertion, and betrayal; the possibility of loss. With joy comes the fear of finding ourselves empty or sad again. With value – Freud mentions patriotism – comes the threat of what we cherish being harmed, destroyed, or taken away.

On this view, life is premised upon trade-offs: life's positives are fragile, precious, and hence difficult to non-ambivalently embrace. We are psychologically prone to experience ambivalence, to a certain extent, about many of our endeavours: from relationship and connection making to creative efforts, to throwing ourselves into various projects, to the making of our world: love and loss are intertwined. When we press into possibilities, or pursue projects, we propel ourselves into our future. We make our future and make ourselves through this projection [*entwerfen*], to use Heidegger's term (1962) (see also Inwood 1999, pp. 176–78). Projection implies both doing and investing, as well as accepting the risks and limitations such doing and investing entail. But we are never just projection – we are always also thrown, hence Heidegger's compact definition of

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the human being as 'thrown projection', encompassing both our freedom and our limitations (Heidegger, 1962; Inwood, 1999).

Freud's view could be called the 'trade-off' view: it sees life as this kind of risk taking: the risk of losing is what makes the game fun, one might say. Or, more poetically: 'Tis better to have loved and lost/ Than never to have loved at all'.[6] The view is neither black and white nor a simple cost-benefit calculus. Freud is at great pains to explain why attaching to things outside ourselves is crucial to our psychic life and why not doing so is existentially and psychologically pathological, if not impossible. Hauskeller (2019) poses the view as a challenge to a certain transhumanist view, arguing that immortality and invulnerability are not ideals to aspire to and that the risk involved is life's driver and provides it with variation and intensity.

Here is another way of understanding the same phenomenon. The dark side of life – loss, pain, rejection, despair – are not a necessary evil we need to put up with in order to obtain the more pleasurable aspects of life. Rather they are the conditions of possibility enabling human life to contain the variety it does. Without them, we would not be who we are and although we are primed to forever want more, we are, at the same time, aware of the futility of our avarice. For wanting more can lead to further philosophical dismay. Take death, for example. As Bernard Williams argues, death is undeniably bad, but so is immortality. That it is better always to live on does not mean that it is better to live always, as he (1973) argues. *Contra* Nagel (1970), life is not a linear accumulation of pleasures so that more is always better than less. Life has a more complex structure. Going on to live indefinitely is not necessarily the happily (for)ever after that we may fantasise about, and there is a clear disconnect between such fantasies and the complexity and deeply ambivalent nature of life.

What would understanding our limits, contingency, and vulnerability as conditions of human life look like? I'd like to start developing this view in relation to what Ian James Kidd and I have called the 'facts of life'. In a recent paper we suggested that the facts of life arise from three aspects of human life (Carel and Kidd, 2019). First, we are embodied and hence subject to injury and illness. Second, we are social and hence vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and oppression by others. Third, we initiate meaningful projects, and these can fail, or go wrong, or be thwarted by others.

[6] *In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 27*, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45336/in-memoriam-a-h-h-obiit-mdcccxxxiii-27 (accessed 20 August 2021).

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The meaning and value of our lives and that we find in our lives can be subverted in any of these ways. As MacIntyre puts it:

> We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by serious ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing, as we encounter bodily illness and injury, inadequate nutrition, mental defect and disturbance, and human aggression and neglect (1999, p.1).

MacIntyre captures the fragility and tenuousness of human life, which is vulnerable to accident, affliction and subjection in the three ways mentioned above. On this view illness and disability play a much more central role in our understanding of human life. Our bodies are vulnerable not only contingently, but also fundamentally open to external forces, in ways that make us extremely vulnerable (as we've seen in the current pandemic). We live in social groups and political systems and are dependent on their continued support. So our own agency, wellbeing and autonomy are also deeply contingent on the continued stability and freedoms afforded by such systems when they operate positively. Finally, we invest time and energy and much emotion in the projects that matter to us. But that investment, as we have seen in Freud's *On Transience*, is, again, contingent on our efforts being well received and supported by others, rather than thwarted by external forces, deliberately or not.

With MacIntyre and Kidd, I propose we see limits, contingency and vulnerability as fundamental modes of human life, not just a necessary evil. This affects our self-understanding as autonomous agents, because our epistemic and practical agency operates against a 'facts of life' background, meaning that our scope for choice is less extensive, our freedom less unbounded, than we might suppose. Human agency is deeply conditioned by complex sets of circumstances, which makes our concrete situation much more of a determinative feature of our life than we may think and makes our control, decision-making and choice less obvious. I suggest we see such limits as enablers of life experiences. In the same way that immortality would, as Williams (1973) argues, make life meaningless and intolerably tedious, removing other limits or barriers can similarly devalue and obliterate meaning from life.

We can reconfigure these limits so as to see their transcendental and meaning-giving nature by mapping them on to the three 'facts of life'. First, we said that there are limits to our bodily capacities. We cannot fly or breathe under water, for example. But not being able to fly or breathe under water are not seen as bodily failures but as ways of defining what human bodies are. In contrast to, say, not being able to

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breathe air, which would be a bodily failure, not being able to breathe under water is a feature of our mammalian land existence: we are creatures who breathe air. Bodily limits are also enablers in an additional way. Fighting against those limits can be creative and fun; coming close to or testing our bodily limits is an enjoyable challenge and human endeavour. For example, extreme sports, strength training, marathon running, and so on, are an engagement with those limits 'from the inside' as it were, but still attempting to push the boundaries of what our bodies are capable of.

Second, our way of being with others is inherently social (Szanto and Moran, 2016). This is expressed by Heidegger in his notion of being-with [*Mitsein*]: whether in a fulfilled or privative mode, we are always and inherently being with others. We seek human companionship and need others for almost every aspect of life. This makes us deeply dependent on others, as MacIntyre (1999) emphasises, and requires trust in others for everything we do (Bernstein, 2011). That dependence and trust make us vulnerable, as MacIntyre claims, but they also make us into persons who are nurtured by connection and relationships. We care deeply about others and about what others think of us. That makes us vulnerable, but it also opens up certain life forms and fundamental concepts such as friendship, love, family, care, and respect.

To appreciate how deep our sociality runs and the extent to which it is an organising principle for human life, we can look to how our social interactions have been profoundly disrupted and restricted during the lockdowns and social distancing measures we recently experienced in the pandemic. The social deprivations and restrictions have made ever more salient that we need other people in a deep way, both practically and psychologically. Our need for social connection and meaningful embodied friendships has been revealed in the marked increase in mental ill health and reported loneliness, sadness, grief, and isolation caused by the pandemic and social distancing (Froese et al., 2021).

Our dependence on others is not some weakness or accidental feature of our big brains and infantile needs. Rather, this dependence is a central and fundamental feature of human life. That dependence, again, can be a source of vulnerability but also an elemental feature of our embodied being. We are grown inside another human, we are nursed and looked after intensively during our infancy and early years and remain dependent on others in ways that are profoundly important to philosophy (Stone, 2019). That dependence is a source of creativity, shared intimacy and joy. It has also been radically underappreciated by mainstream philosophy with the notable exception of feminist authors such as Carol Gilligan (1989), Sarah Blaffer

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Hrdy (1999), Sarah Ruddick (1989), and Alison Stone (2019), to name a few.

Third, our projects are limited by our cognitive abilities, energy, time, enthusiasm, and of course external constraints such as financial and political limits and other people's support or thwarting of these projects. When we invest time and energy in a goal or project, to use Heidegger's term, that investment is limited by our resources and capacities and the willingness of others to support our efforts. These limits delineate what is possible to achieve and what requires more help or a collective effort; what projects we ultimately choose to pursue has a generative function, in that it shapes and defines who we become (Heidegger, 1962).

These three types of limits – our limited embodied nature, our dependence on others, and our limited capacity to project – enable human life and should be seen as akin to Heideggerian possibilities: choosing to press into one possibility closes off other possibilities but it is existence; we press into possibilities in ways that define us, and each choice excludes other possibilities but at the same time also opens other, new possibilities to us (ibid.). Similarly, having limits to bodily capacities, limits (and norms) for social interactions, and having limited capacities to carry out our projects not only limits but also proscribes and defines what is possible.

To conclude this section, let us describe the general features of the three types of limitations. First, they provide boundaries to measure ourselves and push against. These limits define and frame human action: without them our ability to judge and assess our actions and success or its absence would be highly compromised. How can we say whether a bodily performance is successful or not – say, athletic – if we don't have a sense of what our general human limits are and a personal capacity to measure our performance against?

Second, limits combine with the 'life cycle' view to provide a framing that helps with the creation of meaning and meaning-making processes. By 'life cycle' I mean the form of a human life – where significant stages of that life are ones in which we are helpless and depend on others' care: before and at birth and during infancy, as well as during periods where our physical and mental capacities diminish, and we become dependent once again. When we view someone as being in a particular life stage – infancy, say – we can view their actions in that context and then judge whether they have met or exceeded their limits. This is an important way to contextualise and understand how humans change over time, how they develop, and what limits characterise each life stage.

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Finally, limits also provide us with a normative basis because they set our expectations. We understand our actions against a backdrop of a set of norms (these could be norms of health, norms of moral conduct, norms of success) and without limits that would be impossible. In short, limits do not just restrict us, but set out what is possible; in that sense limits are enablers.

4. Contingency: 'man is all accident'

Another significant element of the 'facts of life' is contingency. We cannot control what the day brings or shape our lives independently of that fact. Our decisions are only ever attempts, often futile, to bring about certain states of affairs. But, as the Stoics tell us, at most we can control our attempts and our responses to what unfolds; we cannot control what unfolds (Epictetus, 1891). Epictetus reminds us that we are actors in a drama, not its authors (*Enchiridion* XVII). How our desires and goals encounter the forces of our day's reality can never be entirely planned. Our choices are often confounded by material and other facts about our abilities and bodily constraints (Carel and Kidd, 2019; Carel, 2016a).

We can never fully anticipate the outcome of our choices or dictate the neat unfolding of our future, despite our best efforts. This is a central theme in Greek tragedy: Oedipus chose not to kill his father or sleep with his mother, but in his attempts to avoid these events he ended up doing exactly what he feared. Oedipus' story is often taken to be an illustration of the ancient Greek focus on the clash of human free will with 'fate'. However, the contested and often misunderstood concept of 'fate' lacks nuance on this reading and takes the notion of free will to be more developed than it was at the time of Sophocles' (1984) rendition of the story in *Oedipus Rex*. This view also posits free will in strong juxtaposition to 'fate' in misleading ways that require a rigid understanding of these concepts (see Carel, 2006b for a full discussion). Gould agrees with this view: 'the Greeks before the Stoics had not yet conceived of the will as we do and so did not see fate and free will as exclusive alternatives' (Gould, 1988, p. 51).

Rather than seeing the story of Oedipus as that of a conflict between free will and fate, it provides us with a morally nuanced lesson about how people can be destroyed by 'circumstances whose origin does not lie with them,' and 'things that they do not control,' due to the 'ungoverned contingency [of] social life' (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 25, 89). As H.D.F. Kitto (1958, p. 1)

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comments on Greek tragedy, '"the gods" [are] simply those aspects and conditions of life which we have to accept because we cannot change them'. On this interpretation, the monolithic and explanatorily opaque notion of 'fate' becomes a more nuanced and hermeneutically productive force of contingency.

Seen this way, Oedipus' story illustrates a general truth about human life: any decision-making is always done in the thick of life. Any such decisions could be thwarted, twisted, or otherwise frustrated by a variety of factors and forces, many of them beyond our knowledge, understanding, and control. In the words of Robert Burns, in a 1785 poem to a mouse whose nest he accidentally overturned with his plough: 'The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men/Gang aft a-gley'– often go awry.

Returning to our earlier discussion of *ephēmeros*, this view of contingency is supported by a less familiar meaning of the term. Contingency is a foundational aspect of being *ephēmeros*, 'of the day', which can also mean 'belonging to the day' or 'subject to the day' (Fränkel, 1946). Rather than understanding 'of the day' as meaning 'short lived', being 'of the day' means humans are owned by the flux and continual mutability of the days, to which we must adapt to the best of our ability. We are subject to contingent factors imposed on us by the norms and structures of the day and these are both out of our control and changeable, because what is 'of the day' must change as the days change: mutability marks human life which is lived within ever changing conditions.

As Fränkel writes, 'the term implies that man is moulded and remoulded by changing events and circumstance' (1946, p. 133). Life is ephemeral not in the familiar sense that it is short and passing, but rather because it is too long to retain any sense of stability within it (Fränkel, 1946, p. 134 fn. 13). Thus, *ephēmeros* also denotes what is unstable or precarious: there is no certainty of permanence over the many days of our lives. Even if things are stable, that stability is not guaranteed because life is 'of the day', and hence characterised by this mutability – political, social, personal, existential. Change is also a constant feature of physical bodies, with growth, development, illness, and ageing; this sits well with the 'life cycle' view offered in the previous section.

We also change mentally, with changes in our beliefs, attitudes, values and desires; L. A. Paul's notion of transformative experience provides a framework for understanding how our experiences can give rise to such changes (Paul, 2014; Carel and Kidd, 2019). Such changes, suggests Paul, are characterised by being epistemically transformative (giving us new information we would not otherwise

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have) and personally transformative (changing our beliefs, values, preferences, etc.). Experiences that are both epistemically and personally transformative are what Paul calls 'transformative experiences', and they are the ones that change us. I argue (2019) that such change need not only be seen as momentous, dramatic change, but that we can also be transformed by the cumulative effects of mundane experiences – perhaps the more familiar way of gradually modifying our beliefs and acquiring modest amounts of new knowledge.

And of course, there is continuous social change, with political events and the updating of societal norms, values, and institutions. Taken together, these three main ways in which we change physically, mentally and societally, articulate human openness – some may say vulnerability – to change. We do not have absolute control over any of these types of changes. Change is an existential feature of human life which is therefore ephemeral in its mutability and openness to contingency. In the words of Solon: 'man is all accident' (cited in Fränkel 1946, p. 135). An alternative translation by Joshua Anthony reads: 'man is entirely of circumstance' and A. D. Godley translates: 'man is entirely chance' (Herodotus, 1920).[7] We are made up of our contingent circumstances.

From this, second, meaning of *ephēmeros* as being 'of the day' or 'subject to the day' and hence subject to an unexpected flux of events which cannot be controlled by any individual, Fränkel draws a 'doctrine of personal variability'. This is a negative doctrine which Fränkel attributes to a certain strand of ancient Greek thinking during the epic and lyric eras: we adapt to our circumstances in ways that can be deceitful, dishonest, or opportunistic. We 'seize the day' in order to exploit, fit in, and utilise versatile identities. We need to do all that because we are subservient to the present day, atmosphere, and people we are surrounded with. The doctrine of personal variability sees the self as 'pliable and passive', contributing to a sense of helplessness and inadequacy of man (Fränkel, 1946, p. 136).

But personal variability can also be seen as a positive trait, so change in oneself in accordance with life's events can also indicate openness and flexibility. Our ability to change and adapt, to respond to life's events and circumstances, is surely a crucial feature of one's resilience, flexibility, and creativity. Adjustment, says Fränkel, 'makes the vicissitudes of life easier to bear' (ibid. p. 138).

[7] https://classicalanthology.theclassicslibrary.com/2019/08/11/histories-1-30-1-1-33-solon-at-the-court-of-croesus-part-2-cleobis-and-biton/ (accessed 7 September 2021).

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I would like to go further and suggest that in being *ephēmeros* humans are also *open* to life's events, rather than vulnerable to events and hostage to fortune, because we are able to creatively respond to life's challenges. Adaptability isn't merely a passive responsive mode. Adaptability also implies a creative dimension: when we respond by adapting to a new condition or circumstance, that response is often creative. We adapt to new situations by deploying new strategies, changing our behaviour, adjusting our goals, updating our beliefs, and so on. These responses include a generative element in virtue of the creation of new modes of interaction and action within the new day.

Take the example of falling ill or becoming disabled: when we respond to limitations brought about by illness or accident, we adapt by inventing new ways to achieve our goals or, if required, we can modify our goals and look for new ones that are compatible with our illness. These could be new modes of motility, for example, or new ways of envisaging our future. New sources of enjoyment, or a new way of thinking about our situation. This is not an attempt to assert a 'bright-siding', to borrow Barbara Ehrenreich's (2010) useful term, or a Pollyanna-like minimising of the negative aspects of illness. Of course there is much sadness, loss and negativity in this process, but it is not monolithically bad, as many assume (Carel, 2016a, ch. 6). It is a much more diverse, nuanced, complex, changing and – indeed – *creative* process than is often appreciated (Carel, 2007b; 2016b). This creativity emerging in response to adversity is important to document, witness, and celebrate because illness plays a large role in almost every human life and seeing it as purely negative carries significant costs. Articulating the richness and diversity of illness can bring into view the active agency that is still possible even in severe illness and to therefore contribute to the sense that agency, dignity, and personal growth are not impossible in serious illness. Taken more broadly, this offers a different way to that discussed by Fränkel of understanding how one may respond to the events of the day: not by being hostage to circumstance, but by actively and creatively responding to contingent events.

What are the consequences of being 'day creatures', *ephēmeros*? First, our vision is limited to what is known and accepted by the present day. Our perspectives, beliefs, and values, and hence our choices and actions, are coloured by our contingent position in a particular point in time and place. Second, our opinions and beliefs may not be grounded in permanent, timeless principles. They are 'of the day', so may be anchored in the phenomenal world rather than in timeless truths. Third, our beliefs may change quickly and

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continuously because circumstances change (Fränkel, 1946). We need to constantly update our beliefs and our understanding of the world around us in tandem with new evidence and facts as they emerge and in response to new information and new experiences. Being *ephēmeros* means that epistemically we are perhaps less robust than we hope. But it also means that we can be edified and changed by new knowledge, and that events and circumstances can transform us, again, seeing our openness and responsiveness as positive features of our ephemeral existence (cf. Paul, 2014; Kidd, 2012; Carel and Kidd, 2019). The acknowledgement of our impermanence and the epistemic limits this entails need not be an acknowledgement of a weakness; it can also be seen as an openness to contingency, an embracing of creativity.

5. Conclusion: vulnerability and virtue

I have so far discussed three themes of human life: it is temporally finite, existentially limited, and subject to contingency; I based those features on a 'facts of life' framework, articulating vulnerability and dependence on others. Here I return to the notion of vulnerability, which will allow us to connect the three themes and offer concluding remarks.

The first feature of vulnerability is its universal nature. We are all vulnerable, to a degree, and share important vulnerabilities (e.g. to illness, pain and death), although some people are more vulnerable than others in important ways, as I discuss below (Carel, 2016a; Carel and Kidd, forthcoming). Vulnerability is present as a constant possibility (a 'fact of life'), but it is also uniquely enacted in each person's case. Social, economic, legal, and political conditions will make some persons more vulnerable than others and therefore subject to the vulnerabilising effects of e.g. illness, disability, sexism, ageism, racism, ableism and other forms of social injustice and discrimination (Carel and Kidd, forthcoming; for an in-depth case study see Tremain, 2021).

A second feature of vulnerability is that it is never elected: no one chooses to become vulnerable to disease, natural disaster, accident, or violence. But nonetheless becoming vulnerabilised has the power to profoundly transform us – for example, through the edifying powers of illness (Kidd, 2012), the reflective coping that adversity demands (Carel, 2018), or the posttraumatic growth afforded by trauma (Haidt, 2006; Carel, 2016a, ch. 6).

Despite the sharedness of vulnerability and it being a 'fact of life', it is often unevenly distributed, giving rise to social and other kinds of

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injustice. In other words, vulnerability is both shared as a feature of human existence, and lived in highly specific ways by each person. The term 'vulnerability' has become common in these pandemic times because of the labelling of some groups and people as 'vulnerable' to covid-19.

However, as Shelley Tremain (2021) points out, the term can mask, rather than reveal, what it denotes. I therefore proposed, with Ian Kidd, to use Tremain's term 'vulnerabilisation' to articulate the important claim that one *becomes vulnerabilised* by the actions of others, institutional failings, and broad political processes and life events (Carel and Kidd, forthcoming). We use the term 'vulnerabilised persons' to pick out a large and diverse group of people who suffer situational vulnerabilities, those which were 'caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups' (Mackenzie et al., 2014, p. 7). Such situations may be brief or prolonged and episodic or continuous right up to the level of institutionalisation. These could be, for example, persons with chronic ill health (somatic or mental), those deprived of proper education, those with learning disabilities, people who have suffered adverse early childhood events, such as abuse, neglect, or frequent placement moves, neurodiverse persons, persons living in poverty and deprivation, those who are elderly and frail, and those traumatised by political or economic circumstances, in ways that affect their life opportunities and conduct.

This is not an exhaustive list, but an indication of the diversity of this group. This partial list demonstrates that vulnerabilisation is complex, its sources varied and diverse, and its effects on one's life far-ranging. Moreover, since the causes and forms of vulnerabilisation are many and complicated, we need a nuanced taxonomy. Consider, for instance, that vulnerablisation can take many different forms, like creating, intensifying, exploiting, threatening, or making salient one's vulnerabilities.

We call members of this group 'vulnerabilised' rather than 'vulnerable' because – following Tremain's (2021) important observation, these individuals are *made vulnerable* by circumstances – political, economic, medical, educational, legal, and so on – that are beyond their control, but which impact on their lives in profound and sustained ways. Tremain sees vulnerability as neither natural nor intrinsic to certain individuals. She writes: 'rather than a prediscursive inherent human trait, vulnerability is a contextually specific social phenomenon whose politically potent and artifactual character could be recognized and acknowledged if feminist philosophers (among others) were to take up Foucault's idea of "eventalization"' (Tremain, 2021).

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One is not born vulnerabilised, but rather becomes vulnerabilised through social, legal, and personal processes. All humans are susceptible to such vulnerabilisation and therefore vulnerability is a general feature of human existence. Given that we may each at any point become vulnerable, we need to incorporate this vulnerability as a deeply embedded feature of our life, including it in any discussion of the good life or of the meaning of life. The 'facts of life' ought not to exclude the possibility of flourishing, because flourishing can, and often does, happen against a backdrop that is non-ideal. Flourishing should be possible even to imperfect, limited human forms of life (Carel, 2016b). This is not an attempt to cover up or minimise the powerful effects and profound damage that can be inflicted by vulnerabilisation, for example, by falling ill. Rather, it illuminates the possibility that moral excellence and perhaps other kinds of flourishing are possible even under conditions that are far from ideal and even with limited resources and personal capacities.

All lives are imperfect but some are more so; this fact entails crucial social and political commitments, as has been spelled out in detail in the social justice literature (for a discussion see Carel and Kidd forthcoming). We shouldn't overlook the possibility of flourishing despite diminished capacities and vulnerabilities. We ought to ameliorate and reduce vulnerabilisation and vulnerability, whilst avoiding unnecessarily narrowing the space of flourishing (ibid.; Carel, 2016b).

This paper offered a framework that takes seriously the facts of life, respects contingency, understands limits, and attends to vulnerability. I presented the life cycle view which enables pluralism within a life to reveal the different capacities and characteristics of the different stages of life. Rather than looking to the vulnerabilities or deficiencies of infancy or old age, I suggest that each developmental stage has corresponding virtues and these ought to be studied and recognised in any discussion of the value, meaning or structure of life (Carel, 2016b).

The life cycle view fits neatly into the 'facts of life' framework, that takes our vulnerability to affliction and accident and our dependence on others to be key features of life. That dependence, central also to the life cycle view, is not a weakness or negativity but an articulation of the deep social bonds inherent in human life. The limits spelled out by the 'facts of life' are perhaps mostly acutely reflected in human mortality, or temporal finitude. Human mortality structures human life by seeing us as 'being towards death'. This offers us the helpful contrast between 'being able to be' (life) and 'being unable to be' (death or anxiety) but also the parallels between the inability to be within life (*Angst*) and death. Finally, I articulated the role of

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contingency in human life and how individual decision-making and choices encounter contingency, going beyond a rigid view of contingency as 'fate' or what one stands helplessly before. I enlisted a second meaning of *ephēmeros* to examine what it means to be 'day creatures' who are subject to the changing conditions of a mutable present, providing an account of contingency's central role in human life, endeavours, and wellbeing.

Vulnerability, finitude, contingency, limitations, and incapacity are constitutive of the human condition. They are conditions of possibility for human life as we know it. All humans are vulnerable at the start and end of life, and many were, or will be, vulnerable or vulnerabilised at some point in their life. Such vulnerability both requires and tests virtues such as fortitude, creativity, patience, resilience, and acceptance and often requires us to be adaptive and creative in responding to life's contingencies. When we face our own vulnerability, or that of others (e.g. by caring for someone who is ill or dying) we are provided with an exuberant opportunity to exhibit excellence by responding well to adversity. Being vulnerable is a challenge, and can be a disruption or crisis; illness is a paradigmatic and near-universal case of such disruption. It is also morally demanding: it requires us to attend to bodily failure and death, to acknowledge our limits and finitude, to recognise our inability to control external events and to fully reveal our dependence on others.

Such moral, existential, and personal labour is not only a cost but also an opportunity: moral and other kinds of excellence surely must include excellence displayed in one's response to adversity. So points of vulnerability such as ageing and illness are not just practical problems but challenges that require moral, existential, and personal resources, in order to reflectively cope with our finitude, contingency, vulnerability and dependence. The absence of what we take to be essential components of a human life form does not preclude the possibility of moral excellence, as we can see in Primo Levi's (1979) account in *The Truce*, of a fellow inmate at Auschwitz, attending to a sick man:

> [Charles] lifted Lakmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tin-plate, diluted a little chloramine and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself. I judged his self-sacrifice by the tiredness which I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done.

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The absence of resources and capacities can result in deep and significant instantiations of virtue, so it is not merely those who are cognitively and emotionally well-equipped, those who have much, who can act virtuously, as we can see in Levi's description. Illness and other deprivations do not preclude moral virtue. Adversity can be edifying and such edification through hardship is a significant transformative feature of human life. So the final calculus is not one that prefers a long life, a life without adversity, or a life free of suffering and limits, but that sees a life which includes some adversity as one that seizes opportunities for transformation, change, personal growth, posttraumatic growth, and reflective coping.

Pindar's eighth Pythian, in which the term '*ephēmeros*' appears, is an ode to victory strangely permeated with descriptions of loss, falling, and the intermittent nature of success (Lefkowitz, 1977). After descriptions of combat, wrestling, and other conflict, the ode moves to the famous line: 'Day-creatures [*ephēmeros*]! What is any one, and what is any one not? Man is a shadow in a dream' (Fränkel's (1946) translation).[8] While Matthew Cosgrove (2014, p. 12) takes the line to be an early articulation of Platonic ontology, the line can also be read as an acknowledgement of human fallibility and vulnerability to contingency. We are vulnerable, and perhaps 'all accident', but our accidental, vulnerable lives open a space for possibility, transformation, and growth.[9]

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[8] Or: 'Creatures of a day. What is someone? What is no one? A shadow's dream is a human being' (Lefkowitz (1977) working translation).

[9] I thank Michael Hauskeller for inviting me to the 'Meaning in Life and the Knowledge of Death' conference which took place online in July 2021, and for his helpful comments on this paper. I also thank Ian James Kidd who offered his thoughts in response to a draft.

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