

Title: The pursuit of responsible living: from true being to true organicity

Abstract: A parallel can be drawn between organic processes of death and decay of a living body and an artificial counterpart engendered by dominant philosophies that preach self-sufficiency. While the former involves the natural fading and cessation of living organisms, the latter entails the subsumption and subsequent mortification of bodies in a quest for self-fulfillment. In both scenarios, life is constrained and ultimately extinguished, but in the later, unnecessarily and prematurely. This paper aims to explore a philosophical response to decay that endangers life. Originating from the fear of natural demise, isolation fostering discourses compromise the capacity for organic relationality and accountability. Nonetheless, resistance persists within body-centered perspectives, as the acknowledgement of differences and vulnerability require a more responsible way of living.

**Key words: death, sensuousness, isolation, eroticism, responsibility.**

### **1. The solitary true being**

Recognizing one's own finitude is an act of courage, not so much in trend. During the recent pandemic, fear of imminent death caused not only a rapid change in behavior in most countries, but a change in morality. Taking measures of self protection were deemed as the right thing to do. Whoever questioned them, by words or actions was considered morally wrong. Human life was under attack, no question about that. Paradoxically, the solution for the loss of life was restrictive of life itself. When the human body was synonymous with infection, isolation became a moral duty, not only for factually infected bodies, but also for healthy ones. At once, all bodies were restricted. Decaying bodies (not only due to Covid) were impeded to seek relief in the company of others. And healthy bodies had to forcibly

enter the category of infectious, ceasing to live their prime. This solution, that seems strictly sanitary and punctual, informs us of a philosophical one, where bodies are seen as defectuous and isolation appears to be the restorative medicine.

As odd as it may sound, it is not from today that bodies represent danger to life. Freud has thoroughly shown how bodily mortification has been a strategy against the fear of extreme suffering and death<sup>1</sup>. Fear, a response to imminent threats to life experienced by living organisms, manifests as persistent anxiety in individuals who not only endure present suffering but also anticipate various dangers. To confront the inevitable future faced by the living, the idea of a higher self, able to control impulses, is created. But, not by humanity at large, but by the pioneers of philosophical and religious discourse, namely men. Even though women, as pertaining to a marginalized class, often internalize the dominant perspectives and inadvertently reproduce it<sup>2</sup>, from a historical perspective it is not possible to say they contributed much for what we should call mortification-fostering discourses. On the contrary, women were carefully put in their places by the pioneer discourse, being one of its favorite targets.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir develops the idea that women are often relegated to the status of "the other" with relation to men.

For him she is sex - absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other. (de Beauvoir 1953,16)

The philosopher proposes that in the male-centric dialectical structure, man, as a category, is positioned as the "Self", the subject, while woman is relegated to the role of "the other", the object. As pure sexuality, and opposed to pure spirituality, women are perceived as mere bodies, devoid of essence, thus inept of achieving goodness without the guidance of men. The disdain for this sort of alterity mirrors the disregard for the body, considered lifeless without the influence of the spirit. Both woman and body fall into the same category,

the category of those who must, by force of moral duty, be kept in check, controlled, mortified.

Plato is one of the pioneers of the self-isolation discourse in which body's obedience is required. In his *Phaedrus*, it is shown how the body's inertness represents an impediment for the higher goals of the soul. In the following passage, amidst the discussion of addressing the nature of the soul, Socrates advocates the soul's duty to control the body.

It is the job of the soul in general to look after all that is inanimate,(...) The earthy body of which it takes control seems to move itself, but that is the effect of the soul. (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 246c)

Rather than a mere observation, the wording here carries an ethical assessment. Since the soul is the animate counterpart to the passive body, it must assume a supervising role in the relationship. By simply describing both instances, he implies the soul's duty to *look after* the hopeless body. However, not in an affectionate manner. As the possessor of what the body inherently lacks, it must advise and lead, exert control and suppress it according to its understanding.

According to this standpoint, intelligence is a spiritual attribute<sup>3</sup>, along with real existence. Characteristics of bodies - such as colors and shapes -, discerned by senses and possessed by physical beings are considered deceitful and false. Socrates affirms that *true being has no colour or form; it is intangible, and visible only to intelligence, the soul's guide.* (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247c). Which means that sensuousness is neither a matter to be discussed or a departure for knowledge.

In *Meno*, Socrates asks his interlocutor what is in common with the different meanings of the term "excellence". To what Meno answers by pointing out the excellence of men, women, children, elderly, free and enslaved men in their particularity. But Socrates does not seem satisfied. To him, the essential is what those things have in common, not their

uniqueness (Plato. *Meno*, 71e). He pursues what is always identical to itself, and does not suffer the impact of time.

According to this version of reality, "true being" and "excellence" have nothing to do with the organic, with breathing and living beings. Bodies can only momentarily demonstrate excellence without ever possessing it. Not only the human body, but anything susceptible to decay is excluded from the soul's integrity and deemed as deceitful. Which calls for the soul's "isolating abilities".

In the course of its circuit it (the soul) observes justice as it really is, selfcontrol, knowledge—not the kind of knowledge that is involved with change and differs according to which of the various existing things (to use the term “existence” in its everyday sense) it makes its object, but the kind of knowledge whose object is things as they really are. (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247e)

Through instinctual control, the soul can calmly traverse the heavenly realm, where it "sees" the truth. Far away from the corporeal involucre, the platonic version of the "Self" is as ethereal as his "true being". The portrayed Self can jokingly be seen as no-body, when this is precisely what allows it to possess one.

To illustrate the dynamics between these two instances conveniently separated, Plato forges an analogy in which a charioteer leads two wild horses. In the image, the master is the phantasmagorical element leading instincts and emotions. And being the latter irrevocably entangled with sensuousness, and not pertaining to the province of true being (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247c), the power exerted by the chariot driver is justified not as an act of violence, but of compassion. Diminishment, extirpation and mortification of the wilderness are, in the context, considered a good thing. And that's because the virtuous soul, dedicated to the loftiest aspirations of knowledge and self-fulfillment is one that meticulously governs its basest inclinations, avoiding *the worst suffering and the hardest struggle* (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247b). Sensuousness is thus excluded from the realm of genuine existence and virtue, where

"everything counts as true knowledge", with the excuse that it inflicts suffering (Plato. *Phaedrus*, 247d).

## **2. Eroticism and responsibility**

"there is in erotism a revolt of the instant against the time, of the individual against the universal." (de Beauvoir 1953, 84)

This type of philosophy is dangerous, and causes more suffering than it tries to avoid. Christian theology took its dangers to the extreme. When the soul, in pursuit of its own happiness, distances itself from the body, responsibility for the suffering caused by individuals is evaded. In *Confessions*, Augustine describes how the theft of pears in his sixteenth year is subject of repentance (Augustine, Book II, 4-5). He separates the act of theft, not permitted by god, and the goodness of the pear itself. As God's creation, the pear cannot be bad. What is bad then is the attempt to possess it, motivated by a bodily desire that became bigger than the commitment to the spiritual realm. Seeking immediate gratification is considered a sinful. A stain that can only be removed by confession. And even though the author discusses the divinely prohibition of theft, stealing is seen as an example of what the enticement of the flesh can provoke. Thus, the focus is changed from a repairable crime to a sin toward God, confessed to God and absolved by God. Through confession, Augustine considers himself freed from wrongdoing. Not that the exact theft of a pear in youthful years would be in itself condemnable, but this kind of understanding gives way to the thought that theft and other transgressions, such as assault, murder and rape can be easily forgiven through repentance.

In alignment with Platonic philosophy, Augustine portrays how there is no real enjoyment in satisfying bodily pleasures as they are fleeting and subject to decay. He

contrasts that with the enjoyment of eternal things, which views the body as incapable of experiencing true joy, or suffering, since real suffering is that of the soul. This perspective downplays the significance of truly traumatic experiences and undermines the possibility of harm reduction. Through an act of isolation, the soul becomes the sole responsible for the body's actions. Taken away from the scene as a minor that necessitates supervision, the body is excluded from the conversation between the soul and God, and so are other bodies that become mere supporting actors in their own story. In the solitaire conversation between the soul and God, all can be reviewed and forgiven. Through confession, the damages inflicted by individuals to individuals is magically removed. But the fact that evil was done is not, and no one is left to blame.

Nevertheless, not all christian theologians would agree that responsibility should be avoided. Heloise expresses deep regret from what has been done of Abelard due to their erotic involvement. Even though she never regrets the pleasures they experienced together, she feels causally responsible for Abelard's consequent castration. As a reaction to this event, she develops the idea that there is a difference between harm that is intended and harm that is merely causal, that arises causally, without direct intention. According to Heloise, harm that is deliberately intended carries a weightier moral responsibility, as it reflects a conscious decision to cause injury or detriment to another individual. However, it does not diminish the fact that harm can be caused unintentionally and still be caused. And even though the level of responsibility differs and is clearly lessened when harm was not intended, responsibility to living individuals cannot vanish in thin air in conversation with god. While not guilty for their erotic involvement<sup>4</sup>, she takes accountability for the consequences it produced. Comparing herself to Eve, who in her perception was morally responsible for Adam's ruin, she bears the blame of provoking the incident that brought them both misfortune, in special to him. Even though she does not consider herself entirely guilty for the castration, as she did

not consent to it, she agrees in taking part of the responsibility for it as this occurred as a "twisted outcome" of her indulgence in love for him.

At least I can thank God for this—that the Seducer  
never drew me into guilt with my consent,  
as he did these other women,  
though he did make me a cause in the event.  
My heart, however, is clear of guilt,  
no blame through my consent.  
There were many earlier sins, I know,  
for which I bear responsibility—  
my devotion to the pleasures of the flesh,  
whose consequences have become  
a fitting punishment for me—  
and to that bad beginning do I owe this twisted outcome.  
I only wish it lay within my power  
to do a penance worthy of the wrong  
done against you,  
that at least by long contrition I could offer  
some recompense for the wound that you sustained  
and take upon my mind throughout a lifetime of remorse  
what your body suffered in that hour.  
This is but just, and in this way  
I may make some fit amends—  
to you at least, that is, if not to God. (Heloise 2007, *Third Letter*, 78)

Heloise acknowledges the harm done to Abelard's body and wishes there could be anything she could do to comfort him. Instead of accepting it as a punishment coming from above, she perceives it as harm done by man to man. She even questions the justice of it and wishes to bear as much suffering as he does.

But Aberlard in the subsequent letter, does not interpret her words as words of empathy, but as complaints. Right in the beginning of her response she says:

There are four points, by my count, in your last letter on which you base your sense of injury; I see nothing in the letter more than that. I see nothing in the letter more than that." He interprets all she said as bitterness and lack of tenacity. Moreover, as a self interested thought (Heloise 2007, 79)

To him, Even her kind offer of relieving him was seen as a complaint and an act of self interest (Fourth Letter , 79) that would make her more of an enemy than as a friend. He

claims that instead of a misfortune the castration is a blessing that allows him to atone for his sins. And reminds her:

After you and I were married and you were living with the nuns at Argenteuil, you know how I came to visit you one day and what my lust then did with you even within the walls of the refectory itself, when there was nowhere else for us to go. You know how shamelessly we acted in that holy place, consecrated to the Blessed Virgin. Now even if there were no other sins, that one alone deserves a heavy retribution. (Heloise 2007, 94)

The same scene is reconstructed and interpreted by both philosophers in different manners. What is considered by him an act of shame and thus subject to a "heavy retribution", for it are "the pleasures we shared in love were sweet, so sweet they cannot displease" her now (Heloise 2007, 79). On one side we can see mortification, on the other, a life affirming practice that takes the body, its pleasures and sufferings into consideration. It is true that none of the perspectives could undo the brutality that was committed against him.

But maybe Abelard would have lived a better life beside Heloise if he could only accept his body as it had been, and how it became after castration. This was her proposition since the beginning of the correspondence, which he viewed as impure and self-centered. And besides her devotion to him, his entitlement resulted in a life long separation and a letter exchange that marked her supposed complaints and his judgments and advice to make her a better spouse for god.

In his denial of sensuousness he was clearly more spiritualized, thus better than her.

### **3. Eroticism and irresponsibility**

In the Bible, it is stated that men are the true rulers of the earth, being made in the image of God as spiritual beings. Animals, plants, soil, and air were all considered at their disposal, along with women, who were created to provide the men with companionship and



help. Eve, formed from Adam's flesh and not animated by God's breath, was inseparable from their bodily existence, thus portrayed as ignorant and sinful. Numerous are the accusations against women in the Bible, listed in Heloise's letter:

The first action by a woman lured man from paradise,  
becoming his undoing when the Lord  
created her to be his helpmeet.  
Then Samson, the mightiest Nazirite of the Lord,  
whose conception even an angel had announced,  
was vanquished by Dalila single-handed;  
betrayed to his enemies and his eyes put out,  
his grief at last compelled him to destroy  
himself along with them in general ruin.  
The wisest man of all, King Solomon,  
lost his wits through the workings of one woman  
he had taken to his bed;  
she drove him to such insanity that that great man,  
whom the Lord himself had chosen to build his Temple,  
when even his righteous father had been rejected for the task,  
foundered to the end of his days in the worshiping of idols,  
abandoning the worship of the Lord,  
which he had taught and preached in all his words.  
And Job, whose sanctity was matchless,  
endured his last and heaviest blow  
from his wife, who urged him to curse God. (Heloise 2007, 77)

In these narratives women are associated with temptation. And Heloise recollects them in a moment of self doubt in which she sees herself, as a woman, being responsible for the fall of a great man. And even though she enumerates these stories to prove her innocence - as she did not consent to the miseries her lover underwent as a result of their erotic involvement - she brings them up to differentiate herself from other women, who, in her view, easily team up with "the Seducer". Her acknowledgement that women can overthrow powerful men, scares her in the same way it would scare a powerful man on the verge to be dethroned. What was once the fear of men, became the fear of women. What was then valuable for men, became valuable for women.

Arendt provides an explanation for the marginalization of women in Ancient Greece. Along with slaves, women were kept hidden from public eyes and impeded from participating in the creation of meaning with their people. She mentions two reasons for this exclusion. First because they belonged to "the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy" and secondly because "their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species". (Arendt 1998, 72). The two reasons not by chance correlate women and bodily functions, a relationship that does not privilege them in this context. Because although the realm depends on them to exist, their existence is not accounted for by the public. Hidden in privacy and physically working to guarantee their people's survival, they were impeded from being seen and heard. Thus, their participation in the creation and hierarchization of values that elevated men and inferiorized them and their living conditions can securely be assessed as little to non-existent. Through their deliberations, men not only shaped values and norms, but defined, in the same blow, what was sophisticated and desirable as opposed to despicable, non-existent and subject of unblamed domination.

In his book *Elite do Atraso* (Souza 2001), Jesse de Sousa, a Brazilian sociologist explores the idea that the colonizers brought to us the stigma that we are body, therefore lower, while they would be spirit, and therefore, higher. The author denounces that the first attempts to engender a national identity inadvertently kept the colonizers perspective.

In this context was born the idea of a unique culture in the world, Luso-Brazilian, perceived as a cultural openness to the different and a meeting of opposites. Hence all the virtues of the dominated, as they are associated with the body and not with the spirit, which makes the Brazilian unique for themselves and for foreigners: sexuality, emotionality, human warmth, hospitality, etc. (Souza, 2001, 46)

Sex, emotions, warmth, characteristics of an embodied existence were considered constitutive of Brazilians, as opposed to coldness and distance, typical of the colonizer. What seemed to magnify our existence as those who are capable of what the exploiter is not,

reinforces the paradigm that defines the spirit in its potential for superior intelligence and morality against the bestialized body. Not only that but it allows for exploitation.

Freyre seeks, in reality, to use all the implicit ambiguities in the paradigm that defines the spirit in its virtuality of superior intelligence and morality against the animalized body. The body in Freyre is perceived as the domain of emotions repressed by the spirit that not only thinks and moralizes, but also controls, sanitizes, and segregates. (Souza 2001, 46)

In the same way that women are seen as pertaining to the domain of emotions and bodily ambiguities, Brazilians are here seen just as their colonizers want them to be seen, as beasts in need of repression. Just as Heloise describes the bestiality of her own sex, so does Freyre, showing how those affable identifying qualities of Brazilian lack lapidation. What seems like mere wordplay actually contributes to a shared vision. Brazil is known today not for its intellectuality, contributions in science, politics, economics and all fields of human development, but for carnival and soccer. This all departs from an idea of the body as lifeless and incapable of intellectual thought.

The distinction between body and spirit, wherein intelligence, excellence and agency are attributed to the spirit while the eroticized body is considered stupid, sinful and lifeless, overlooks the fundamental reality that all human experiences occur within physical bodies; that thought, what is supposedly created in the solitude of the spirit, is in fact developed in a linguistic environment involving bodies in dynamics teaching and learning, associating procedures and diverse forms of community engagement.

But the tendency to decontextualize words and isolate meanings, such as "spirit" and "body" as we could see, is not a product of mere misunderstanding of how words gain their meaning. On the contrary, it serves certain purposes. "Knowledge is power," as famously stated by Francis Bacon. To be the holder of a meaning, accessible only through a capacity that mere flesh cannot attain empowers those who detain it. Also allows for culpabilization of the victim and the consequent inability, on the part of the self-acclaimed superior group, to

take responsibility over the harm on the victims. Just like Abelard, accuses Heloise of being ungrateful to god in her "complaints" about the way she was forced to pursue a monastic life. Much like Abelard's evasion of responsibility regarding Heloise's fate by attributing it to divine will, colonial powers historically justified their superiority by claiming spiritual ascendancy, thereby exploiting and subjugating Spirit-less, sinful creatures. The colonizer in this sense, has little to nothing to do with the pain inflicted in the colonized, it's all justified by their inherently higher position, that permits the use of flesh at their own whim.

#### **4. Subsumption versus true relational organicity**

Despite the veneer of sophistication inherent in the philosophical resolutions, they often employ a detached self, an extraordinary and imperishable entity to surpass and guide the body. The disorder, the repulsive, and instinctual inclinations inherent in embodied life are either mitigated or eradicated by the self-discipline inherent in the rational being travested as self-sufficiency, good character and good will. Both christianity and Philosophy survived on the belief that, ultimately, the entirety of the physical universe can be subsumed by rational laws.

When contrasted with the expansive reach of reason, the insignificance of the body becomes evident and perspectives are seen just as nuances of the revealed universalizing structure. Ultimately, the rational self prevails, not by virtue of such maneuvers, but by virtue of its promise of eternal life—persisting within every human being who has existed, exists, and will exist—thus rescuing individuals from the afflictions of a finite and futile existence.

Hegel represents the epitome of this understanding. For him, the essence of matter would be outside of itself. In *The History of Philosophy*, he develops the idea - much discussed in German idealism - of independence of the Spirit from Matter. Perceived as two

separate entities, the physical world would be the stage and means by which the Spirit realizes itself *and the sphere of its realization* (Hegel 2001, 70).

Independent from matter and yet using it for its goals, the colonizer Spirit expresses its independence and follows immaculate the course of its development. About the relationship between matter and spirit Hegel affirms:

Matter has its essence out of itself; Spirit is self-contained existence (Bei-sich-selbst-seyn). Now this is Freedom, exactly. For if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself. (Hegel 2001, 31)

Freedom is thus defined as a spiritual attribute in two ways. Firstly, as the quality of being inherently independent of matter. Its self contained existence has no relationship with matter as the latter represents its alterity. Just like women represent "the other" for men - as mentioned sooner in the words of Beauvoir - so does the Spirit perceive in matter its antithesis and see in it a possibility of self expression; and secondly, as its *telos*. Embodiment serves as a means for the spirit to understand itself through its temporary negation. The course of spiritual development towards Freedom would pass through the surpassing and subsumption of matter.

Paradoxically, Hegel uses the metaphor of a plant, a living organism, to illustrate the dialectical movement of the Spirit from potentiality to actuality. While employing the analogy, Hegel suggests that the progression from a seed to a fully grown plant relies solely on the plant itself, excluding its dependency with the soil, weather and human care.

And as the germ bears in itself the whole nature of the tree, and the taste and form of its fruits, so do the first traces of Spirit virtually contain the whole of that History. (Hegel 2001, 31)

The analogy suggests that just as a germ contains the essence of a tree and its fruits, Freedom is contained in history since its beginning, even though it can only be seen in the end. But it consists of a faulty analogy and doesn't serve Hegel's purpose for three reasons. Firstly, because the process by which a germ becomes a plant is dependent on environmental factors, while the Spirit's actualization occurs independently. Secondly, because living organisms decay after their actualization, whereas the Spirit remains towards its ultimate goal. The third reason lies in the inherent strangeness between spirit and matter. One is substantial while the other is accidental, thus subservient to the former. In this sense, the fate of the physical world and the spiritual realm are entirely unrelated.

The destiny of the spiritual World, and — since this is the substantial World, while the physical remains subordinate to it, or, in the language of speculation, has no truth as against the spiritual — the final cause of the World at large, we allege to be the consciousness of its own freedom on the part of Spirit, and ipso facto, the reality of that freedom. (Hegel 2001, 31)

But Hegel insists on the analogy, indicating its significance beyond mere coincidence. He is earnest in its application, as he sees no better method to convey the dialectical process than through the organic growth of a plant from a seed. But he makes adjustments showing that there are two separate parts to be considered in the development of natural objects.

Development, however, is also a property of organized natural objects. Their existence presents itself, not as an exclusively dependent one, subjected to external changes, but as one which expands itself in virtue of an internal unchangeable principle (...). (Hegel 2001, 70)

In this passage, he seeks to preserve the immutable aspect of the plant, overlooking the fact that everything in the plant is subject to change as it is in a dynamic relationship with its environment. As obvious as it can be, Hegel fails to acknowledge that there is no independent part in a plant, as it cannot exist in isolation. Its development relies on numerous factors, without which germination and ripening become impossible. And more often than

not, these conditions are not assured, as evidenced by deforestation. With all evidence against it, Hegel insists in saying there is nothing that could stop a germ from becoming what it is programmed to be.

That development (of natural organisms) takes place in a direct, unopposed, unhindered manner. Between the Idea and its realization — the essential constitution of the original germ and the conformity to it of the existence derived from it — no disturbing influence can intrude. (Hegel 2001, 71)

When talking about Adorno and his view on the direction of the dialectic development, we will see that it is the spirit itself that causes such hardship for nature. Instead of letting it grow in tranquility as proposed, the restlessness and tyranny of the spirit, that all wants and subsums, provokes its premature death.

But in relation to Spirit it is quite otherwise. The realization of its Idea is mediated by consciousness and will; (...) Its expansion, therefore, does not present the harmless tranquillity of mere growth, as does that of organic life, but a stern reluctant working against itself. (Hegel 2001, 71)

Despite Hegel's assertion that the development of Spirit involves conflict and opposition, while that of the plant is tranquil, it appears to be quite the opposite. When, in its dialectical but unimpeded movement, the Spirit obliterates all living things - the dependent plant has its cycle constantly disrupted by the independent Spirit, whose pervasive presence impedes its germination, growth and decomposition. Solitude, a desirable characteristic for the restless Spirit, represents the plant's ruin.

Using the same analogy, or, in her words, the plant image, Martha Nussbaum offers a contrasting viewpoint. She starts her first chapter by analyzing Pindar's poem:

A vine tree must be of good stock if it is to grow well. And even if it has a good heritage, it needs fostering weather (gentle dew and rain, the absence of sudden frosts and harsh winds), as well as the care of concerned and intelligent keepers, for its continued health and full perfection. (Nussbaum 2001, 1)

She understands the plant, as a vulnerable being, depends on luck to survive. Internally, it must have a good heritage; externally, a good environment and proper care. But

the "internal" here is very different from the "isolated" nature of the Spirit in Hegel - acknowledging that nothing in the realm of living is isolated. Also, the "external" here, is not exactly "external", as nourishment is assimilated by the plant, thus becoming its constituent.

Understanding human fragility entails forging an ethical goal that is quite different from spiritual freedom. Dependency brings with it the thought that an individual cannot be accomplished and happy in solitude. Thus, a good life requires a web of living organisms living well as a result of the fulfillment of their needs.

If it is reason, and reason's art, philosophy, that are supposed to save or transform our lives, then, as beings with an interest in living well, we must ask what this part of ourselves is, how it works to order a life, how it is related to feeling, emotion, perception. (Nussbaum 2001, 8)

As opposed to "pure reason" that puts itself beyond and above circumstances, practical reason operates within them, as the part of ourselves that is capable of transforming lives in a better way. It entails facing the unknown everyday without a clear idea of what to do. Externally, the mission involves dealing with a world of perishable objects in which loss and the danger of conflict emerge, and internally with our bodily and sensuous nature, our passions, our sexuality that often succumb into madness and blurs our judgment.

Excellence, as understood by the pioneers of the philosophy of disembodiment, is something that does not pertain to bodies. But in this analysis Nussbaum shows that it cannot be understood if not in reference to bodies, and the way they interact with one another. While Hegel, Augustine and Plato advocate the self-sufficiency of the Spirit, she wants to prove that the individual has something of plant and something of agent (Nussbaum 2001, 5). The plant would be the part of us that is absolutely helpless when facing its luck, and the agent the part that can oppose it. And with that in mind, she proposes that the quest for excellence should happen taking these limitations to agency into consideration. Comparing the material of life with that of the tragedy, she indicates how pervasive is luck and how fragile our agency is in



facing it. Thus, the pursuit of excellence should take these elements into consideration. Considering that humans are organisms, and organisms are in relation to one another, and inherently dependent, both the idea of excellence and the pursuit of it are done within a context. Based on Aristotelian ethics, she proposes that humans just like plants require nurturing and care to thrive. From the presence of role models to serve as guidance to an environment in which life circumstances are not an impediment for the practice of virtue are requirements for goodness to exist. In the light of that humility it is possible to recognize that, not only the body is an instance to be considered, but the diversity of bodies and their single set of needs. Understanding vulnerability leads to a life in which excellence is intertwined with self care and care for other beings.

By negating the body and its necessities the obliteration of life is inevitable. As the most sophisticated measures cannot obscure the fact that we are going to die, that people we love will die, and that we will certainly reach the end of our journeys. Facing this head-on may be the first step towards launching ourselves into a life project itself. In the Homeric myth Odysseus successfully resists the allure of the Sirens through the control over himself and others, yet he cannot resist the pull of his own sorrow and longing for home. His yearning for Penelope embodies his acceptance of the reality of change. It suggests that a part of him was left behind when he left Ithaca. A part that decays and dies, a vulnerable and dependent part. In deciding to abandon Calypso's eternal youth and returning to his aging wife, Odysseus shows a change in the hierarchy of his values. In Penelope's arms Odysseus finds himself. Not a phantasmagorical self, but an organic one. He comes home to embrace decay and death with his elderly wife. The acknowledgement that she, as much as he, suffers the impact of time unifies what was once alterity.

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## Endnotes

1. Freud examines mechanisms of mortification associated with the fear of death and suffering, showing that not only the western mind is prone to annihilating instincts and giving up happiness for what is considered a safer way to live. "*The gratification of instincts is happiness, but when the outer world lets us starve, refuses us satisfaction of our needs, they become the cause of very great suffering. So the hope is born that by influencing these impulses one may escape some measure of suffering.*" (Freud 1930, 31-32)
2. As discussed in section 3 of this paper.
3. We will see in section 3 how it is explored by colonizers.
4. While Abelard abhors the erotic involvement they lived, she confesses to him, not to God, that the pleasures they shared in love were sweet and "rarely are they out of mind". And recognizes that a life of celibacy is conflicting with her own needs as a young woman. She writes: *I am still young, and the passions of youth and my experience of those sweet pleasures exacerbate the torments of the flesh. They count purity of the flesh among the virtues though the virtue belongs to the heart and not the body.* (Heloise, 79)