

Historical Roots of Contemporary Religious Issues

Benedict's psychology

Monastic values for burnout prevention

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Introduction

After its emergence in American psychology in the 1970s, the concept of 'burnout' has spread across geographical and linguistic boundaries, nowadays being a common diagnosis in Western society. The term predicates a psychological downside to the many revolutions and advancements throughout modern history. With an increasing amount of workers suffering long-term fatigue related to their profession, an entire 'burnout industry' (with e.g. retreats, workshops, psychotherapy) has popped up rather separate from academic psychology.¹

This paper tries to develop a perspective on work that addresses burnout issues with the inspiration of the 6th century monk St Benedict. In the meantime, it seeks to bridge the gap with the academic field by investigating the socio-cultural and psychological factors that contribute to the development of a burnout. The central question is: How can St Benedict's perspective on work be useful in avoiding burnouts?

In the first chapter, the historical background of "The Rule of Saint Benedict", Benedict's major work is discussed, and what its vision is on work. The second chapter discusses the socio-cultural roots of burnouts, and offers a psychological perspective on how it emerges. The final chapter synthesizes the preceding chapters to inquire the extent of the value of Benedict's inspiration for a contemporary approach to work. The paper studies only burnouts that are related to the work sphere.

¹ Wilmar B. Schaufeli, "Burnout: A Short Socio-Cultural History", *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion : An Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction*, 105, 106.

Chapter 1 St Benedict on work

1.1 Historical Background

At the advent of the Middle Ages, Western civilization witnessed a turbulent time. The decline of the Roman empire brought political instability, an important cause of a coexisting economic and moral chaos that was exacerbated by pestilence and famine.² Due to barbarian migrations, higher cultural life was for the most part eradicated.³ In this unsettled era, the idea of an isolated community void of the world's distraction and instability gained popularity.⁴ The Christian cloister emerged as a protected enclosure for contemplation and work,⁵ providing an alternative to the societal chaos outside.⁶

One of the monasteries that appeared was established by Saint Benedict of Nursia (†547). St Benedict was born in Italy and went to study in Rome, where – according to his biographer Pope Gregory I – he was converted and started to live a solitary life.⁷ He attracts followers, but his first experience as a leader of monks ends in a disillusionment.⁸ After several years, in a renewed attempt of spiritual leadership, he establishes a monastery at Monte Cassino and writes a comprehensive “Rule” that should be strictly complied. Nevertheless, he seems to have administered the community rather with his *being* than with the Rule.⁹

The Rule of Saint Benedict describes how the monks should follow Christ and how the monastery should be organised, both inwardly and outwardly. The Rule quickly spread through Europe, and received via the papacy a significant authority in Western Civilisation.¹⁰ Benedict is considered to be the founder of Western Monasticism, and Benedictine (and Cistercian) communities that follow his Rule exist until nowadays.

² Dermot Tredget, “‘The Rule of Benedict’ and Its Relevance to the World of Work.” *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 17, no. 3, 220.

³ Tarnas, Richard, *The Passion of the Western Mind : Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*, 171.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology, An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (2nd ed.), 80, 81.

⁵ Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 171.

⁶ Tredget, “‘The Rule of Benedict’”, 222.

⁷ Vefie Poels, “Benedictus van Nursia”, *Christelijke Encyclopedie VOLUME 1*, 172. Tredget, “‘The Rule of Benedict’”, 220.

⁸ Anselm Grün, *Eén worden, De weg van de heilige Benedictus*, trans. Sabine Wauters, ch. 7

⁹ *Ibid.*, 67. Benedict demanded in his Rule of all abbots that they would show “all virtue and sanctity, more by deeds than by words”. See “Gregory the Great: Life of Our Most Holy Father St. Benedict with the Rule of The Same Holy Patriarch”, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, ch. 2.

¹⁰ Christopher Dawson, *De schepping van Europa*, trans. Aug. Cuypers, 223.

1.2 *The Rule of St Benedict*

In his “Rule” for monasteries, St Benedict provides a set of guidelines for the monks that aims primarily spiritual flourishing. Materiality is entirely subjected to the higher otherworldly pursuits. Almost every rule about physical work is spiritually substantiated. Benedict starts the chapter on physical labour with the following: “Idleness is an enemy of the soul. *Therefore* the Brethren ought to be employed at certain times in labouring with their hands, and at other fixed times in holy reading”¹¹ (*italics mine*). This clearly illustrates that *ultimately* hand labour is done for the soul’s welfare.¹² In Benedict’s Rule, both spiritual and physical activities serve a unitary purpose. Therefore, the well-known ‘ora et labora’ (which is not even found in Benedict’s writings) can be misleading, as it suggests a dualism of work and prayer, whereas the Benedictine life is an integrated whole.¹³ This raises an important question that will be shortly discussed: Can his view on work be abstracted from its spiritual background?

Sake of utility

Many of Benedict’s advises for monks are argued on the basis of Bible passages or other references to Christian spirituality. If his view on particular topics is filtered from these spiritual footings, it might lose some of its probative force and beauty: the entire transcendent dimension that includes its very aim is lost. However, argued from a pragmatic perspective, his views might be adopted in the contemporary work sphere for the sake of their utility. This stance is taken by Wil Derkse, a Dutch philosopher and Benedictine oblate who authored several books on Benedictine spirituality. He writes that if one suspects that this spirituality can be fertile in his own context, Benedict’s practical principles can be applied.¹⁴

Structure

One key element in Benedict’s Rule is structure and rhythm. The idea of orderliness by rules tends to be even more important than the rules’ specific content. This is exemplified by Benedict’s short comment after ten chapters on the arrangement of psalms: “If this arrangement and distribution of the psalms displease anyone, let him, if he think good, order them otherwise”¹⁵. The same order is reflected in the Benedictine day schedule. All things should be done “at their appointed times”¹⁶. This emphasis on orderliness is implied in one of the three monastic vows, *stabilitas*. Work should be alternated with repose and relaxation; In modern terms: a full agenda but never busy.¹⁷ This requires the capacity to begin and to cease, a balanced and moderate pace.¹⁸

Obedientia

Another monastic vow that monks should make when they enter the monastery is *obedientia*. Its meaning goes beyond mere obedience, and describes an attentive attitude that produces adequate and sincere responses.¹⁹ It is about discerning what is demanded *at this moment, here*, and responding with integrity – a kind of spiritual hospitality. *Obedientia* is not even about obeying itself, it is about the *willingness* to obey

¹¹ ccel.org, “Life and Rule”, ch. 48.

¹² On a lower level, work is also “an economic necessity and a service to other people within and outside the monastery”. Tredget, “The Rule of Benedict”, 223.

¹³ Wil Derkse, *Een levensregel voor beginners*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ ccel.org, “Life and Rule”, ch. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 47.

¹⁷ Derkse, *Een levensregel*, 103.

¹⁸ David Murray, *Reset: Een Bijbelse Levensstijl in Een Jachtige Cultuur*, trans. Peter Meeuse, 16. See also Tredget, “The Rule of Benedict”, 226.

¹⁹ Derkse, *Een levensregel*, 29.

and listen. Disobedience in Benedictine means to spoil chances, to miss important signals – a form of spiritual failing.²⁰

Servant leadership

Finally, Benedict promoted servant leadership – which means at bottom: leading souls. It is tempting to float on an external and organisational level, to direct the finances, networks, ‘research and development’, etc.²¹ This might bring about external improvement, but spiritual growth is improbable. A leader creates inner flourishing in attitude of heartily *commitment*, as a source of inspiration.²² Directing souls is much more difficult than merely managing a company’s thriving. It implies primarily exemplification.²³ Benedict believed that an abbot ruled primarily by giving the good example. It also requires obedientia, the art of listening and responding, and thus the flexibility to conform to the group – instead of *vice versa*.²⁴ To this purpose, Benedict wrote that an abbot should always consult (and carefully listen to) the council of brethren before making decisions.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., 50.

²¹ Derkse, Een levensregel, 76.

²² Ibid., 75, 77.

²³ ccel.org, “Life and Rule”, ch. 2.

²⁴ Derkse, Een levensregel, 78, 79.

²⁵ ccel.org, “Life and Rule”, ch. 3.

Chapter 2 Burnouts

1.1 Historical background

The term ‘burnout’ emerged in the second half of the 20th century when two American psychologists simultaneously and independently sought to label the poor psychological condition that certain workers were exposed to. These workers regularly faced professional crises due to persisting fatigue and negative perceptions.²⁶ Subsequent research demonstrated that burnouts are not purely an individual syndrome, but also a relational flaw and socio-cultural phenomenon.²⁷

Although the concept of ‘burnout’ is relatively young, symptoms that are related to this syndrome are not new. Already in classical antiquity, the problem of enduring exhaustion concerned thinkers from various disciplines.²⁸ In the course of history, focus on signs of exhaustion intensifies in periods of major socio-cultural and economic changes.²⁹ S. Neckel *et al.* write in the introduction of a comprehensive, interdisciplinary study on exhaustion that “the digital revolution and the acceleration of financial market-driven growth capitalism may have contributed to bringing about the exhausted self of the present.”³⁰ This quote suggests two causes on an abstract historical level: the digital revolution and the growth of capitalism.

These two unprecedented developments that accelerated modern man may have been amplified in a fusion with a pervasive existentialist and liberalist philosophy that burdened individuals with the duty of self-determination. The emergence of the *authentic* individual paralleled the rise of a free market economy as the core domain of Western society. A *good* life became connected to success on the free market – a rat race was launched.³¹ The resulting emphasis on work had a precursory in protestant theology and its view on profession as a divine vocation.³² Furthermore, after the Second World War, traditional institutions and communities became increasingly criticized and gradually eroded, which led to social fragmentation.³³ These socio-cultural and economic developments contributed to an increasingly complex and demanding work sphere that has created a psychological pressure on individuals.

It must be noted that the label ‘burnout’ is historically relative. In the 19th century, a similar psychosomatic condition would probably have been predicated with ‘neurasthenia’, which was at that time a popular diagnosis for the lack of energy and motivation that nowadays people with burnouts encounter.³⁴ Nevertheless, it remains significant that burnouts occur in increasing proportions and the syndrome can be regarded as a typically modern issue.

²⁶ Schaufeli, “Burnout”, 107, 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁸ Anna Katharina Schaffner, “Pre-Modern Exhaustion: On Melancholia and Acedia”, *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion*, 28.

²⁹ Sighard Neckel *et al.*, “Introduction”, *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion*, 5, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ Ad Verbrugge, *et al.*, *Het Goede Leven & de Vrije Markt, Een Cultuurfilosofische Analyse*, ch. 11.

³² Max Weber described the influence of protestant ethics on the rise of capitalism. Consider e.g. Calvin’s perspective on work as being *in majorem gloriam Dei* and Luther’s view that a profession is God’s calling. One’s capital became a simple indicator of his obedience towards this spiritual calling. Max Weber, *De protestantse ethiek en de geest van het kapitalisme*, 59, 81.

³³ Schaufeli, “Burnout”, 110.

³⁴ The striking similarities with neurasthenia are discussed by Schaufeli, “Burnout”, 113-116.

1.2 Psychological perspective

Symptoms and Causes

A burnout is a syndrome that occurs after a long-lasting incongruence between an employee's aspirations and his work context.³⁵ Together with cynicism and a sense of inefficacy, exhaustion belongs to the most common symptoms of burnouts.³⁶ Burnouts were traditionally understood as an individual matter. Though, more recent investigations have pointed out that it should be understood primarily as emerging within relationships. This "transactional" understanding takes into account the stress that emerges within roles: "role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload," as the British psychologist Philip Dewe summarizes.³⁷ Role overload is described primarily as quantitative, but more recently also as qualitative overload. The latter refers to high qualitative demands of employees, such as keeping up with the latest technological advances, being able to work under time pressure, being able to cope with a changing work sphere and many other demands that reflect the rapid socio-cultural and economic changes of recent decades.

Role conflict is related to conflicting demands, and role ambiguity with a lack of information, both of which resulted for many in dissatisfaction and strain.³⁸ To give an example, role conflict might occur when employers seek to cut costs due to limited resources which makes it more difficult for a worker to meet his employer's demands.³⁹ In the aforementioned interdisciplinary study, Breevaart *et al.* write that "[t]he existing literature suggests that constructive leadership (e.g., supervisory support, guidance, and inspiration) diminish follower burnout". This emphasizes the responsibility of leaders in creating unambiguous and clear roles for their employees.

Social Pressure

Another important source of qualitative role overload is the social work sphere. Human's vulnerability within relationships was elaborated by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum: a good life involves relying on the variable (in our context: colleagues and supervisors) – for which we need courage.⁴⁰ Working with other people does not only increase possibilities and enhance one's work experience, it also demands social skills besides the skills that the profession requires.⁴¹ Besides, within working relationships, one is vulnerable for mistreatment.⁴² Moreover, colleagues (especially employers) can have high demands or expectations that generate a psychological pressure on workers. This pressure results in growing mental and physical exertion to meet demands that others or workers themselves make.⁴³ An exposure to uncertainty (especially after 2008's financial crisis) exacerbates the conditions.⁴⁴ These 'stressors' might be one of the causes of the development of exhaustion, cynicism and other symptoms related to a burnout in the long run.

³⁵ Michael P. Leiter & Christina Maslach, "Interventions to prevent and alleviate burnout," *Burnout at Work: A psychological perspective* 1st ed. (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 145.

³⁶ These three symptoms were described by Christina Maslach, an influential scholar in burnout studies. Despoina Xanthopoulou & Laurenz L. Meier, "Daily burnout experiences: critical events and measurement challenges", *Burnout at Work*, 96, 97. See also Johanna M. Doerr & Urs M. Nater, "Exhaustion Syndromes: Concepts and Definitions", 93.

³⁷ Philip Dewe, "Job Stress and Burnout", *Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology* vol. 2 (2004): 476, 477.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 477.

³⁹ Michael P. Leiter *et al.*, "The contemporary context of job burnout," *Burnout at Work*, 3.

⁴⁰ Ad Verbrugge, *et al.*, *Het Goede Leven & de Vrije Markt*, ch. 11.

⁴¹ Leiter *et al.*, "The contemporary context of job burnout", 2.

⁴² Xanthopoulou, "Daily burnout experiences", *Burnout at Work*, 59.

⁴³ Sighard Neckel & Greta Wagner, "Exhaustion as a Sign of the Present", *Burnout at Work*, 289.

⁴⁴ Linda V. Heinemann and Torsten Heinemann, "Burnout: From Work-Related Stress to a Cover-Up Diagnosis", *Burnout at Work*, 147.

Chapter 3 Synthesis

As discussed in the first chapter, the ideas behind St Benedict's practical guidelines provide us with a perspective on work that might be adopted from a pragmatic perspective. In the second chapter, several factors that contribute to the development of a burnout were discussed. The Benedictine perspective might enrich present-time psychology with a view on work that does not eliminate the many 'stressors' that pervade the modern work sphere, but that does generate an attitude towards work that takes away the stressors' stressing element.

Rhythm

One of the alleged causes of a burnout is both qualitative and quantitative role overload that causes psychological pressure. This pressure results in stress that culminates in the long term in a burnout. Benedict's prescriptions for rhythm and structure throughout the day, week, and year, offer a life pattern that delimits labour in regulated time periods, and keeps space for leisure. The amount of time for work or leisure is secondary; it is the framework that is wholesome. Since the digital revolution, the boundaries between the work sphere and the private sphere have become blurred, especially in the service sectors.⁴⁵ Benedict's strict separation prevents work stress from insinuating in private life.

Transactional understanding

Another important aspect of burnouts that has frequently been overlooked is its emergence within relationships. Burnouts are caused by a mismatch between the individual and his work context. This transactional understanding of the causes of a burnout generates an understanding that helps prevention or alleviation of a burnout. Stress that is caused by role conflict and role ambiguity should be prevented within the relationship, involving both the employee and the employer. On the level of the employer, two Benedictine ideas can contribute to a fertile work environment in the long term.

Attentiveness

Firstly, the monastic vow for *obedientia* ensures that abbots are careful to signals of monks that indicate role ambiguity or role conflict. This Benedictine idea meets the need for constructive leadership in that it takes the first step towards support and guidance: knowing the issues that a worker encounters. Much like Benedictine monks, present-day managers, CEO's, and other employers should be attentive to (non)verbal signals of their employees instead of inflicting their *targets* without considering their feasibility. It helps to adjust the demands to the worker's capacity, reflecting the Benedictine ideal that "the strong should have something to strive for, yet the weak should never be driven away"⁴⁶.

Servant leadership

Secondly, Benedictine leadership is characterized by service. According to Benedict, one leads primarily by embodying what he teaches and commands.⁴⁷ Adam Smith, generally considered to be the founder of the free market, also advocated moral virtue for the right functioning of the free-market-economy. However, this aspect of his thought has been forgotten, and he has been elevated as the defender of 'economic' virtues (profit maximization, efficiency, expansion, etc.). This morality of the economic sphere – of the *homo economicus* – has been criticized by Joan Tronto, who argued for a reintegration of 'caring values': responsibility, involvement, etc. Benedict would have criticized modern management ethics along the same lines: it does not take valuable principles such as humility, exemplification, and accommodation to the group into account.

⁴⁵ Heinemann, "Burnout", 139.

⁴⁶ Tredget, "The Rule of Benedict", 226.

⁴⁷ ccel.org, "Life and Rule", ch. 2.

Conclusion

St Benedict's wrote his rule for monasteries at the dawn of the Middle Ages, an era of political and economic turmoil. With the technical and digital revolutions of the past centuries, also modern man lives in a rapidly changing environment. It might be the stable inner dynamics of a monastery that we need in our turbulent times.

Before I started doing research, I had the idea that burnouts are individual problems, that should be solved on the level of the individual. While investigating in the psychology of burnouts, I discovered that burnouts emerge by incongruencies between the worker and his work domain. It was interesting to discover how Benedict's perspective on work, (the equivalent of) employers, and day schedule, matches the present needs for a stable and enduring work sphere.

As with all psychological studies, this abstract research should be empirically tested and verified in order to gain practical significance – for which I recommend further research. Additionally, Benedict's timeless principles emerged within a certain historical context, and to apply them in modern times requires contextualization. How should day rhythm take shape in our digitalized era? What means servant leadership in contemporary organization theory? These and other questions require further study.

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