

8. Damien Freeman – Human Complexity and *The Thread of Life*

1. *History, complexity, and melancholy*

In the Preface to Richard Wollheim's collected essays, *On Art and the Mind*, he writes of the influence of a certain form of aestheticism on his own personal development, explaining that he can "clearly recognize its continuing influence: in an impatience I have after a little while with any form of culture that turns its back on history, or complexity, or melancholy." I begin with this passing observation, because I think it discloses something about the significance of history and complexity (to say nothing of melancholy) that Wollheim attaches to any form of human cultural achievement. As such, it speaks to the theme of the Joske Colloquium—Human Complexity.

Wollheim had an enduring interest in human complexity—indeed, one of his books is entitled, *The Mind and Its Depths*. He was particularly interested in understanding the nature of our affective life, and the way that this played out in the conduct of our practical lives; and the nature of our aesthetic contemplation, and the way that this informed the practice of art. He was a man who was consumed by the awareness that the human condition is inherently complex, and he went some way towards providing an account of this complexity.

For Wollheim, integral to human complexity is *the past* and the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, in the way we live our lives. He provides an account of the human condition which suggests that much of what matters to us and the choices that we make in life have to do with the past; or, to be somewhat more precise, with the relationship between the past and the present. According to his analysis, what matters most about being human is the way that the lens of the past colours the way that we see the future in the present. In my contribution to the Joske Colloquium, I should like to investigate what Wollheim has to tell us about human complexity, particularly in his masterpiece, *The Thread of Life*.

2. *Professor Wollheim*

Richard Wollheim (1923-2003) read history and PPE at Oxford. His education was interrupted by service in the British Army during the Second World War. Upon completing his BA, he was given a lectureship by A. J. Ayre in the Department of Philosophy at University College, London, where he stayed for the rest of his career, rising to the Grote Chair of Logic. In retirement, he travelled to the United States, where he held various positions at prestigious institutions on the east and west coasts. It was during this period that he wrote most of his important monographs: *The Thread of Life*, *Painting as an Art*, and *On the Emotions*.

Wollheim was part of the tradition of analytic philosophy that flourished in England and America in the twentieth century. This was the tradition that had its origin in the new logic of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wollheim's early aesthetics, as exemplified by *Art and Its Objects*, owes much to a broadly Wittgensteinian approach to analytic philosophy. However, he was also an acknowledged expert on British idealism, having written the standard text, *F. H. Bradley*. Although Wollheim was phenomenally well-read, the deep and abiding influence on his thinking was the psychoanalytical writing of Freud and Melanie Klein. He was (almost) unique among the philosophers of his generation in the interest that he took in psychoanalysis. Most of the philosophical interest that analytic philosophers took in psychoanalysis lay in discrediting psychoanalysis as a science. (A quite different story might be told about the interest of continental philosophers in psychoanalysis.)

Wollheim was an expert on psychoanalysis. Indeed, he published an intellectual biography of Freud. His deep understanding of psychoanalysis as a theoretical system was complemented by his own analysis, over many years, by the noted London psychoanalyst, Leslie Sohn. What interests me about Wollheim and psychoanalysis is not the sense in which he was an expert on the topic, but the creative use that he made of psychoanalysis in his philosophy. It is for this reason that I prefer to think of him as a *psychoanalytically informed philosopher*, rather than as a *philosopher of psychoanalysis*. For he made great use of psychoanalytical ideas in his philosophy. In my opinion, it is to his credit that he made quite unorthodox use of psychoanalytical ideas, and these sometimes cannot be reconciled with the Freudian or Kleinian corpus.

For the sake of completeness, I should add that Wollheim was also an acknowledged expert on the history of Western painting, and his art criticism is also psychoanalytically informed, most notably in *Painting as an Art*. He wrote one novel, *A Family Romance*, which was psychoanalytically informed, and *Germes*, a psychoanalytically informed memoir of his childhood. However, in order to understand what he had to say about human complexity, I shall focus on the psychoanalytically informed philosophy contained in *The Thread of Life*.

3. *The Thread of Life*

The Thread of Life is a revised version of the William James Lectures that Wollheim gave at Harvard University in 1982. The preface to the published version contains a few references that support anecdotal evidence that I have been told about the book. It seems that Wollheim was one of those people who thought that he was not long for this world. He was convinced that he was about to die, and that he had to publish all his ideas before his imminent death. As it happens, he had another two decades. However, he thought that he would not have time to give his ideas the sustained treatment that they required,

and so *The Thread of Life* is a sketch of the ideas that he would wish to develop, but for the fact of his *impending* death, which he thought prevented him from doing so. One of the topics that he acknowledges to be in need of a sustained treatment is his theory of the emotions. He did eventually publish a sustained treatment in *On the Emotions*. But the point is that we cannot read *The Thread of Life* as a work of systematic philosophy. It is better understood as a prolegomenon for such a work. Before discussing the treatment of human complexity in this work, let me say something about what I see as the structure of the book.

Chapter I: Living – Wollheim sets up the enquiry as an enquiry into what it means *to live the life of a person*. He distinguishes this from an enquiry into the nature of *a person*, and from an enquiry into *the life of a person*. He is adamant that an enquiry into *living the life of a person* is an enquiry into a *process*, and what it is about this process that is distinctive and valuable. Wollheim's argument develops as a response to Bernard Williams's famous argument in philosophy of mind about *personal identity*. This is an argument about what it means for a person's identity to persist over time, and for a person who exists at two different points in time to be regarded as one and the same person. Wollheim thinks that this is fundamentally mistaken, because the important question concerns not what a person is, or what the life of a person is, but what it is to live the life of a person.

II: On the Mind – Wollheim then gives us an account of the nature of the mind. He does this because he believes that we cannot understand the mental process that constitutes living the life of a person until we understand the nature of the mental phenomena involved in this process. He claims that there are three important distinctions that we need to appreciate, in order to have a proper understanding of the mind: that between the past, present, and future; that between mental states and mental dispositions; and that between conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mental phenomena. Wollheim's argument can be understood as a response to Gilbert Ryle's famous argument in his influential *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle famously argued that there is no such thing as the mind, and that what we need to do is to 'exorcise the ghost in the machine'. Wollheim draws on Ryle, but he fundamentally disagrees with Ryle because Wollheim maintains that mental dispositions possess 'psychological reality'. Thus, *pace* Ryle, the mind is not merely a way of talking about ourselves: it really exists.

Chapter III: Iconicity, Imagination, and Desire and Chapter IV: Experiential Memory, Introjection, and the Inner World – In these chapters, Wollheim sketches out the processes through which the mind operates. In Chapter III, he provides an account of what he calls *iconic mental states*. These are the product of imagination, and involve the imagination drawing together a range of disparate mental states and dispositions, and then a further act of imagination representing this assemblage in some way; as something

coherent that can be felt or experienced in a particular way, before, finally, this assemblage is experienced in the imagination. The imagination creates iconic mental states that possess *phenomenology*, which is to say that there is a feeling *that it is like* to experience the iconic mental state, and this feeling has an impact on the mind. The intensity of the feeling heightens the intensity of the impact on the mind, and for this reason the iconic mental state also has *psychical force*: it is able to initiate new desires and other mental dispositions in the mind. In Chapter IV, Wollheim considers different forms of memory and phantasy, each of which involve iconic mental states. *Event-memory* is a particular form of memory, in which past events trigger iconic mental states. *Introjection* is a particular form of phantasy, which has similarities with event-memory, but in which the initiating event is not represented in the subsequent iconic mental states, and so they carry no information about the seemingly forgotten initiating event. Wollheim draws extensively on Freud in these chapters. His is a *psychoanalytically informed* theory of what it means to live the life of a person.

V: The Tyranny of the Past – Wollheim now introduces the great problem that we face in living the life of a person: the tyranny of the past. It goes without saying that the past has a causal impact on the present: how I am at present is a result of the process that happened in the past. But Wollheim argues for something much stronger. He claims that the past can *manifest* itself in the present, and it does so in a special or '*disguised*' way: mental dispositions that are tied up with the past manifest themselves in mental states, but it is not always clear to us that our mental states are manifestations of mental dispositions. And a mental disposition can disguise itself in iconic mental state. Such mental states have psychical force on account of their phenomenology. This psychical force also gives them psychical function: they can trigger other mental states and mental dispositions on account of their intense phenomenology, and they owe their existence to their peculiar ability to bring about new mental phenomena in this way. Our current mental states and dispositions dispose us to desire the future to be a certain way, and we try to act in a way that will bring this about. What we do not understand is that it is *the past*, which manifests itself in a disguised way in *the present*, that determines our present attitude to *the future*.

Chapter VI: The Examined Life – Self-examination turns out to be a malign phenomenon according to Wollheim. He argues that the process of living the life of a person involves memories and phantasies that manifest themselves in iconic mental states, which in turn are responsible for many of our desires for the future. These iconic mental states are not only manifestations of the past: they are disguised manifestations of the past. This creates a special problem for self-examination: introspection does not readily lead us back from our present attitude (seemingly concerning the future) to the psychically forceful iconic mental state that initiated it, or to the event in our past that gives rise to the phantasy that

manifests itself in the iconic mental state that is responsible for our present behaviour and desires. This is because they are disguised. So self-examination, rather than leading to self-knowledge, will often lead to self-misunderstanding, if not error. This is an implicit attack on Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living: fo

Chapter VII: From Voices to Values – The Growth of the Moral Sense – In this chapter, Wollheim demonstrates how his philosophy of mind provides for the moral psychology that underpins morality. He argues that introjection, or the internalisation of the mother's voice, is the origin of the obligation that is at the core of morality. Morality is only one form of value, and he contrasts this with love. Love has its origin in extroversion: the object of love is an object onto which we have projected a valued property of our own mind. Whereas he believes that morality exercises a baneful influence over us, love constitutes a more benign influence. One way of understanding this chapter would be that Wollheim seeks to find in Freud a basis for both the morality associated with Kant (moral obligation), and the value (or utility) that is central to Mill's utilitarianism. If he succeeds, this is a mighty achievement.

Chapter VIII: Overcoming the Past and Our Concern for the Future – It is possible, Wollheim maintains, to overcome the tyranny of the past. This occurs in the psychoanalytic process, in which an interpretation originates with the analyst and is then experienced by the analysand in a way that enables him to overcome the domination of the past, often by unpacking a phantasy. Wollheim admits that this might be achieved in other ways too: much of life is given over to this process, and this is witnessed to great effect, he maintains, in creativity and sexual experience. He investigates the possibility that there is some form of self-concern that might allow us to find life worthwhile.

Chapter IX: Cutting the Thread: Death, Madness and the Loss of Friendship – This is a coda to the main argument. Death brings the process of living the life of a person to an end, and so Wollheim provides an account both of the concept of death and the significance of *the idea* of death, for, not only will we die, but we know that we will die, and we live with this thought all the days of our lives, so it is relevant to the process of living. He also offers some remarks on madness and the effect that this has on the process of living, and finally a very beautiful account of the nature and value of friendship, and its contribution to living the life of a person.

4. *The complexity of living the life of a person*

Given that our current concern is with the nature of 'human complexity', what does *The Thread of Life* have to tell us about this phenomenon? Human complexity is, I assume, a particular variety of complexity—*human* complexity. In what sense does human complexity differ from other forms of complexity? Or, What is distinctive about the sense in which humans are complex? Wollheim, I believe, can shed some light on this.

In order to understand how human complexity differs from other varieties of complexity, we would have to get clear about what it is to be human. Wollheim has an interesting insight here. Our natural starting point is a *thing*: the person that each human being is. Such a thing is something that occupies space. (That it is natural to begin with the thing is apparent from the huge appeal that human rights discourse currently enjoys: human rights are thought to be rights that attach to a something in virtue of its being the kind of thing that it is: if something is a human being, then in virtue of being a human, it has certain rights—human rights.) Wollheim thinks it is a mistake to focus our attention on the thing. Things have a *life*, and we can speak of the life of a person. A life is something that commences at one point in time; endures across time; and then concludes at another point in time. It would be natural to assume that if it is not the person that matters, it is the life of the person that matters; if it is not human beings that matter, it is human life that matters (cf ‘the sanctity of *human life*’). But, again, Wollheim rejects this. He points out that human beings are not the only things to have lives: refrigerators also have lives. So it cannot be that what distinguishes human beings is that they have lives, for other things also have lives. What, he believes, is distinctive of human beings is the way that they *live* their lives. Living the life of a person is a *process*. Wollheim maintains that it is analysis of this process that is crucial to understanding the human condition. It is the process through which we live our lives, rather than the kind of thing that a person is, or the kind of life that a person has, that is distinctive of the human condition.

And what I want to suggest today is that when we approach the topic of *human complexity*, we should be approaching the complexity of the process that is living the life of a person, rather than trying to unpack the complexity of the thing that a human being is, or the complexity of a human being’s life.

And Wollheim has something significant to tell us about the process of living the life of a person. The process of living the life of a person is complex in a special way. It has to do with the way in which, Wollheim maintains, the past exerts a special influence over the process of living the life of a person. This influence is “baneful”, and it is what he sums up as *the tyranny of the past*—the way that the past is able to control a person’s present attitude to the future.

5. *Concern for the future and the lens of the past*

The complexity of living the life of a person has to do with the influence that the past exerts over this process. Wollheim maintains that there is something unique about the way in which the past influences the present in the process of living. What is unique is that the past *manifests* itself in the present. To understand what is so special about this claim, we must distinguish it from a trivial claim.

There is an uninteresting claim that Wollheim might be making, which is merely that the past determines the present. This is as true for human beings as it is for anything else in the natural world that is subject to causation. Whenever there is a cause and an effect, we can say that the past has influenced the present, because the past cause has influenced the present effect, in that the past cause brought about the present effect.

Wollheim understands this, but it is not what concerns him. There is nothing remarkable about this. It is just to say that, if you want to understand how a person behaves now, you need to look into his past to understand why the past experiences shaped him in the particular way that they did. So, in Freud's famous analysis of the Ratman, that would just be to say that the Ratman behaves in a bizarre way that is caused by his early psycho-sexual experiences. This is one insight that psychoanalysis offers, and it is an insight that is now probably generally accepted: early infantile experiences have a profound effect on the development of the child, and they affect the behaviour of the child in adult life. So, if you want to understand why an adult behaves bizarrely, you should look to his childhood, and there you will find the causes.

But that is just to say that human psychology involves cause and effect. What is disturbing about this might be that we do not like to acknowledge that our present behaviour is the effect of causes in our childhood, because often those childhood experiences are embarrassing, if not disturbing and confronting. Whether or not psychoanalysis is correct in the claims that it makes about infantile sexuality, ordinary adults often find it confronting, if not disturbing, to acknowledge that certain aspects of their childhood relationships with their parents have shaped the way that they live the most intimate parts of their lives.

Such insights of psychoanalysis might be interesting, but they are not what Wollheim would regard as the deeply profound insight. The deeply profound insight is that the past is not merely causally responsible for the present (as it is in every other part of the natural world), but that the past is alive in the present in a special way. When it comes to living the life of a person, the past life of the person is not merely causally responsible for the present life of the person; the past *manifests* itself in the present. If this is correct, it is something special about the process through which we live our lives: my past is not only causally responsible for who I am now, but that the past is somehow alive in the present and constitutes who I am now.

This, I believe, is one of the central insights of *The Thread of Life*. Wollheim attempts to offer an account of what it means for the past to manifest itself in our present psychology, and the (baneful) impact that this has on the lives that we lead. He does this through the distinction that he draws between mental disposition and mental states. Mental states, unlike mental dispositions, possess psychical force, owing to their phenomenology. But mental dispositions can manifest themselves in mental states. So a

mental disposition might exert psychical force though the mental state in which it manifests itself, even though we are unaware that that psychically forceful mental state is a manifestation of this (or any other) mental disposition.

Wollheim believes that what is central to how I lead my life is my orientation to my future. At any moment, I am in the grip of my desires. My desires are concerned with the future; they articulate changes that I seek to bring about in order that the world should be acceptable to me. (Whereas my beliefs are a matter of my trying to modify my picture of the world, so that my mind accords with how the world actually is, my desires are concerned with my quest to modify the world, so that the world accords with me.) So living in the present is about my concern for the future. That much is not so surprising: my grandfather, for many years, worked hard six days a week, and the reason that he was working so hard was his concern for the future; not just his own future, but the future of his wife and children.

What turns out to be interesting about the process of living the life of a person is the way that the past colours our attitude to the future in the present. If Wollheim is correct, when my grandfather is working hard to provide a good future for his family, the future that he sees is coloured by the lens of the past. It would be one thing to say that the austerity of the Depression and the death of his mother when he was two-years-old *caused* him to desire to work hard so that he would be able to enjoy emotional security and material prosperity with his wife and children. It is another thing to say that this desire is really a manifestation of his past.

In the example of my grandfather, what was absent in the past and what is desired in the future are sufficiently similar that it is easy to see how they are related. But, according to Wollheim, often this relationship is not transparent. It is not transparent because, not only does the past manifest itself in the present, but it does so in a way that is disguised. It is not always apparent that present desires for the future are manifestations of the past, because the connexion with the past is disguised. Freud's analysis of the Ratman is a case in point.

So to summarise the position that I believe Wollheim develops:

- In human psychology, the past does not merely determine the present, it manifests itself in the present;
- The structure of our mental life is such that the past is kept alive in our present psychology, and it is alive in a way that determines how we tackle the future;
- When a mental disposition manifests itself in a mental state, it is not always apparent that the mental state is a manifestation of a disposition;
- In the present, a person is orientated towards the future in a way that colours the perception of the future through a lens of the past;

- Human complexity is inherent in the process of living the life of a person, because of the disguised way in which our psychology enables the past to manifest itself in the present.

6. Desires for the future and reliving the past

For Wollheim, what appears to be a desire for the future is in fact an attempt to reorganise the past. It is not just that our past experiences influence what we now desire for the future. A desire appears to be concerned with the future, but, according to Wollheim, it is really concerned with the past, not the present or the future.

In my example, it may be that, although my grandfather believes that he is concerned with giving his wife and children the emotional security and material prosperity that he never had, in fact, he is trying to undo the past. He is trying to restore the maternal love that he lost and to make his childhood less austere. If this is the right analysis of what he is doing, how he treats his wife and children is not merely a response to his past. It is an attempt to change his past.

That is something that makes no sense to us. How could we possibly believe that what we do in the future can change the past? Wollheim believes that it is a fact about how we live our lives that we continually seek to influence the past through our desires for the future. We fundamentally misunderstand the nature of our concern for the future. So, for Wollheim, when our psychology appears to address the future, it is really addressing the past, and we fail to appreciate this because the concern for the past is disguised to appear as concern about the future. And he believes that he can provide an account of why this is so.

7. Living the life of a person, the disguised manifestation of the past, and human complexity

So what is the insight that Wollheim offers us into human complexity in *The Thread of Life*? I believe that he shows us that human complexity is a feature of the process through which we live our lives. The complexity of this process can be attributed to the impact of the past.

A person's past mental states and mental dispositions are not merely causally responsible for his current mental states and mental dispositions. They are able to manifest themselves in his present mental states and mental dispositions. And they are manifested in a disguised way, which means that the person is unaware that his current mental states and mental dispositions are manifestations of past mental states and mental dispositions. A person's present mental states and mental dispositions orientate him towards the future in a particular way. They present themselves to the person as his desires for the future. What he does not appreciate is that, through the activity of imagination, his past mental states and mental dispositions are able to persist in the

present by manifesting themselves in a disguised way. What appears to be a desire for the future is, in fact, a disguised response to the past.

These disguises create much of the complexity of our emotional lives. Our incessant desires for the future are—unbeknown to us—attempts to recreate the past in a more idyllic way.

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us...” we are told. But what appears to Gatsby to be a desire for the future is really a disguised manifestation of the past: “So we beat on,” as F. Scott Fitzgerald writes in the concluding lines of *The Great Gatsby*, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

This ending to the novel is a wonderful summation of the interaction between history, complexity, and melancholy in the human condition.

Contributor's Note – Damien Freeman lectures on ethics and aesthetics at Pembroke College, Cambridge and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and is the Director of the Governor General's Prize, which is an initiative of the Constitution Education Fund Australia. His recent publications include *Art's Emotions: Ethics, expression and aesthetic experience* (Acumen, 2012), *Roddy's Folly: R.P.Meagher QC – art lover and lawyer* (Connor Court 2012), *The Aunt's Mirrors* – a memoir (2014), and with Derek Matravers, an edited collection *Figuring Out Figurative Art: Contemporary philosophers on contemporary paintings* (Routledge, 2014)