

Self-Stress: A New Perspective on Stress and Moral Disorders of Civilization

Joao Carlos Orquiza
Centro Universitário Filadélfia – UNIFIL

This essay delves into self-stress arising from societal expectations and moral norms. It compares pre-agricultural life, focused on physical survival, with post-agricultural life, where stress is linked to productivity and social demands. Compulsory human labor is highlighted as a significant source of chronic stress, posing a direct threat by mandating individuals to "earn a living." The role of moral rules in today's society is explored, potentially influencing the shift of stress from physical to internalized. The essay proposes critical reflection on the impact of the "civilizing moral we," where collective achievements are internalized, possibly contributing to contemporary chronic stress and impacting mental health and societal cohesion. Despite apparent civilizational evolution, the concept of private property remains invulnerable, akin to prehistory. Given this complexity, there is a need to consider reformulating current morality to better address genuine human needs.

Keywords: self-stress, moral disorders of civilization, pre-agricultural life, post-agricultural life, work, chronic stress, moral rules

INTRODUCTION

The human being has evolved over time shaped by different environmental, social and cultural contexts. Before we settled in farming communities, we had an existence based on immediate survival, where stress played a crucial role in physical and mental preparation to face tangible threats. This changed with the advancement of societies to more complex civilized states, where human energy was directed toward long-term tasks less related to direct survival.

In this essay, we will address the transformation of stress from an essential response to survival to becoming a reflection of the pressures inherent in the contemporary lifestyle. We will investigate in detail the concept of self-stress, characterized as the self-imposed tension imposed by the expectations of today's society. In addition, we will explore the influence of morality on self-stress, debating how ethical rules and standards can shape our self-perception and intensify levels of internal tension.

In addition, we will review the so-called "moral disorders of civilization"—mental health problems that can emerge when the demands of the civilizing moral "we" become oppressive. In an attempt to suggest possible ways to improve the individual's interaction with society, we will also propose a critical analysis of the impact of this moral "we" on our mental health and well-being.

Finally, we will discuss the implications of modern work as a major personal predator and how morals, society, and stress connect in contemporary civilization. Our goal is to raise awareness of the possible consequences of the modern lifestyle and suggest ways to rethink and reshape our relationship with stress, morale, and work for the benefit of our mental and overall health.

MORAL DISORDERS OF CIVILIZATION

In analyzing the contemporary panorama, we encounter what this essay proposes to call moral disorders of civilization, phenomena associated with the transition from nomadic to agricultural life and eventually to life in cities, it became necessary to establish norms and rules to ensure collective survival. But in this process, the imposition of complex moralities has dramatically altered how we perceive stress and how we impose psychosocial threats on ourselves—self-stress and self-attack.

Morality, in the context of post-agricultural society, has acquired an influencing potency, affecting our perceptions of well-being, success, and failure. The further we move away from our individual needs and desires to meet the demands stipulated by such moralities, the greater the tendency toward self-stress and self-attack. In fact, these self-imposed expectations, amplified by a collective morality of hard work and productivity, can lead to anxiety disorders, depression, burnout, and a host of other mental health problems—the aforementioned moral disorders of civilization.

The importance of in-depth research on the aforementioned moral disorders of civilization lies precisely in the urgency of their impact on the physical and mental health of individuals in contemporary times. This is a challenge that requires immediate actions, both in the academic community and in society in general, aiming at the development of preventive, therapeutic and formative strategies that take into account the complexity of these phenomena.

SELF-STRESS IN TRANSITION: FROM PRE-AGRICULTURE TO MODERN SOCIETY

In this scenario, the concept of self-stress is predominantly derived from the internal pressures created by expectations and moral norms in our modern society. This stress, of a more individual and internalized nature, is contrasted with that experienced in pre-agricultural times, when humans operated under an objective and functional biological system, cultivating strong bonds of unity to combat natural and biological challenges.

In the pre-agricultural era, survival depended on the group's ability to cooperate and withstand adversity. These threats based on the physical environment and basic biological needs fostered the development of strong community bonds and a union indispensable for survival (Smith, 2012).

However, the evolution into the post-agricultural era brought with it a paradigm shift. Pressures have become more individualized and internalized, with social norms and expectations emerging as major sources of stress.

BIOLOGICAL STRESS: THE ACADEMICALLY IGNORED COMPONENT AND ITS CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE IN UNDERSTANDING MORAL DISORDERS OF CIVILIZATION

The biological stress response, especially evident in mammalian organisms, acts as an essential mechanism of survival and adaptation. From an academic point of view, stress is a multifaceted response of the body to situations of danger or pressure, encompassing behavioral, emotional and physiological responses.

Although the term “stress” is often associated, in everyday language, with feelings of anxiety and emotional problems, in the animal kingdom, this stress response is invaluable when it comes to dealing with direct risks to life. For example, when an animal encounters a predator, stress triggers the “fight or flight” response that can be crucial for survival.

If the animal manages to escape, another important aspect of stress will come into play: recovery. The stress response is therefore a dual mechanism, both helping the body cope with imminent danger and aiding recovery after the stressful event. This is particularly vital in situations where the organism suffers physical damage, such as a serious injury that occurs when the prey manages to escape from the predator's mouth.

In this context, when surviving a potentially fatal event, the organism will activate a cascade of repair and recovery responses. This includes, among other aspects, signaling for triggering healing processes,

replenishing energy reserves, and potentially reorganizing behavioral responses to deal more effectively with similar future situations.

Stress, therefore, in its biological context, plays a crucial role in the survival and evolution of living things, allowing adaptation to ever-changing environments and overcoming unforeseen and often deadly challenges. Consequently, its importance should not be underestimated and studies on this phenomenon should always take into account this essentially adaptive and vital perspective.

STRESS AS A SURVIVAL AND RECOVERY MECHANISM: A BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE BEYOND THE HUMAN CONTEXT

The view of stress is usually guided by the lens of human experiences, however, by broadening the scope and analyzing the stress response from a perspective of biological adaptation and survival, one can discern its vital function in the animal kingdom.

The stress response in animals is a crucial component of their ability to survive and thrive in inhospitable environments or in the face of threatening situations (Koolhaas et al., 2011). For example, when confronting a predator, the stress response allows the animal to quickly mobilize the necessary energy, enhance the perception of the details of the environment around it, and physically prepare the body for action – either to face the threat (fight) or to avoid it (flight).

After the danger has passed, the stress response also mediates the body's recovery. This process can include the healing of physical traumas, such as wounds, regeneration of energy levels, as well as the adaptation of the organism to increase effectiveness in the face of similar stressful situations in the future.

Additionally, endocrine and neuroendocrine mechanisms are involved in the regulation of the stress response. When an animal experiences a stressful event, the release of adrenaline and cortisol occurs (Sapolsky, 2004). Adrenaline provides an immediate increase in energy by mobilizing the body's glucose and fat reserves. Cortisol, known as the "stress hormone," acts at a slower pace and has more varied functions, including suppressing the immune system and increasing the metabolism of proteins, lipids, and carbohydrates, thereby aiding in post-stress recovery.

In short, the stress response is an essential mechanism that contributes to the survival and adaptation of animals in the face of potential threats. While chronic stress can have harmful consequences, it's crucial to understand that the stress response itself is a fundamental and necessary part of biological life.

THE UNDERESTIMATED RELEVANCE OF RETRIEVAL STRESS: BIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING AND HISTORICAL CONTRAST

In the course of human evolution, the role of stress as a survival and recovery mechanism was crucial. However, in an ever-changing society, the primary relevance of this aspect of stress seems to have lost importance in public and academic discussion.

In the past, humans lived in natural environments where biological "fight or flight" responses were needed to deal with immediate physical dangers. After escaping the threat, the stress recovery function played a key role in survival. This involved repairing physical damage, recovering energy reserves, and adapting to better responses to possible future threats.

However, as human societies have become more complex, the threats they face have also transformed, becoming mostly psychosocial in nature. Although these threats do not cause direct physical harm, the stress response is still activated, often improperly or excessively. In these cases, the recuperative role of stress, which is essential in the context of physical threats, seems to lose relevance.

In addition, the historical and popular understanding of stress has often focused on its detrimental effects, with the stress response being seen as a problem to be avoided, which may underestimate the adaptive value that stress can have in acute situations.

These factors may have led to underestimation of the adaptive and recuperative value of stress in academic discourse and public understanding. However, to effectively address the challenges of stress in

modern society, it is crucial that we fully recognize and understand the biological complexity of stress and its various functions.

The stress response is a primary evolutionary tool in the sense of enabling the survival of the organism in threatening or demanding situations. This occurs through an intricate neuroendocrine system, involving the hypothalamus, pituitary, and adrenal glands (known as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, as well as several brain centers, including key limbic system structures such as the amygdala and hippocampus.

In the prehistoric era, stress was an immediate and tangible response to imminent danger, often related to issues of physical survival and restoration of the organism post-severe injury, such as escaping a predator or foraging for food in times of scarcity. The function of stress was to prepare the body for rapid and effective action commonly known as the “fight or flight” response by enhancing focus and attention and making quick energy available to the body through the release of hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones serve a primeval biological function, restoring the organism after severe injury.

With the transition to a more sedentary life after the Agricultural Revolution, everyday threats and challenges began to change. Instead of acute stress in response to an immediate physical threat, people began to deal with more chronic and persistent types of stress, often linked to social coexistence, culturally established morals, and long-term duties such as harvesting the crop, caring for livestock, or maintaining cooperation and harmony within the group.

In modern civilization, this chronic psychosocial stress persists and deepens. The pressures for moral conformity and the challenges arising from life in a complex and interconnected society can create environments conducive to “self-stress” and “self-attack,” in which individuals internalize pressures and expectations and self-deprecate by perceiving failures, real or otherwise, to achieve these standards.

Morality, coupled with the complexity of modern society, has probably influenced the transition of stress from a strictly physical survival mechanism to a more abstract and chronic response to the psychosocial pressures of everyday life. It may have helped pave the way for modern phenomena such as self-stress and self-attack, reflecting an internalization of society’s demands and value judgments.

Morality is a set of rules that guides our social behavior, being a crucial element for communication, cooperation and social cohesion. By following these rules, individuals maintain a system of shared values that aids in group survival. However, their integration, particularly in post-agricultural societies, can result in self-stress and self-attack.

ADAPTATION AND SURVIVAL: THE EVOLUTION OF STRESS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVILIZATION

In analyzing human evolution, we realize that both our biological response to stress and civilizational development seem to follow a similar path: that of adapting and responding to the environment to ensure survival.

The human organism has evolved to respond to stress in an immediate way, preparing the body to deal with concrete threats to survival. However, this stress response has undergone changes in form and focus with the advent of civilization and the establishment of complex moral norms.

Similarly, the concept of civilizational “we” also represents an adaptation in response to environmental change. With the transition from nomadic to agricultural life, and later to life in cities, it became necessary to establish norms and rules to ensure collective survival.

In this perspective, both our organism and the civilizing “we” function as an adaptive system, focused on survival and prosperity. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that there is a fundamental similarity between both: the need for adaptation and response to the environment.

However, an important difference lies in the fact that while the human organism adapts to tangible threats, the civilizing “we” deals with abstract issues, such as morals, that influence the perception of stress and can lead to the phenomenon of self-stress and self-attack.

In addition, it is important to note that despite adaptations and the establishment of a civilizing “we,” on some level, we continue to be like our prehistoric ancestors, seeking to defend our territory – now called home – and our organism.

In the end, the similarity between the human organism and the civilizing “we” shows how much we are products of our evolution, adapting our responses and behaviors in function of environmental changes to ensure our survival. However, this evolution also brings new challenges, such as increased psychosocial stress, which we must learn to manage to ensure our well-being.

THE TRANSITION OF HUMAN ENERGY: FROM BIOLOGICAL SURVIVAL TO SOCIAL SERVITUDE

The passage to agricultural society, and eventually industrial and contemporary, caused the purpose and function of human energy to be redirected. The energy that was previously directed toward immediate survival—finding food, shelter, and fleeing predators—has been restructured to meet the demands of a society that increasingly placed value on productivity.

Morality, in this context, began to play a fundamental role, establishing norms and values that influenced not only social behavior, but also the channel of human energy (Haidt, 2001). The emphasis on work ethic, discipline, responsibility, and self-sacrifice has promoted a kind of “hijacking” of human energy (“forced to “make a living”), removing it from its more biological role and directing it toward the pillars of modern society: production, trade, transportation, and consumption.

In this sense, we can say that human energy was, in a way, “enslaved” by morality. It was recruited to serve the engine of civilization rather than to meet the individual needs of the organism.

This new “energy paradigm” has allowed for the progress and climb of human civilization to unprecedented heights, but it has also ushered in a new way of living that can be considered, in some ways, “surreal.” Displaced from their biological roots, humans find themselves living to work, rather than working to live, in a seemingly endless cycle of production and consumption. If we look under a critical lens, we might question whether this direction of energy is somehow undermining the organisms that sustain it, leading them down a path of chronic stress, burnout, and imbalance.

THE PREDATOR OF MODERN WORK: THE TRAJECTORY OF SELF-IMPOSED STRESS IN CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATION

In the context of work, human energy is often utilized in a way that deviates directly from its original biological purpose. Once used for primary needs like foraging for food or running away from predators, it is now directed toward tasks and responsibilities that are rarely related to the individual’s immediate biological needs.

Modern work often requires the individual to set aside fundamental needs, prioritizing productivity and efficiency (Beehr & Newman, 1978). This results in a situation where work becomes a kind of predator, causing stress not due to a physical threat, but due to psychological and emotional pressures.

This constant pressure can lead to elevated levels of cortisol, the “stress hormone,” which, when chronically high, can have several negative health effects. This includes reduced immune function, increased blood pressure, and damage to the heart and brain, as well as increasing the risk of depression and anxiety.

Therefore, work in this context seems to serve a socioeconomic morality that values productivity and efficiency above human well-being. In essence, work can be seen as an aspect of civilization that causes self-imposed stress, forcing the human organism to direct its energies toward activities contrary to its original biological purpose.

DECONSTRUCTING THE CIVILIZING MORAL ‘WE’: REFLECTIONS ON THE POST-AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Post-agricultural society, with its emphasis on property and productive labor, has constructed a new notion of “we,” replete with problematic and often detrimental moral strategies to individuals’ mental health. This new civilizing moral “we,” saturated with challenges and contradictions, has dramatically influenced the way we deal with stress and provoked a series of civilizational moral upheavals.

At the core of this dilemma is the expectation that each individual should serve as an uninterrupted source of work energy, fostering a culture of exhaustion and chronic stress. This phenomenon expanded with the advent of agriculture, which ushered in the notion of land ownership and, by extension, the ownership of organisms—a way of securing the labor needed for production.

This model, however, ignores the true value of human energy and the universal principles of energy maintenance, generating an environment conducive to the proliferation of civilizational moral imbalances and disorders. Children and adults are stuck in this cycle, often without conceiving of an alternative path.

Alone, we are driven to compete rather than collaborate; to define personal value by the ability to produce rather than who we truly are as individuals and as members of a community.

We thus face a complex and multifaceted challenge: to reflect critically on how we construct this civilizing moral “we” and to seek ways to reshape it so that it can truly meet our needs as human beings.

By underscoring the urgency of this reflection and subsequent action, this examination also serves as a call to the academic community and society at large to seriously analyze the implications of this civilizing “we” in our lives. Acknowledging the existence and impact of these civilizing moral disorders is the first step in overcoming them and creating a society based on mutual respect, cooperation, and shared well-being. Productive labor and property must exist as tools to help nurture these principles, not as the sacred ends of them.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In retrospect, the evolution of human civilization, from small bands of hunter-gatherers to post-agriculture and modern communities, brought with it a shift in the basis of stress: from physical to psychosocial threats. The introduction of complex morality, together with the restructuring of the exploratory channel of human energy, directly influenced the perception and response to stress, giving rise, in this essay, to concepts such as self-stress and self-attack.

The transition of human energy from a predominantly survival function to an instrument of productivity in contemporary society raises urgent questions about the implications for mental health and general well-being. We observed that while social evolution has allowed for unprecedented achievements, it has also produced an environment that can be conducive to self-attack and self-stress.

Therefore, it is crucial to fully recognize and understand the dynamics of these phenomena. We must conduct further research and develop strategies that effectively address these issues in order to achieve a healthy balance between civilizing progress and the mental health of individuals.

We must remember that although we have forged our progress through complex social structures and tortuous morality, we are still, in essence, biological organisms seeking to survive and thrive in our respective spheres. It is our collective duty to ensure that these spheres nurture an environment conducive to our well-being, rather than becoming a breeding ground for self-stress and self-attack.

As humanity has evolved from a pre-agricultural life to complex societies, the nature of the stress we face has also changed significantly. Stress arising from immediate physical threats to survival has been replaced by psychosocial stress, often self-inflicted, resulting from social expectations and norms. The advent of modern work has further accentuated this phenomenon, with the constant pressure for productivity turning work into an emotional and psychological predator, further increasing chronic stress in everyday life.

In parallel, morality has been a key influence on the development of civilization, stipulating guidelines that shape human behavior and directing human energy to facilitate the vital functions of society, such as

production, transportation, trade, and consumption. This progress culminated in the emergence of a “civilizing moral we,” where the achievements of humanity as a whole are internalized by the individual (“we went to the moon”). However, this phenomenon may be intrinsically linked to the increasing levels of chronic stress observed in contemporary society.

This new understanding of the factors that contribute to stress in modern society requires a reassessment on the part of academia. We need to expand our traditional understanding of biological stress to include the psychosocial threats and pressures of modern life.

The academy has a responsibility to lead this paradigm shift, recognizing that the classic concept of stress, focused on survival in the face of an imminent physical threat, remains relevant, but is insufficient to portray the complex reality of the twenty-first century.

This academic readjustment will have significant implications for the study of stress, work, morals, and human well-being. It will enable a greater understanding of the impact of “self-stress” and “self-attack” on individual physical and mental health, as well as provide insights for the creation of more effective intervention and prevention strategies.

Therefore, academia must embrace this challenge and explore new ways to understand and treat stress in modern society, aiming to promote the well-being and health of the population.

Meeting these challenges requires courage, creativity, and a great deal of compassion for both ourselves and others. However, doing so is essential if we are to build a society that is not only productive but also truly humane.

SELF-STRESS, HOMEOSTASIS, AND INEQUALITY: AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE FOR PROTECTION AND MITIGATION

Protection and Mitigation Strategies

Self-stress, a form of self-imposed stress, can be understood as a fundamental biological response aimed at protecting the organism and maintaining homeostasis. However, when self-stress becomes chronic or excessive, it can lead to a range of mental and physical health problems.

Awareness of self-stress is a crucial strategy for protection and mitigation. Understanding that stress is a biological response designed to protect the organism can help individuals recognize when self-stress is becoming harmful and take steps to effectively manage it.

However, self-stress does not occur in a vacuum. It is influenced by a variety of factors, including the broader socioeconomic context in which an individual lives. Social and economic inequality, for example, can exacerbate self-stress by creating additional pressures for individuals to overcome socioeconomic barriers (Smith, Smith & Coddling, 2023).

Therefore, strategies for mitigating self-stress must take into account both individual aspects and broader social contexts. Policies that promote social and economic equality, for example, can help alleviate some of the pressures that lead to self-stress. Additionally, promoting a culture of acceptance and support can help create an environment where individuals feel less pressured to overburden themselves.

In summary, protection and mitigation of self-stress require an integrated approach that considers both the biological aspects of stress and the broader social and economic contexts.

REFERENCES

- Beehr, T.A., & Newman, J.E. (1978). Job stress, employee health, and organizational effectiveness: A facet analysis, model, and literature review. *Personnel Psychology*, *31*(4), 665–699.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, *108*(4), 814.
- Koolhaas, J.M., Bartolomucci, A., Buwalda, B., de Boer, S.F., Flügge, G., Korte, S.M., . . . Fuchs, E. (2011). Stress revisited: A critical evaluation of the stress concept. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, *35*(5), 1291–1301.
- McEwen, B.S. (2007). Physiology and neurobiology of stress and adaptation: Central role of the brain. *Physiological Reviews*, *87*(3), 873–904.
- Sapolsky, R.M. (2004). *Why zebras don't get ulcers: The acclaimed guide to stress, stress-related diseases, and coping-now revised and updated*. Holt Paperbacks.
- Smith, E.A., Smith, J.E., & Coddling, B.F. (2023). *Toward an evolutionary ecology of (in)equality*. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B*.