Clutter, Memory, and Living Well

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This piece fell by the wayside, I think because it altogether pleased neither those who anticipated a conceptual analysis, but received a piece of moral philosophy which took advertising spiel as its starting point, nor those who desired moral philosophy but not an essay that frames itself eudaimonistically without fitting squarely or even triangularly into the scholarly domain of virtue ethics. At length (the length owing to the difficulty of finding a reviewer for such a theme) one editor did venture the opinion that I was 'on to something'; but since I had become busy with other things it took a year before I put together a revised draft; a year after that I had heard nothing back; and now at the start of 2015, about three years after this piece was originally drafted, I remain absorbed in other matters and so, presumably, does the world at large.

The original draft was partly shaped through discussion at a postgraduate philosophy seminar in Durham. I think it was the one at which somebody brought up *The Sims*.

'Tidy desk,' we say, 'tidy mind'. Yet we also and more ominously say, 'Out of sight, out of mind'.

Neither tidiness nor the faculty of memory plays any notable role in Aristotle's discussion of the life well lived;[1] although memory was incorporated by Cicero into the virtue of prudence, and his taxonomy was influential in the rhetoric and ethics of the Middle Ages.[2] Accurate recollection demanded orderly arrangement of one's mental furniture, sometimes very literally: among the traditional mnemonic techniques is that of the memory palace, which employs movement through an imaginary building as a sequence of triggers to evoke more abstract recollections,[3] bringing these within the ready grasp of the mind as one takes one's place within the memory palace and moves between its contents. Yet if mental untidiness is an impediment to achieving the prudent and thereby prosperous life, what then of domestic untidiness in the buildings in which we physically live our lives? To this the modern world, at least, has produced an answer.

Historically, the role of clearing up after people has on the whole not been linked to expert authority or professional prestige. Yet a remarkably unremarked development of recent decades has been the rise of the professional organiser, and more precisely of a corresponding professional ethos (or an advertising theme) which links the de-cluttering of workplaces and (especially) homes with not merely practical but positively therapeutic benefits. If indeed these claims deserve even half-credence, they should certainly divert philosophers' attention, lest our conceptions of the good life and its requirements should otherwise prove too narrow or too highfalutin.

There is a straightforward sense in which charting a course through stacks of old magazines and accumulated bric-a-brac might prove a practical impediment to our pursuit of ongoing wellbeing and domestic tranquillity; but we find ourselves invited to consider the possibility that 'clutter' has other and more directly psychological effects on our capacity to live well, and it is on this suggestion that I draw in what follows. Construed as a biographical accumulation, an encrustation of our pasts and thereby a manifestation of personal memory, clutter becomes a physical medium through which we find ourselves dwelling among the sometimes years-old remnants of discarded hobbies and unconsummated plans. To be engulfed by this clutter would be to wallow in the lingering past; to forsake it, to erode one's own biographical strata.

I argue as follows. The accumulation of domestic clutter in our untidy lives is plausibly linked to our recollection of, and reflection on, those lives; to our

[1] He does comment in *De Memoria et Reminiscentia* on the kinds of people who have poor memories, and on mnemonic exercises; but there his focus is on the nature of the memory. It is only interpreting Aristotle along overtly Nietzschean lines that leads Richard Findler to impute an 'active forgetfulness' to his *eudaimonia* in Findler, Richard S. (1998), 'Memory and Forgetfulness in Aristotle's Ethics: A Nietzschean Reading', in *New Nietzsche Studies* Vol. 2, No. 3–4, pp. 27–39.

[2] Yates, Frances A. (1966), *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 20. (Since this essay is concerned with ethics, albeit ethics in a broad and broadly eudaimonistic sense, I do not discuss the role of memory in virtue *epistemology*.)

[3] *Ibid*, pp. 2–3.

selves, our responsibility for the state of our own living spaces, and thereby to our 'memory' not so much of the facts of the matter as of the lived experiences which our domestic accumulations evoke, and to the projects and priorities we used to weave around ourselves. (I do not mean that when we line our nests with clutter it serves the function of an *aide-mémoire*, like a diary or a calendar; clutter may in fact disrupt the efficiency of what one commentator on 'the extended mind' has called 'epistemic artefacts',[4] principally by making them hard to locate.) Therefore de-cluttering, in which some items are thrown out and a new order is imposed on the rest, is linked to what we choose to forget, to abandon and to ignore. Therefore the phenomenon of professionalised domestic organisation, and by extension the practice of de-cluttering in general, suggest deeper implications for our attitudes towards human self-cultivation and self-reflection. Here I suggest two (somewhat mutually compatible) implications, one benign, the other less so.

A Tidy Summary

The National [*sc.* American] Association of Professional Organizers claims 'nearly 4,200 members throughout the U.S. and in 12 other countries'.[5] Whenever a spotlight has hitherto swung near the work of professional organisers, however, its focus has tended to be the clutterer: the more luridly compulsive the hoarder, the more morbidly compelling the spectacle. Among several such exhibitions on television, the 'American documentary series *Hoarders*, which introduces interventions into sufferers' lives, started in 2009 and [as of late 2011] is... in its fourth season'.[6] Yet the therapeutic benefits of de-cluttering are not advertised exclusively to the figure of the obsessional hoarder discussed, for example, in Randy Frost and Gail Steketee's *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*.[7] Besides the 'compulsive hoarding' known to psychiatry there is also the simple, everyday experience of realising just how much disorderly stuff you own and how limited your living space.

Simple and everyday, but supposedly not without therapeutic benefits when it results in a home containing fewer and more orderly objects after a process of de-cluttering has removed the excess. The Toothbrush Principle promises 'that miraculous sense of flow you can have in your home and your life when everything stays in its proper place'.[8] Cluttergone offers 'control of your life' in which you will feel calmer, less embarrassed and 'able to move on in life'.[9] (There is even an association of Christian organisers.)[10] Advertising copy of

[4] Sterelny, Kim (2004), 'Externalism, Epistemic Artefacts and The Extended Mind', in Schantz, Richard (ed.), *The Externalist Challenge: New Studies on Cognition and Intentionality* (Berlin & NewYork: de Gruyter), pp. 239–54.

[5] http://www.napo.net/press_room/napo_facts.aspx (retrieved 15th January 2012).

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16299670 (retrieved 13th January 2012).

[7] 2010, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

[8] http://www.thetoothbrushprinciple.com/ (retrieved 13th January 2012).

[9] http://www.cluttergone.co.uk/ (retrieved 13th January 2012).

[10] http://www.faithfulorganizers.com/ (retrieved 13th January 2012).

this sort is not philosophically exact, and we should hardly expect it to be. Yet if an advertising strategy of this nature is effective, then presumably it is effective because it captures something of commonplace human experience of clutter, and human anxieties about cluttering. By enquiring into how this might be, not uncritically or credulously but nonetheless curiously, we may therefore hope to learn something about what it is to live well which is ordinarily absent from philosophical examinations of that weighty topic.

Most of anybody's life, after all, is everyday life. The quotidian is not manifestly invested with moral drama (except perhaps in the work of Michel de Certeau), but the age which invented 'ethical shopping' is plainly capable of finding moral salience in mundane matters of lifestyle. Clutter, it is true, is not of the same nature as commerce: it is not other-regarding in the fashion of a purchase which makes us fear our complicity in foreign sweatshop labour or environmentally destructive global freight networks. So long as we limit it to our own spaces, clutter is only other-regarding at all when we have visitors. A self-regarding emphasis, however, need hardly exclude a topic from moral philosophy's examination. 'Discussions of the moral significance of illness can be found in a range of philosophical traditions from ancient times onwards', for example;[11] and if decluttering can successfully be advertised therapeutically, then it too may be fair game for moral philosophers. Considerations of autonomous moral agency can acquire a new tang when one reads one organiser's comment: 'My goal is for my clients to be able to open the mail without me.'[12]

What *is* this clutter which reportedly can impede the flourishing of our lives; and how might it prevent any of us from moving on in life? We need to know what the subject of this enquiry is; but a conceptual dissection of 'clutter' will not necessarily leave us with the kind of clarity which helps us to understand why someone might hope to become 'able to move on in life' as a result of decluttering. Much of what follows will therefore owe rather more to phenomenological tendencies than to conceptual analysis. In identifying clutter we cannot escape subjective and psychological elements, chiefly those concerned with responsibility for the untidy obstruction, and hence with responsibility for the past of which it constitutes persistent evidence. Mind Over Clutter even makes one of its four subcategories 'anything unfinished':[13] reminders of our lifetimes' abandoned or unsuccessful projects thereby come to be treated as obstructions which cling to us when we might otherwise forget about them and surge onwards. We accumulate clutter as we accumulate a past; and if we cannot erase our messy pasts, we may at least seek to impose order on their residue.

Our encounters with clutter are both bodily and visual, and the two are not trivially equivalent. For one thing, their domains are differently extensive: only the eye can discover that a picture is cluttered in its composition. Purely visual clutter, however, need concern us no more than it does a professional organiser; it belongs to the realm of art criticism and instruction. Nevertheless, this very

[11] Kidd, Ian James (2012). 'Can Illness Be Edifying?' in *Inquiry* Vol. 55, No. 5, p. 496.

[12] Teresa Parker, letter to *The New York Times*, 15th January 2011.

[13] http://www.mindoverclutter.com/ (retrieved 13th January 2012), citing Karen Kingston's *Clear Your Clutter With Feng Shui* (1999, New York: Broadway Books).

fact underscores the aesthetic element in judging that a scene is cluttered: it is as a spectator that one takes in a scene, a manifold full of things perceived at once and all together, and judges that before one is a displeasingly cluttered composition.

The body's tactile apprehension of clutter is different, and so is our spatial dodging around it, in which the eyes are involved but we do not get to stand back and *look*. In this mode we peer into spaces, not at them. We are most intimately involved with clutter when we find ourselves in an attic or an overflowing cupboard, searching and groping and fumbling, bumping into things and knocking them over, gradually forming a mental map and revising it every time some object gets brushed off a shelf and rolls away out of sight, or when we move a box from our passage and add it to the little trail of disturbed belongings that forms behind (while trying to memorise where it was when we came upon it, lest we otherwise have to invent a new arrangement when putting everything back).

It is our questing fingers that often lead the way, especially where the light fails to reach: probing the niches at the backs of shelves, dipping and delving into bags and boxes and buckets of miscellaneous little objects. With them we explore each item individually, adding it to the mental map: a round thing, a heavy thing, a *sharp!* thing. Especially interesting objects are brought out of the shadowy corners for the eyes to identify more reliably, one by one. Any sense of an enveloping manifold has been pushed into the background: we examine *this* thing we thought had been lost forever, and *that* thing we actually came here to retrieve. We are surrounded by clutter, wading through it, but our attention flitters from item to item; it is only the eyes, not the fingers, that can see each object as part of a cluttered ensemble, and therefore not the eyes and fingers when we deploy them together.

Compared to hands, our limbs and our shoulders have a broader view (and even the toes we stub), but still we cannot spectate with them. We encounter clutter with our whole bodies when we are stooping and bending amongst it, or when reaching through things, behind things, under and between things, leaning around or stretching to reach high boxes of yet more things. Sometimes we bend around clutter for a better view, but this is not very like bending around a sculpture for a better vantage point, for we are not appreciating but searching, or wondering which rearrangement would best enable us to cram as much into the available space as possible. There is a perceptual aspect to such contortions, of course, but instead of surveying a scene and thereupon judging that it is cluttered, we find ourselves in the midst of clutter because we are making our bodies involved with it. It would be rash to deny that there is any sensuous element in the body's navigation of a cluttered environment, when sensation plays a frequent role; but whereas the displeasure that comes with looking at clutter may easily be identified as aesthetic, the annoyance of raking around in clutter is most obviously one of practical engagement.

It turns out, then, that our judgments about what is cluttered are not only subjective but subject to variation even in accordance with our sensory organs and the purposes to which we are presently putting them. 'Clutter'

is not, once unpacked, a very simple-looking word. Sometimes it may signify simple disorganisation; or, more specifically, it may refer to an accumulation of things which have not been put away in their 'proper' places. (One reviewer, in questioning my emphasis on accumulated clutter which is a residue of the past, suggested that piles of laundry, constantly in use and in motion through the house, could perfectly well be called clutter. This is true but no organiser, one hopes, is going to advise you to stop washing your clothes.) In other cases it may indicate sheer troublesome volume; the most meticulously catalogued of collections may be labelled clutter if the labeller is sufficiently overwhelmed by the space it takes up, and simultaneously unimpressed by its utility.[14] (My present concern, however, is with one's own clutter in relation firstly to oneself, and secondly to the world at large; I do not consider, for example, scenarios in which one person's prized collection of unusual bricks manifests itself as clutter to the spouse who trips over it whilst crossing the matrimonial bedroom in the dark.) At its most broadly construed, clutter is an obstacle: clutter gets in the way, has to be walked around, takes up space which could serve more immediate uses.

Still, it is an obstacle with an owner. Clutter in a house is not like litter in a street, even when both are disorderly; the clutterer accumulates things rather than abandoning them. Neither can the clutter I create be detachable from my involvement in its being present, as though some outrageous individual might have trespassed in my home in order to use it for storage. The task of acknowledging the clutter in my house confronts me with the knowledge that before me lies the accumulated consequence of all my little lazy deeds; and it also confronts me, however hard I might try not to care about the clutter, with the knowledge that others will think I ought to. There can be clutter which is both immobile and impersonal: one might speak of an architectural clutter of excessive public signage, erected by municipal officials.[15] My domestic clutter is both mine and mobile, however, and consequently I can stand accused of a failure to sort it out.

It is my house, my home, that fills up with my clutter (or otherwise my workplace, my office, my desk): a space for which I am responsible, and moreover one which may be expected to bear the imprint of my character. If (as Kirsten Jacobson writes) 'our home is a second body for us',[16] our clutter is a second scruffiness. This is not immediately and automatically a cause for censure; it is while pottering about at home that we are at most liberty to clothe ourselves in ancient and elbow-patched cardigans, free of the public demands of smartness and style. Yet it is also when they inspect our homes that visitors are most able to inspect *us*; those who get no further than the front room may be hoodwinked

[14] An accusation of cluttering might be preferred to Jean Baudrillard's remarks that 'there is something of the harem about collecting' and man 'never comes so close to being the master of a secret seraglio as when he is surrounded by his objects'. ((2005), *The System of Objects*, trans. Benedict, James (London: Verso), p. 94.)

[15] Cf. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20901026 (retrieved 3rd January 2013).

[16] Jacobson, Kirsten (2009), 'A Developed Nature: A Phenomenological Account of the Experience of Home', in *Continental Philosophy Review* Vol. 42, p. 361; see also p. 357.

by a freshly hoovered carpet and an orderly shelf of (conspicuously highbrow) books, but deceptions grow harder to maintain with increasing intimacies. (Even within the home, there may be gradations of permissible clutter: there is a stigma mildly attached to an attic which has been stacked floor-to-ceiling with things under the pretext that they might come in useful one day, but it hardly compares to the embarrassment of having to clear the chairs in a living room before one's guests are able to sit down. The potentially dual role of a bedroom, as personal retreat and as erotic theatre, is a matter of particular complication.)

Jacobson's is therefore a somewhat one-sided treatment when she writes:

> Though there may, of course, be rules that structure our homes—rules of cleanliness, *rules of where things belong*, rules of respecting other members of the home if they exist—these are rules in which we are precisely at home; they are not experienced as alien impositions but, like the specific parameters of limb and muscle that constitute the body's very capacity for action, they are the very terms within which we experience ourselves as having the capacity to live freely. Thus, within the bounds of our own projects, we can do as we wish, when we wish. Home is filled with our interests and with our moments of drifting without any explicit interests, and it protects us temporarily from the interests and demands of others. In this way, home is a place of self-nourishment and self-development, and is also fundamental to our experience of our 'own'.[17]

Home is intimate somewhat as one's body is intimate, but home is also public somewhat as bodily hygiene is. Nevertheless, this only reinforces Jacobson's observation that we

> are *responsible* for making our home, for making ourselves at home, and this is something we must learn how to do [...]. Though it is a passive dimension of our experience, home is an accomplishment—that is, it is dependent upon our action.[18]

This responsibility is not purely for presentability (and clutter is not presented by organisers as a problem exclusively for our public selves). 'Home' emerges as a precondition for certain habits of orderliness, for 'our first home is also where we learn how to put things in their "proper" place, what it means to have belongings, how to care for and clean our surroundings'.[19] (Neatness may subsequently develop into an attitude towards the world in general, as when my mother leaves a trail of straightened picture frames in her wake wherever she passes; but this will typically reflect a concern not for the geometrical orderliness of spaces but for their being kept in good order as habitable places.) Domestic space thereby acquires a normative dimension, and home becomes part of our moral education, in practice if not in conventional moral theory.

[17] *Ibid*, p. 359 (my emphasis).
[18] *Ibid*, p. 362 (emphasis in original).
[19] *Ibid*, p. 363.

The mental discipline embodied in the technique of the memory palace accordingly mirrors the principles of physical orderliness familiar to us from the palaces, or the more modest dwellings, in which we make ourselves at home. Whether one form of discipline, outer or inner, precedes the other in the development of the human individual or species need not presently concern us; our arrangement of our environment to suit ourselves is less remarkable among species than our capacity for cluttering it. Clutter, in turn, need not be a straightforward human universal. How neatnesses vary with the ways in which we domesticate ourselves (between men and women in their fluctuating domestic roles, or between routine and creative jobs, or between householders with and without servants) is a matter for the social sciences; and it may emerge that 'clutter' in all its psychological complexity is a culturally local or variable phenomenon.

If this is the nature of clutter, it is no more saturated with culture than the beings that create it. Against the background expectations which we bring to domestic space, my clutter is linked to my self not only through my straightforward causal responsibility for its presence but also because it reflexively defines me as a clutterer: open to public judgment as lazy or untidy or incapable of letting go. Having a place to come home to, somewhere to dwell at length and call one's own, thereby makes it possible to take on the aretaic characteristics of domesticity: to be characteristically neat, presentable and so on becomes a matter less of the clothes I can change each passing day than of the utility room which I mainly ignore and occasionally think I ought to clear out one of these days.

Clutter in a house, however, is significantly disanalogous to both dirt and structural decay; any of the three may be a sign of domestic neglect, but clutter also offers us a more complex and ambiguous story. Unlike filth, the objects which compose clutter may be of some potentially positive value, be it practical or economic or sentimental value.[20] It is hardly neglectful to store away that which might come in useful someday, even when things which might just come in useful someday are already so bountiful that I can barely shut the cupboard doors; if anything we have an Aristotelian excess of habitual forethought on our hands.

Yet our relationship with clutter can be more than misplacedly acquisitive. As an aspect of one's dwelling, clutter is a biographical phenomenon, as telling as a kitchen midden which has come under the scrutiny of an archaeologist.[21] The accumulation of clutter reflects the developing, temporal self, and can manifest

[20] Frost and Steketee note that in the case of compulsive hoarding, hoarders' ascriptions of value to what would ordinarily be considered junk range from aesthetic appreciation to an anthropomorphism which results in feeling sorry for objects which are to be thrown away. See interviews at http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1984444,00.html and http://www.salon.com/2010/04/25/hoarding_interview_stuff/ (both retrieved 18th March 2012).

[21] This is also true of the rubbish which people *do* routinely throw out, as Don DeLillo recognises in a scene in *White Noise* which describes rummaging through domestic waste. Rubbish in the modern process of disposal, however, by its nature normally offers more a snapshot than an extended memoir.

itself as a particularly obstructive one among the many ways in which the past clings to one's present.

> My past remains alive for me in my explicit memories of single events, of particular shared experiences, moments of embarrassment or joy. But my past also still marks me in all the things I know about the world yet don't need to think about right now—in the way other people interact with me, in the way I drive and the music I sing along with as I do, in the state of my teeth, in my clothes and my smile, in the scar on my elbow and the condition of my internal organs.[22]

The Things We Forget

A rare example of reportage which emphasises the professional organiser over the spectacle of compulsive hoarding (albeit an organiser with some fabulously wealthy clients) was provided by *The New York Times*, in a profile which paints an ambiguous (and possibly atypical) portrait of a woman who admits to having turned her personal neuroses about tidiness into a business opportunity.[23] Its vignettes narrate the disposal of children's belongings in particular, such as 'the notebooks, now touching artifacts, filled with the earliest handwriting of [a] couple's 8-year-old son, Lucas. "Everybody's going to learn how to read and write," Ms. Reich said. "You don't need the evidence." ' The predominant theme is of an assault not merely on unused things that take up space, but on nostalgia, on holding on to what was and what might have been: thus outgrown sports uniforms are discarded after a 'frank assessment that Lucas was unlikely to… make the Hall of Fame' as a professional sportsman someday.

> 'If you're nostalgic in any way, you're probably in trouble with Barbara,' Ken Yaffe, a client, told me. I happen to be nostalgic in every way. I cannot, for example, part with matchless baby socks. Or certain stacks of old newspapers. But it would be nice to be able to find working batteries and misplaced Batmobiles.[24]

Therein lies the dilemma; and not every reader was won over by such an approach to de-cluttering:

> I am a committed saver of mementos because they serve as a physical connection to my family that can be passed on to my children and grandchildren. Yes, I have kept some of my children's toys, and

[22] Sutton, John (2009), 'The Feel of the World: Exograms, Habits, and the Confusion of Types of Memory', in Kania, Andrew (ed.), *Memento: Philosophers on Film* (Abingdon: Routledge), p. 65.

[23] 'Organize This!' in *The New York Times*, 9th January 2011, p. MB1.

[24] 'Abandon All Nostalgia. The Organizer Is Coming Over', in *The New York Times*, 9th January 2011, p. MB6.

> now my grandchildren play with them. Letters and cards from my parents, husband and children can bring a family history to life.[25]

In part this difference of judgment is about which items have useful and renewable potential; in part, it is about what *counts* as useful potential for possessions to have. In particular, it turns out to be about the roles which objects play in our temporal lives as beings on the way from the past which we remember into the realisation of one among our potential futures.

'My past', as it pervades my present, is not a linear sequence of events. Besides my continuing awareness of biographical facts there is also the multitude of ways in which my present is structured by what I have done and what I have acquired and kept. A home, and especially an old home, chiefly among familiar places, is a timeless place in that the strata of earlier phases of one's life remain visible and near at hand in one's environment unless, of course, steps have been taken to discard them, or sell or give them away, or at least consign them to orderly storage. It is no wonder that memory is sometimes described using the imagery of keepsakes:

> Recall, more limited than habitual memory but still pervasive, involves awareness of past occurrences or states of being. Mementoes are cherished recollections purposely salvaged from the greater mass of things recalled. This hierarchy resembles relics: everything familiar has some connection with the past and can be used to evoke recollection; out of a vast array of potential mnemonic aids we keep a few souvenirs to remind us of our own and of the wider past. Like a collection of antiquities, our store of precious memories is in continual flux, new keepsakes all the time being added, old ones discarded, some rising to the surface of present awareness, others sinking beneath conscious note.[26]

This principle of resemblance applies also in reverse: like our restless memories and reinterpretations of how we came to be where we are, the things with which we surround ourselves are constantly subject to additions and subtractions and reorganisations. It is when things are allowed simply to lie strewn about us, even to the extent that they start to get in our way, that they stand out as something we call clutter.

Among the things in which the past remains manifest, clutter manages to be at once an obstacle, experienced as somehow an obstruction, and simultaneously a personal and sometimes even an intimate thing. Compared to internal organs it plays little or no practical role in my day-to-day activity, making it more like an appendix than like the throbbing heart of my material world. Yet clutter is not only practical but purposive; it just doesn't necessarily reflect my *present* practices and purposes and projects. A bicycle in a cyclist's stairwell looks like clutter only if it could be less obstructively placed elsewhere; but in the stairwell

[25] Ruth L. Krugman, letter to *The New York Times*, 15th January 2011.

[26] Lowenthal, David. (1985) *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 194.

of someone who has *stopped* cycling, it is a blockage of a particularly provocative sort: a blockage which lurks by the stairs to remind its owner of the lingering possibilities of fresh air and greater fitness. To get rid of it, disavowing one's identity as a clutterer of the stairwell, would also be to confirm one's identity as an ex-cyclist. While it lingers, the bicycle offers both the possibility of gripping its handlebars again and an uncomfortable reminder of how long it is since anyone last did so.

If the nature of clutter is not merely physical but inescapably psychological, and especially if amongst it is included 'anything unfinished', we should expect that de-cluttering will have, as promised by professional organisers, some psychological effect. If it is in the nature of clutter that through it we cling to the unfinished projects of our past selves, then de-cluttering accordingly will take the form of (among other things) a performance of forgetting: not the erasure of our memories of facts or of events, but the elimination of environmental triggers which make our former projects present for our present selves. Grit your teeth; accept that nowadays you drive everywhere; and your cycling memories will fade from your attention as your conscience and your stairwell become correspondingly clear.

A performance of forgetting no doubt has its due place within mnemonic prudence. (Could anyone wish to live like Funes the Memorious as Borges imagined him, who could recall every detail of any day of his life, but would take an entire day to do it? His closest nonfictional counterparts report that *hyperthymestic syndrome* may prove too burdensome to be an unmixed blessing.)[27] In *A Study in Scarlet* Sherlock Holmes compares the brain to an attic of limited capacity, to be stocked

> with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skillful workman […] will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order.

From *his* mental architecture he takes pains to expel any knowledge without present use to him: that the Earth orbits the Sun, for example.

Yet forgetting is also a form of loss; and if de-cluttering is therapeutic, it may nevertheless prove a therapy involving disorienting shock. 'Everything seemed to have its place,' writes a hoarder in the aftermath of employing professional organisation to remove her overwhelming surfeit of belongings, 'but where was mine? I didn't know. The wide expanse of floor space, the smooth desk, seemed foreign, reminding me of the apartment's emptiness when I first moved in.'[28] So alien is emptiness in a place where people live that, as Gaston Bachelard put

[27] Parker, Elizabeth S., Cahill, Larry and McGaugh, James L. (2006), 'A Case of Unusual Autobiographical Remembering', in *Neurocase* Vol. 12, pp. 35–49.

[28] http://www.salon.com/2011/08/23/i_am_a_hoarder_confessional/ (retrieved 13th January 2012).

it, 'an empty drawer is *unimaginable*. It can only be *thought of*.'[29] Since the accumulation of clutter in one's domestic environment is a gradual biographical event, and since both home and the clutter within it stand in significant relations to one's self, the sudden removal of overflowing possessions may have alienating repercussions. To see one's 'second body' suddenly stripped, and to find that there is little left that seems familiar or a reflection of oneself, may make home abruptly uncomfortable.

What then for our ethics: what of the life well lived? I am not presently concerned, as Avishai Margalit often was in *The Ethics of Memory*,[30] or as Jeffrey Blustein heavily was in *The Moral Demands of Memory*,[31] with whether there are any obligations to remember past events. Neither am I about to map out the systematic bounds of mnemonic prudence; the thoroughly prudent individual may intuitively possess some aretaic insight into how much fussing over the arrangement of possessions makes a comfortable home, but for us who do not it would be helpful to acquire some notion. If the existence of an industry of professional organisation is any clue, our predicament is widespread. Insofar as I have liberty to let things slip from my attention and lie forgotten, then, which acts of pruning am I to undertake if my life is to go well, and which had I better avoid?

In an article on the practice of collecting, the economist Russell Belk describes a short story called 'Filthy with Things',[32] in which two hoarders turn to a professional organiser to sort out their overflowing home. This is a somewhat fantastical story, and the organiser who ministers to their house is grotesquely portrayed: she entirely empties it. 'Like Goldilocks visiting the three bears, we are given two extremes here—too much and too little—with the suggestion that there is a golden mean of moderation that lies somewhere in the middle.'[33]

Can we achieve such moderation in our lingering amidst the remnants of our past? If we think that we can discard any of them like a suit of clothes, this is only because that too has been more than trivially connected to the person who puts it into the charity bag. 'The past is present and melts insensibly into the present,' reflected Jean-Paul Sartre; 'it is the suit of clothes which I selected six months ago, the house which I have had built, the book which I began last winter, my wife, the promises which I have made to her, my children; all which I *am* I have to be in the mode of having-been.'[34] Take away the suit, consign the book to the attic, and what results for us?

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[29] (1994), *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Stilgoe, John R. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press), p. xxxvii (emphasis in original).

[30] 2002, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

[31] 2008, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[32] Boyle, C.T. (1994), 'Filthy with Things', in *Without a Hero: Stories* (New York: Viking), pp. 41–63.

[33] Belk, Russell W. (1995), 'Collecting as Luxury Consumption: Effects on Individuals and Households', in *Journal of Economic Psychology* Vol. 16, p. 478.

[34] *Being and Nothingness* (2003), trans. Barnes, Hazel E. (Abingdon: Routledge), p. 518.

The Re-examined Life

There are two possible implications which I propose to explore. In identifying these I draw on Eli Zaretsky's suggestion that 'there are two different ways to understand memory: the first conceives of memory as the recollection of an *event*, the other insists that the act of remembering is not completed until the event is situated into a meaningful, coherent *narrative*'.[35] Margalit draws a loosely related and more overtly value-laden distinction: that between a vision of life which emphasises 'the trivial experiences that… are the ones that truly make up our lives,' such as his many moments of sipping coffee, and on the other hand 'the conflicting literary picture of life,' in which 'we are the authors of our lives, and we had better make sure that they add up to something meaningful'.[36]

That we are the authors of our lives is inescapable; but recollection makes us their editors too. Rather impotent editors, for memory is notoriously fallible; but it lies within our voluntary power both to strive to remember certain things rather than others, and to hold on to certain objects and not others. There are therefore two senses in which we might hope for 'narrative well-being'. The first involves a spectatorial viewpoint: this is what permits Byron Stoyles to argue against Epicurus that death can be an evil for the person who dies, since the narrative arc of this person's life may be said to have been cut short even when the person no longer exists to see that it is so.[37] The other involves the subjective viewpoint of a life remembered and reinterpreted by one still living it. We may decide that we are satisfied or dissatisfied with what we have become; and that may depend on what stories we think we are telling ourselves.

If we construe memory in terms of the working out of coherent narratives, then domestic de-cluttering may look very plausibly like an outward, material mirror of the mental pruning that permits us to put these stories together. In that case, recollection may *require* selective forgetting and, by extension, de-cluttering. Like a historian marshalling swarms of archival material into an account of a decline and fall or of the causes of some coup, the storyteller must omit more than can possibly be selected for inclusion; and if to remember is to narrate, then our remembrances will be perhaps the more serene if we do not continue to surround ourselves with traces of what has no place in our stories as we have now chosen to tell them, let alone with reminders of what might have been in stories which we left forever uncompleted.

Something like this construal of memory emerges in Walter Benjamin's reading of Proust, who, famously, 'did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. […Yet is] not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involuntaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?'[38] Perhaps indeed it is; and

[35] Zaretsky, Eli (2009), 'Collective Memory and Narrative: A Response to Etkind', in *Constellations* Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 201 (italics in original).

[36] *Op. cit.*, p. 134.

[37] (2011), 'Challenging the Epicureans: Death and Two Kinds of Well-Being', in *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 1–19.

[38] (1999), 'The Image of Proust', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico), ed. Arendt, Hannah,

in so describing it Benjamin presents it as a rather special case, perhaps to be contrasted with what he elsewhere calls 'authentic memories', the marking of which he compares to the meticulous construction of an archaeological record.[39] Among the characteristics of the faculty of memory is that it can fail us, and routinely does; hence such techniques as the memory palace, designed to increase our voluntary, purposeful control over our wayward recollections. We cannot be Funes, we cannot remember everything; but it need and may not follow that we can easily find ourselves at liberty to wallow wholesale in a Proustian reconstruction of our experiences, no matter how much residue of the past may surround us.

Yet the fact remains that our recollections are inescapably those of the selves we have become, rather than the people we once were. Here we might turn again to Sartre: 'In order for us to "have" a past, it is necessary that we maintain it in existence by our very project towards the future.'[40] Though the facts are now immutable, on Sartre's account the *meaning* of past events depends on other and ongoing projects: for example, an adolescent crisis might prefigure a future conversion, but conditionally on whether one *does* later convert.[41] Thus pasts may become 'dead' as we let them go, not forgotten but abandoned, and a suit which has ceased to please since it went out of fashion may belong to just such a past—except insofar as a present project of economy ensures that it still gets worn nonetheless.[42]

Where dead pasts have left unburied traces on our shelves and in our cupboards, may we not conclude that these have lain in state for altogether too long? Clutter is not simplistically the villain of this piece: where the past is something with which we need to come to terms, we might expect that it would *help* us to sift through our mnemonic resources, reminiscing after the Proustian fashion, revising and reconfiguring our salient narratives as we go delving in the attic through our layers of accumulated paraphernalia. Yet what clutter portends is not a controlled and selective lacework of memory but a past untamed and unresolved: the raw material out of which a narrative of memory must be made, and made anew whenever we gird our loins and clamber up into the attic. Will our lives then flow more smoothly, and will each one fall more neatly into a satisfying narrative shape, if we do not let our present selves be haunted by the relics of dead pasts and abandoned projects? It may indeed be so, and perhaps a 'declutter consultant' or a 'clutter coach' would indeed offer the right prescription to those whose mementos lie moribund around them.

On the other hand, however, I should like to turn to Zaretsky's alternative account of memory in which the emphasis is on events; for pruning out things which have come to seem useless or superfluous may erode a record of what was and might have been. De-cluttering might then be more the imposition of a

& trans. Zorn, Harry, p. 198.

[39] (1999), 'Excavation and Memory', in *Selected Writings* Vol. 2:2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bellknap Press of Harvard), ed. Jennings, Michael W., p. 576.

[40] *Op. cit.*, p. 519.

[41] *Ibid*, p. 520.

[42] *Ibid*, p. 521.

narrative than its working out: a comforting—or disconcerting—simplification of a complicated past.

In his discussion of the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the plot of which concerns a technology that can remove painful memories, Christopher Grau suggests that such imaginary technology can be thought of as Robert Nozick's experience machine in reverse—and that it is no less problematic than a machine through which you can take enjoyment in phantasmal experiences. 'Similar philosophical issues arise, as the worry is that in both cases we are achieving pleasure (or the avoidance of pain) at the cost of truth.'[43] This, of course, would be ridiculously heavy artillery to bring directly against decluttering, which removes merely the lingering material remnants with which our recollections are intertwined, and which need hardly be connected to painful memories. (Grau even comments that 'one might think that choosing to remove the memories of someone else is not significantly different from throwing out their old letters or deleting all their emails. Is it not her right to remove mementos […] if she chooses?')[44] Yet it illuminates, I suggest, the thought that it is troublesome at once to acknowledge the involvement with our former selves and projects of the objects which thereby constitute 'clutter', *and* to treat them as disposable, as though they were obstructions akin to rubble. It might be thought a strange sort of self-respect which so briskly sweeps away its past.

Could there nonetheless be virtues of self-disposal? In his recent work John Cottingham has considered integrity not merely as a virtue but as potentially the master virtue.[45] This might initially suggest a case in favour of divesting oneself of any traces of past selves which feel inconsistent with what we have made of ourselves, in honest acceptance of what we have chosen to become. (One writer on regret chose as a subtitle 'The Persistence of the Possible',[46] and nothing persists as stubbornly in a household as the paraphernalia at the back of a seldom opened drawer.) It may be true of me that in different circumstances or through different choices I might have developed the artistic abilities I neglected since childhood (for I still have my coloured pencils somewhere), or might have travelled more freely in exotic places while I had more opportunities (and perhaps I got as far as acquiring the brochures); but these adventures belong to my modal counterparts. Why tolerate their physical belongings under my own roof? If we are to have integrity, we may doubt that it is to be achieved through letting one's identity split in manifold directions between one's actually living self and one's wistfully counterfactual pseudo-selves. If we are to live well, it must be in the lives we actually lead.

Yet integrity, as Cottingham understands it, is crucially a matter of knowing

[43] (2006), '*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the Morality of Memory', in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 64, No. 1, pp. 121–2.

[44] *Ibid*, p. 126.

[45] (2010), 'Integrity and Fragmentation', in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 2–14.

[46] Landman, Janet (1993), *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

who one is;[47] and we have become who we are through having been who we were. All of that clutter of abandoned and unfinished things takes up space in my home precisely because it does persist in its embodiment of the projects I abandoned and my dreams that slipped away.

My life is integrated into the tapestry that it is precisely because it is my own life as I have led and experienced it; my past, thus understood, is not a biographical narrative in need of editing before it can be bound and set before a curious public, but instead the events, however botched and unplanned some may have been, in which I was a participant.[48] If you have ever had the experience of sorting out the accumulated belongings of a deceased relative, you may have found yourself sifting through suggestions of old loves and faded friendships, photographs from unknown holidays, and abundant other things of this sort which encode the substance of a story that has lost the only person who could give a thread of narrative meaning to the totality. Yet the richness of a full and worthwhile life may nonetheless be there to see. The experience can be a frustrating one for the surviving, but a disordered record is no evidence of a failed life, and need hardly preclude our pronouncing people happy once they are dead. One must have lived a very self-contained life indeed if one's bereaved friends and relations are not to reflect that everything before them is, ultimately, a project left 'unfinished'.

I do not sing in praise of clutter,[49] but neither can I see it straightforwardly as something to be cut out from a life and home like a tumour from a body. Insofar as what makes it 'clutter' is not merely its volume and arrangement in the space that houses it, but also its remoteness from our present projects, it manifests itself as an obstruction precisely because it persistently reminds us, even when we stub our toes on overflowing boxes of it, that there is always more to human life than present lifestyle.

[47] *Op.cit.*, p. 8.

[48] I do not mean this as an endorsement of Galen Strawson's scepticism about narrative conceptions of the self, although of the alternatives I extract from Zaretsky, no doubt he would prefer the event-centred approach to memory. See Strawson, Galen (2004), 'Against Narrativity', in *Ratio* (New Series) Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 428–52. An alternative but also uncertain touchstone might be Steven Galt Crowell: 'Nostalgia,' he tells us, 'testifies to the impossibility of a complete narrativization of the self.' ((1999), 'Spectral History: Narrative, Nostalgia, and the Time of the I', in *Research in Phenomenology* Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 86.)

[49] http://www.economist.com/node/1489224 (retrieved 15th January 2012) does, but it is concerned with the failure as an effective workplace of the 'paperless office'.