The Impermanence of All Things: An Existentialist Stance on Personal and Social Change

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Change is a given. Be it due to external forces or internal psychological processes, people are in a constant state of flux, confronted with various challenges and threats on an ongoing basis. Change is also inextricably linked to the human existential plight because our very existence is part of a cycle, a process. Every day thousands of people die and thousands more are born. Within a mere century the entire population of the planet will have been replaced. Yet people seem relatively oblivious to these dramatic facts and strive to achieve a sense of permanence and stability in their lives. It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that people are generally resistant to change. In fact, change is a celebrated value in contemporary societies and is equated with progress and improvement. Lack of change signifies stagnation and decay. Thus, the sands of time may be a threatening reminder of the emptying hourglass of life, and change may signify the loss of youth and vitality. Permanence, however, may be equally threatening because it is through progress and rejuvenation that people achieve meaning that helps them to transcend the ephemeral nature of their physical existence. In this talk, based on terror management theory, we will explain how change poses both an existential threat and provides a possible remedy for it. We will review the terror management and existentialist literatures through the lens of change, and then present a series of new studies examining the relationship between the prospect of change and existential concerns. These studies examine change in three different domains (vocational, interpersonal, and political) and show that the relationship between change and existential threat can be attributed to change per se and is not confined to a specific change domain. We will conclude with a discussion of how an existentialist perspective on change may help people deal with the various social and political challenges confronting contemporary societies.