

Chapter 10

Learning to be Dead

The Narrative Problem of Mortality

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Palomar does not underestimate the advantages that the condition of being alive can have over that of being dead. . . . A person's life consists of a collection of events, the last of which could also change the meaning of the whole, not because it counts more than the previous ones but because once they are included in a life, events are arranged in an order that is not chronological but rather corresponds to an inner architecture. . . . This is the most difficult step for one who wants to learn how to be dead: convincing himself that his life is a closed whole, all in the past, to which nothing can be added, nor can changes in perspective be introduced in the relationships among the various elements. . . . He decides that he will set himself to describing every instant of his life, and until he has described them all he will no longer think of being dead. At that moment he dies.¹

Italo Calvino, "Learning to be Dead," *Mr. Palomar*

I. MR PALOMAR AND THE GENERAL PROBLEM OF MORTALITY

Italo Calvino's implacably inquisitive Mr. Palomar, who "has realized that things between him and the world are no longer proceeding as they did before," undertakes to "act as if he were dead."² After a brief struggle with this task, he meets the ultimate practical obstacle, in the form of his death prior to his project's completion. But what exactly is Mr. Palomar trying to accomplish in learning to be dead?

If we were to induct Mr Palomar into the society of fictional representatives of philosophical issues, he would best stand for the so-called "problem of mortality" for narrative views of the self.³ The traditional narrative view in its "hermeneutical" incarnation has its roots in Alasdair MacIntyre.⁴ It is characterized by a focus on agency, intention, and the quest for the good in life, along with an interest in life's unity and completeness, often as modeled on literary narratives. While the problem of mortality has haunted the narrative view of the self for some years now, like many ghosts, its contours and the specific nature of the threat it poses are unclear. Insofar as we can generalize about the problem, it has something to do with our self-narrative being rendered necessarily incomplete in virtue of our inability to experience and/or appreciate the meaning of a key event: our death.

The problem of mortality treats death as a posing a paradox. The narrative view needs death, it seems. It is death that completes a life, in a manner analogous to the ending of a story.⁵ But death is inaccessible to the subject herself. Therefore "the analogy between lives and stories breaks down completely at the fatal end-point."⁶ We end up with a confounding picture of the narrative self "simultaneously demanding and resisting subsumption in a unified narrative."⁷ "Demanding" subsumption in a unified narrative because unity is bound up with completion and so, as the source of completion, my death "looms over and constitutively defines the character of every moment of the life that I do inhabit from the inside."⁸ "Resisting" unified narrative because "I have to be alive to experience meanings,"⁹ but "my death can be experienced only from a perspective *outside* my life."¹⁰ Death "cannot be brought into any narrative that might confer meaning upon it while the subject lives."¹¹ I myself cannot access my whole, completed narrative.

In sum, "the problem of mortality" as I use the term here is primarily, if not exclusively, a specific problem for the hermeneutical narrative view of the self ("narrative view" from herein), in which death plays a special role. And the problem involves a seeming paradox in the form of needing to grasp our death while being debarred from doing so. Finally, something of deep significance to the narrative view is apparently threatened by the problem of mortality.

Why should we care whether there is a serious problem of mortality for the narrative view of the self? For several reasons, philosophical and otherwise. The narrative outlook permeates popular thinking about life and death. Outside of philosophy, it is not at all uncommon to come across sentiments such as those recently expressed by Atul Gawande in his *New York Times* bestseller, *Being Mortal*: "In the end, people don't view their life as merely the average of all its moments. . . . For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story. A story has a sense of a whole. . . . And in stories, endings matter."¹² In material designed for popular or practical consumption, the

focus on dying and death as the final chapter to life's story is as familiar as it is unchallenged.¹³ The problem of mortality may be grounds for a challenge.

Within philosophy the narrative view occupies an important, perhaps unique, position in the canon of responses to the putative evil of death. Against the Epicurean outlook, which copes with death by reducing value in life to something noncumulative, the narrative account presumes to provide a framework in which there can be clear reasons to live a rich and decently long life; one must do this in order to live out a full narrative trajectory. On the other hand, narrativists do not take up the common anti-Epicurean stance of wanting the goods of life to, ideally, continue on indefinitely—perhaps forever.¹⁴ Their reasons for eschewing immortality are, however, not negatively motivated by familiar concerns about encroaching boredom or alienation.¹⁵ Rather, the end of life is extolled as the capstone—death completes and thereby secures the sought-after narrative structure.¹⁶

We might sum this up by saying that for the narrativist, reasons for living and reasons for dying are intimately intertwined. It is partly this that opens the door to the alleged paradox at the heart of the problem of mortality—being debarred from apprehending one's own death is significant and problematic if death informs the meaning of one's life. If a legitimate version of the problem of mortality exists, it may put pressure on the feasibility of the narrativist's unique view of life and death.

Narrativist attempts to solve the problem of mortality often involve exercises in "learning to be dead" in an effort to demonstrate that one's death is not, after all, entirely outside one's grasp. But as John Davenport has shown, there are differing versions of the problem of mortality, which invite disparate solutions. In trying to get to the bottom of the problem, I follow Davenport by considering different versions, though my distinctions diverge from his in places.¹⁷ And I begin with the assumption that any legitimate version of the problem of mortality must live up to the three criteria outlined above, which all discussants seem to agree on: it should be a problem primarily for the narrative view of the self; it should involve a seeming paradox or conundrum in the form of our simultaneous need and inability to grasp our death; and something of importance to the narrative view must be under threat.¹⁸

I will argue that most formulations of the problem of mortality do not meet all these criteria. In order to strike at the narrative view in particular, in a fashion that is significant and in a form that is paradoxical, a quite specific type of death must be at issue—one that is sudden and unanticipated, like Mr Palomar's. But interestingly, a suggested resolution to this version of the problem of mortality implies that the problem can be dissolved by disavowing certain alleged narrative presuppositions that fuel it. Whether those presuppositions are essential to sustaining a uniquely narrativist outlook on life and death remains an open question.

II. THE TIME-LAG PROBLEM

The problem of mortality is sometimes construed as, essentially, a temporal problem. One cannot grasp one's death or (insofar as this may be considered distinct) the final moment of life because it lies outside one's grasp, which is only ever retrospective. Hence, a person's life "cannot be a 'complete' story for her while she is living it; at best, it can only become a unified narrative for others after her death."¹⁹

This version of the problem of mortality has its roots in Sartre, as Stephen Mulhall elucidates. Mulhall sums up his own reading of Sartre on the self and the intentionality of mental states in terms of a problem of time lag: "one can be conscious of oneself only as one was, not as one is."²⁰ Self-consciousness can only involve grasping past states of oneself as intentional objects of contemplation. It follows that the final moment of one's life remains permanently inaccessible as an object of self-conscious contemplation, since it is the one event in our life that we cannot regard in retrospect.

It may seem that the Kierkegaardian notion of imaginative co-presence with death could help us overcome this time-lag problem (though Davenport himself uses it against a different version of the mortality problem, as we shall see). Imaginative co-presence with death is a Palomarian-type envisioning of one's life as "all in the past."²¹ It involves a removal of oneself from time—"as if the midnight hour has already struck, as if we are already dead and our story finished. . . . Thus we can experience 'being dead' *metaphorically* as being out of time."²² Although we cannot literally contemplate our final moment in retrospect, we might reach this imaginative "as-if" form of doing so, and thereby possibly glean all we could want or need from such contemplation. Of course there are concerns of accuracy, but the unpredictability of the nature of one's death may be exaggerated, as Davenport notes,²³ and at worst it renders this imaginative exercise difficult, not impossible.

However, this solution is a somewhat extravagant one if we consider this version of the problem in more detail. For, it seems, the problem to hand is mischaracterized as a time-lag problem—a problem of only the *past* states of oneself being available for contemplation. This misconstrues the difficulty as essentially temporal rather than logical. The problem of reflexive intentionality, if it is one, concerns the relation between higher and lower order actions. In theory, I can contemplate my ending at any point during my life, and without the effort of removing myself from time, metaphorically or otherwise—without, that is, the need to imaginatively place my death "as if" in the past. The only thing from which I am necessarily debarred is the simultaneous contemplation of myself contemplating it.²⁴

There is perhaps a more pressing concern about framing of the problem in terms of the possibility of reflexively contemplating only one's *past* states.

It puts the focus on our final moment or moments as the one part of our life that is necessarily inaccessible to us. Insofar as this is presented as a problem, the implication is that for the narrativist there is something of outstanding significance about this event in and of itself, which renders its inaccessibility to us deeply problematic—as though the narrative structure of a life, insofar as it might be analogous with literature, were most closely modeled on highly contrived cases in which climax coincides with literal ending ("the butler did it"; "he loved Big Brother"; "reader, I married him").

But can this possibly be what the narrativists have in mind when they designate the ending of life important? Of the whole host of events and actions that comprise one's life—some reflected upon and others not—why might the final one be deemed of such significance that one's failure to grasp it would constitute a deep problem? It is not clear what of profound value or consequence in the narrative view is threatened by the loss of comprehension of one's very final moments, and even if we could overcome that loss, it is far from apparent what we would gain.

This first pass at trying to isolate the nature of the problem of mortality is unsatisfactory, as a deep and clear problem for the narrative view fails to emerge. A broader characterization of the problem may rectify this.

III. THE DEPRIVATION PROBLEM

A broader understanding of the problem of mortality is implicit in Davenport's own appeal to imaginative co-presence with death. Imagination, here, takes us beyond accessing some all-important but elusive final moments. The idea, as Davenport makes clear, is not merely to envision our ending but to comprehend the ramifications of it for our life as a whole ("a closed whole," to return to Palomar's own imaginary flight). This involves "briefly exist[ing] in a kind of living death; we *experience* what it would be like to be dead, or to be unable to alter our narrative, and what that would mean to us if we were still able to experience meanings in that state."²⁵ The purpose of this imaginative exercise is a twofold edification, according to Davenport: we measure how worthwhile our commitments would be when fixed by death; and if they are found wanting, we experience a longing to correct them. And once we snap out of our *Christmas Carol*-like reverie, we find that we may, after all, have the opportunity to effect a moral reform in order address some of those shortcomings.²⁶

But just what problem is imaginative co-presence with death designed to combat? As Davenport presents it, this solution is directed toward something quite distinct from the time-lag problem, namely the inability to achieve closure because "as beings of finite powers and limited time but indefinitely

extending interests, aspirations and loves, there is always more we would do or say if death could be postponed."²⁷ While the act of imaginative co-presence with death clearly cannot remedy this situation, it nonetheless can instill in one the resolve to make better use of the freedom to change while one can.

The problem as described resembles the familiar deprivation theory of the evil of death. Thomas Nagel proposes that death is evil insofar as it deprives us of the goods of life, and also notes that such goods may be "indefinitely extensive," in that however many we have acquired more are always conceivable.²⁸ Davenport's own talk of "indefinitely extending interests, aspirations and loves" seems a conscious echo of Nagel's own wording here. Though Davenport is less concerned with the deprivation of new experiences or concrete goods than with further opportunities to reconfigure the meanings or narrative trajectories of past events. But insofar as deprivation of indefinitely extensive benefits is at issue in both cases, the problem we have on our hands is importantly disparate from the problem of mortality. What is seemingly desired and what death prevents is a life that is itself as extensive as the possible goods to which it aspires. There is no implicit competing conviction that death is also desirable or necessary to securing meaning in life; if there were, any desire for indefinitely extensive goods would be fraught with ambivalence.

It is this ambivalence that is lacking in Davenport's characterization of this version of the problem of mortality. And in losing it, we lose the needed element of paradox at the heart of the problem. Insofar as being deprived of indefinitely extensive goods is considered a problem, it does not take the form of a narratively induced paradox—of both resisting but *demanding* death in order to secure a good life.²⁹ To focus on deprivation is to ground the problem in the fact that we are not immortal; if we were immortal, the opportunities for bettering our life (whether it be by adding more experiences, or rectifying the meaning of past ones) would be indefinitely extensive and the matter would be resolved. Immortality, not enhanced appreciation of the meaning of our death, is the desideratum at the heart of deprivation problems, and is anathema to the narrative outlook.

Furthermore, there are many responses to the problem that deprivation presents that do not require us to live through some imaginative equivalent of Scrooge's ordeal in order to grasp the salient point that the possible goods in life can outstrip our scope for attaining them. Though in Davenport's favor, his solution implies that the particular nature of the problem is not merely a failure of intellect—a failure to acknowledge one's limited capacity for achieving the goods in life—but a failure of imagination. Imagination can personalize the problem of deprivation in such a way as to make any reform gain purchase and be sustained. We can be caught supremely off guard by the prospect of a life to which nothing can be added or changed. The supplement

of an imaginary component might make up for our deficiency in grasping the implications of this.

Thus Davenport's solution is a potentially valuable one when it comes to addressing the deprivation problem. But it is a stretch to say that what we're faced with here is a species of the problem of mortality. By transposing the problem of mortality into a variation on the deprivation problem, we end up with something not exclusive to the narrative outlook and not paradoxical.

IV. THE FINITUDE PROBLEM

The deprivation version of the problem of mortality was ineffective in making the problem an especially narrative one. A similar shortcoming affects the next interpretation of the problem of mortality that I consider. This version focuses on our inclination to live as though death will not happen; we do not sufficiently acknowledge the fact that we will die when planning and making choices.

Talk of "anticipatory resoluteness" as a solution to the problem of mortality sometimes fosters this picture of the mortality problem. Anticipatory resoluteness is a notion that, via Heidegger, again traces back to Kierkegaard. It involves "anticipatory understanding [of] the fact that I will die," instilling "certainty of my temporal finitude and an end to my efforts as part of the overall meaning of my life before my death has happened,"³⁰ and presumably, incorporating that understanding into the overall understanding of my life. Anticipation of death places "the manner in which one lives under interrogation."³¹ As a solution to the problem of mortality, this differs from imaginative co-presence with death because of a difference in the "*mode of contemplation*"³²; anticipatory resoluteness, expressed in terms of the *understanding of the fact* I will die, seems to involve an intellectual rather than imaginative grasp of my death and its implications, thereby implying that the problem it targets is at the level of belief and practical reasoning. Davenport presents this as an easily effected solution, though to what he suspects may be an "uncharitable construal" of the problem of mortality.³³

Why the construal of the problem is uncharitable is left unsaid. But it may be because this is not the problem of mortality per se. It is not the end of life itself—our need and/or inability to grasp it—that is at the forefront of consideration. Rather, the problem here concerns limitations that result from death. While the two are intertwined, it is life's finitude more so than death per se that is at issue, specifically the need to face up to the strictures of a limited lifespan and live in accordance with them. The difficulty at the heart of the mortality problem, that "I have to be alive to experience meanings,"³⁴ remains true but entirely tractable on this account: I can "experience" the meaning of

my death in the form of the belief that it is inevitable (I do not need to know or imagine the particulars), and achieve an intellectual maturity such that my acceptance of my mortality has application in determining how I live my life.

Unlike the deprivation problem, the finitude problem does not necessarily bring with it the assumption that the goods of life are even in theory indefinitely extensive (even a committed anti-immortalist can struggle with life's actual limits).³⁵ But like the deprivation problem, the finitude problem is hardly exclusive to narrativists. Many others have suggested that failure to accept mortality and keep it in our thoughts likely results in a worse life.

Steven Luper, for example, advocates a heightened and ongoing attention to our limited lifespan in order that we can plan a life of worthwhile goals and activities, but divest ourselves of certain desires and relations of dependency as our end approaches.³⁶ The purpose of this is in part to limit, as much as is possible, the feelings of encroaching desire-frustration that might otherwise ensue as time runs out. Luper's nonnarrative credentials reveal themselves when he proclaims that "a life can be made neither good nor bad by the fact that it will eventually end, any more than a car can be made good or bad by the fact that it will eventually be scrapped."³⁷ Death, on this account, does not make life good or meaningful. It is a biological contingency that circumscribes the boundaries within which a good life can be arranged. One can see the need to acknowledge and accept finitude in the sense of planning the best life possible within its confines, without in any way feeling that the value of life depends on that which renders it finite.

Once again, far from being exclusive, we have here a widespread problem that traverses the borders of narrative views about life. And we are offered a solution that can be and is in some form embraced by those not party to the narrative outlook. Our next version of the problem of mortality, in contrast, reveals more specifically narrativist concerns and a narrativist-targeted solution.

V. THE SOLONIAN PROBLEM

This version of the problem of mortality concerns the apparent fact that, up until the time of my death, the future could unfold in more than one way and may therefore be "a threat to whatever 'unity' I may have achieved."³⁸ As Davenport puts it, "the time or manner of my death might undo the meaning that my whole life has had for me up till then."³⁹ More so than the previous versions considered, this may fulfill the criteria set out for the problem of mortality. In contrast with the time-lag problem, this version of the problem doesn't concern only the literal final moments of a life, and doesn't fix on the end of life arbitrarily and in isolation from the rest. Rather, its significance

is grounded in a broader context: the end has the power to make or break the meaning of the rest of a life. Furthermore, the focus here is squarely on the end of life and the retroactive impact it may have, in contrast with the less relevant concerns of the deprivation and the finitude problems (which focus, respectively, on the theoretical limitlessness of the goods of life, and on the strictures of a normal lifespan).

I'll call this version of the problem of mortality "the Solonian problem," since it is reflected in Solon's dictum, "look to the end," and Aristotle's interpretation of it as proscribing the attribution of happiness to any person until after he has died. The example is from Herodotus's (apocryphal) account of Solon's meeting with King Croesus of Lydia, who supposed himself the happiest of men but went on to lose all that he valued in the end.

One response that Davenport gives to this problem is as follows. We may be able to exercise considerable autonomy over how our last days will go, and ensure that they fit with our life as a whole. While this will not be an opportunity open to all (more on this in the next section), it is more common than often acknowledged. Even when we have little power over the events that transpire, insofar as the end is foreseeable, exercising some control in the form of last words and gestures may secure the right sort of ending for us. Even reversals of fortune on a Croesean scale may be mitigated in this way. "We can," in short, "sometimes *make* an end,"⁴⁰ and in so doing, defeat this version of the problem of mortality.

The solution of making an end requires fairly specific information on what those final stages of life will be like. That is, we must do more than grasp the fact of our mortality (as with anticipatory resoluteness) or even imagine our end (as with imaginative co-presence with death). We need a notion of what will happen and when. In addition, we must prepare ourselves in advance for committing end-related actions and decisions, so that we are not just "passive spectators of a final choice that affects the meaning of all our past choices."⁴¹ Thus resolving the Solonian problem involves gaining knowledge of and some control over the end of life. Under these conditions, the end can be "made" and, crucially, appreciated before reaching our literal final moments.

This account gets us closer to the problem of mortality. It suggests an end-related problem to be resolved in order for narrative unity to be secured. And it seems to be a "narrative" problem, to the extent that the power of final events to undo the whole depends on a holistic outlook on the value of life. Its value is not the mere sum of its parts (the aggregate well-being score would be quite high, in the case of Croesus). Rather, the overall well-being "corresponds to an inner architecture" of tight relations between any one part and the whole. Hence the end has the capacity to consolidate or undo the gains of the past.⁴²