21. There might be room for argument about what counts as a substantial loss, and there are going to be unclear cases. Still, it seems that there are recognizably substantial losses of agency and practical identity, as exemplified by Alzheimer's disease.

22. It is worth noting that my argument for the rationality of fearing death doesn't depend on whether the loss of one's agency and practical identity is a mere comparative bad or an absolute bad. Strictly speaking, then, my argument can be made independently of Draper's framework.

23. See, for instance, Samuel Scheffler's recent discussion of this point (pp. 83–110) in *Death and the Afterlife* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

24. Christine Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 363.

25. Special thanks are due to UCR's Agency Workshop, John Martin Fischer, and especially Monique Wonderly for many discussions of the ideas here, and for many helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Thanks also to Karl Ekendahl for useful feedback on a late draft of this chapter.

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Chapter 8

Constructing Death as a Form of Failure

Addressing Mortality in a Neoliberal Age

Beverley Clack

For nearly forty years, Western politics has been dominated by a particular account of what it is to be a human subject. This model of subjectivity owes much to the Enlightenment vision of the self as rational, autonomous, and capable of choice. In its contemporary iteration, this "neoliberal" construction of the human subject places subjectivity in a specific economic setting where one's individual destiny is shaped through exercising one's ability to make rational choices in a marketplace; choices which are invariably shaped in terms of the ability to purchase and consume the material goods deemed necessary for a meaningful life.[1]

In this chapter I explore the model of success which arises from thinking of the human subject in this way. My focus is on the problems this model of the successful life encounters when confronted with the inevitability and inescapability of death. This necessitates, firstly, addressing the model of failure that arises from the neoliberal account of success; and secondly, resisting the neoliberal construction of death as the ultimate failure in order to reassert the fact that to be human *is* to be mortal. My contention is that recognizing the inevitability of death for the human subject enables a set of values to emerge which are more conducive to human flourishing than those currently offered by dominant neoliberal philosophies.

SUCCESS, FAILURE, AND THE NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT

It is worth spending a little time identifying what precisely makes the neoliberal account of subjectivity distinctive from other accounts which similarly prioritize rationality and autonomy.[2] Starting in this way illuminates what success and failure mean for the individual conceived thus. David

Harvey provides the clearest definition of neoliberalism which highlights its relation to classic liberal accounts of the self, while also recognizing its distinctiveness:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.[3]

In order to free the entrepreneurial spirit of the individual, neoliberal societies embark on policies of deregulation and privatization. As the state withdraws from most areas of social provision,[4] the focus falls on the responsible self, whose freedom to pursue their own goals is framed through a corresponding commitment to the freedom of the market. It is in the marketplace that this self is to be actualized, the neoliberal subject being a *consumer* rather than a *producer* of goods.[5] Through exercising the ability to choose, the individual is expected to be able to construct a successful life: success being measured in financial terms. This involves not just being able to choose from the marketplace the goods that are desired, but also attaining the material resources necessary to create, more broadly, the kind of life one wants. Drawing upon Foucault's insight, to be human in a neoliberal society is no longer to be *Homo sapiens* (the wise animal) but *Homo oeconomicus,* an economic unit with the power to shape its own (economic, social, and political) destiny.[6]

Subjectivity, then, is shaped by faith in free market economics. Given this economic framing it is not surprising that work should take on a particular role in the shaping of the human subject. If past generations assumed a life separate from the labor which they traded in the workplace, now it is *in* the workplace that one is expected to find meaning for one's life: through acquiring the money necessary for the good life, but also through the opportunity it provides for creating the kind of lifestyle that one desires.[7] To use Thomas Lemke's telling phrase, individuals are now understood as "entrepreneurs of themselves," "human resources" who must monopolize and market their talents, strengths and achievements, for it is only in this way that one is able to be deemed a success.[8]

The skills for success can—indeed, should—be taught. To be successful, attention must be paid to improving the self, acquiring the kind of skills that will enable you to become a successful individual. Just as a business would invest to improve itself, so the individual should be prepared to invest in the self, learning to cultivate the image of the winner through "the management of the interpersonal relations upon which winning depends."[9]

Cultivating success involves being prepared to take risks. The risk-taking subject is at the heart of neoliberalism, defined through "the story of an entrepreneurial self."[10] The ideal human subject is the one prepared to "take up any challenge, transcend any limitation, and embody any quality."[11] If you are bold enough and willing enough to challenge yourself you can become anything that you want to be. Forget self-knowledge as the aim of life: now the goal is self-expression. Aspiration becomes the guiding principle for how to live. Note that neoliberal ambition is framed by the rejection of the social self: to achieve self-actualization you must be willing to embrace competition (the neoliberal's "primary virtue"), rejecting solidarity with others as "a sign of weakness."[12] No class consciousness or group identity can shape your experience. You alone must create yourself and your destiny.

The goal of this aspiring subject? Ansgar Allen claims that it is difficult to identify any aim beyond "the narcotic of constant activity."[13] There is some truth in this: define the self as entrepreneurial and work will necessarily appear as an end in itself. At its most lofty, the goal of the neoliberal subject seems to be acquiring the resources necessary for constructing a lifestyle that allows for self-expression. At its most prosaic, in a precarious world where the state provides limited protection from the ills of life, acquiring material goods acts as a buffer against the swings and arrows of outrageous fortune. In order to be secure, you need monetary resources capable of providing that security.[14]

Here we start to get a glimpse of the shadow that haunts neoliberal success: failure. That not all can be successful under such a model, that economic or educational success will have to be weighed against others failing, that success can just as easily give way to failure, is rarely acknowledged. Following Judith Butler, we might note the significance of this unacknowledged experience, for as Butler says, attending to those things which are absent from discourse is just as important as considering those things which are present. Those things which are excluded "haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic."[15] Exploring neoliberal attitudes to failure makes possible the illumination of neoliberal fears and desires; it also opens up the possibility of thinking differently about what makes for a meaningful life.

So how is failure conceived in neoliberal discourse? Crucially, failure is viewed as something which reflects flaws in the self rather than something resulting from problems in the socioeconomic system that one inhabits. If one does not become successful in the way outlined above, blame lies squarely with the self, the assumption being that one's failure results from either failing to "work hard enough" or from a failure of character. Failure to achieve ends with the belief that if you fail, you *are* a failure.[16]

That failure is never something that happens to you, but that it always arises from a flaw in your character informs the way those deemed failures are treated in societies that refuse to accept that individual achievement might be constrained by economic or social conditions way beyond the scope of the individual's control. Attitudes to the poor are most telling, for they reveal not just the desire to separate the successful subject from those deemed to have failed, but also suggest something of the ethics supporting neoliberal subjectivity that makes it extremely difficult to establish a sense of the common life we share.

At one point in his analysis of "Everyday Neoliberalism," Philip Mirowski homes in on what he calls "the theatre of cruelty" attending to the treatment of the poor. No longer understood to exist as a class, "it is easier to hate them as individuals." Rather than seek to protect those rendered vulnerable by market forces or social inequality, the relatively better-off are "galvanised to find within themselves a kind of guilty pleasure in the thousand unkind cuts administered by the enforcers of trickle-down austerity."[17]

Here's an example. Since the global financial crisis of 2008 which heralded in the UK's new "age of austerity," British TV has been saturated with what commentators have taken to calling "poverty porn." These reality TV shows claim to reveal the feckless lifestyles of the "undeserving poor" and glory in titles such as "Benefits Street" and "Benefits Britain." At the time of writing, the BBC (world renowned public service broadcaster) has commissioned a show that it is gleefully describing as akin to *The Hunger Games*, where the unemployed will be pitted against the low paid in order to find "Britain's Hardest Grafter."[18] Crucial to such "entertainments" is the erosion of empathy: in order to be entertained, you, the viewer, must not see yourself in *their* plight. It is hard not to concur with Mirowski's conclusion that such programs are there to direct attention away from those who benefit from an unjust socioeconomic system to those who suffer from it. The poor are to blame for their situation and thus are worthy of contempt. As Mirowski puts it, "In the neoliberal theatre of cruelty, one torments the poor or indigent precisely *because* they are prostrate."[19]

I want to pick up on this response to perceived failure, because I believe it reveals the problem at the heart of the neoliberal subject. To shape the subject as an entrepreneur whose meaning resides in the extent to which they are a success in the marketplace has a pernicious effect on how we shape supportive and inclusive societies. For neoliberal societies, economic theory is not simply restricted to the realm of economics: it comes to shape our ethics, our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. Free market exchange is not "just" an economic theory: it is "an ethic in itself, *capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs*."[20] To fail in the marketplace is to *be* a failure: worthy of contempt

and ill-treatment. It is my contention that not only does this way of thinking cultivate cruelty, it does so by misrepresenting the facts of what it is to be human. By failing to engage with the social aspect of our humanity, we end up with disconnected communities incapable of supporting the flourishing of more than a few. In what follows, I suggest that one way of challenging the problems that attend to neoliberal accounts of success and failure is to turn to that feature of life which is inescapable and to which philosophers have repeatedly directed their gaze when considering the nature of human subjectivity: death. Through reconsidering what it means to be mortal we can form better ways of understanding subjectivity, as well as, crucially, returning to the importance of community for living well.

DEATH AND THE LIMITS OF NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITY

Death stands at the limits of human existence. It denotes the ultimate boundary, the end point, for all human striving. In existentialist philosophy, death is that which defines life.[21] While it is possible to discern in the neoliberal call to self-expression the ghostly presence of the existentialist call to self-creation,[22] the attention paid to death is not similarly present. For Jean-Paul Sartre, death reveals the ultimate absurdity of human striving.[23] Its unpredictability means we cannot assume our goals will be attained or our projects completed. Life is tragic, the possibility and projects of human life rarely being achieved.

To accept that there might be limits of human endeavor, to grapple with the reality of "being-towards-death,"[24] challenges the relentless optimism of neoliberal aspiration. Acknowledge the skeleton beneath the skin, and the idea that we are always "in control" of our lives seems a peculiar conclusion to draw from the facts of existent being. Yet, the success of neoliberalism as an ideology stems from the way it appeals to what *we like to think* about our lives. As David Harvey notes, for any ideology to be successful, "a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, our values and desires, as well as the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit."[25] The central tenets of neoliberalism are appealing as they map onto how we like to think of ourselves: as responsible, creative, and free.

Not surprising, then, that the neoliberal strategy for dealing with death is not dissimilar to that advanced for dealing with poverty. Rather than accept that there might be things outside our control (be that socioeconomic forces or death itself), facing the feelings of vulnerability that such an acceptance engenders, we prefer to believe that we are in control of our own destinies. The consequence of this overweening faith in our own capacity lends itself to a view of death where it is just another variety of failure, best explained by reference to the capacities—or lack of them—of those who are dying.

The language commonly used in accounts of terminal illness reveals something of the power of this construction. Philip Gould, one of the architects of the neoliberal political project in the UK which was New Labour illustrates this with his initial framing of his treatment as not dissimilar to a political campaign that will test his resolve and his personal resources: "Everything I thought about the battle with cancer was strategic, as if I was fighting an election campaign. I saw the elimination of the cancer as victory, and the test results as opinion polls."[26] If the elimination of the cancer is victory, if the test results highlight whether he is winning the battle, it is not surprising that negative results are experienced as failure. Telling, perhaps, that Gould should structure his experience of cancer in this way, given his political commitment to the values of autonomy and choice. Later, as he realizes he cannot win this battle, he is forced to shift his focus away from such notions to acceptance, developing a sense that what really matters is less this individual battle and more his relationship with his family and nature,[27] a move to which we will return later in this chapter.

Gould is not alone in recognizing the failure of neoliberal values in the face of death. Kate Gross' account of terminal illness gives understandable expression to her anger at the unfairness of her diagnosis. Like Gould, Gross was an advisor to the UK's New Labour government. In the face of advanced colon cancer, she finds the values by which she has structured her life no longer make sense: "I am not used to this uncertain terrain. In every other aspect of my life, diligence and hard work have been rewarded with getting what I want."[28] Now she finds that dying has "freed me from convention and from ambition."[29] It takes struggle to get to this point: a struggle not helped by the prevailing culture that has little place for loss, dying, or, indeed, anything which suggests limits might be placed on the kind of achievements that have shaped Gross' life.

Reading death through the lens of failure is not a move peculiar to neoliberalism: though, I shall argue, it takes on a particular form shaped by the neoliberal application of economics to all areas of life. Early Christian theological reflection on death reflects a similar pull toward thinking of death as aberrant rather than natural. While Pelagius (390–418) and Julian of Eclanum (386–455) saw death as very much a natural part of life,[30] Augustine (354–430), their opponent and victor in the battle for Christian orthodoxy, understood death as far from natural: it was an aberration humans "brought upon ourselves" through our failure to obey God's command.[31] Had there been no sin there would be no death, for, as St Paul pithily puts it, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Elaine Pagels suggests that before we dismiss Augustine's claims as "antinatural and even preposterous,"[32] we should look a little more closely, for the view that death is an aberration is all-too-familiar. Death strikes us as obscene because it throws into stark relief our insignificance in the face

of cosmic forces. In the face of death, neoliberal aspiration is rendered as absurd as existentialist self-creation. While Sartre makes absurdity a cornerstone of his philosophy, aspiring neoliberals turn to the market for an answer to the problem of mortality. And why not? After all, "neoliberalisation has meant . . . the financialisation of everything."[33] If all areas of life—including education, health, and the utilities deemed necessary for sustaining human life—can be bought and sold, monetarized in order to create profit for companies and shareholders, why can a similar method not be applied to confronting death itself?[34] Indeed, large sums of money are being put into making the dream of conquering death a reality.[35] In the most well-known of these, cryonics, the body is frozen immediately after death in the hope that future medical advances will enable the deceased to be returned to life. With cryonic procedures costing anywhere between $28,000 and $200,000, the implication is that the advantages of wealth extend even to the most basic fact of our humanity. If you are rich enough, even death need not apply.[36]

It is too early to say whether such procedures will succeed. Regardless, what they do reveal is something crucial about how *homo oeconomicus* approaches death. Those who commit to spending their money on such hopes pay little attention to how the success of such strategies would affect future generations: what happens to the already-stretched resources of the planet if the yet-to-be-born are also faced with the demands of the should-be dead? That we are part of an ecosystem, that from the perspective of the natural world we are not the isolated economic units of neoliberal theory, is refuted by the cryonicist as they push against the notion that death might reveal the limits to human striving. But this is about more than the individual cryonicist pursuing a radical solution to dying. What is revealed here is the more general problem of the neoliberal construction of subjectivity. Conceived in isolation from community and others, it is not surprising that some should take this notion into the battle with death. Neoliberal subjectivity is conceived as transcending family, friends, culture, and history. In cryonics this disconnect from the elements that ground subjectivity is simply taken a step further, the individual now focusing on life in a future world without these relational ties. Death is approached as a problem *for the individual*, the proffered solution being found in having the financial resources to combat it. Little discussion is had about whether death might be more than something to fear: that perhaps it might be read as a feature of life which reveals something significant about our humanity, and, crucially, about our need the one for the other.[37]

VULNERABILITY, MORTALITY, AND THE SICK BODY

How might consideration of death lead us to an understanding of what it means to live well *together*? Perhaps the best way into this theme is through

consideration of vulnerability. There are different ways of understanding this feature of life, and I want to suggest that if we read it through the discussion of mortality we might be able to construct better ways of living than those currently offered by societies dominated by neoliberal paradigms.

What it means to be vulnerable takes on a particular shape under neoliberalism. We have noted the attraction of the claim that economic, social, or political factors need have little impact upon the extent to which anyone can be successful. If you utilize your talents and skills effectively enough, it is possible to rise above forces apparently outside your control. If you have shaped a sufficiently entrepreneurial self, adaptive to circumstance, you will not need an interventionist government to address inequalities arising from the economic system. This confident imaging of the self may be attractive, but it is not without its anxieties. Accepting responsibility for one's lot, not surprisingly, leaves many feeling vulnerable in the face of the expectation that they should be able to be the self-actualizing individual peddled by neoliberal politics and culture. Recent studies suggest something of the strain felt in societies basing social policy on this model, governments since the 1990s attempting to find ways of explaining the puzzling lack of correlation between increased affluence and a greater sense of well-being in the general population.[38]

Governments have struggled to cope with what might be called "the well-being deficit." That well-being is now measured alongside things like Gross Domestic Product says much about the importance successive governments have given to this. Social policy has been directed at addressing the fact that many struggle with the feelings of vulnerability that come with accepting the responsibilities necessary for being a successful neoliberal citizen. Governmental interventions in this area do not, however, include recognizing the limits to the responsibility one can reasonably be expected to bear for one's life. In practice, quite the reverse is true: in accepting the idea of the vulnerable self, state-sponsored interventions in schools and workplaces focus on cultivating resilience through teaching strategies which enable the individual to overcome their feelings of vulnerability in order that they *can,* indeed, become successful members of society.[39]

Such strategies have not been without their critics. Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes have challenged the promotion of the vulnerable self which, they claim, lies behind "therapeutic" forms of education focused on cultivating emotional well-being in students at the expense of cultivating knowledge. Much depends in their argument on identifying a trend toward "therapeutic education,"[40] and they draw upon accounts of the "diminished self," formulated by Christopher Lasch and Frank Furedi,[41] to support their thesis. In refuting the idea of the vulnerable individual, they aim to assert the

cultivation of "aspiring, optimistic and resilient learners who want to know everything about the world."[42]

In rejecting the legitimacy of addressing vulnerability as an educational concern, Ecclestone and Hayes inadvertently reveal the connection between the values shaping the classical liberal construction of subjectivity that they reassert, and the values shaping the neoliberal self which they do not examine. By grounding the meaning of vulnerability in therapeutic practices, they underplay, crucially, its formation through an economic model which requires governments to address citizens' feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem in order to create the resilient and adaptive subjects required by the contemporary workplace.[43] While noting that "political interest in people's emotional "skills" and well-being is, of course, integral to the demands of the labour market,"[44] Ecclestone and Hayes do not pursue this theme, preferring to direct attention at what they consider to be the creeping influence of psychotherapeutic practices over the last forty years. As a result, they identify a crucial issue—vulnerability—but fail to explore its relationship to the stresses and strains of a world defined by a particular economic and social model that makes work the principal arena in which the successful life is to be constructed. Moreover, they neglect the effect of making the individual primarily responsible for cultivating the attributes necessary for success in that workplace. Far from being the fictional burden that Ecclestone and Hayes claim, the diagnosis of the vulnerable self tells us much about an economic paradigm that is not capable of supporting human flourishing.

Absent from governmental interventions designed at addressing feelings of vulnerability is the discussion of death and the lessons that might be drawn from its reality. Rather than attempt ways of overcoming "debilitating" vulnerability, an alternative approach might be to think of vulnerability as an appropriate response to acknowledging the *limits* of overcoming. In facing death we are forced to confront the ultimate vulnerability of every human subject. Tracing vulnerability back to death requires envisioning it less as an emotional response made by (some) individuals in isolation, and more as the ontological reality of human animals. Making this move necessitates thinking again about the kind of connections that might be made between self and other.

A useful way into this alternative way of thinking about the vulnerable self is found in Arthur Frank's work on chronic illness. Frank rejects medical interventions that tend to fragment the patient into a set of body parts in need of fixing. Instead, he wants to start *from* the perspective of the one who is ill, using their experience to transcend the "facts" of medical science that all-too-easily turn them into another case of a particular illness, rather than allowing them to be seen as a person in their own right.[45]