Constructing Death as a Form of Failure: Addressing Mortality in a Neoliberal Age

Beverley Clack, Professor in the Philosophy of Religion, Oxford Brookes University UK

Introduction

> "And all these people in pain…all these people with aches and all these people suffering. We walk in different dimensions. We have access to different experiences, different knowledges…What would happen if we all knew what it really meant and we all lived as if it really mattered, which it does. We could help the normals and the white coats both. We could help them see that they are wasting the precious moments of their lives…I'm convinced only sick people know what health is. And they know it by its very loss" ('Gail' quoted in Frank 1995: 141).

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 late capitalist societies this construction of the subject has taken on a particular form which reflects changing economic structures. 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 market place; 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 paper 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

[1] For an excellent account of the forces that shaped neoliberal thinking on economics, society and politics, see David Harvey's *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: OUP, 2005.

encounters when confronted with the inevitability and inescapability of death. This necessitates, firstly, addressing the problematic conflation of failure and loss in neoliberal constructions of subjectivity; and secondly, suggesting an alternative response which advocates a more explicit engagement with death and loss. My contention is that recognising the inevitability of death enables a set of values to emerge which are more conducive to human flourishing than those currently offered by dominant neoliberal philosophies.

Defining Success for the Neo-Liberal Subject

In order to understand the challenge death poses to neoliberal accounts of the human subject, it is worth spending a little time thinking about the way in which neoliberal success is defined.[2] An article in a recent UK newspaper supplement offers a neat example of how success comes to be viewed, while also highlighting the stresses and strains that result from *not* having those things deemed necessary for the successful life under this model. The article – 'Are We the Lost Generation?' - presents a number of personal perspectives from university-educated twenty-somethings complaining about the mismatch between what they had been led to believe life

[2] It is worth noting, with David Harvey, that while neoliberal faith in the market, coupled with the commitment to an ideal of human freedom, might well be viewed as the 21st century hegemony, it takes on different forms reflecting its manifestation in particular cultural contexts (2005, chapter 4). Jamie Peck has gone so far as to describe these as "mongrel, shape-shifting forms" (Peck 2010: 276); Philip Mirowski, similarly, describes the difficulty of identifying neoliberalism as an ideology, suggesting the most effective way of understanding its hold on attitudes to economics, subjectivity and society is to consider it as a 'movable feast' (Mirowski 2014: 50), a 'Russian doll' (p. 43) of interlinking ideas, set out by the Mont Pelerin Society, which group around "general issues such as liberty and private initiative" (p. 47). For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the way central neoliberal concerns shape discussions in Western countries, where its interconnecting ideals fit - not always neatly - with the liberal values of the Enlightenment: most notably the belief in individual autonomy and personal responsibility.

would be like and its reality. Sarah, a teacher at a private primary school, encapsulates the general tone of these reflections:

> "I imagined being 27 with a Prada handbag, a *Sex and the City*-type girl-about-town doing really well. I think that level of expectation came from my school, a private girls' school where we were told we could do whatever we wanted … I thought I would be a high-flyer – and married by the time I was 26. I graduated from Durham University with a 2:1 and moved to London expecting to live the dream. I took the first job I could get, as a PA, but I was miserable. I thought that, by 26, I would have this snazzy life. Now I'm 27 and I'll probably be in my forties by the time I have a house" (in Radnor 2012: 39).

It is worth considering the model of subjectivity that supports Sarah's visualisation of what a successful life should look like. Building upon the Enlightenment construction of subjectivity as rational and autonomous, the contemporary framing of this model reflects the changing economic structures of late capitalist societies. Now this 'neoliberal' subject is defined as a *consumer* rather than a *producer* of goods (see Rose 1999: 102). Through exercising one's ability to choose, one is able to construct a 'meaningful' life. This involves not just choosing from a market place the goods that one desires, but also choosing the kind of life one wishes to have. Work takes on a particular importance in this context. If past generations assumed a life separate from the labour which they traded in the workplace, now it is <u>in</u> the workplace that one is expected to find meaning for one's life, along with the opportunity to create the life that one desires. Participation in the sphere of work is *expected* to enable the subject to find fulfilment (see Rose 1999: 104). Modelling the subject in this way

leads to a vision of human beings as economic units, 'human resources' who seek to monopolise and market their talents, strengths and achievements. To use Thomas Lemke's telling phrase, individuals are now understood as "entrepreneurs of themselves" (2001: 199). As Foucault comments, the Western self is now defined as *homo oeconomicus*: an entity with the power to shape its own (economic, social and political) destiny.[3]

If the human subject is modelled as an economic unit, it should come as no surprise that 'the good life' is envisioned in economic terms. In order to live well, it is necessary to be materially successful.[4] The autonomous individual of Enlightenment thought, responsible for their decisions through the exercise of reason, can be discerned in this marketised iteration of subjectivity.[5] Understood as an entrepreneur of the self, the individual is ultimately responsible for their lot. One's success is dependent upon the extent to which one has or has not utilised one's talents and skills to the best advantage. Rather than consider the role social structures might play in enshrining inequality, thereby developing ways of challenging, resisting and reshaping them, the goal becomes *adaptation* to one's environment, finding ways of improving the self, acquiring the kinds of skills that will enable one to become a successful individual. In theory, such achievements are open to all, for the skills

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[3] Lemke's 2001 paper draws upon a lecture given by Foucault in 1979 which is only available as a recording. Lemke's article is both a reconstruction of the lecture material and a commentary upon it.

[4] To lose or lack the elements deemed necessary for success leads to condemnation as a 'failure'. This judgement can rest on the most flimsy of reasoning: during a 1980s parliamentary debate, the then UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, remarked that "a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure" (1986; cited in Commons debates, 2003-07-02, col 407).

[5] Commentators disagree about the extent to which neoliberal values conform to Enlightenment ideals, with some suggesting that it denotes a break with that tradition (see Harvey 2005, chapter 1; Mirowski 2014, chapter 2, especially pp. 39-41). From my perspective, it is the prioritising of individual autonomy that suggests continuity with the thrust of Enlightenment thinking about the nature of subjectivity.

necessary for success can – indeed, *should* - be taught. To be successful, attention must be paid to investing in the self, learning to cultivate the image of the winner through "the management of the interpersonal relations upon which winning depends" (Rose 1999: 117). Against such a backdrop, addressing inequality becomes less a matter of redistributing wealth, and more about providing access to the kinds of skills that offer the individual the possibility of shaping the self in ways conducive to the achievement of success.[6]

Death and Failure

So much for the framing of success: what constitutes failure under the neoliberal model? Failure reflects flaws in the self rather than something resulting from problems arising from the socio-economic system that one inhabits. If one does not become successful in the way outlined above, blame lies squarely with the self, the suggestion being that one's failure results from either a failure of character, or from failing to 'work hard enough'. Not surprisingly, then, that failure is constructed as something shameful, consigned to the margins, where it acts as the unacknowledged shadow of success. That not all can be successful under such a model, that economic or educational success will have to be weighed against others failing, is rarely considered. That success can just as easily give way to failure is rarely acknowledged: only when failure is believed to have been overcome might it be dragged into the light to act as a lesson from which others might learn.[7] The problematic nature of failure in

[6] For a description of the policies which reflect this approach in relation to the education policies of the New Labour Government (1997-2010), see Ecclestone and Hayes 2009.
[7] See examples of reflections on political failure: for example, Michael Ignatieff's *Fire and Ashes: Success and Failure in Politics* (Random House: 2013). Few stories of failure that has not been overcome are likely to make their way to the bestseller lists.

such a context makes it worthy of exploration, for as Judith Butler points out, attending to that which is absent from discourse reveals exclusions that "haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic" (1993: 188). Exploring failure illuminates the fears and desires that shape neoliberal accounts of the world, thereby making possible different ways of thinking about what makes for a meaningful life.

To define success as attainment runs up against the problem of what to do with the things that reveal all-too-starkly the limits of human control. Blaming the individual for their lot on the grounds that they have not utilised their talents and skills effectively enough goes only so far. The ambient cultural narrative that exhorts us to be 'whoever we want to be' eventually collides with those things that place limits on all human achievement: namely, loss, decay and, ultimately, death, whose unpredictability might well be seen, with Sartre, as rendering all human projects absurd ([1943] 1969: 533). Death reveals the ultimate failure of all neoliberal success, and as a result becomes a phenomenon whose meaning is primarily located in the extent to which it can be avoided. This construction affects medical practices, medical ethics and even the ability to mourn.[8] Rather than allowing death to challenge the way in which success is habitually constructed, death itself becomes viewed as a form of failure. To succumb to death is to fail: a construction that goes some way to explaining the prevalence of combative imagery in the accounts of those with terminal illness. Philip Gould, one of the architects of the neoliberal project which

[8] It is worth noting that medical practitioners are starting to recognise the limits of this construction when it comes to treating terminal illness: see Atul Nawande's *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*, London 2014.

was New Labour illustrates this with his initial framing of his treatment as a political campaign: "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" (Gould 2012: 20). It is not surprising that he should start with this notion, given his political commitment to notions of autonomy and choice: later in his account the narrative shifts to acceptance, and, importantly, a sense that what really matters is less this individual battle and more his relationship with family and nature (2012: 110, 134, 141); a shift to which we will return later in this paper.

There is nothing peculiar about framing death as a form of failure. Early Christian theologians grappled with a similar question when they asked whether death was a 'natural' or 'unnatural' phenomenon.[9] For figures like Pelagius (390-418) and Julian of Eclanum (386-455), condemned as heretics by the Church, death was very much a natural part of life.[10] For Augustine (354-430), their opponent and victor in this battle to establish Christian orthodoxy, death was far from natural: it was an aberration that humans "brought upon ourselves" through their failure to obey God's command (Pagels 1988: 128). 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 points out that 21st century readers are likely to view Augustine's claims as "antinatural and even preposterous" (Pagels 1988: xxvii). Yet look a little more closely, she suggests, and the view that death is an aberration is all-too-familiar.

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[9] See Peter Brown's *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
[10] See Pagels 1988, chapter 6, for details of this debate.

Like our ancestors, we seek a bulwark against the onward march of death, rendered so terrifying in paintings like Pieter Bruegel's 'Triumph of Death' (1562). Where Bruegel's age looked to religion to offer some kind of succour, contemporary Western societies look to medical science for the means of halting death's advance (Gawande 2014: 187): with some justification given the increases in life expectancy.[11] Its very success lends itself to the hope that 'one day' an indefinite lifespan might be possible. Where once flying machines or heart transplants were believed impossible, perhaps one day the notion that death is inevitable might turn out to be false.

We might dismiss such notions as idle fantasy; but before we do so, it is worth noting the powerful pull of such dreams. A figure as self-consciously hard-nosed and rationalist as Freud played with the notion that death might not, in fact, be inevitable (Freud 1920: 46).[12] Before we put aside the seriousness of such daydreams, we might consider the sums of money being put into making the dream of conquering death a reality.[13] In cryonics the body is frozen immediately after death in the hope that future medical advances will enable the deceased in be returned to life. The Cryonics Institute describes this practice as "a visionary concept that holds out the promise of a second chance at life: life with renewed health, vitality and youth."[14] Claiming such a process as 'visionary' suggests those who see death as unavoidable somehow lack imagination in much the same way as did those who doubted the possibility of air travel.

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[11] **Link to figures for life expectancy - Hick??**
[12] Freud was an adept player with ideas, who was not always as convinced by his own speculations as might be assumed (Freud 1920: 59).
[13] In September 2014, the online blog *Techcrunch* reported that scientists in Palo Alto were offering a $1million prize to anyone who could end ageing.
[14] www.cryonics.org, accessed 21 October 2014

Exploring the claims and methods of cryonics is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, it is the alignment of cryonics with neoliberalism that is of most interest. As David Harvey notes, "Neoliberalisation has meant…the financialisation of everything" (2005: 33). Nothing is sacrosanct from the belief that 'the market' is the best arbitrator of value. All areas of life - including education, health, and the utilities deemed necessary for sustaining human life - can be bought and sold, monetarised in order to create profit for companies and shareholders. There is little that money cannot, apparently, buy.[15] With cryonic procedures costing anywhere between $28000 and $200000, 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.

Robert Ettinger's creation of the Cryonics Institute in 1976 maps rather neatly with the consolidation of neoliberalism as the new economic orthodoxy in 1979, the year that saw the election of Mrs Thatcher in the UK (Harvey 2005: 22).[16] The kind of faith in the market and the commodification of life witnessed in both political and cryonic contexts raises the question of sustainability. Ecological and social costs are insignificant for creeds which considers agents should be free to pursue ever

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[15] This viewpoint has not gone unchallenged, and has come under pressure in the years following the global financial crisis of 2008. See for example Michael Sandel's critique in *What Money Can't Buy* (2012).

[16] That Thatcher and Reagan (elected US President in 1981) might be described as 'neoliberal' may give us pause. As Peck points out, the question "what's the difference between a neoliberal and a neocon?" might well be answered "the Atlantic Ocean." When analysed, neoliberalism and neoconservatism share the foundational commitment to "limiting the state's ability to intervene in the activities of the individual" (Peck 2010: 3), along with the belief that the Market is the best arbitrator of value. The main difference is the neoconservative commitment to conservative moral and religious values, neoliberal governments invariably pushing progressive moral agendas directed at enabling the individual to pursue their desires as they see fit.

increasing growth: be this in terms of the individual or companies looking to utilise limited natural resources (see Goodchild 2002). The cryonicists' desire for endless life presents in stark relief the impact of refusing to accept the notion of limits. Were the cryonicists to succeed in their attempt to conquer death for the few, a new dimension would be added to the on-going problem of population growth: how to balance the demands of the old undead with the new life of new births?

This question suggests that the construction of death is not without an impact on the lives of others. Confronted with death, the cryonicist seeks a way of addressing its threat by assuming a solution for the human subject conceived in isolation from community and others; the assumption being that subjectivity transcends family, friends, culture and history. The things which ground the subject in time and place are deemed of little significance for their future. Rather than see cryonics as an extreme approach to death, it is worth noting the beliefs shared with the dominant neoliberal construction of subjectivity considered thus far, where self-interest and autonomy are placed centre-stage, with little attention being paid to the way in which relationships with others and the world also create one's sense of one's self.

Vulnerability, Mortality, and Tales of the Sick Body

The relentless optimism supporting neoliberal individualism makes it difficult to know quite what to do with death. While cryonics depends on the fantasy that wealth makes it possible to put off the inevitable, broader neoliberal culture prefers to draw a discrete veil over death. To pay too much attention to it would threaten the ideal of self-actualisation that lies at its core: a tension that is rather well attested to in the memoirs of Philip Gould (2012) and Kate Gross (2015). Like Gould, Gross was an

advisor to the UK's New Labour government (1997-2010), and similarly struggles with coming to terms with the limits of achievement when facing death. Gould begins his account with analogies of battle, eventually giving way to the concern to take charge of one's own dying. Gross, a young mother, directs her anger at the unfairness of terminal illness, eventually coming to believe that striving and achievement are less important than family and friends.

Despite such missives from what Gould calls "the Death Zone," the belief that we are all responsible for our lives is very attractive. It is reassuring to believe that economic, social or political factors have little impact upon the extent to which we are able to be successful. Yet to believe in our ability to rise above forces outside of our control is not without its everyday anxieties; and it is the burden imposed by the mantra of personal responsibility that goes someway to explaining a phenomenon that has perplexed western governments: increased affluence does not have a corresponding impact on the sense of wellbeing (Layard 2005).

That feelings of vulnerability might trouble the subject is explained rather well by Philip Mirowski's depiction of 'everyday neoliberalism' (2014: 89-155). In constructing the subject as "an entrepreneur of the self" (2004: 119), in rejecting the traditional categories of class, race or gender as determinants for one's social experience, the neoliberal individual may be freed from the sense of constraint, but the price of such freedom requires taking charge of one's life, making of it what one will. In order to be successful, one is required to take risks: and if these risks end in failure, there is no one to blame but oneself (2004: 120). Feeling vulnerable in the face of such a challenge seems a perfectly reasonable response. Governmental

recognition of feelings of vulnerability has not, however, involved recognising that there might be limits to the responsibility one can reasonably be expected to bear. In practice, quite the reverse is true: in constructing the self as vulnerable, state-sponsored interventions in schools and workplaces aim at cultivating resilience by adopting strategies that enable the individual to overcome their feelings of vulnerability in order that they *can* become successful members of society.[17]

Such strategies are not without their critics. Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes (2009) challenge the promotion of the vulnerable self which, they claim, lies behind ‘therapeutic’ forms of education which focus on cultivating emotional wellbeing at the expense of cultivating knowledge. Much depends in their argument on identifying a trend towards ‘therapeutic education’ (2009: viii-xv), and they draw upon accounts of the ‘diminished self,’ formulated by Christopher Lasch (1979) and Frank Furedi (2004) 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” (2009: back cover).

In rejecting the legitimacy of 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

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[17] Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) describe a number of interventions supported by New Labour policy makers for dealing with feelings of vulnerability, ranging from circle time in primary schools (pp. 28-31), peer mentoring schemes in secondary schools (pp. 55-57), through to staff development activities in the workplace designed to deal with stress and bullying (p. 110-120). That many of these strategies survive in the Age of Austerity instigated by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government of (2010-2015) says much about the strength of this cultural narrative.

in therapeutic practices, they underplay, crucially, its formulation under the neoliberal 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 (see Adkins 2002, chapter 3). While noting that "political interest in people's emotional 'skills' and wellbeing is, of course, integral to the demands of the labour market" (2009: 18), 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 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 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 response might be to think of vulnerability as an appropriate response to the *limits* of overcoming. In acknowledging death we are forced to confront the ultimate vulnerability of the 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 which demands

deeper consideration of the connections between self and other than is made possible by neoliberal individualism.

Arthur Frank's work on chronic illness offers a useful way into this alternative way of thinking about the vulnerable self. Frank's work challenges the practices of 'modernist medicine', which he defines as forms of medical procedure designed to cure the body. If such interventions tend to fragment the patient into a set of body parts, Frank argues for a form of 'post-modern medicine' that would attend to the *totality* of the person suffering from sickness. Seen thus, medicine becomes less a method for fixing a broken body, and more a way of *thinking 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 (see Frank 1995: 7).[18]

Rather than allowing this focus on the experience of the sick person to shape an individualistic approach to health care where each is 'responsible' for their health and recovery, Frank connects the individual's suffering with an acknowledgement of relationship: "the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story [told by the sick person], *the common bond of suffering* that *joins bodies in their shared vulnerability*" (Frank 1995: xi; my emphasis). Rather than pathologise sickness and chronic illness, Frank suggests allowing the stories told by the sick - himself included as a person in remission from cancer (Frank [1991] 2002) - to shape understandings of our common life together. The sick person is not an aberration set

[18] A similar challenge to current medical practices is found in Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal* (2014).

apart from the broad mass of healthy humanity; neither are they the passive recipient of care. Rather, they are someone with a story to tell about the human condition. Their story links to the stories we all might tell – indeed, most likely, will eventually tell – for it highlights the experience of being vulnerable beings in a mutable world. As Frank comments: "any sickness is an intimation of mortality" (Frank 1995: 6), for the suffering of the ill is "a common condition of humanity" (Frank [1991] 2002: 115).

Recognising the connection between those who are sick and those who are healthy is to challenge the basic assumption of modernist medicine, according to which one is *either* sick *or* one is healthy. In practice, there are always shades of grey, as the person in remission knows all too well (Frank 1995: 9). Yet it is not only the one in remission who is a "citizen of two kingdoms", to use Susan Sontag's phrase (Frank 1995:7), for this is true of all, whether acknowledged or not.

For Frank, then, the sick body acts as a reminder of mortality, a fleshier version of the traditional, skeletal *momento mori*. In illness, we live the reality of "lost control" (Frank 1995: 30); with the knowledge that responsibility for our life only goes so far. To be human is to be limited, subject to the constraints facing all animals. Illness challenges the claim that the natural human state is to be capable and resilient; a view that lends itself to the fantasy that we are 'immortal'. When Elaine Pagels seeks to understand the perplexing victory of Augustine's view that death is unnatural over the more reasonable claims of his critics, she hits on the general difficulty of accepting the limits accompanying mortality. Like Augustine, we prefer to "feel guilty [rather] than helpless" (Pagels 1988: 147). We prefer to take responsibility for death, rather than be faced with the reality of our dependence on a mutable world.

A further dimension relates to this refusal to accept the limits attending to human existence. All-too-often, to be sick or ill or dying, carries the kind of shame that Martha Nussbaum describes as the "sense of failure to achieve some ideal state" (Nussbaum 2004: 184). The vulnerabilities seen in the body of the sick other become a means of displacing *one's own* fears of failure, *one's own* terror of death. One's fears are projected onto the bodies of the ill, making it possible to ignore those fears by marginalising the people who embody them. All of this comes at a price: in the desire to maintain the illusion of control, even over death, connection is lost with those who are suffering and dying. The tragedy of this lost connection is that one day, almost inevitability, our own illnesses, ageing and dying will be similarly marginalised.[19]

Not surprisingly, then, Frank draws attention to the preference the healthy have for stories where people are restored to health. Such stories enable the belief that illness can be - *will* be - overcome. The reality, however, is that chronic forms of illness do not lend themselves to such a neat story arc, and Frank describes 'chaos stories' which challenge the hope for neat and tidy ends. Such stories bear witness to "the triumph of all that modernity seeks to surpass" (Frank 1995: 97). Told by the terminally and chronically ill, they show "the modernist bulwark of remedy, progress and professionalism [cracking] to reveal vulnerability, frailty, and impotence" (Frank

[19] Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* offers a powerful insight into this process at work. Ivan's friends see Ivan's illness and death as an *accident* that has befallen him, but that they will avoid through showing the requisite care that Ivan lacked. Where Ivan failed, they will be more successful. The result of this disaggregating of Ivan's experience from the possibility that they will one day be similarly afflicted, leads to a false attitude towards Ivan that makes his experience incapable of genuine expression, contributing to the isolation he feels.

1995: 97). As language breaks down in the chaos wrought by such illnesses, the modernist assumptions of overcoming death are challenged, laying bare the reality of death and the failure of human interventions to succeed on all occasions.

Living Well with Death and Loss

What happens if modernist and neoliberal solutions are resisted, and instead we begin, not with ideals of control, but with the experience of vulnerability that comes with acknowledging mortality? Frank and Nussbaum suggest something of the direction of travel necessary if the vulnerability accompanying the experience of being human in a mutable world is taken seriously. In what remains, I offer an approach that proceeds from recognising the inevitability of death. Foregrounding death enables a set of values to emerge that challenge contemporary constructions of success, and which, as a result, enable a different understanding of what it means to flourish as a human being.

Accepting the inevitability of death is no easy matter, for it necessitates rejecting the habitual construction of human beings as fundamentally different from the rest of the natural world. Val Plumwood articulates something of this difficulty when describing the experience of surviving an attack by a crocodile. Plumwood details how she ‘became prey’, recognising - initially with horror - that it is possible to be both human and food for another. We might be “food with pretensions” (2012: 18), but we are food nonetheless. As Plumwood notes, funeral rituals invariably involve resisting the possibility of the corpse becoming food for others: we are buried deep, encased in impenetrable coffins, embalmed to ensure that no creature can eat us (2012: 18-19). Plumwood allows her experience to challenge “the illusions of superiority and

apartness" (p. 13) reflected in such rituals. We are not separate from the world, we are not 'special', as such practices lead us to believe. We are part of the ordinary physical world. If "modernist liberal individualism teaches us that we own our lives and bodies" (2012: 19), Plumwood's experience leads her to a different conclusion. There are limits to human control, which she realises as she looks into 'the eye of the crocodile'.

Recognising the limits of human existence in the way Plumwood suggests challenges the optimistic tone of societies shaped by neoliberal ideals. Belief in power over self and world does not adequately reflect our dependence on that mutable world for our continued existence. No wonder we prefer not to think about mortality; although, as Zygmunt Bauman notes, even that *not* thinking suggests something about the challenge death poses for all human pretension. For Bauman, all human activity is traceable to the attempt to find strategies for dealing with the reality of death (1992: 9). Everything comes back to its reality; every activity ultimately traced to the avoidance or acknowledgement of mortality. For neoliberal societies, the struggle is the same as it was for modernists: if the aim is to master reality, to achieve status and success, something has to be done about death, the thing that reveals the limits of mastery and achievement. In practice, there is only one solution: consign its destructive reality to silence.

There are other ways of engaging with death. Stoic philosophers accepted that death could not be avoided; yet rather than eliciting fear, they viewed this acknowledgement

as necessary in order to live well. Death is the condition for existence.[20] In the face of death, the right response is not petulant refusal but acceptance. Coming to accept death is no easy matter: it requires reflective practice, and Pierre Hadot (1995) notes the significance of the Stoic practice of "the spiritual exercise," an imaginative exercise where one contemplates death and comes to terms with its reality.[21]

To accept death's reality is to accept limits. Nothing – status, wealth, or fame – lasts for ever. In the face of death, all is, to echo Marcus Aurelius, "smoke and nothingness" (1990: 97; *Meditations*, Book 10.31). Aurelius' words are bleak, a suitably short description of the fleeting nature of life. Yet the very bleakness of his words holds out the necessity of challenging models of subjectivity which evade acknowledging mortality; not least because the knowledge that all is contingent, vulnerable to chance and change, brings to our attention the dependence each has on the other.

Confronted with dependence, the Stoic solution is to cultivate detachment from the things that might disturb one's tranquility in the face of death. To live well, one should not value too highly the things most vulnerable to loss in a mutable universe. Such a viewpoint has the unfortunate consequence of detaching the individual from

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[20] Seneca berates those who would have life otherwise thus: "There's no ground for resentment in all this. We've entered into a world in which these are the terms life is lived on – if you're satisfied with that, submit to them, if you're not, get out, whatever way you please" (Letter XCI; 1969: 181-2).
[21] Again from Seneca: "Without anxiety, then, I'm making ready for the day when the tricks and disguises will be put away and I shall come to a verdict on myself, determining whether the courageous attitudes I adopt are really felt or just so many words…Away with the world's opinion of you – it's always unsettled and divided. Away with the pursuits that have occupied the whole of your life – death is going to deliver the verdict in your case…It's only when you're breathing your last that the way you've spent your life will become apparent. I accept the terms, and feel no dread of the coming judgement" (Letter XXVI; 1969: 71).

those amongst whom they live. This is not the lesson we need draw, however, from acknowledging the vulnerability of our status as existent beings. With Martha Nussbaum (1990: 374), I accept that the things that are most vulnerable are precisely those things which are most valuable: our loved ones, children, friends.

To accept the vulnerability of the things that make life worth living - to recognise that to love is also to be open to loss - necessitates developing a different solution to death than that offered by the Stoics. Thinking about the subject's vulnerability in the face of death directs the gaze towards the other with whom we are in relationship. If the neoliberal vision of subjectivity forces us to face death alone (Bauman 1992: 48-50), an alternative vision makes our shared vulnerability the basis for stronger communities. As Frank says, "sooner or later everyone is a wounded storyteller… (T)hat identify is our promise and responsibility, our calamity and our dignity" (Frank 1995: xiii). In accepting our vulnerability towards death, we recognise the need each has for the other.

Mortality unites us. Regardless of wealth, race, gender or creed, it frames and shapes our life. Margalit Fox, reflecting on her career as an obituary writer, sums up this perspective rather neatly: "For obit writers, the whole world is necessarily divided into the dead and the pre-dead" (Paris Review, 23/9/14). Rather than hiding from mortality or thinking it does not apply to us, Fox's words encourage a different perspective. Starting from the premise of shared vulnerability in the face of death enables the formation of values that unite, rather than divide.

What would it mean to live well if we took seriously that shared experience of being vulnerable, mortal subjects? Frank (2004) suggests the reclamation of generosity towards the others, a value somewhat neutered in the current climate of the resilient, responsible, entrepreneurial self. Under the neoliberal paradigm, generosity is invariably related to philanthropic giving.[22] In a world where resources are spread unequally, to be philanthropic is undoubtedly better than being miserly or misanthropic. Yet to identify generosity exclusively with philanthropy is not unproblematic, as aspects of Nietzsche's critique of pity reveal. Rejecting Christian 'slave-morality' in favour of cultivating strength and nobility, he notes that "pity on the whole thwarts the law of evolution, which is the law of selection. It preserves what is ripe for destruction" (Nietzsche [1888] 1990: 130; *Anti-Christ* §7). Such a view does not seem particularly helpful for an attempt to build an ethic based on shared vulnerability in the face of death. Where he is more useful for my purposes is when he turns his attention to the complex motivations and emotions that attend to the expression of pity and the experience of being pitied.

For the one pitying another, "the thirst for pity is…a thirst for self-enjoyment, and that at the expense of one's fellow men" (Nietzsche [1878-80] 1996: 39; HAH I §50). Far from enabling a sense of solidarity with the one who is suffering, pity depends upon condescension. In the movement from the one above to the one perceived as below, Nietzsche spies "the pleasure of gratification in the exercise of power" (1996: 56; HAH I §103). He goes further: if the person we pity is "very close to us, we

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[22] An example of this marketised view of generosity can be found in a comment of Margaret Thatcher's from 1980: "Nobody would remember the Good Samaritan if he had only good intentions. He had money as well." We might think of the philanthropists Bill Gates and Warren Buffet as examples of what Thatcher was getting at.

remove from ourselves the suffering we ourselves feel by performing an act of pity" (1996: 56; HAH I §103). In pity Nietzsche identifies the attempt to distance self from other. The emphasis is on assuaging one's own feelings. There is, as a result, nothing noble about the act of pitying.

And what about the one who is pitied? Nietzsche suggests that the effect is to be rendered invisible to the other. To be pitied is to experience contempt for one's humanity: "pity is felt as a sign of contempt because one has clearly ceased to be an object of *fear* as soon as one is pitied. One has sunk below *the level of equilibrium*" (1996: 322; HAH: WS §50; my emphasis). This brings us to the heart of the matter: what happens to parity of relationship between the one suffering and the one who is not? To equate generosity with philanthropy is to accept the unequal starting point between the one who gives and the one who receives. Instead of seeing the sufferer, instead of hearing their story and recognising in it our shared struggles, the bestower of pity overrides that story and "gaily sets about quack-doctoring at the health and reputation of its patient" (1996: 229; HAH2: §68). Pity becomes a means of asserting inequality rather than *assuming* equality of humanity. Nietzsche's analysis is persuasive and goes someway to supporting his claim to be the 'first psychologist'.

An alternative account of generosity is possible, however, if one begins with the shared experience of being vulnerable human beings standing in the face of death, and can be found in the approach offered by Nietzsche's erstwhile mentor, Schopenhauer.

In seeking a basis of morality, Schopenhauer rejects Kant's view that it is found in rational recognition of the dignity of the other. While Kant depends on an abstract

construction of the individual, Schopenhauer bases his morality in the emotions, specifically in *experiencing* another's suffering as one's own. The basis for morality is in compassion for the other; in the *felt recognition* of a common humanity.[23]

Nietzsche denies Schopenhauer's compassion to be immune from the criticisms he directs at pity.[24] David Cartwright dismisses this claim, arguing that Nietzsche's pity and Schopenhauer's compassion are not one and the same. Cartwright draws attention to the relationship Nietzsche identifies between pity and contempt: there is no parity of esteem in pity. In Schopenhauer's account of compassion – '*mitleid'* or 'fellow-feeling' – "the other's misery assumes the same status as my own by moving me to relieve it" (Cartwright 1988: 561). When faced with the one who is suffering "I feel his woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own" (Schopenhauer [1839] 1995: 143). I identify myself with the other. In making this identification, "the barrier between the ego and the non-ego is for the moment abolished" (Schopenhauer 1995: 166). In that first moment of looking in the other's face, I realise "an intuitive and immediate truth" (Mannion 2003: 19): that the other's suffering matters as much as my own. There is nothing unusual about this experience: "it is the everyday phenomenon of compassion", of "participation…in the suffering of another" (Schopenhauer 1995: 144). Crucially, this fellow-feeling acts as a call to action. Generosity is called forth by recognising the other's suffering to be just as important as my own.

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[23]Schopenhauer extends this argument to animals, arguing that this compassionate feeling for a fellow being in pain should affect their treatment (Schopenhauer 1995: 179).

[24] Solomon (2003: 98) argues that Nietzsche is correct on this point. Nietzsche claims that *mitleid* does not convey the parity of esteem between sufferer and subject which is represented by his own use of *mitgefuhl* as a basic virtue.

Schopenhauer’s account of compassion rests upon a far-reaching critique of the pretensions of individuation and the egoism that emerges from it. Human life is miserable because we failure to see the world aright. Salvation lies in identifying and overcoming ‘the Will’, that “constant yearning simply to be” (Mannion 2003: 3). Schopenhauer’s advocacy of asceticism does not, however, remove our obligations to the other. Far from it:

> Every good or kind action that is done with a pure and genuine intention proclaims that, whoever practices it, stands forth in absolute contradiction to the world phenomenon in which other individuals exist entirely separate from himself, and that he recognises himself *as being identical with them* (Schopenhauer [1862] 1974: 219; PP2 §115).

Seeing the world aright means we will not ground our hopes of living well in the construction of attitudes and beliefs that separate each from the other. Like Schopenhauer, Levinas locates morality in our response to the ordinariness of the other’s face. If we doubt the strength of such a construction for ethics, we should note Levinas’ comments on the lived experience that makes it so:

> ‘Where did you ever see the ethical relation practised?’ people say to me. I reply that its being utopian does not prevent it from investing our everyday actions of generosity and goodwill towards the other: even the smallest and most commonplace gestures, such as saying ‘after you’ as we sit at the dinner

table or walk through a door, bear witness to the ethical (in Kearney 1985: 68).[25]

The promotion of self-reliant neoliberal subjectivity makes it difficult to cultivate the sense of fellow-feeling at the heart of both Schopenhauer and Levinas' ethics. Where one's success is cultivated through one's own endeavours, it is difficult to acknowledge the limits imposed on all subjects by the fact of mortality. As a result, the suffering of the other, a fellow traveller on the path to death, cannot easily be recognised.

A different model of subjectivity that recognises dependence on each other is necessary to cultivate the fellow-feeling Schopenhauer and Levinas place at the centre of their ethics. To recognise death challenges the claim that humans are best understood as isolated economic units in control of their lives and destiny. We are, as Aristotle set down so many centuries ago, "social animals", and no more is that sense of solidarity more obvious than in the need to support each other in the face of death.

Conclusion

Constructing death as a form of failure isolates those who suffer in its shadow. Ignoring its inevitability marginalises the vulnerable and limits the ability to reflect on the fragility of life. In thinking of mortality as that which unites us we find the basis for forging a new life together. When we look death in the face we are reminded of

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[25] Thus Ivan Karamazov's claim that "to love a man, it's necessary that he should be hidden, for as soon as he shows his face, love is gone" (Dostoyevsky []1982: 276) is refuted. Ordinary human reveals this is not necessarily so.

the things that emerge from that shared life - love, relationship, friendship, laughter – all vulnerable in a mutable world. Recognising vulnerability enables us to prioritise the things which help build connection and relationship; the things that we recognise in the face of the other as a fellow being whose suffering demands a response. In building again that social principle for understanding humanity we might go some way to addressing the anxiety and disappointment that all too often emerges from the impossible models that define success in a neoliberal society. In thinking again about death, we might come to a better sense of what makes for a meaningful life.

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