

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The traditional narrative view in its "hermeneutical" incarnation has its roots in Alasdair MacIntyre.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> But death is inaccessible to the subject herself. Therefore "the analogy between lives and stories breaks down completely at the fatal end-point."<sup>6</sup> We end up with a confounding picture of the narrative self "simultaneously demanding and resisting subsumption in a unified narrative."<sup>7</sup> "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."<sup>8</sup> "Resisting" unified narrative because "I have to be alive to experience meanings,"<sup>9</sup> but "my death can be experienced only from a perspective *outside* my life."<sup>10</sup> Death "cannot be brought into any narrative that might confer meaning upon it while the subject lives."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> Their reasons for eschewing immortality are, however, not negatively motivated by familiar concerns about encroaching boredom or alienation.<sup>15</sup> Rather, the end of life is extolled as the capstone—death completes and thereby secures the sought-after narrative structure.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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."<sup>19</sup>

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."<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> 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,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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."<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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."<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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,"<sup>30</sup> and presumably, incorporating that understanding into the overall understanding of my life. Anticipation of death places "the manner in which one lives under interrogation."<sup>31</sup> 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*"<sup>32</sup>; 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.<sup>33</sup>

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,"<sup>34</sup> 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).<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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."<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> 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."<sup>39</sup> 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,"<sup>40</sup> 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."<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

This "whole life unity thesis"—the view that the whole of the events in a life are unified by a teleologically driven narrative—is certainly one that commentators have ascribed to the narrative view.<sup>43</sup> And critics have taken the narrative view to task for treating life events as "interconnected] in a grand scheme"<sup>44</sup> and leading, ideally, to "culminating experiences,"<sup>45</sup> the objection being that this is descriptively inaccurate and practically unachievable.<sup>46</sup>

Whether it is charitable to ascribe the whole life unity thesis to the narrative position is a point I'll postpone until the next section. For now, note that insofar as the Solonian problem clearly attaches to this version of the narrative view, it does not present a paradox in the sense of my needing, but being debarred from, grasping the meaning that my death supplies. For I can perfectly well apprehend such final events as part of the story of my life. I may see them coming and they are quite possibly sufficiently temporally extended that I can both experience them and take in the ramifications of that experience. As the solution of "making an end" indicates, I do not need to occupy some imaginary post-mortem position in order to comprehend the ending's impact on the meaning of my life as a whole (Croesus's tragedy—in stock Classical fashion—lies in part in his having time before he dies to comprehend his final reversal of fortune). The solution of making an end may be effective in offsetting the problem here, but if so, it is largely because the problem lacks the force of paradox promised by the problem of mortality; any ending we can make occurs within life's timeframe, as does any threat it addresses.

What, it might be objected, if the ending is sudden, and we truly do not see it coming and have no control over it? Does this not approach the more paradoxical nature of the time-lag problem, but with the addition of striking at the core of the narrative view? In this case we do seem to get closer to a form of the problem of mortality that meets the general criteria I outlined. We also arrive at the final version of the problem of mortality that I wish to consider—a variation of sorts on the Solonian problem.

## VI. THE SUDDEN DEATH PROBLEM

Davenport offers another variation on the Solonian problem of "the time or manner of my death" undoing "the meaning that my whole life has had for me up till then"<sup>47</sup>—one in which death is sudden and unexpected. This introduces an enhanced if not unique version of this problem, in that it casts a pall of existential absurdity over the entire life that ends in this fashion.<sup>48</sup> The previous solution of "making an end" is of no help here, since the end in question, by definition, cannot be anticipated or influenced. And the threat is more plausible than a dramatic reversal of fortune in one's last days; instead

we are faced with the perhaps equally dire but more likely prospect that life will simply be cut off in some sudden and unforeseen manner, regardless of how well or badly it is going—the point being that it was still going and we were in the midst of many things.

Of all the candidates considered, this comes closest to fulfilling the general criteria laid out for the problem of mortality. It is the very end of life that is the source of the problem, but not because it is in and of itself of value or interest (in contrast to the time-lag problem); in keeping with the Solonian problem and its grounding in the whole life unity thesis, the end is the focus insofar as it threatens to undercut the meaning and unity of the whole life. The issue thus is not mere finitude or the deprivation of indefinitely extensive goods; instead, the end remains the key to narrative completion.

But in contrast with the previous version of the Solonian problem, it is not so much the particular *manner* of one's ending that is the source of the problem. So long as the death is not anticipated, the specifics of it are not at issue. One doesn't have to go out by, say, slipping on a banana peel, in order to partake of the existential absurd. Rather, it is the fact of death being unanticipated at that time that is pertinent.<sup>49</sup> This has the potential to introduce the sought-after element of paradox, in that it is impossible to foresee and influence the impact that death will have for the whole of our life if death is sudden and unpredictable; this conflicts with the narrative demand for something that can be subjectively apprehended as a conclusion rather than a mere breaking-off. We cannot readily imagine or otherwise contemplate our life ending thus (since the possibilities are numerous). As an intentional object I may direct my attention toward my future sudden death, but the thought is entirely bereft of detail that would aid in my planning and shaping events and choices in light of it; I am left with only the dizzying notion of "every moment of my existence possibly being the last."<sup>50</sup>

If we take this problem seriously, then Mr Palomar's fictitious case illustrates how a sudden death can affect a life: even his endeavor to come to terms with death is itself—the potential culmination of a life of inquisitiveness—is undermined. One really cannot defeat the obstacle here by learning to be dead. From a narrative point of view, this is perhaps supremely emblematic of all one's best-laid schemes having ganged aghley, in a breakdown that is as complete as it is unpreventable.

If the problem of sudden and unanticipated death is the problem of mortality in its most viable form, is there a response? Davenport makes some brief, but telling remarks here in reaction to the sudden death problem. He claims, "it is false that 'one minute more or less may perhaps change everything.'"<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, he says that we can act in such a way as to ensure that "our sense of embracing meaning continues right up to our sudden end, if it happens that way."<sup>52</sup> Taken together, these remarks imply that our ending,

regardless of its unexpectedness, does not after all have power to undermine the whole—that a different ending may make little difference. In particular, it suggests that the attainment of meaning in life may be relatively independent of the suddenness and unpredictability of life's ending, and impervious to serious impact from it.

If this is the response—or at any rate a response—to the problem of mortality *qua* sudden death problem, it is nothing like the previous solution of making an end. It is, rather, a case for making a life. The solution of making an end capitulated to the supposition that the end of life has power to undo the whole. Whereas the present solution rejects that assumption and divests the end of such authority, spurning what James Warren calls “the Solonian privileging of what is to come” as that which will “determine the final value of the life as a whole.”<sup>53</sup> And in doing so, the present solution tacitly rejects the whole life unity thesis with which this picture of things is bound up. The mortality problem is hereby not so much resolved as dissolved, through a dissolution of the whole narrative basis for the problem. Unless we accept that, for the narrativist, there is something like an overarching grand scheme that connects all the events of a life; the capacity of the ending to undo the whole is diminished, to say the least.<sup>54</sup>

Is this then a narrative solution at all? That depends on how we interpret the narrative view. It is possible that the narrativist's dedication to the whole life unity thesis has been an exaggeration—that that thesis is one to which narrativists do not subscribe or can in any case forgo.<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, the narrative view may not survive the loss; it may be true, after all, that our “storied” lives must have “a sense of a whole” and that for this, “endings matter.”<sup>56</sup> In any case, in giving up the whole life unity thesis, the narrative view may not be able to sustain what I identified at the outset as its unique balance of clear reasons to live a rich and decently long life, alongside treatment of the goods of life as necessarily bound by death. Without this particular vision of life's unity in place, we perhaps wind up with an outlook on life that would not be unacceptable to those well outside the sphere of narrativist sympathizers.

Indeed, Davenport's claim that we can achieve a sense of embracing meaning up until the point of death is arguably close to the neo-Epicurean outlook that values complete living over a complete life—making a life rather than making an end, by emphasizing the value of participating in projects over that of finishing them.<sup>57</sup> When discussing anticipatory resoluteness, Davenport cites a passage from Kierkegaard that could apply here as well: “earnestness chooses ‘work that does not depend on whether one is granted a lifetime to complete it well or only a brief time to have begun it well.’”<sup>58</sup> While there isn't space to explore the details of this solution, it may be worth noting that Calvino's portrayal of the rest of Mr Palomar's life with its myriad of observations, ruminations, and intense absorption in the sometimes-overwhelming phenomenology of experience, may serve as one possible model here.

## CONCLUSION

Whether or not we choose to label Davenport's response to the sudden death version of the problem of mortality a truly narrative one, we can treat it as good news for Mr Palomar. His sudden and unanticipated death subjects him to the most convincing version of the mortality problem. But it does so only from the point of view of a narrative account committed to the whole life unity thesis. It is that commitment that creates the conditions under which the mortality problem flourishes. The problem of mortality dissolves if the narrativist is willing to forgo that thesis. On my account, Davenport's own response to the perils of sudden death supports this move. And from this position there is room to say that while it is true Mr Palomar does not succeed in grasping his death “from the inside,” this is not in and of itself a conundrum or even a cause for concern; death needn't be something that “looms over and constitutively defines the character of every moment of the life,”<sup>59</sup> in the sense of something that promises or threatens to infuse the rest of the life with a meaning beyond our grasp.

To be sure, any number of potential problems with mortality may remain, including those of deprivation, finitude, and even Solonian reversals of fortune. But as I have argued, these first two are not exclusively narrative problems, and none of these amounts to a paradox. Only sudden and unanticipated death comes close to informing a specifically narrative and paradoxical problem of mortality. And if the narrativist is willing and able to forgo certain alleged assumptions about the role of death in unifying a life, there is no deep or special narrative problem of mortality.<sup>60</sup>

## NOTES

1. Calvino 1999: 110-13.
2. Calvino 1999: 108.
3. See Behrendt 2007; Davenport 2012; Lippitt 2007; Mulhall 2009; Stokes 2006.
4. See MacIntyre 1984. I presuppose this version of the narrativist view of the self throughout. See Schechtman for the terminology and useful distinctions between the hermeneutical and other forms of narrative views of the self; other hermeneutical narrativists include Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur, but MacIntyre's influence on contemporary narrative views of the self is arguably the most pervasive, and the problem of mortality has particular pertinence for his formulation of it; see Mulhall 2009 and Lippitt 2007.
5. See MacIntyre 1984: 212 and Malpas 1998.
6. Davenport 2012: 40.
7. Mulhall 2009: 194. See also Lippitt 2007: 45 ff; Davenport 2012: 40. Note Mulhall follows Heidegger in embracing and thereby offsetting the harmfulness of the paradox.

8. Mulhall 2009: 189. See also Malpas 1998.
9. Davenport 2012: 157.
10. Lippitt 2007: 45. Lippitt is here drawing from Mulhall and Ricoeur.
11. Stokes 2006: 403.
12. Gawande 2014: 238–39.
13. See Behrendt 2014 for further examples of nonphilosophical narrative-infused views about death and dying.
14. Cf. Nagel 1979.
15. Cf. Williams 1973.
16. See MacIntyre 1984: 197 and Malpas 1998.
17. My account is hence not intended as a critique of Davenport; since he has given the most extensive and thoughtful treatment of the matter to date, I make use of elements of his categorization of the problem and of possible solutions. But I draw further distinctions and make some different connections between problems and solutions.
18. The first criterion is tied to the second; because death apparently plays a certain role in conferring meaning in life upon the narrative view, our alleged inability to access that meaning is a specifically narrative problem.
19. Davenport 2012: 40.
20. Mulhall 2009: 191. See Lippitt 2007: 46.
21. Calvino 1999: op. cit.
22. Davenport 2012: 161.
23. *Ibid.*, 158–59.
24. I take it that this is the fundamental point behind Gilbert Ryle's declaration of "the systematic elusiveness of 'I'"; see Ryle 1966: ch. VI.7.
25. Davenport 2012: 161. Davenport uses the term "narrative" to refer to a subject's living story, which develops largely prior to any recounting or "rational interpretation" on the part of the subject; see Davenport 2012: ch. 2, § 4.2.
26. Davenport 2012: 162–63; the comparison with *A Christmas Carol* is his own.
27. Davenport 2012: 160.
28. Nagel 1979: 10. There is more to be said here. For now I can only venture that insofar as there may be in theory infinite possibilities for retroactive reconfiguration of the past, this is still a species of deprivation problem and to that extent mirrors a problem that the non-narrativist is also subject to.
29. There are of course paradoxes generated by the deprivation theory, in the form of questions of for whom death is an evil, and when the badness of death occurs—but these do not capture the paradox imbedded in the problem of mortality.
30. Davenport 2012: 157–58.
31. Stokes 1996: 408.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Davenport 2012: 158.
34. Davenport 2012: op. cit.
35. See Williams 1973: 100.
36. See Luper 1993.
37. Luper 1993: 280.

38. Lippitt 2007: 46. See also Davenport 2012: 158.
39. Davenport 2012: 160.
40. *Ibid.*, 159.
41. *Ibid.*, 160.
42. See David Velleman's (1993) account of "narrative relations" and conception of overall well-being for a philosophical counterpart to Palomar's "inner architecture."
43. See Stokes 2012: e92–93; cf. Behrendt 2014.
44. Christman 2004: 704.
45. *Ibid.*, 703.
46. See Christman 2004 and Lippitt 2007.
47. Davenport 2012: op. cit.
48. Davenport derives this version of the problem from Sartre; see Davenport 2012: 158, 160.
49. Though Montaigne offers up quite a good list of especially ludicrous sudden deaths, historic and contemporary, and it is arguable that manner combined with precipitousness makes for a particularly dismaying prospect (Montaigne 1811: 75–76).
50. Mulhall 2009: 189.
51. Davenport 2012: 160, citing Sartre.
52. Davenport 2012: 160.
53. Warren 2004: 126. Warren argues that the Epicurean's rejection of this is implicit in their own assessment of Solon's dictum: "The saying 'look to the end (*telos*)' of a long life is ungrateful to past goods" (Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings*, 75, in Warren 2004: 125).
54. As is any unique or elevated significance that we may consequently attach to the end; therefore this response could also be used to further undermine the force of the previous Solonian problem (although, as argued, that remains less of a legitimate problem of mortality).
55. See Behrendt 2014.
56. Gawande 2014: op. cit.; cf. Fischer 2009.
57. See Rosenbaum 1990—although narrativists might resist the suggestion that meaning can be acquired in the absence of even small-scale closures or completed stages; though see Fischer 2009 for a defense of the "short story" model of the narrative life.
58. Kierkegaard, "At a Graveside," cited in Davenport 2012: 158.
59. Mulhall 2009: op. cit.
60. I thank John Davenport, Rockney Jacobsen, Randy Mercafe, and Roman Alshuler for their comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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## Chapter 11

### Love and Death

#### *The Problem of Resilience*

Aaron Smuts

In an equally disturbing and insightful paper, "Love and Death," Dan Moller explores the significance of some revisionary empirical research on mourning.<sup>1</sup> Everyone seems to know an old married couple that re-enacted the plot of E. M. Forester's example of a minimal story: "The King died and then the queen died of grief." My maternal grandparents followed the pattern. In her late 60's my grandmother died of a sudden heart attack and then, within months, my grandfather developed brain cancer. I don't think he made it a year and day without her.

For some time, I've thought that this pattern provides the strongest argument for marriage. There's something beautiful about the fact that two people can come mean so much to each other that they simply cannot go on living in the absence of one another. An Epicurean might find this cause for avoiding such attachments, since they make us vulnerable. As the movies teach us, no gangster is safe with a wife and child, or even a cute Beagle puppy. And no one, it would seem, is safe with a long-term spouse. Rather that conceding the Epicurean's point, however, their immature obsession with security gives us good reason to avoid these skittish individuals, not for avoiding love, however perilous it may be.

The eye-watering ending of *Make Way for Tomorrow* (McCarey, 1937) depends on the well-known horror of separation. At the end of the movie an old couple is forced to part company. They are no longer able to care for themselves. The problem is that none of their selfish children are willing to put them both up in the same household. As a result they have to move in with two different children who live far apart. Near the end of the movie they say their goodbyes in a train station. We know that their parting will be as sudden and permanent as death, if not fatal itself. Separated, both will likely die of grief.