

21. There might be room for argument about what counts as a substantial loss, and there are going to be unclear cases. Still, it seems that there are recognizably substantial losses of agency and practical identity, as exemplified by Alzheimer's disease.
22. It is worth noting that my argument for the rationality of fearing death doesn't depend on whether the loss of one's agency and practical identity is a mere comparative bad or an absolute bad. Strictly speaking, then, my argument can be made independently of Draper's framework.
23. See, for instance, Samuel Scheffer's recent discussion of this point (pp. 83–110) in *Death and the Afterlife* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).
24. Christine Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 363.
25. Special thanks are due to UCR's Agency Workshop, John Martin Fischer, and especially Monique Wonderly for many discussions of the ideas here, and for many helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Thanks also to Karl Ekenndahl for useful feedback on a late draft of this chapter.

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Chapter 8

Constructing Death as a Form of Failure

Addressing Mortality in a Neoliberal Age

Beverley Clack

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

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

SUCCESS, FAILURE, AND THE NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DEATH AND THE LIMITS OF NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITY

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

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

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

The language commonly used in accounts of terminal illness reveals something of the power of this construction. Philip Gould, one of the architects of the neoliberal political project in the UK which was New Labour illustrates this with his initial framing of his treatment as not dissimilar to a political campaign that will test his resolve and his personal resources: "Everything I thought about the battle with cancer was strategic, as if I was fighting an election campaign. I saw the elimination of the cancer as victory, and the test results as opinion polls."²⁵ If the elimination of the cancer is victory, if the test results highlight whether he is winning the battle, it is not surprising that negative results are experienced as failure. Telling, perhaps, that Gould should structure his experience of cancer in this way, given his political commitment to the values of autonomy and choice. Later, as he realizes he cannot win this battle, he is forced to shift his focus away from such notions to acceptance, developing a sense that what really matters is less this individual battle and more his relationship with his family and nature,²⁷ a move to which we will return later in this chapter.

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

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

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

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

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

VULNERABILITY, MORTALITY, AND THE SICK BODY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Frank's approach is not concerned with developing the kind of health-care provision that focuses on the individual as "responsible" for their health and recovery. Instead, he connects the individual's suffering with an acknowledgment 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*."⁴⁶ Rather than pathologize sickness and chronic illness, Frank suggests allowing the stories told by the sick to shape understandings of our common life together. His account is particularly convincing as he is himself a person in remission from cancer.⁴⁷ The sick person is not an aberration set 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. Therefore "any sickness is an intimation of mortality,"⁴⁸ for the suffering of the ill is "a common condition of humanity."⁴⁹

If sickness is seen as a fundamental part of the experience of being human, Frank directs our attention to stories that we might not like to hear. If "restoration stories" can too easily be adapted to tales of "winning" and "losing" the battle with death, Frank's interest is with stories that do not lend themselves to such a neat story arc. In "chaos stories" we are confronted with experiences that defy the desire for happy endings. Told by the terminally and chronically ill, such tales reveal the "bulwark of remedy, progress and professionalism [cracking] to reveal vulnerability, frailty, and impotence."⁵⁰ As language breaks down in the chaos wrought by such illnesses, the assumption that death can be overcome is challenged, laying bare the fact that "in the midst of life we are in death." Human interventions can only do so much when faced with the reality of being mortal beings in a mutable world.

The sick body, then, acts as a reminder of mortality, a fleshier version of the traditional, skeletal *memento mori*. In illness, we live with the reality of "lost control"⁵¹; we live with the knowledge that responsibility for our life extends only so far. To be human is to be limited, subject to the constraints facing all animals. Chronic illness challenges the claim that the natural human state is to be capable and resilient; a view easily lending itself to the fantasy that death is an aberration, that we are—or should be—"immortal." When Pageal attempts to understand that perplexing victory of Augustine's view that death is unnatural over the eminently more reasonable claims of his critics, she hits on the difficulty of accepting the limits accompanying mortality. With Augustine, we prefer to "feel guilty [rather] than helpless."⁵² Filtered through the optimism of the entrepreneurial self, this claim resonates even more strongly. To take responsibility for one's death sits comfortably with the narrative that tells us our destiny is shaped by our own endeavors.

To accept that notion seems far preferable to the alternative, which is revealed in illness; namely, the reality of our dependence on a mutable, physical world.

Refusing to accept that there are limits to human existence is not without an impact on our relationships. In particular, it is felt by those who stand in close proximity to death. As Martha Nussbaum notes, to be sick or ill or dying carries with it the "sense of failure to achieve some ideal state."⁵³ That feeling of shame is met in the common response made by healthy others to the bodies of the sick, used as receptacles for displaced fears of their own failure, their own terror of death. Rather than face up to our own vulnerabilities, we project them onto the bodies of the ill, making it possible to ignore our fears by marginalizing 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 inevitably, our own illnesses, aging and dying will be similarly marginalized.⁵⁴

LIVING WELL WITH DEATH AND LOSS

What happens if we begin, not with ideals of control, but with the experience of vulnerability that comes through acknowledging mortality? In what remains, I offer an approach that proceeds from that recognition of the inevitability of death. Foregrounding death enables a set of values to emerge that challenge neoliberal constructions of success, resulting in a different understanding of what it means to flourish as a human being.

Revisiting the history of philosophical engagements with death is useful for considering alternatives to the neoliberal avoidance of accepting mortality. If the practices of Stoic philosophy have been used to shore up the vulnerable self in order to create resilient subjects (Clack 2012), other aspects of its creed have not proven so acceptable to the neoliberal gaze. Central to Stoic philosophy was the importance of facing death, a crucial part of the process by which one learned what it meant to live well. The right response to recognizing one's mortality was not petulant refusal but acceptance.⁵⁵ Coming to accept death is no easy matter: it requires reflective practice, Pierre Hadot noting the significance of the Stoic practice of "the spiritual exercise," an imaginative exercise where one contemplates death and comes to terms with its reality.⁵⁶

To accept death's reality is to accept limits. Nothing lasts forever. In the face of death, all is, to echo Marcus Aurelius, "smoke and nothingness."⁵⁷ Marcus' words are bleak, a suitably dismissive rejection of the idea that fame or status or wealth could ever provide a secure basis for the good life. Yet the very bleakness of his words holds out the necessity of challenging models of

subjectivity which evade grappling with the reality of mortality. To ground our hopes in material possessions or the garnering of glittering prizes is to lose the deeper possibilities of being human which emerge from recognizing that all is vulnerable to chance and change. When we recognize this fundamental vulnerability, we are confronted with that which neoliberalism is least comfortable with: dependence on world and others.

When the Stoic is confronted by dependence, their solution is to cultivate detachment from anything 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. The unfortunate consequence of such a viewpoint is that it suggests the individual is best advised to seek detachment from those among whom they live, for after all, all existent beings are subject to loss and death. This is not, however, the lesson we need draw from acknowledging the vulnerability of our status as existent beings. The things that are most vulnerable are precisely those things which are most valuable: our loved ones, children, friends.⁵⁸

To accept the vulnerability of the things that make life worth living—to recognize 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 toward the other with whom we are in relationship. If the neoliberal vision of subjectivity forces us to face death alone,⁵⁹ an alternative vision makes our shared vulnerability the basis for stronger relationships. As Frank says, "sooner or later everyone is a wounded storyteller . . . [T]hat identity is our promise and responsibility, our calamity and our dignity."⁶⁰ In accepting our vulnerability toward death, we recognize the need each has for the other.

In accepting the need we have for each other, a different focus emerges about how we might live together than that offered under neoliberalism. Rather than start from the belief in the resilient, responsible self fundamental to neoliberalism, we might start, instead, with the shared experience of being vulnerable, mortal subjects. Frank suggests such a starting point might lead us to reclaim the value of generosity toward the others.⁶¹ Under the neoliberal paradigm, generosity has become indelibly attached to philanthropic giving.⁶² In a world where resources are spread unequally, being 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 favor 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."⁶³ Such a view does not seem particularly helpful for the 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."⁶⁴ Far from enabling a sense of solidarity with the one who is suffering, pity depends upon condemnation. In the movement from the one above to the one perceived as below, Nietzsche spies "the pleasure of gratification in the exercise of power." He goes further: if the person we pity is "very close to us, we remove from ourselves the suffering we ourselves feel by performing an act of pity."⁶⁵ 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 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*."⁶⁶ 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? Is it possible to create reciprocal relationships, the basis for the good society, if we enshrine pity in our version of generosity? 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 recognizing 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."⁶⁷ Pity becomes a means of asserting inequality rather than *assuming* equality of humanity.

Nietzsche's careful unraveling of the psychology of pity is persuasive. An alternative account of generosity is possible, if one begins with the shared experience of being vulnerable human beings standing in the face of death. Such an approach can be found in the writings of Nietzsche's erstwhile mentor, Schopenhauer.

In seeking the basis for 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.⁶⁸

Nietzsche denies Schopenhauer's compassion to be immune from the criticisms he directs at pity.⁶⁹ 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.”⁷⁰ When faced with the one who is suffering “I feel his woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own.”⁷¹ I identify myself with the other. In making this identification, “the barrier between the ego and the non-ego is for the moment abolished.”⁷² In that first moment of looking in the other’s face, I realize “an intuitive and immediate truth”⁷³: 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.”⁷⁴ Crucially, this fellow-feeling acts as a call to action. Generosity is called forth by recognizing the other’s suffering to be *just as important as my own*.

Schopenhauer’s account of compassion rests upon a far-reaching critique of the pretensions surrounding the process of individuation by which we come to believe ourselves separate from others and nature. Human life is miserable because we misrepresent our place in the world. Salvation from such misery lies for Schopenhauer in identifying and overcoming “the Will,” that “constant yearning simply to be.”⁷⁵ In order to extricate desiring, Schopenhauer advocates asceticism; but this does not mean the removal of our obligations to the other. If anything, our obligations become more pressing when we recognize that there is no difference between self and other:

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*.⁷⁶

Seeing the nature of the world correctly means we will not see living well as something to be achieved apart from our relationships with others. The promotion of self-reliant neoliberal subjectivity makes it difficult to cultivate the sense of fellow-feeling at the heart of Schopenhauer’s ethics. Where the successful life is understood to be cultivated through one’s own endeavors, 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 traveler on the path to death, cannot easily be recognized.

A different model of subjectivity, grounded in the recognition of the dependence each has on the other is necessary to cultivate the fellow-feeling Schopenhauer places at the heart of his ethics. To recognize that we are all subject to 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

When neoliberalism aligns death with failure, it renders impossible discussion about what it means to be a mortal subject, standing as we all do in the shadow of death. Ignoring death’s inevitability marginalizes the vulnerable and limits the ability to reflect on the fragility of life. By way of contrast, thinking about mortality has the capacity to restore a sense of shared experience, allowing acceptance of death’s reality to forge the basis for a new life together. When we look death in the face we are reminded of the things that emerge from our shared life—love, relationship, friendship, laughter—all vulnerable in a mutable world. Recognizing our shared vulnerability enables us to prioritize the things which help build connection and relationship, the things that are called forth as we look in the face of the other and see 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 that all too often emerges from the impossible models defining success which proliferate in neoliberal society. In thinking again about death, we might come to a better sense of what makes for the well-lived life.

NOTES

1. For an excellent account of the forces that shaped the emergence of neoliberal thinking on economics, society and politics, see Harvey (2005).
2. The identification of the key attributes that make an economic theory or a view of the human subject “neoliberal” is something of a complex task. Philip Mirowski aligns neoliberalism with a suite of attitudes regarding economics, subjectivity and society, and he emphasizes that these ideas and attitudes must always be understood as “a movable feast” (Mirowski 2014, p. 50), a “Russian doll” (2010, p. 43) rather than a clear statement of an ideological perspective. He, and others, direct attention to the role of the Mont Pelerin Society which gathered around the political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek in 1947 as a group committed to rejecting the postwar Keynesian consensus. In contrast to the active role of the enabling state, their focus was on advancing “general issues such as liberty and private initiative” (2010, p. 47). Harvey (2005) notes the different forms these values have subsequently taken in different cultural contexts, a variety that makes it difficult to name only one form taken by neoliberalism. Jamie Peck, likewise, details the “mongrel, shape-shifting forms” (2010, p. 276) of neoliberal theory and practice.
3. Harvey (2005), p. 2.
4. Harvey (2005), p. 3.
5. Rose (1999), p. 102.
6. See Thomas Lemke’s 2001 article in which this phrase is used. Lemke 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.

7. Rose (1999), p. 104.
8. Lemke (2001), p. 199.
9. Rose (1999), p. 117.
10. Mirowski (2014), p. 92.
11. Mirowski (2014), p. 117.
12. Mirowski (2014), p. 92.
13. Allen (2015), p. 6.
14. While Guy Standing (2011) identifies the “precarariat” with a specific strata dependent on zero hours contracts and low pay or benefits, it could be argued that with the exception of the top 10 percent, most who depend on work for their income fall into this category.
15. Butler (1993), p. 188.
16. The toxicity of this notion that hard work is central to what it is to succeed is being identified and increasingly challenged (see George Monbiot, ‘Aspirational parents condemn their children to a desperate, joyless life,’ *Guardian*, 9 June, 2015 <http://gu.com/p/49/jk9/sbl1>)
17. Mirowski (2014), p. 130.
18. Allsop (2015).
19. Mirowski (2014), p. 131.
20. Paul Treanor, quoted in Harvey (2005), p. 3, emphasis added.
21. For a commentary on this aspect of existentialist thought, see Cooper (1990), pp. 127–46.
22. See for example Sartre (1966), pp. 26–28.
23. Sartre (1943) 1969, p. 533.
24. See Heidegger (1962), p. 264; also Cooper (1990), pp. 136–39, for discussion of the broader application of this concept.
25. Harvey (2005), p. 5.
26. Gould (2012), p. 20.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 134, 141.
28. Gross (2015), p. 153.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
30. See Pagels (1988), chapter 6, for details of this debate.
31. Pagels (1988), p. 128.
32. *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.
33. Harvey (2005), p. 33.
34. This viewpoint has not gone unchallenged in the years following the global financial crisis of 2008. See Michael Sandel’s critique in *What Money Can’t Buy* (2012).
35. In September 2014, the online blog *Teachmeanth* reported that scientists in Palo Alto were offering a \$1 million prize to anyone who could end aging.
36. It is probably no accident that Robert Etinger created the Cryonics Institute at a time when neoliberalism was being consolidated as the new economic orthodoxy (1976). In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became UK prime minister, while Paul Volcker became chair of the US Federal Reserve. In 1980, Ronald Reagan became US president. All were committed to rejecting Keynesian economics in favor of a free-market

- economics that was the method, but, as Thatcher noted, “the object [was] to change the soul” (Harvey 2005, pp. 22–23).
37. Recently, Anil Gawande (2014), an oncologist, has argued for this kind of discussion to be at the heart of medical practice.
 38. See Richard Layard (2005), economist and advisor to the New Labour government for strategies promoting greater individual happiness. That the source of much unhappiness might be found in the practices of neoliberalism Layard advocates is suggested by Ted Shrecker and Clare Bambara’s *How Politics Makes Us Sick: Neoliberal Epidemics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
 39. 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 (pp. 110–20). 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.
 40. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), pp. viii–xv.
 41. Lasch (1979), Furedi (2004).
 42. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), back cover.
 43. Adkins (2002), chapter 3.
 44. Ecclestone and Hayes (2009), p. 18.
 45. Frank (1995), p. 7.
 46. Frank (1995), p. xi, emphasis added.
 47. Frank (1991) 2002.
 48. Frank (1995), p. 6.
 49. Frank (1991) 2002, p. 115.
 50. Frank (1995), p. 97.
 51. Frank (1995), p. 30.
 52. Pagels (1988), p. 147.
 53. Nussbaum (2004), p. 184.
 54. Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1880) 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 is a false attitude toward Ivan that makes his experience incapable of genuine expression, contributing to the isolation he feels.
 55. Seneca berates those who would have life otherwise: “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 XCII, 1969, pp. 181–82).
 56. 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).

57. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book 10.31 (1990:97).
58. Nussbaum (1990), p. 374.
59. Bauman (1992), pp. 48–50.
60. Frank (1995), p. xiii.
61. Frank (2004).
62. An example of this marketized 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 billionaire philanthropists Bill Gates and Warren Buffet as examples of what Thatcher was getting at.
63. Nietzsche (1888) 1990, p. 130; *Anti-Christ* §7.
64. Nietzsche (1878–1880) 1996, p. 39; HAH I §50.
65. Nietzsche (1996), p. 56; HAH I §103.
66. Nietzsche (1996), p. 322; HAH: WS §50; emphasis added.
67. Nietzsche (1996), p. 229; HAH2: §68.
68. Schopenhauer extends this argument to animals, arguing that this compassionate feeling for a fellow being in pain should affect their treatment (Schopenhauer 1995, p. 179).
69. See Solomon (2003, p. 98), who accepts Nietzsche's claim that Schopenhauer's *mitleid* does not convey the parity of esteem between sufferer and subject, represented by his own use of *mitleid* as a basic virtue.
70. Cartwright (1988), p. 561.
71. Schopenhauer (1839) 1995, p. 143.
72. Schopenhauer (1995), p. 166.
73. Mannion (2003), p. 19.
74. Schopenhauer (1995), p. 144.
75. Mannion (2003), p. 3.
76. Schopenhauer (1862) 1974: 219; PP2 §115.

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