# Reasons to be Fearful: Strawson, Death and Narrative

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When attempting to face the prospect of one's own death, it has been said that 'the mind blanks at the glare'.[1] Perhaps we should not treat our attitude towards our death as rational or reflective of our views on the self and on life. But to exempt views on death from the scrutiny of rational discourse seems to be a last resort (albeit one we may need recourse to in the end). There is a general tendency to neglect death within those discussions of the self that fall outside the confines of a certain strain of continental thought roughly construed, or at best to treat it as a topic that resides beyond the borders of the rational. I do not aim to rectify this situation here, nor do I think it obvious that death is something that can be clearly and consistently dealt with by those theories of persons and selves that primarily represent, to use Thomas Nagel's words, 'an internal view that sees only this side of death—that includes only the finitude of [one's] expected future consciousness'.[2] But I do believe that those who have spent a good deal of time thinking about the life of the self ought to spare a thought or two for its demise, and that such thoughts may contribute to our over-all assessment of their view.

I will compare and assess what two significant and opposing approaches to the self have to say about death. By death here, I am speaking only of one's own death—not grieving, or the death of others, or even one's own dying and the pain and fear that that process may involve. I take death to mean, minimally, the permanent end of life, on the understanding that we can grasp and accept this conception of death independent of resolving the more vexed question of what the criteria for death are, i.e. what

[1] P. Larkin, 'Aubade', originally published in *Times Literary Supplement* Dec. 23, 1977, reprinted in *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, A. Thwaite (ed.) (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 208–209.

[2] T. Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 225.



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conditions must be met in order for the end of life to obtain.[3] The two approaches in question are those of the episodic anti-narrativist, as articulated by Galen Strawson, and the narrativist, as somewhat synthetically pieced together from a variety of accounts.[4] As we shall see, neither party fares particularly well on the matter of death, both unable to point towards a view of death that is clearly consistent with their views on the self. In the case of the narrative view, this inconsistency, while not as explicit, is particularly entrenched.

## II

Galen Strawson offers a view of the self that is both anti-diachronic and anti-narrative. He holds an anti-diachronic or 'episodic' view of the self in that he does not think that he himself as an inner mental self—as opposed to a biological entity or human being—continues over time for any significant duration. His self in this sense is not 'something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future'.[5] While he is perfectly aware that Galen Strawson the human being has endured for some time and will probably carry on for some time to come, and he has from-the-inside memories of Galen Strawson's experiences, and expectations and practical concerns for Galen Strawson's future, he does not identify his present self with those past or future subjects. His self as a mental entity is largely bound to the 'present, brief, hiatus-free stretch of consciousness'.[6] He sometimes calls this anti-diachronic stance the 'Pearl view' of the self, meaning that 'many mental selves exist, one at a time and one after another, like pearls on a string' in the life of a human being.[7]

[3] For this concept/criteria distinction, see J.M. Fischer, 'Introduction: Death, Metaphysics, and Morality', *The Metaphysics of Death*, J.M. Fischer (ed.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3–30, 3–6.

[4] As there is no single narrativist group or movement I will speak freely of 'the narrativist view' or 'narrativist views', on the understanding that I am primarily concerned with those views as they pertain to the self and involve some alleged reflexive application of conventional narrative structures to one's own life, descriptively and/or normatively.

[5] G. Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio* 17, 2004, 430. Cf. ' "The Self" ', in *Models of the Self*, S. Gallagher and J. Shear (eds.) (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 1999), 1–24.

[6] ' "The Self" ', op. cit. note 5, 14.

[7] Ibid., 20.

As for the narrative view, Strawson defines this as, minimally, involving the deliberate application of a story-like unifying or form-finding construction to the various events that compose one's life, in the sense of 'conceiving of one's life ...as some sort of ethical-historical-characterological developmental unity, or in terms of a story, a *Bildung* or 'quest'', which fits 'the form of some recognized narrative genre'.[8] He attacks the narrative view of the self both as construed descriptively, as offering an account of how we in fact live and view our lives, and normatively, as a prescription for how we ought to live our lives.

The anti-diachronic and anti-narrative views, while they may influence one another, are distinct and do not depend upon one another, according to Strawson.[9] One does not need to be anti-diachronic in order to be anti-narrative, though it seems clear that it helps; if one does not view the self as diachronically extended, it is easier to reject the view that the self is and/or ought to be the subject of a certain developmental progress.[10] It is evident that in Strawson's own case the presence of the anti-diachronic and anti-narrative views reinforce one another and each forms part of what is intended to be an over-all account of the nature of the self, which he has been developing for some time. I therefore consider the implications of his view of death for both his anti-diachronic and his anti-narrative stance. The problems that arise in each case are separate, though, and it may be that in the end the anti-diachronic and anti-narrative positions would benefit from being fully divorced from each other, at least as far as dealing with death is concerned.

## III

As Strawson himself acknowledges, what he says about death seems, at least on the face of it, decidedly to contradict his anti-diachronic stance. He says that when he thinks of his death at some unspecified future time, he thinks that it is he, *qua* inner mental self, who will die and, what is more, that he fears this death. 'This seems odd', he admits, 'given that my death necessarily

[8] 'Against Narrativity', op. cit. note 5, 441, 442.
[9] Ibid., sect. 6.
[10] This is especially clear in ' "The Self" ', op. cit. note 5, sect. VIII, in which anti-diachronicity and anti-narrative are largely treated as of a piece.



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comes after any future events in my life' and, granting his anti-diachronic Pearl view of the self, he doesn't think he continues to exist for these future events in life.[11] How then can it be he himself who dies and whose death is the intentional object of his fear? He has an explanation, namely that relative to the eternity of non-existence that is death, his whole life as a human being is so short as to condense it to a moment in which, it seems, he *qua* the same mental entity (or 'Me*', to use Strawson's notation) still exists at the end of it: 'When eternity—eternal nonexistence—is in question, the gap between Me* and death that is created by the fact that I still have an indefinite amount of life to live approximates to nothing (like any finite number compared with infinity). So death—nonexistence for ever—presents itself as having direct relevance for Me* now even if Me* has no clear future in life—not even tomorrow'.[12] This is an explanation of how Strawson manages to over-ride his anti-diachronic stance and thereby to be entitled to a view on his (distant future) death. Is it a satisfactory explanation?

There are several reasons for being less than satisfied with it, in so far as the explanation seems to presuppose a dubious view of death, and one that has problematic consequences. This can be drawn out by means of some standard Epicurean criticisms of the fear of death. The first of these is something I'll call the 'temporal fallacy', according to which death is mistakenly treated either explicitly or implicitly as an ongoing state of affairs comparable to an 'event in life'.[13] The temporal fallacy is a more general form of what we might call the 'experiential fallacy' that Lucretius identified, according to which the man who fears death, unconsciously 'infects [the corpse] with his own perception', covertly believing himself to continue after death and experience its disadvantages.[14] Strawson's explanation as to why he views death as something that will happen to Me*, is that my death unlike my life is eternal, 'eternity' being equated with 'eternal nonexistence', and an 'eternity of nonexistence' being what he fears.[15] A finite duration, however long, shrinks to a pin-point when contrasted

[11] ' "The Self" ', op. cit. note 5, 16.

[12] Ibid. Cf. 'Against Narrativity', op. cit. note 5, 430–431.

[13] To borrow from Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D. Pears and B. McGuinness (trans.) (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1961), 6.4311.

[14] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 3.883. Cf 3.870–83. All translations of Lucretius are by J. Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

[15] ' "The Self" ', op. cit. note 5, 16, 17.

with an infinite duration, and the temporally-extended succession of Strawsonian mental selves is compressed into a seemingly single unit in the face of posthumous infinite temporal duration.

But the fact that one is dead by a certain point on a standard *B* series time-scale, and for all points later than that point, is quite different from the suggestion that one's death is eternal, in the sense of having an infinite temporal duration. As Nagel points out, we don't object to death on grounds of quantity, in the way in which we might feel compelled to value life quantitatively; we may say Bach reaped more of the benefits of life than Schubert, but we don't by the same token say that Shakespeare has received a larger portion of the evil of death than has Proust.[16] Whilst Nagel doesn't go on to explore this in depth, I think the reason for the disparity is that 'infinity' in the case of death is not infinite duration but timelessness.[17] The thing in question is removed from time altogether by being removed from existence. Yet infinite duration seems to be how Strawson is and must be viewing death in order that he compare it to the finite duration of life. The result of this comparison is indeed cause for distress. As Tom Stoppard's re-imagined Guildenstern remarks: 'Death followed by eternity ...the worst of both worlds. It *is* a terrible thought'.[18] But if Strawson were to treat death not as a state of eternal duration but as something ex-temporal, it would no longer be commensurable with the temporal nature of life and the basis for his explanation—the prospect of a future of eternal non-existence—would be lost.

A further reason for finding Strawson's explanation problematic lies in another Epicurean-identified complication, namely the well-known symmetry argument, according to which our attitude towards our post-natal non-existence—our death—ought to be consistent with our attitude towards our pre-natal non-existence, or the time before our birth, the situation for us in both cases being the same. Strawson is particularly vulnerable to the implications of the symmetry argument. If the thought of eternal non-existence provokes the belief that it is he who will die, then contemplation of the infinite duration of time prior to his birth ought to prompt the view that it is he who was born (on whatever date Galen Strawson the human being was born), and if he fears the time after death

[16] T. Nagel, 'Death', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1–10, at 3.

[17] Again, borrowing from Wittgenstein, op. cit. note 13.

[18] T. Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), act 2, 72.

then he ought also to fear the time before birth. But we have no reason to think he does fear his pre-natal non-existence; it is in any case a highly unlikely and uncommon view.[19] Assuming he does not in fact fear the time before his birth, he is, like most of us, guilty of an asymmetrical attitude towards pre-and post-natal non-existence. There are many worthy objections to the symmetry argument, but the bulk of them tend to appeal to our general evaluative bias towards the future, in order to justify our widespread tendency to negative attitudes towards post-natal non-existence and indifference towards pre-natal non-existence. It is unclear whether Strawson could reasonably uphold and sustain such a bias, in light of his express claims to the effect that his self-interest does not extend to the past *or* the future (more of which below). Given these claims, and assuming Strawson does not in fact fear the time before his birth, he may belong to what Derek Parfit presented as the wholly hypothetical class of those 'who both lack the bias towards the future, and do not regret their past non-existence'. Such a view is the only one against which the symmetry argument has genuine force; for someone in this position cannot appeal to the point that it is non-existence in general—pre- and post-natal—that they fear, nor can they cite future bias as the reason for fearing only the latter.[20]

## IV

Even apart from these criticisms, we still have to be aware of the limits of Strawson's explanation as to why he fears his death. It is an explanation of how he over-rides his anti-diachronic view in order to arrive at the thought that he, who does not endure in life, nevertheless will suffer death. It therefore allows him to fulfil a necessary condition of fearing death, namely having the thought that it is *he* who will die. Even if it is or can be made acceptable, therefore, his explanation only entitles him to *an* attitude towards his death. It does not justify or account for why that attitude is one

[19] Though a compelling example of anxiety concerning pre-natal non-existence can be found in the opening of V. Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 17.

[20] D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 175. Parfit attributes the symmetry argument to Epicurus, but it is more commonly ascribed to Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 3.832–42 and 3.972–5. Cf. Warren, op. cit. note 14, ch. 3.

of fear, nor is it intended to do so. Indeed, his explanation of why he feels it is he who will die appears to presuppose rather than account for his fear; as he writes, 'the thought of eternity ...has an emotional force that makes it seem plain that death faces Me*'[21]—as though the emotion precedes and prompts his diachronic lapse. In so far as his explanation of his attitude towards death does not seek to account for the particular nature of the attitude—fear—my criticisms of his explanation do not touch on that particular attitude.

In order to get at fear of death and its appropriateness within the framework of a Strawsonian view of the self, we must turn from anti-diachronicity to that other key aspect of Strawson's view, namely his anti-narrative stance. Here we're not just faced with the absence of explanations. We are also in possession of an overwhelming body of evidence, in the form of his anti-narrative view of life, that would lead us to expect Strawson to possess a much more dispassionate attitude towards death than he does. As said, though, Strawson does not present his particular attitude towards death as rationally justified. But—and especially in an age in which we are coming increasingly to recognise that emotions are at least in part cognitive—it is still worthwhile asking whether the fear of death can be rationally accounted for by someone who advocates Strawson's anti-narrative stance while at the same time does wish to claim her fear or abhorrence of death is consistent with her anti-narrative position. This, I will argue, is none too easy to do. The philosopher concerned to align her view of death with her anti-narrative stance will find her options constrained if she constructs that stance on the Strawsonian model.

## V

The *locus classicus* of the anti-narrative position is, arguably, Epicureanism. The Epicureans did not deny that they, *qua* enduring mental and physical beings, would die, so any strain of anti-narrativism here is not influenced (for worse or for better) by an anti-diachronic view of the nature of the self. The crucial point of comparison is that the Epicureans did not place value on kinetic or time-dependent pleasure, but on katastematic, or static, pleasure. It is this that underlies Epicurus' controversial pronouncement that

[21] ' "The Self" ', op. cit. note 5, 16.



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'the infinite time has as much pleasure as the finite'.[22] Here is Stephen Rosenbaum's gloss on this key aspect of the Epicurean outlook:

> ... the Epicurean view of the significance of projects for human life lies in the way they may or may not engage the natural capacities of the human, not in their completion. Completeness thus lies in a certain time-independent quality of one's activities, not in whether the activities produce specific (future) results ...It is not that the completion of projects in the future is unimportant, but rather that being unimpededly engaged in the activity of completing them is the only essential aspect of their contribution to one's well-being ...[This is] better said to be the idea of complete living, rather than that of a complete life.[23]

Compare this with Strawson's articulation of a strong anti-narrative stance: 'I'm completely uninterested in the answer to the question 'What has GS made of his life?', or 'What have I made of my life?' I'm living it, and this sort of thinking about it is no part of it. This does not mean that I am in any way irresponsible. It is just that what I care about, in so far as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now'.[24] Such a sentiment is echoed throughout Strawson's attack on the narrativist view, and is crucial to it. In keeping with Rosenbaum's gloss on the Epicurean stance, he claims to be able to maintain a basic, practical awareness of and attention to the future of GS. But in his case, as in the Epicurean case, this does not amount to subordinating the present to any larger, explicitly-articulated purpose or future result. Trajectory, vocation, development, project, and quest are all terms that Strawson associates with the narrative view, and in rejecting that view he rejects a long-term interest in the self over time and any picture of life as deliberately moving towards a conclusion whose nature will be determined by the pattern of living that precedes it. It is worth noting that, aside from this fundamental similarity with respect to katastematic values, Strawson also shares the Epicureans' concerns about the negative influence of religious beliefs amongst those who

[22] Epicurus, *Kyria Doxa* 19. All translations of Epicurus are by Warren, op. cit. note 14.

[23] S. Rosenbaum, 'Epicurus on Pleasure and the Complete Life', *Monist* 73, 1990, 37.

[24] 'Against Narrativity', op. cit. note 5, 438; cf. ' "The Self" ', op. cit. note 5, 15.

espouse kinetic values,[25] and levies Epicurean or neo-Epicurean charges of parochialism and cultural imposition against his opponents.[26]

Thus it appears that Strawson the anti-narrativist shares certain key values with the Epicurean, especially concerning the interest in one's self as it exists in the present or, at the very least, as something not bound by concerns for the future. Yet strongly related to their view of complete living as a present-tense endeavour is the Epicureans' notorious indifference to death. According to that view, death is not to be feared because there is no actual perceiving subject of it, and there is no possible subject of it:[27] 'death, the most terrifying of evils, is nothing to us, since for the time when we are, death is not present; and for the time when death is present, we are not'.[28] What is the relation between the Epicurean view of life and the Epicurean view of death? Much is assumed but certain passages are explicit:

> The mind, taking the calculation of the goal and limit of the flesh and, banishing the fears brought on by eternity, makes life complete and no longer in need of an infinite time. But the mind does not flee from pleasure nor, when things bring about a departure from life, does it depart as if lacking something from the best life. The man who knows the limits of life knows how easy it is to produce the removal of pain caused by want and to make one's whole life complete. As a result, there is no need for competitive behaviour.[29]

Katastematic pleasure is founded on the absence of pain for the Epicurean, as this (and other) texts indicate, and so does not require

[25] Cf. 'Against Narrativity', op. cit. note 5, 436–37.

[26] Cf. ibid., 429, 437. For an Epicurean position on this, see Rosenbaum, 'Epicurus on Pleasure and the Complete Life', op. cit. note 23, 36: 'There is no goal or type of goal, the objective achievement of which is necessary for a person to live a complete life. The requirement that a person achieve such goals in order to have a complete life would be, for Epicurus, an abstract, unjustifiable, and anxiety-producing cultural imposition on human thriving.'

[27] For the significance of the difference between these two strands of arguments see: Nagel, op. cit. note 16; M. Nussbaum, 'Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, 1989, n. 5; and Warren, op. cit. note 14, ch. 2.

[28] Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 125. Cf. *Kyria Doxa*, 2.

[29] Epicurus, *Kyriai Doxai*, 20–21.



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a diachronically extended series of actions or experiences in order to be attained. It seems that ridding oneself of fear of death is part of recognising that a good life is not contingent upon kinetic, time-bound pleasures or goals and does not require an interest in the persisting self's progress over time. Indifference to death and the acceptance of katastematic values are mutually supporting: by abandoning interest in a persisting self not subject to mortality, we clear the ground for the appreciation of katastematic pleasure; at the same time, realising that pleasure does not require persistence makes it possible to accept mortality. Normally adherence to the Epicurean view of death requires a therapeutic re-examination of one's ordinary values which, it is expected, will be time-bound and so will run contrary to it; but in so far as the Strawsonian anti-narrativist is largely bereft of the time-bound values that commonly hinder progress towards Epicurean enlightenment, she ought to be a prime contestant for immediate indoctrination into the Epicurean indifference to death.

It may be retorted that the anti-narrativist concerned with the rational explanation of her emotions is still entitled to fear death. She just needs to account for it in such a way as to address the Epicurean argument that death is nothing to us—an argument that is notoriously unconvincing, it must be said. Perhaps she could avail herself of some of the standard criticisms of Epicureanism here. Unfortunately for her, these criticisms tend to affiliate their proponents with the narrative camp. The rejection of Epicurean equanimity towards death is traditionally tied (explicitly or otherwise) to a rejection of the Epicurean view of life, through the promotion of time-bound pleasures and values. Take the examples of two of the best-known arguments, variations of which continue to inundate the philosophical literature on death. The desire-frustration account (primary advocate: Bernard Williams) proclaims death an evil (and a unique evil) because it frustrates certain categorical desires to live—these tend to be egocentric long-term desires involving deep interest in one's further future, and are linked by Williams to his commitment to determinate diachronic personal identity.[30] The deprivation theory (primary advocate: Nagel) says death is bad because it deprives a person of the goods in life. A person, on this theory, is not merely an actual subject of experience at a given moment, but 'a person identified by his

[30] B. Williams, 'The Makropulos Case', in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100.

history and his possibilities';[31] we must consider not just who the present subject is but what he was and could be in order to address difficult questions of when and for whom the badness of death applies. As Martha Nussbaum interprets Nagel, death is 'a termination of something that was under way, projecting towards a future'.[32] By treating the person as a temporally-extended being with an on-going concern for, or identity enshrouded in, his past history and/or future possibilities, both the desire-frustration account and the deprivation theory seem to presuppose or tacitly endorse crucial aspects of the narrative view (or at least something incompatible with an anti-narrative view),[33] and so it is not advisable for the anti-narrativist to look towards these sorts of arguments in order rationally to sustain her fear of death in the face of the Epicurean insistence upon equanimity.

Of course we could fall back on the claim that no rational explanation of fear of death is in order here. I've said that that sort of approach is a last resort, but in this case it may be a welcome refuge. Perhaps fear of death does not admit of rational explanation within the confines of the anti-narrativist account of the self. But on the other hand, nothing else in that account depends upon holding the view of death that Strawson does; his fear of death is not a product of his anti-narrativism. It is possible that he, or at the very least a follower of his view, could come to divest himself of this fear without thereby doing violence to the rest of his view. But if this cannot be achieved, and fear of death prevails, then it is perhaps best treated as a-rational, standing apart from the account, and neither the outcome nor the source of rational influence. As we shall see, this would still place the Strawsonian anti-narrativist in a superior position to the narrativist, who may not be at liberty to deal so perfunctorily with the problems that death creates for his account—problems that are arguably borne of elements intrinsic and essential to it.

[31] Nagel, op. cit. note 16, 5.

[32] Nussbaum, 'Mortal Immortals', op. cit. note 27, 315.

[33] Note that Nagel's remarks, elsewhere in the same article, concerning the desirability of eternal life, may place him in opposition to another crucial aspect or implication of the narrativist view of the self (see n. 41 below); nevertheless, his emphasis on viewing a person in terms of his history and possibilities is sufficient to render him at odds with aspects of Strawson's anti-narrative stance, in particular Strawson's lack of concern for questions of the sort, 'What has GS made of his life?' ('Against Narrativity', op. cit. note 5, 438).

## VI

So far I've been contrasting the narrative view with the Epicurean attitude towards life. It is hardly surprising to learn that narrativism is antithetical to a view that proclaims that the value of life is not kinetically-based—is not time-dependent. Following Strawson's broad characterisation of the narrative approach to the self as involving a deliberate unifying or form-finding tendency modelled on recognised narrative genres, it is clear that the life of the self upon the narrative view is essentially time-dependent. It requires concern for one's past and future self, in so far as the self has an ongoing engagement in the realisation of the non-immediate achievements, goals, and possibilities that form and contribute to the narrative construct. But while time is important for the narrativist, the point of contrast between the narrativist and the Epicurean does not merely concern the duration of life. Gisela Striker attacks the Epicurean view from an overtly narrativist position, arguing that although Epicurus may have been right to imply that an infinitely long life is not desirable (as we shall see, the narrativist and the Epicurean are in agreement on this point), he wrongly focused on the duration of life and neglected the issue of the completeness of life. Death is bad when one has not completed one's life, says Striker, and Epicurus with his focus upon katastematic pleasures cannot accommodate this point.[34] The Epicurean goal, in so far as we can speak of one, being katastematic and essentially negative in form (the absence of pain), can theoretically be achieved at any point in a life and does not require the playing out of certain patterns of living over time.[35] In contrast, Striker reveals her time-dependent understanding of complete and incomplete lives through comparison of life with the

[34] G. Striker, 'Commentary on Mitsis', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy* 4, 1988, 325–326. Cf. Rosenbaum, op. cit. note 23, and Warren, op. cit. note 14, 115 ff.

[35] Cf. Warren, op. cit. note 14, ch. 4: he offers two possible interpretations of the Epicurean notion of a complete life—one which, in keeping with the narrative view eschews only premature death, and the other which sees the good life as obtainable no matter what a person's age or stage in life. He rallies strong textual evidence in support of the latter view (focusing on the Epicurean rejection of Solon's dictum, 'call no man happy until he is dead', and the claim that katastematic pleasure is not at all improved by duration), and concludes that Epicureanism is incompatible with the narrative outlook.

viewing of an opera; one does not want to be made to leave after the first act, but to experience the whole spectacle—its progress and vicissitudes.[36]

Note that death *per se* is not being identified as bad here; we need only fear premature death. This is because the time that the narrativist depends upon for completeness cannot be unlimited. Other narrativist sympathisers such as Williams, Nussbaum, and Richard Wollheim all corroborate this point,[37] each agreeing in one way or another that a complete life takes considerable time and so death before a certain point is an evil, but that 'immortality is not the answer to death'[38]—after a certain point death is desirable or at least necessary. Why is so-called non-premature death desirable or necessary upon narrative views of the self? The answer is encapsulated in Jeff Malpas' rhetorical query, 'How could one conceive of a life without end as constituting a whole?'.[39] It is not just its duration or diachronic extension but its finitude that permits our lives to be structured along conventional narrative lines, which in turn allows us to partake of the benefits that narrativity putatively confers, be it unity and completeness, authenticity, participation in fulfilling human relationships, self-understanding, ethical character, or achievement of the status of personhood. In the case of lived narratives, the ending is secured and indeed constituted by death, as Alasdair MacIntyre makes explicit; faced with the objection that life, unlike stories, has no beginnings, middles or ends, he responds, 'Have you never heard of death?'[40] Therefore while the narrativist eschews the Epicurean's indifference to life's duration, there is a sense in which he is not wholly at odds with the Epicurean; he can accept death at least on

[36] Striker, op. cit. note 34, 325–326.

[37] See: Williams, op. cit. note 30; Nussbaum, op. cit. note 27; and R. Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1984), ch. IX.

[38] Wollheim, ibid., 267.

[39] J. Malpas, 'Death and the Unity of a Life', in *Death and Philosophy*, J. Malpas and R. Solomon (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1998), 120–134, 131.

[40] A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 212.

certain terms.[41] Nussbaum even goes so far as to suggest that such a narrativist-driven acceptance of (non-premature) death is neo-Epicurean.[42]

## VII

There are several things that concern me about the place of death in the narrativist view. The first two concerns pertain to the suggestion that non-premature death is acceptable to the narrativist. As Steven Luper-Foy proclaims, 'any reason for living is an excellent reason for not dying',[43] and while this is a point that the Epicurean can reject, it is much harder for the narrativist to deny. If we see life as 'projecting towards a future', in which certain possibilities may be realised in accordance with a certain narrative trajectory or structure, it seems hard to avoid the view that death at any time is abhorrent, because it deprives us of the fulfilment of all possibilities.[44] This is where the Epicureans have the advantage over the narrativists; by dissociating the complete life from the attainment of goals over time and instead restricting the highest achievement to *ataraxia* or the absence of pain or disturbance, the value of which does not increase with its duration, completeness such as it is for the Epicurean can clearly be obtained within a life.[45] In answer to this, it might be said that the narrativist view allows us to curtail death's potential for deprivation by providing us with a prescription for securing a complete life; comparison of lives to novels or stories suggests that completion is both imperative and

[41] This is where Nagel may diverge from narrativist accounts; despite his emphasis on a life judged in terms of its history and possibilities, he is careful to observe that 'a man's sense of his own experience ...does not embody this idea of a natural limit' and that, furthermore, there may be 'no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have' (op. cit. note 16, 9–10). This does not exclude Nagel from the official narrativist view, because there is no such official view. But I believe it betrays the spirit of many narrativist accounts; I take the limit or finitude of life to be a necessary adjunct, in light of what the more overt narrative advocates say or imply in their writings with respect to both the shape and the completeness of a life.

[42] Nussbaum, op. cit. note 27. Cf. S. Luper-Foy, 'Annihilation', in *The Metaphysics of Death*, op. cit. note 3, 269–290.

[43] Luper-Foy, ibid., 278.

[44] Cf. Nagel, op. cit. note 16, 9–10.

[45] Cf. Warren, op. cit. note 14, ch. 4.

obtainable. Were we to achieve it, we would thereby cheat death, leaving nothing for it to deprive us of. But if one has a kinetic-based view of life's structure and value, is it possible to obtain complete satisfaction with one's life (a possibility that Italo Calvino describes as a 'too uninteresting to make it worth investigating')?[46] Only in fiction is it even arguably the case that there are no possibilities outside the confines of the given narrative (thus we view with deep suspicion questions to the effect of where Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy might spend their honeymoon). There will always be, up until the time of our death, further possibilities for us that death will eradicate, some if not many of which could otherwise stand as reasons to go on, upon a kinetic-based set of values.[47] So I greet with some suspicion any allegedly neo-Epicurean gesture on the narrativist's part to embrace so-called non-premature death.

Relatedly, the reduction of concern with death to concern with premature death just seems descriptively false. There is a form of dread of death that stands apart from any and all concerns we may have with our lives and their completeness or lack thereof. 'The mind blanks at the glare', says Philip Larkin, 'not in remorse' for 'the good not done, the love not given, time / Torn off unused ...', but 'at the total emptiness for ever'.[48] This dread of the 'total emptiness forever', which some philosophers have attempted to deny or downgrade in light of other possible death-related fears, undeniably exists and is deeply felt by some.[49] Amélie Rorty calls it the fear of death 'as such', and Nagel, the 'unmistakable experience' of the 'expectation of nothingness'.[50] I'm inclined to

[46] I. Calvino, 'Learning to be Dead', in *Mr. Palomar*, W. Weaver (trans.) (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Ltd., 1985), 121–126, 124. He adds: 'This is the most difficult step in learning how to be dead: to become convinced that your own life is a closed whole, all in the past, to which you can add nothing and can alter none of the relationships among the various elements' (ibid., 125).

[47] Cf. Rosenbaum, op. cit. note 23, 34–35.

[48] Larkin, op. cit. note 1.

[49] Deniers and downgraders include: R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 2.; R. Solomon, 'Death Fetishism, Morbid Solipsism', in *Death and Philosophy*, op. cit. note 39,152–176; and Warren, op. cit. note 14, 4.

[50] A. Rorty, 'Fearing Death', in *Mind in Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 197–211, at 200, and Nagel, op. cit. note 2, 225. In keeping with Larkin, both Rorty and Nagel distinguish this unique and objectless dread of death from various death-related concerns, both personal and social, which, as Rorty notes, 'attend other conditions as well as death' (A. Rorty,

think that this is the sort of fear of death to which Strawson was referring. If, as Larkin conveys, it stands apart from the many varieties of remorse and regret to which we are so susceptible, so likewise it stands independent of and impervious to the rewards of life, including the completion of our long-term life projects, and therefore even the committed narrativist ought to remain susceptible to it.

My final concern—and the most serious one, I think—is about the role of death more generally within the narrativist account. Here the narrativist seems to commit a variation upon the temporal and experiential fallacies discussed earlier in connection with Strawson. The narrativist (implicitly or explicitly) treats death as an event in life, when he of necessity attempts to incorporate death into the story of his life as its final occurrence. But death is not an event in life. Death is not lived through. It can't form part of one's self-narrative. It can only interrupt such a narrative. Only from the spectator or reader's point of view does death contribute to the narrative of a life. Not so for the subject herself, so there is something like a category error being committed when one tries to incorporate one's own death within one's life story. If our lives are stories they are necessarily incomplete ones from the point of view of ourselves, which is the only point of view we're concerned with here. The narrativist thus ends up with a paradox at the heart of his view: he needs mortality for meaning, completeness, unity, yet his death deprives him of completion of his self-narrative.[51]

## VIII

The response to this final criticism may be that it overstates the problem. MacIntyre says of Kafka that 'it is no accident that Kafka could not end his novels, for the notion of an ending like that of a

ibid). Note also the discrepancy between the 'expectation of nothingness' and Nagel's earlier, more widely accredited discussion of what we fear in fearing death (op. cit. note 16); his later discussion places him at further remove from the narrativist view.

[51] Cf. S. Mulhall, 'The Enigma of Individuality: Identity, Narrative and Truth in Biography, Autobiography and Fiction', in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, R. Eldridge (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

beginning has its sense only in terms of intelligible narrative'.[52] But MacIntyre does not here explicitly make the converse claim that I am making on behalf of the narrativist, namely that narratives only make sense if they have endings (as well as beginnings). The fact that Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was unfinished doesn't make what we have of it read like Kafka, and something similar could be said for self-narratives; our inability to complete them doesn't undermine their narrative credentials as a whole. There may be something to this. But I would suggest that we grasp the narrative arc of incomplete novels or stories (whether their incompletion be due to accident or deliberate irony or subversion) in light of complete ones, which constitute the norm, and my point is that there is no such norm available when it comes to self-narratives; they are all necessarily incomplete, unlike novels or stories, which are occasionally unfinished but are nevertheless embedded in a tradition of finished ones. This discrepancy between the incomplete story and the incomplete life may put intolerable pressure on the attempt to treat one's own life as a story, especially in light of the fact that the comparison when made is often between self-narratives and conventional or traditional, linear, usually literary, narratives,[53] which tend to have (to repeat MacIntyre's description) beginnings, middles and ends.

A related but more substantial response to my concern might be to say that the mistake of treating one's death as the end of one's narrative stems from what Peter Goldie has identified as an overly-literal conception of the narrativist endeavour—one in which 'life is a narrative, of which the person living the life is the author'.[54] As Goldie rightly notes, 'to elide the notion of narrative and the notion of what a narrative is about is to lose the distinction between language (and thought) and the world—between representation and what is represented'.[55] On my argument, the pitfalls of failing to separate the story from the subject of a self-narrative become especially apparent and unavoidable when it comes to writing the final sentence. But as Goldie suggests, we do not need

[52] MacIntyre, op. cit. note 40, 213.

[53] Cf. for instance: MacIntyre, op. cit. note 40, ch. 15; Nussbaum, op. cit. note 27; O. Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (Cambridge, MS.: Harvard University Press, 1991); M. Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), ch. 5.

[54] P. Goldie, 'One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective', *Philosophical Papers* 32 (2003), 303.

[55] Ibid.

to buy into the overly-literal reading of the narrativist endeavour. Even if some narrativists are themselves guilty of a literalist approach (Goldie identifies MacIntyre as the prime offender) others are not, or needn't be. The narrativist can reject the literal reading while sustaining what is important about his view:

> the denial that we are *literally* authors of our own lives does not imply that narratives are not central to how we lead our lives. We think, talk and write *about* our lives as narratives, and our doing this can profoundly affect our lives as such, in our engagement with, and response to, our past lives, and in our practical reasoning about what to do in the future. Narrative thought and talk about our lives, or segments of our lives, can thus be embedded in, and profoundly influence, the lives that we lead, even though those lives are not themselves narratives.[56]

This sounds eminently sensible. Will it be acceptable to narrativists in general? Not in so far as many of them are literalists (along with MacIntyre, Strawson identifies Jerome Bruner, Daniel Dennett, Marya Schechtman, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur all as possible culprits).[57] Even setting this aside, will the non-literal version of the narrative outlook avoid the pitfalls of the narrativist view, when it comes to death? It ought to, if the allegation of those pitfalls was itself a result of presupposing the literalist reading of the narrative position; if one is not literally the author of one's own story, if the life of the self is not literally the product of one's own narration, then it is no great criticism to note that one cannot ever deliver on the final draft.

I welcome a less literal construal of the narrative endeavour, but I suspect that the upshot of opting for a non-literal narrativist view will be to remove oneself to the periphery of many narrativists' concerns and alleged insights, and that the confrontation with death will exacerbate this marginalisation. Narrative risks becoming a conceit upon a non-literal approach—something we can take or leave, as circumstance or temperament warrants. This plays into

[56] Ibid., 303–304.

[57] Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', op. cit. note 5, 435 ff. I would also add Owen Flanagan to the list. He writes: narrative is the 'essential genre of self-representation, and not merely ...one normative ideal among others. A self is just a kind of life that has a beginning, a middle, and an end that are connected in a traditional storylike manner' (Flanagan, op. cit. note 53, 148–149). Cf. D. Jopling, *Self-Knowledge and the Self* (London: Routledge, 2000), 48–49 for discussion of this passage and of essentialism in the narrative view.

the hands of the Strawsonian excoriation of narrativists on the grounds that they are 'really just talking about themselves ...saying [what] is true for them', but not true in a more strict sense.[58] Why? Because in abandoning the literalist reading one thereby abandons the descriptive thesis, according to which the narrative view reflects facts about the way persons are and, some will claim, *essentially* are.[59] All one is then left with is at best an ungrounded normativity—a set of claims about how one ought to view one's life—claims which have no obvious application beyond one's own case and are not grounded in general truths about our nature. Even in one's own case they do not represent the literal truth of the matter and may serve to obscure it: 'the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being'.[60] Nothing makes the dichotomy between narrative and reality more perspicuous than confrontation with one's death, which permanently resists the application of narrative thought. Deprived, therefore, even of the pretence of ever being able to apprehend of the whole of one's life as narratively complete, the value of the entire enterprise up until that point may be cast into doubt, or retroactively downgraded. In contrast, there is something heroic perhaps about the literalist narrativist who is able to forge ahead upon the assumption that we are all authors of our own story, and life as narrative is somehow literally true, and who may not be disabused of these beliefs up until the point of his death (at which point he may be too preoccupied to take note). But the non-literalist narrativist with her admission that narrative is something that we—or she, anyway—superimposes on reality leaves herself all the more exposed to the limitations of the enterprise, including if not especially the impossibility of closure and completeness.

## IX

Where does all this leave us? Death places a limit on the narrative view by exposing a significant point of discrepancy between conventional narrative and so-called lived narrative, both by casting doubt on the possibility and the value of a closed, complete life, and

[58] Strawson, ibid., 437.

[59] Cf., for instance, Flanagan's claims, note 57 above, and also MacIntyre, op. cit. note 40, ch. 15, and Schechtman, op. cit. note 53, ch. 5.

[60] Strawson, ibid., 447. Cf. Jopling, op. cit. note 57, 47–55.

by paradoxically demanding and being debarred from narrative closure. Just how serious this is, is a matter for further debate and may depend on whether or not narrativists are and ought to be committed to a literal construal of the narrative view of the self.[61] By the same turn, death remains a concern for Strawson's view as well, for two reasons. First, his explanation of how he over rides his episodic view of the self in order to be entitled to any attitude towards death of the self is unsatisfactory. This is not a serious problem for a death-conscious anti-narrativist who does not share Strawson's anti-diachronic stance. She will not be subject to the difficulties anti-diachronicity creates in entitling her to any attitude towards her own death. Though at the same time, she will not benefit from the circumstantial support that anti-diachronicity otherwise lends anti-narrativity. Second, the particular attitude towards death that Strawson displays, fear, is out of keeping with the anti-narrative view of life. The anti-narrativist who fears death but strives for an attitude that is rationally consistent with the rest of her view will be disturbed by this. If so, she could perhaps place her hopes in the possibility of an Epicurean transformation of attitude, which would render her view of death consistent with her anti-narrative stance. This remains at least a theoretical possibility, because fear of death is not built into the nature of the Strawsonian view of the self. This is in contrast with the aforementioned paradox, which may be intrinsic to the narrativist account, and which leaves the narrativist no option but to treat his death as playing a role that is simultaneously necessary and unfulfillable according to the dictates of a narrativist view of the self. To be fair to all parties, it is worth noting that even the Epicureans, who presented themselves as paradigms of consistent thinking about human life and death, have been accused of failing in this regard, specifically of overcoming fear of death at the cost of their professed humanity.[62] Death continues to create obstacles for those who are especially concerned to work out consistent views of the

[61] With respect to the paradox, Stephen Mulhall, for one, sees the need only for qualification rather than rejection or fundamental over-haul of the narrativist view, and is not in any case threatened by the implication of a paradox ('The Enigma of Individuality', op. cit. note 51)

[62] Cf. Nussbaum, op. cit. note 27, who claims their view ultimately promotes abhorrence of rather than indifference to mortality, and accuses the Epicureans of denying their humanity and wanting to live like gods.

life of a self. It may be the ultimate test case for measuring the resilience of those views. It may be the stumbling block on which all are bound to falter.[63]

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