

Mortality and the Other

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I.

Let us suppose that General Franco on his deathbed is disturbed by the noises of celebration and woe coming from the gathering crowds outside. His attendants are embarrassed by the mixed reaction of the populous and when asked about the noise they reply, with some hesitation, that it is the people. They have come to say goodbye. 'Goodbye?' asks Franco, 'but where are they going?' The failure illustrated in this apocryphal story is a real and familiar failure. We can see the same failure in the behaviour of Adolf Eichmann in his final moments. Having been tracked down, put on trial and found guilty for his role as the administrator of the Holocaust, Eichmann used his last words to announce that he did not believe in an afterlife and that he would not forget Argentina or Germany. He spoke as if he were delivering someone else's funeral oration.¹

I will take it that what went wrong in Eichmann's case was not just his failure to follow some appropriate procedure concerning how to die bravely or with dignity. There is something implausible about the very idea that we ought to live out our final moments by following an established routine such as acting like Seneca, Hume or, better still, Socrates, all of whom are known for their dignity at the end. What Eichmann failed to come to terms with was, in some difficult to elucidate sense, the *personal* nature of his mortality.² It was *his* execution and no-one else's.

I will take it that recognition or acceptance of this personal dimension would have required more than ensuring that the manner of his demise cohered in some way with, or

affirmed, his life. Mere consistency is not the issue here. Eichmann's final moments *were* consistent with his evasive life. Similarly, the tale about Franco depicts the Generalissimo with exaggerated consistency, still refusing to see that he must go, that he cannot cling on any longer. Both behave impeccably like themselves, living with blinkers on and remaining blinkered even at the end.

In the following attempt to cast some light upon the personal nature of mortality I will be concerned with two strands of philosophy, stemming from Heidegger and from Wittgenstein. Within both, an orientation towards death is taken to be an important part of living a favoured kind of life, a life that is in some sense *authentic* or, more minimally, *truthful*. Being truthful in this minimal sense involves facing up to what we are and living accordingly.

The two strands differ over their community-oriented (Wittgenstein) and individual-oriented (Heidegger) sympathies but they agree that a failure to face up to mortality is not only reprehensible but is a common, everyday fault. It is something that we fall into and should attempt to wrest ourselves from. We are not, without effort, able to live in accordance with an acceptance of our mortality. Our formal acceptance that all persons are mortal belies a deeply rooted evasiveness, an evasiveness that may be easier to picture, by appeal to cases such as Eichmann and Franco, than to analyse.

II.

From a Heideggerian point of view, what *goes wrong at the end* in such cases is what has always gone wrong. When we are at the end of our lives we are constitutively the same as we have always been. We remain, for example, projective, forward looking. Evasiveness in our final moments, at the point of demise, can be, at most, symptomatic of a broader failure that stretches along an entire lifetime. (Although this linear metaphor is one that Heidegger

uses cautiously: the end of a road does not annihilate it in the way that death annihilates our being.) For Heidegger this enduring failure is partly a matter of individuation, it is a failure to appreciate the unique relation that each individual has to their own death as something that sets them apart from all others. What we miss when we fail to come to terms with mortality is taken to be the following: an individual's death is *non-relational*, it severs their possibility of relating to others; it is *not to be outstripped*, i.e. it is not something that the individual can ever get beyond; it is *certain*; and in point of timing it is *indefinite*. (With this latter indefiniteness of the *when* helping us to conceal the certainty that our being really is all along being-towards-death.)³

The mortality of a person is taken to be *non-relational* both in the sense that nobody else can die my death, and in the sense that death removes the possibility of forming or holding any attitude whatsoever towards others. In this respect, it is quite unlike bereavement which remains a mode of *being-with*. 'The deceased has abandoned our *world* and left it behind. But *in terms of that world* those who remain can still be with him.'⁴ As such, a truthful orientation towards our own mortality must be different from the contemplation of the dead. The latter annihilates *their* possibility of relating to me but leaves me able to relate to them. (In grief, sorrow, remembrance, fondness, and so on.)

When Heidegger claims that 'The dying of the Other is not something which we experience in a genuine sense', we might wonder at the extremity of his formulations.⁵ When he goes on to remark that 'By its very essence, death is in every case mine', we might be led (and led by his own formulations) to think that his proprietorial metaphors go too far, that his concept of *ownmost* death concerns something akin to personal real estate.⁶ (As if death were some inalienable possessing that individuates in the sense of isolating and fencing off.) Uneasy as I am with his choice of metaphors, this is *not* a reading of Heidegger that I have any wish to endorse. Even if it picks up on a genuine tendency in his writings on mortality it

may not do justice to the complexity of his position.

I do however, have a concern that there is some failure of a weaker sort here, a failure to attend adequately to the mortality of the other. Consideration of the latter enters into Heidegger's own discussion only as a diversion, as a 'substitute theme' for the real task of bringing the entirety of our being into view.⁷ That is to say, while he does set out a personal and individual relation to our mortality, he does so without sufficient consideration of the positive, illuminating, features of our attitude towards the mortality of others. Nor does his approach allow for the possibility that the significance of our mortality *for others* might itself enter into the ontological significance of our own death *for ourselves*. In which case there is an important sense in which non-relationality would be compromised.

That is to say, what concerns me about Heidegger's account is not anything that he explicitly commits to. He does not, for example, claim that our attitude towards the death of the other must be (in his terms) *inauthentic*. What is troubling, rather, is the way that the mortality of the other is explored *only* in relation to our own potential for inauthentic being. Beyond this negative role, concern for the mortality of the other drops out of view.

III.

Whatever else we may say is involved in a *truthful* orientation towards the mortality of a person, it should minimally involve a recognition of their *uniqueness*. Drawing upon an organic terminology that is both metaphorical and smacks strongly of Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt, I want to say that this uniqueness is always bound up with their *rootedness* in a unique past.⁸ (And this is *not* something that is at odds with Heidegger for whom 'Dasein is its past'.)⁹ This is something that we can make sense of best by attending to the phenomenon of love. I do not want to go home to someone who is qualitatively identical to the person I said goodbye to this morning, I want to go home to the unique individual who

has my partner's causal history and none other. When it comes to the recognition of uniqueness, love (of the right sort) is exemplary.

More specifically, given the assumption that there *is* something wrong with our default orientation towards mortality, I want to suggest that a movement into a more truthful attitude will involve thinking about ourselves in a way which is analogous to, *and draws from* our experience of, coming to terms with the mortality of those others that we love. This is a point which I propose to develop in broadly Wittgensteinian terms.

In the above, readers may already detect the influence of Raimond Gaita and what follows will draw upon work by David Cockburn and Iris Murdoch (although Murdoch is not a Wittgensteinian but more of a fellow-traveller who shares similar ideas about the other and about moral discourse).¹⁰ The central claim that I will build upon is drawn Wittgenstein's discussion of the uses of 'I' in the *Blue Book*. Wittgenstein points out that there are uses of 'I' as an object and of 'I' as a subject and that everyday uses of 'I' in pain contexts are (somewhat deceptively) of the latter sort. That is to say, they don't identify some definite, unique bearer of a pain-thing, but rather they are learned as substitutes for pain behaviour. 'To say "I have pain" is no more a statement *about* a particular person than moaning is.'¹¹

This may seem to be rather an obscure and even *intra*-Wittgensteinian, point, but the following thought experiment may clarify it's relevance. Suppose that I look into a wood and I see a young girl in a red hood being attacked by a wolf. I believe that the unfortunate girl is my granddaughter. My concern about her pain and suffering is influenced by this belief about precisely *who* she happens to be. When, in the course of the struggle, her hood falls down and I see that the victim is some other, unknown girl, perhaps on her way to some other unknown grandmother, I may remain concerned, but in a different and somewhat diminished way. I may be relieved and perhaps also feel somewhat guilty about being relieved.

Suppose that I now go back into my woodland cabin and, in a state of distraction, I

burn my hand on the stove. My concern about my burned hand will not be diminished if I suddenly realise that I am mistaken in some way about my own identity. The pain will be just as real, and my concern to diminish it will be just the same if I find out that I am, for instance, be a misinformed amnesiac. *The important point here is that my concern about the pain in my own case is not contingent upon personal identification in the same way that my concern about the pain of the girl in the red hood is dependent upon such personal identification.*

David Cockburn extends this claim about blindness to identity by suggesting that the same asymmetry can be found in our thought about our own mortality.¹² We are concerned about our own finitude *irrespective* of who we happen to be, but our concern about the mortality of others is identification-dependent. Ordinarily, I will jump out of the way of a juggernaut irrespective of my personal biography. But given that I am a rather commonplace person and not at all heroic my willingness to jump in front of a juggernaut to save another person will depend upon *just who* I believe them to be.

If Cockburn's point is right (and below I will suggest that it stands in need of some qualification) then we can say the following: given that a truthful attitude towards a person is one that has regard to their uniqueness, i.e. one that recognises that they have a unique past, it seems that our default everyday attitude towards the mortality of certain others provides our best model for a truthful orientation towards the mortality of anyone (including myself). One qualification that may be needed here is that it is not our attitude towards others in general that is exemplary, but only our attitude towards those others that we love and strongly care for.¹³

An advantage of this approach is that it saves an important feature of a commonsense view that Heidegger sets aside, the view that bereavement is an epistemically privileged occasion on which we can, more than at any other time, come to grips with our own mortality

through our response to the mortality of others. (And this is an altogether more important matter than coming to grips with any experience of *what it is like* to face immanent death.) In bereavement, in the loss of someone close, our attitude towards our own mortality may be at its most truthful. Although this truthfulness may subsequently be lost as we work our way through the loss and rejoin the ranks of complacent disregard for mortality. Any reader of the novels of Iris Murdoch will be familiar with numerous depictions of just this process of return.¹⁴

Against such a claim, we might consider Heidegger's objection to the effect that even when we are confronted with a corpse, we relate to it as something that is unalive and lacking. That is to say, we take up a particular attitude which involves *being-with*, an attitude which our own death will make unavailable. This Heideggerian objection is not something that needs to be denied but rather qualified. Bereavement does mixe *being-with* and an acceptance that there is nobody there to be with. It is not comprehensively disclosive nor even uniquely disclosive of mortality in every respect, but disclosive only in some respects and only to a limited extent. As such, it could not serve to bring the *entirety* of our being into view. (And this is the task that Heidegger has in mind.)

However, we need not expect more than the limited and partial insight that such an experience may allow us to form. That the insight we are capable of gaining is limited does not indicate that there is any more direct, certain or unlimited path of the sort that Heidegger is looking for. Deliberation about mortality by any route may not take us all the way. But to turn away from the informativeness of bereavement and demand a great deal more than it allows is to be too demanding.

IV.

My case so far has been that (i) coming to grips with the personal nature of mortality

requires a recognition of our personal uniqueness; and (ii) the exemplary form of recognizing uniqueness is attention to the mortality of those others that we love and care for most. The former claim is shared by both positions under consideration. The latter is a more Wittgensteinian point which is in tension with Heidegger's way of orienting the readers attention.

Here, it should perhaps be noted that Heidegger and Wittgenstein share something else in common: a suspicion about normativity as opposed to description. While I have drawn upon Wittgensteinian sources, I do not favour *leaving everything as it is* but, along with Iris Murdoch, I favour a revision in our everyday ways of thinking. I will accept that what I have outlined has a normative dimension that may be specified as follows: *we would do well to shift the way that we think about our own mortality in order to bring it closer into line with our thought about the mortality of those others that we care for most.*

Having said this much, some qualification is in order. I have tried to set up Cockburn's extension of Wittgenstein's position on pain in such a way that it is plausible to move from a claim about our use of pain language to a claim about our attitude towards mortality. This is something which might be subject to various challenges. But even if the move is allowed, what makes my appeal to Cockburn tentative is the following consideration: when it is claimed that our concern about our own pain tends to be self-blind we may ask *well is it really?*

I will conclude by considering two objections to Cockburn that both proceed along these lines. Firstly, it might be suggested that once we move away from dubious thought-experiments concerning little red riding hood and look instead at lived experience we will no such tendency towards self-blindness when it comes to suffering and mortality. Against this, I want to cite a non-trivial example drawn from Viktor Frankl's memoir of life in a concentration camp. On two separate occasions Frankl encountered prisoners who were

contemplating suicide. He was able to dissuade them from this course of action only by drawing attention to considerations that, in the midst of their suffering, they had lost sight of, 'for the one it was his child whom he adored and who was waiting for him in a foreign country. For the other it was a thing, not a person. This man was a scientist and had written a series of books which still needed to be finished. His work could not be done by anyone else, any more than another person could ever take the place of the father in his child's affections'.

What Frankl tried to reawaken was a sense of their uniqueness and its connection to their mortality. 'When the impossibility of replacing a person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude'.¹⁵ What is important here is not, of course, Frankl's veracity. Biography is fraught with the dangers of one-sided memory and even misrepresentation. Rather, what matters here is a certain kind of reflection upon the efforts that Frankl depicts, the attempt to get the men to attend in a particular way. We may say *yes, this is a good and truthful way of looking at matters*, this is a *more relational* way of thinking of oneself, and of projecting a future on this basis. The projection in Frankl *is* about the future but it is not exclusively about the future. It involves attending to the historicity of the individual and a recognition of their shared past with others who are cherished and who could be harmed as a consequence of their death. Here, a non-trivial example flags up the same problem of suffering inducing a certain kind of blindness to the historicity of the individual.

A second, and perhaps more telling, objection involves pointing out that our attitude towards our own suffering and mortality *do not always* involve a default self-blindness that stands in need of being combated. Cockburn's position runs the risk of ignoring a large class of pains which do not annihilate or conceal our personal sense of dignity, integrity or identity but which are experienced precisely *as* a threat to them. Let us revert again to a thought experiment and imagine that Napoleon is ritually humiliated in a more or less painful but not

life-threatening manner after Waterloo, thrashed perhaps by Wellington and his officers. Would his concern about the associated pain not be thoroughly dependent upon his sense that pain *of this sort inflicted in just this way* was beneath his dignity precisely because of who he was? Consideration of at least some pains are in no way susceptible to self-blindness but are instead understood in relation to a narrative about the self and the way in which this narrative is corrupted or made to end badly by a debasing mode of suffering

Here, I want to say that *yes, sometimes circumstances are like this*, and the whole point of my argument is that they ought to be like this the rest of the time. But sometimes this is lost sight of. Our ordinary, everyday encounters with pain and fears concerning our own finitude are often not sufficiently contextualised by any narrative at all. By contrast, our concern for the sufferings and the mortality of those we love is *characteristically* bound up with our past-dependent appreciation of just who they are. In this respect, attention towards the other is characteristically more appreciative of their unique irreplaceable, individuality.

¹ Gaita (1991), 278 and 305-11.

² Gaita (1991), 308.

³ Heidegger (1962), 302 [258]. The page number for the later German editions is given in brackets.

⁴ Heidegger (1962), 282 [238].

⁵ Heidegger (1962), 282 [239].

⁶ Heidegger (1962), 284 [240].

⁷ For the death of the other as a 'substitute theme' see Heidegger (1962), 281 [238]; 283 [239]; 284 [240].

⁸ This way of thinking about the individuation of persons stems from Hannah Arendt, (1958) 181), but here I do not propose to adopt her Socratic metaphor of *natalità* as a counterpoint to Heidegger's direction of the readers attention towards mortality.

⁹ Heidegger (1962), 41 [20].

¹⁰ Murdoch (2001). I have drawn upon her concept of 'attention' and her deliberation about mortality.

¹¹ Wittgenstein (1975), 67.

¹² Cockburn (1990), 164-168; Cockburn (1997), 333-334.

¹³ Here I have in mind the view that 'only the existence of those we love is fully realized', Weil (1952), 56.

¹⁴ For an account of Murdoch on the importance of attending to mortality and the other see Milligan (2007).

¹⁵ Frankl (1964) 79-80.

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