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The Last Chapter in the Story: A Place for Aristotle's Eudaemonia in the Lives of the Terminally Ill

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Abstract

The 'deficiency model' of aging has often been criticized for its lack of attention to the individual patient's narrative understanding of his own life. However, such narrative conceptions tend to focus on a generic adult person, situated in specific on-going projects and relationships, moving toward a more or less clear conception of the future. What interest me, on the other hand, are those individuals who have become aware of their own death as imminent, and who therefore strive to compose the 'last chapter' of their life story. Imminence is not to be taken in chronological or clinical terms, but as revealing an attitude to oneself and one's own life. The composition of the last chapter requires recollecting and reappraising the events of one's life in an effort to make sense of the life as a whole. I propose revising the ancient Greek word eudaemonia to capture this sense of achieving an integrated meaning to one's life.

Keywords:

Narrative, Old Age, Last Chapter, Eudaemonia, Self-Deception

The Last Chapter in the Story: A Place for Aristotle's

Eudaemonia in the Lives of the Terminally Ill

The goals of medicine in the face of biological aging should be, above all, to target those physical and mental conditions that tend to rob old age of human meaning and social significance. Medicine cannot create that meaning, which must come from individual reflection and social policy and practices. (Callahan 1994 p. 41)

These are the words of Daniel Callahan. In this article, I am less interested in Callahan's proposed changes to social policy and practice, and more in the 'individual reflection' mentioned above; especially that type of reflection peculiar to the final stages of life. But understanding individual reflection properly will require a discussion of human meaning and social significance, and the role of such significance in the dying patient's reflection.

Despite their enormous diversity of personalities and backgrounds, the elderly are all too often united in discussions about healthcare policy into a single class on the basis of biological ageing, sometimes called the 'deficiency model' (Schmid, 1991). Certain physiological functions decline in a given individual in predictable ways, and it will require resources to care, treat, and manage the decline as best as possible. Old age is a mirror image of infancy because of the return to physical vulnerability and dependency, and in some cases, to the same kind of incompetence.

Such a classification, as heretofore described, is certainly understandable for a healthcare policy analyst or manager. In basing the classification on deficiency; however, I submit that the class implicitly includes other individuals with long-term deficiencies such as children and the handicapped. But the elderly are importantly different from these two other classes because they are at the end of their lives. Even if they are not able-bodied now, most of them have been in the past; but more than just able-bodied, they have lived rich lives full of projects and relationships. Obviously, any decent care of the elderly requires some interest in their biographies. However, such an interest is required for all patients whatever their age or prognosis. With the elderly, the individual's location in life, the fact that they are looking back on their biography, is just as important as the content of the biography. I want to suggest that this location, last chapter of the story," (Brody 2003 p. 254), is the source of the peculiar vulnerability to humiliation suffered by the elderly; especially in institutional healthcare.

In explaining this, I shall make use of the ancient Greek concept of eudaemonia, which is all too often mistranslated as happiness. This elderly person is not just at the end of life, but at the end of his life, and he is therefore concerned to write the last chapter of the story of his life. As any book-reader knows, the last chapter is not merely the final series of events, but it wraps up the story, and may do so more or less satisfactorily. No matter how enjoyable the story might have been to read through chapter by chapter, it is possible to spoil a book by a bad ending. It is the last chapter, and the effort to write it, that best characterizes the elderly.

What do I mean by 'elderly', since of course "you're only as old as you feel"? The concept is necessarily vague, and has little to do with chronological age or medical prognosis: there is always room for hope, however slim, and there is always room for defiant self-deception. Instead, I have in mind those people who are aware at a suitably deep level that allows for no further self-deception that the end is nigh, and who are preparing themselves for it bravely and responsibly. How nigh is again impossible to define; but there will be a moment where the person realizes that it is simply time to start preparing for the inevitable. Such preparations are certainly compatible with continuing delight in one's day-to-day living, and with looking forward to events in the weeks and months to come; there need be no bitterness or defeatism in the preparations. This paper will explore the nature of such preparations, phrased in terms of writing the final chapter and seeking eudaemonia. I shall not be getting into thorny questions of when to withdraw treatment or when to make strenuous efforts to prolong life, although what I say will have clear implications for such a debate.

EUDAEMONIA

The concept of eudaemonia does not seem to have much currency in medical ethics today, let alone in modern philosophy. There is an English word 'happiness' into which the Greek word is widely translated, which has played a key role in the development of utilitarianism and which retains pride of place in the Declaration of Independence. But happiness is too thin and too vague to suffice as a translation, and it has unwelcome connotations of subjectivity, as can be seen in the vapid response: "Whatever makes you happy, dear."

Sometimes eudaemonia is translated as 'flourishing', which is an improvement because it has a wider temporal scope, a greater engagement with objective facts about the quality of one's life, and a greater complexity than mere happiness (<http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/aristotle-ethics>). Nevertheless, it remains too limited to suffice as a full translation because it remains essentially occurrent. I am flourishing now, but there is no necessary reference to whether my life as a whole was flourishing. My present flourishing is compatible with an unexpected reversal of fortune, or with the discovery of facts that would radically undermine the value of my present commitments. It is this reference to one's life as a whole that is a key to understanding eudaemonia. Insofar as the future remains open, it is hard to tell how worthwhile the life as a whole will be. As such, eudaemonia is something that can only be acquired and observed at the end of a life, once the story has been written and all the pieces are in place. (Strictly speaking, a person's eudaemonia does not end entirely with his death. One's achievement as a parent, for example part of one's eudaemonia will be partly revealed by the behavior of one's offspring after one's death.)

A closer translation at this point might be 'reputation', but on its own that is too pragmatic. A reputation is something that I seek to acquire as a means to doing other things, such as business. Eudaemonia cannot be so instrumental since the dead person

does not stand to benefit at all. But 'reputation' is partly correct in allowing the survival of the reputation beyond the death of its owner.

I think the best translation is simply 'good life story'. It is the story that others will tell about me after I have gone, a story that accurately captures me as a person, as well as the projects and relationships to which I contributed and which partly constituted me as a person. It is a story with familiar requirements of coherence and integrity, and it is a story with clear chapters; the one emerging out of the preceding one, and leading toward a final chapter which wraps the story up satisfactorily.

This narrative conception of life is hardly new. What is often neglected in narratives discussions, however, are the elderly person's specific location in the story and his relation to that story. I'm interested in that person's experience of looking back over his life, and in his efforts to make sense of it by writing the final chapter.

NARRATIVE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The patient's narrative understanding of his illness, i.e. the way that the illness is experienced within the context of his on-going life, is now widely recognized as important to medical ethics (Charon & Montello 2002; Nelson, 1997). Let me recap something of the narratives critique of the conception of the self-presupposed by most debates in medical ethics. Liberalism tends to conceive all competent adults as a single class, and in many ways this is a good thing. A competent 98-year-old has exactly the same right to vote, marry and buy property as an 18-year-old; and in both cases it will be up to the state to justify any restrictions on such a right. As such, it doesn't matter, in the narrow sense that it is not the state's business to ask, who or what the person is. Strictly speaking, the person's biographical history, as well as his present commitments and plans for the future, are irrelevant to the individual rights which characterize his relations with the state, and by extension, with any large institution (such as healthcare facilities) regulated by the state.

As has now been recognized by many, the combination of the thin liberal account and physiological deficiency model cannot adequately account for the more complicated lives of real people. There is no room for the individual's personal narrative as a source of integrity and identity as structuring the elderly patient's point of view on the world; including his point of view on any care and treatment he is being offered. Such integrity and identity also grounds the particular kind of dignity possessed by the elderly (in the sense of their particular vulnerability to humiliation), above and beyond the general dignity ascribed by liberalism to all human beings.

The complicated lives of real people are lived in medias res (in the midst of things); they essentially find themselves in certain on-going narratively-structured projects and relationships, on their way from their past toward their conception of the future. Such projects and relationships will themselves derive part of their determinate meaning from the meta-narrative structures that define certain institutions and communities. So a

marriage between two people will best be conceived in terms of a narrative through time, and that narrative will itself make necessary reference to the narrative of marital traditions in that community.

The past and the future in question provide much of the meaning to the individual's present options, dilemmas and choices. Most 'narratives' accounts, however, focus on the lives of generic adults, where the individual still has a future. There has been comparatively little discussion of how the deep awareness of inevitable death, for those who are so aware of it, radically changes one's attitude toward one's life: both the life experienced in the present and the life remembered from the past.

The last chapter is about preparing for death; certainly about putting one's affairs in order, making a will, expressing gratitude and apologies, and saying goodbye. But the last chapter is also about recapitulating the events of one's life, and striving to make sense of them. I submit, this is much more than just recalling the event, and, say, taking pleasure in the recollection: it is more to do with trying to fit it into the life story by making use of the more objective perspective available at the end of the story.

Consider the following narrative as an example. Let's say I met my future wife on a summer's day at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in 1980. I then married her in 1985, and we both fondly remembered the first meeting in Edinburgh. Then things went wrong. I divorced her in 1990 and cursed that day in Edinburgh. Five years after the divorce, I come to think that we both tried our best to make the marriage work, but it was simply not to be. There were some good times and my memory of the Edinburgh meeting might now be described as bittersweet.

Now throughout the period from 1980 to 1995, the facts of the matter have not changed, but the significance has. Facts can be corroborated: I can check the color of her dress from a photograph I still have, I can check the title of the performance we saw on a particular date by looking through archives, and I can therefore correct my memory. In other words, my memories of the facts of an event are answerable to the truth. The precise significance of an event, on the other hand, will depend on my precise location in my life's journey, and on the context of that location, since I will be looking at the event from that location. 'Location' has a broad scope to include all my projects, relationships, concerns of that moment, as well as the route by which I got to this location. Perhaps, in order to see the event in a bittersweet hue, I already had to go through the 'sweet' and the 'bitter' phases.

There is no correct understanding of the significance in the sense that there can be a correct understanding of the facts. Within my life, the only significance the events can have is the significance they do have for me. In saying this I quickly have to guard against four misunderstandings. First, even if the only relevant significance is the significance-for-me, this does not mean that such significance is subjective; I discover the significance, and cannot make events signify anything I want (although there is some room for giving or withholding the benefit of the doubt). Second, even if the only

relevant significance is the significance-for-me, this does not mean that I am impervious to persuasion by others, to accounts of conflicting significance offered to me by others, and to changes in the significance emerging from my own reflection on what happened. Third, although there is no absolutely objective significance, my understanding of the significance of the event is still partly constrained by the facts of what happened, by general rules of coherence and consistency with the rest of my memories; and by general rules of human behavior. Within such constraints, however, there will remain wide room for a shifting significance of the same event. Fourth and finally, it may seem that if the significance can shift, and there is no absolute significance, then the significance is arbitrary: that it doesn't really matter what the event signifies, since the significance might shift by the next year. This is misguided because it matters to the individual whose memories they are, and there is nothing arbitrary about the event as experienced in recollection.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE LAST CHAPTER

This business of shifting significance obviously goes on throughout one's life. But, what is distinctive about the last chapter in the story is that many such events can be re-evaluated at once, such that the recollected significance of one event will affect the recollected significance of another as they come to fit into the big picture. It is worth stressing that such a big picture could be positive or negative in tone: I could recall an event and forgive my enemy, or I could send him back to hell with renewed vigor. There is no necessary reason why the deep awareness of one's own death should inspire humility and charity over smugness and Schadenfreude (malicious satisfaction received from the misfortune of others).

Writing the last chapter therefore involves rewriting the chapters before it. This sounds dangerously like self-serving rationalizations to hide a guilty conscience, but it need not be. I will address this danger below. Instead, it can be compared to the healthy practice of a novelist revising the body of his book in the light of his knowledge of the whole, a knowledge he could only glean as he nears the end. The novelist may have a rough idea of the plot when he starts out, but inevitably things will turn out differently as a result of the sheer momentum of partly-independent characters and events. Then, he will go back and revise the earlier chapters to give a better structure to the whole. Similarly, the reader's experience of earlier chapters will be subtly altered by completing the book. In the crudest detective novels, for example, certain events or utterances, at the time apparently benign, will come to assume monstrous significance when the murderer's identity is revealed at the end, to which the typical response is "of course, I should have seen that."

There is nothing more frustrating than getting absorbed in a book and then finding the final pages missing. The completion of the story has a much greater importance than merely confirming the reader's hope that the protagonists will live happily ever after. Instead, it gives a meaning to the whole story, making it greater than the sum of its parts. Similarly, if the final pages are intact, but the conclusion disappoints, we speak of

the end 'spoiling' the story. The text on the pages comprising the bulk of the book has not changed, of course, and still holds the same capacity to delight the reader reading it for the first time. But the ending spoils the whole, and affects the memories I retain of the book as an entirety.

Perhaps this discussion is too metaphorical, so let me come back to a specific example of a dying person. Ronald Dworkin considers the subtle difference between a dying patient holding on until a particular event and holding on for that event. The former attitude is merely temporal, and involves enduring in one's struggle with deteriorating body. The latter attitude confirms "the critical importance of the values it identifies to the patient's sense of his own integrity, to the special character of his life." If I have always been attached to my family and to family events, for example, there will be a special urgency in being kept alive long enough to learn of the birth of a healthy grandchild. Conceiving of such an event as "salient for death," says Dworkin, confirms the importance of all such events in the person's life (Dworkin 1993 p. 212). Of course the person had experiences of family life that were enjoyed, appreciated and recollected in their own right. But it is this last wish which ties together all the individual experiences into a satisfying ending of the story of a particular person, a person partly defined by the long-standing value that his family played in his life. The longing to hear the news of the healthy grandchild naturally emerges from the recollection and reappraisal of all the events in the person's relationships with his family.

THE RISK OF SELF-DECEPTION

It could be objected that my account of the final chapter leaves too much room for self-delusion. A classic example might be King Lear's mistaken confidence that his daughters Goneril and Regan loved him as much as they said they did. In Lear's case, his self-delusion certainly did exacerbate his tragedy. Similarly, if I choose to forgive my ex-wife as part of the composition of my final chapter, this could also be self-delusional in that it might not be my place at all to forgive her; instead, maybe it is I who should make special efforts to seek her out and beg her forgiveness. However accurate to the facts (I am assuming that both examples can plausibly allow for these interpretations) and coherent my final story might be (the four qualifications I listed above), it could be resting on big lies at its core.

I have three responses to this worry. The first involves a reiteration of my point about the absence of any absolute significance. When considering the possibility of self-deception during the composition of the last chapter, it is important to remember that the past events are no longer directly accessible. Again, there may be facts of the matter to which any account will be answerable; but two people can find incompatible significances in a single fact without the implication that at least one of them is misremembering the fact. Such a conception of significance then means that any accusation of self-deception will be necessarily embodied; that is, made by one specific person to another specific person within a specific context. The accuser will compare his understanding of the fact with his understanding of the other's understanding of the

fact. Nothing in what I have said implies that the composition of the final chapter is impenetrable to challenge by relevantly knowledgeable others. The accuser may be able to explain to the accused why his account is self-deceiving; but there is no guarantee that such efforts will succeed, even when the accused is as open-minded and good-willed as the accuser could wish.

Second, it is worth remembering that the intuitive badness of self-delusion is essentially forward-looking, as much as one's identification with the projects and commitments that give one's on-going life meaning. Within my own perspective on my life, I can be concerned for the truth because such concern will help me to avoid disappointment later on. If, however, there is to be no 'later on', then there will be no consequences of 'getting it wrong' in the sense of which self-delusion is normally presented as a danger. Sometimes, during the composition of the last chapter, I may be genuinely unsure about the significance of an event; in which case I may have to 'plump' for a given interpretation and see it through: such plumping may be vulnerable to accusations of self-deception. (I borrow the term from Simon Blackburn (1996), who uses it in a different but not unrelated discussion.)

Third and finally, there is an important sense in which I can say: so what if he is self-deceiving himself in the composition of the last chapter? Indeed, for many people a certain amount of self-deception is surely essential to writing the final chapter with any degree of optimism that one's life has amounted to anything. After all, this is the result of all one's labors: this undignified decline of body and mind, the abandonment of family and the death of friends, and the sheer corrosive boredom and loneliness of long-term geriatric care. This would be bad enough in the middle of a life; it is appalling at the end of one. Self-deception in the sense that interests me is compatible with a clear-eyed effort to do justice to the people in one's past relationships.

CONCLUSION

The mere composition of a story, however, does not seem to provide the depth and richness and the importance that a person's life can have for that person. After all, in some contexts; a story is merely a story, a bloodless distraction from real life. Whereas, my focus has been very much on the real life in the importation of the term, eudaemonia. One advantage of this term over 'narrative', again, is that the latter can be applied essentially to any period in one's life. Eudaemonia is something that has to be achieved at the end of a life, when there is no further possibility for adversity that might undermine the holistic meaning of the life. The second advantage of the Greek concept is revealed by attending to the translation 'flourishing'. For in trying to achieve eudaemonia in the final stage of my life, I am not merely creating a coherent story for others, I am trying to flourish in the process of doing so. This requires more than the mere creation of the story; it also requires an intimate identification with the story, a blurring of the distinction between me and my story, and a final drive to live the story in full awareness of its partly-discovered and partly-assembled meaning. Above all, eudaemonia is about meaningfulness: what did this person's life mean? Who was he?

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