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The Shortness of Life, Redux

Most of humankind, Paulinus, complains about the spitefulness of Nature, on grounds that we're born for a short life span, and that these moments of time that have been given to us dart away so quickly, so swiftly, that only a few escape this pattern: Life deserts us when we're just getting ready for life.

—SENECA, OPENING WORDS OF *ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE*[1]

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA (Seneca the Younger: circa 4BC–CE65) wrote a beautiful and appropriately brief book called *On the Shortness of Life*. The book you are now reading is in part intended to provide a kind of updating of that classic work, which was really one of the first self-help books.[2]

Seneca was the tutor of the young Nero, who would become Emperor of Rome. In fact, Seneca committed suicide to evade being subject to interrogation over a plot to kill Nero (the so-called Pisonian conspiracy). It was a rather gruesome death. After first slitting his wrists and legs, he failed to properly

bleed out. He then took hemlock, but by then his circulation had been reduced, so that failed too. So, he was placed in a warm bath to speed up his circulation.[3] Being entangled with the powerful, Seneca got himself mixed up in various other intrigues: he was exiled, supposedly for having slept with the "Mad Emperor" Caligula's sister (given the gossip about him, Caligula may have been jealous!).

On the Shortness of Life was written around 55 CE. Intrigue was indeed rather commonplace for major public figures then, as it remains, and probably played a role in the writing of the book. Though directed at his father-in-law, Paulinus, purportedly in a bid to have him retire from public life (where he was charged with the administration of Rome's grain supply as *praefectus annonae*), it seems Paulinus was already on the way out (in favor of Agrippina's preferred chap, Faenius Rufus), and the book was more of a face-saving exercise so he could exit without shame. Since it contains many negative remarks about life in the upper echelons of Rome, the book was unlikely to have done Seneca any favors there.

"Seneca" can be translated into English as "old man." Ironic, given his book's title, but also quite apt, since our time, for Seneca, should be viewed as the most valuable commodity there is: the most precious substance in the universe, far transcending material goods. This is certainly not just a case of "time is money": time is infinitely more precious than money, which is fungible and reusable. Of course, time is a peculiar substance, and quite probably no kind of substance at all in the usual sense: we can't see it, or smell it, or hear it. We have no special sense organ for time. We only see processes *in* time, and these processes are sometimes, unfortunately, associated

with our aging: the motions of celestial bodies marking out the years, clocks ticking, calendars being turned over, pages in diaries being filled up, and so on.

The sad thing about time, or at least our journey through it, is, of course, that it is seemingly taking place down a one-way street. We can't re-experience old events directly. Only by accessing memories. Hence, we have a key element of its preciousness: every event is *unique*, never to be repeated. As another Roman writer, the Epicurean philosopher Lucretius, puts it in *On the Nature of Things*, "Presently the present will have gone, never to be recalled."[4] If we adopt an economics of value-in-scarcity, then we can see why time is so valuable. One should use this resource most wisely, counsels Seneca, not wasting any of it on frivolous pursuits.[5] And yet that is exactly what most people do: complaining about not having enough time on Earth while squandering it. We should not be bitter at nature, at the universe, for this sorry state of affairs, but at ourselves. We should rather be thankful for what time we have been given. Hence Seneca's view defended in *On the Shortness of Life* that "[i]t's not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it."[6]

I'm sure Seneca would be horrified to see how so many people spend so much of it on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media! Years of a "Millennial's" or "Zoomer's" lifespan are spent idling on these platforms, concerned more with how they appear than how they *are*, never giving themselves space to properly think—true even of a good deal of my academic colleagues, I might add! I share Seneca's horror at the great wastage of time—I ditched all social media for this reason, and felt better almost immediately. (Chapter 4 will deal with

some of the reasons *why* we have a tendency to waste our time, and then chapter 5 will try and provide some means for combatting it.)

In Seneca's day, the average life expectancy was a mere forty years. Life really was short back then. Though our lifespan, at least in developed Western countries, has doubled, it is still a relatively short life. Looking back at the prolific nature of some short lives way back when, you wouldn't think we've only relatively recently doubled average lifespans. Seneca's message still strikes forcefully home, and I will refer back often to his small book, which still manages to encapsulate mountains of words (and songs!) that came after him.

Yet, with apologies to Seneca, life is still too damn short: I want more, and so, probably, do you, at least if the many supposedly life-extending supplements are anything to go by. Rather than extending life, this book, like Seneca's (whatever its initial motivation might have been), is principally about using your most precious resource, time, wisely and more effectively—and also more consciously, with an awareness of how extraordinary it is that you have any time at all. I want to take as little as possible from you in this book. Time is surely the most curious and ill-understood element in the universe, second only to (and probably profoundly connected to) the mystery of why anything exists at all. Time enables me to return to this same computer in the same room to type more words. It is a superbly efficient way to recycle materials, and indeed my view of time's role in the universe is based on this principle of efficiency (the universe is the great optimizer) and *doing the most with the least*, much as Seneca suggested we ought to do with time itself.

Our lives are of course temporal entities. We might think that the following simple equation holds true: Time = Life. Our life is clearly bookended by times, marking our birth and death. Though as the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel rightly noted, birth is essentially a death-sentence:

> The nature of finite things as such is to have the seed of passing away as their essential being: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death.[7]

The mind has its own kind of event horizon too. Just as you are limited by the span of time within which you exist, so you have limited resources at any one, single time within that already limited timespan. Only a small snapshot of reality can be captured by your mind in a moment, lasting roughly a few milliseconds to a few seconds or so. This is your immediate awareness, or what the great psychologist and philosopher William James called "the specious present."[8] This is reality for you. It is your *Now*. Philosophers get all excited about this, because we clearly have to infer the rest of the universe, including the past and future, an external world, and other minds, from this tiny window of present experience. The Austrian musicologist Viktor Zuckerkandl puts it rather well:

> What a precarious situation, balancing on the hairline of the present, which, itself evaporating into immeasurability, separates two oceans of non-being.[9]

Indeed, there are then two kinds of nonbeing we find ourselves wedged between: the past and future that form the boundary of our present and also the prenatal and postdeath nonbeing that

form those above-mentioned bookends marking the boundary of our lives (at least, it is nonbeing as far as *we* are concerned).

But according to Seneca, the equation "Time = Life" is not quite right. Simply existing (or enduring) time is not the same as living: "all the rest of existence is not life, but merely time."[10] The Latin word for life, *vitae*, brings up this difference. Life is vital. As he writes,

> There's no reason to think someone's lived long, on account of their grey hair and wrinkles. That person only existed, not lived, a long time. Would you say that a man has done much voyaging, if, as soon as he left port, a violent storm seized him and, with furious blasts of wind arising from every direction, drove him in a circle over the same route? He didn't do much journeying, he was only much tossed around.[11]

Long or short, we surely want a journey. Adding up the time actually lived—really *lived*—we often have a short life indeed, but only because so much time was spent unlived, often in a kind of limbo, waiting for life to happen to us (a topic we return to in chapter 6, when we consider the notion of "the provisional life"). Rather than making life happen, we choose to view through our tiny window of presentness quite unworthy contents.

To have a good journey, we often need a good map. Seneca wanted to provide such a map. A way of not going off course. A way to avoid too many distractions and wrong turns. Seneca was a classic example of a Stoic philosopher who often wrote guides to *good living*. We now think of "stoic" as a term referring to a person who suffers the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune with dignity and equanimity—incidentally, the word

"stoic" itself simply comes from the Greek word for porch (*stoa*) under which these philosophers did their philosophizing. The Stoics were a group of philosophers largely associated with such a view of life, but their views are far wider and provided a fairly complete worldview, covering fields as far apart as politics and physics.

I don't wish to make this a book on Stoicism, which seems to have become something of a fad of late, most likely as a corrective to the anxiety and narcissism epidemic seemingly coursing through society, but also, no doubt, as a nontoxic corrective to the attacks on so-called toxic masculinity. But I do briefly want to switch to another, rather more famous Greek philosopher, Epicurus, who was also concerned with matters of life and death—though more so with easing anxiety over the shortness of life, rather than debating whether it really is all that short or how to fill it up.

Death anxiety is of course very common—I have it in spades.[12] As Jean-Jacques Rousseau once put it,

> He who pretends to look on death without fear lies. All men are afraid of dying, this is the great law of sentient beings, without which the entire human species would soon be destroyed.[13]

Yet Epicurus famously said, "Death is nothing to us." Why? Because of a simple argument: "When we exist, death is not; and when death exists, we are not."[14] Now, of course, a dead person will not suffer. Indeed, the phrase "dead person" might be viewed as an oxymoron: a person must be alive and kicking to be a person. Being dead is not really a *state* of a person in the sense of your home being tidy. But what about the process of

going from *living* to *dying* to *dead*? Here one is losing the property of being alive. That might be something we don't wish to lose, even though once lost there is no self left to care about it!

Lucretius, the Epicurean philosopher mentioned above, presented another better-known version of this argument against death terror, based on a symmetry between the two states of nonbeing (prenatal and postmortem) mentioned above:

> Look back at the time before one's birth. In this way, Nature holds before our eyes a mirror of our future after death. Is this so grim, or so gloomy?[15]

In other words, you don't worry about not existing in the period *before* you were born, and yet that is qualitatively no different (a mirror image) to the kind of nonexistence that will occur *after* you are dead. We should surely treat symmetrical situations in the same way if we want to be rational beings, so if we do not worry about our past nonexistence, then neither should we worry about our future nonexistence.

There are many ways we can face this argument. The French novelist Michel Houellebecq once pointed out in an interview that the symmetry argument doesn't work when considering other people.[16] That is, it might work perfectly well when considering your own death, but not the death of a loved one. We can say a similar things about Epicurus's no-harm argument: death might not harm the dead, but it can certainly harm those left behind.

This is all perfectly true, but let us be selfish and keep the focus on ourselves here—don't worry, we will pay penance for

this later in discussions of narcissism. Does the symmetry argument help us? I don't think so. To say as the Epicureans do that death is nothing to worry about is to ignore its indispensable role in providing meaning through the enforcing of choices. Death is crucial to meaning because it provides a finite boundary, and that is really a key point of this book. Death should not be dismissed so lightly: it should be seen more as the gift that breathes life into existence and gives existence a point.

Much of this has to do with a fairly basic feature of time that we have already mentioned, namely that time goes in one direction, and as it does it seals off past events from further influence. This has all kinds of implications that are significant for humans. As Herman Melville puts it in his novel *White-Jacket*, "The Past is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation."[17] In other words, the arrow of time points to the fact that the premises of the symmetry argument are incorrect: the past and the future are not to be treated in the same way when it comes to the human scale since one way is open to possibilities and the other is closed. The next chapter deals with what would happen when we have no constraints on such future possibilities.

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