

The Art of Dying

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration of what Jean Améry calls the ‘aesthetic view of death’. I address the following three questions. To what extent, and how, do we take an aesthetic view of death? Why do we take an aesthetic view of death? Third, for those whose deaths are impending and have some choice over how they die—most prominently the elderly and the terminally ill—what would it mean for them to take an aesthetic view of their own impending deaths, and, in particular, what would it mean for them to act in the light of such a view?

In an essay called ‘At the Mind’s Limits’, the Holocaust-survivor Jean Améry explores the particular difficulties he faced as an intellectual during his time at Auschwitz. In one passage, he describes how his view of death was challenged:

Death lay before [the prisoner], and in him the spirit was still stirring; the latter confronted the former and tried—in vain, to say it straight off—to exemplify its dignity. The first result was always the total collapse of the *aesthetic* view of death... For death in its literary, philosophic, or musical form there was no place in Auschwitz.¹

This essay is an attempt to understand what could be meant by ‘an aesthetic view of death’. I will not be aiming to interpret what Améry himself means by the phrase, (although I will hazard one guess later on). Rather, I will take the passage largely in isolation, following my own trajectory.

The heart of my paper is concerned with defending three claims, corresponding to Sections 2, 3, and 4. First, deaths are appropriate targets for a narrative aesthetic judgement. Second, acting in the light of

1 *At the Mind’s Limits*, translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Indiana University Press, 1964/1980), p. 16.

an aesthetic attitude towards my own death carries certain dangers, and should, perhaps, be avoided. Third, a narrative aesthetic response to a death indicates one's evaluation of the death *as a good or bad death*; that is, in this realm at least, aesthetic responses are also ethical responses.

1.

One idiosyncratic feature of my discussion of aesthetic attitudes towards death is that I will only be concerned with *narrative* aesthetic attitudes towards death. I am interested in the phenomenon of aesthetically regarding a death in virtue of its placement within the overall narrative of a life, and I will simply ignore the possibility of aesthetically responding to non-narrative elements of a death.

A *non-narrative aesthetic response* to death would be a response to the appearance either of a dying person or of the circumstances that surround her at death. Images of the dead or dying are not aesthetically insignificant. We find it natural to respond to the imagined or real appearance of someone's death with the aesthetic judgement that it is revolting, composed, or spectacular. Indeed, many of us can imagine deaths that we would like to avoid not because they would be painful or drawn-out, but because they would be horrible in appearance. Albert Camus apparently said that he could not imagine a death more 'meaningless' than dying in a car crash,² but we can readily imagine Camus making a more aesthetic claim, say, that there is nothing more *ugly* than dying in a car crash. I, for one, have some sympathy with this aesthetic sentiment. We can also make non-narrative aesthetic choices as to how we will die, opting to die not in a hospital, but at home, in the light of how we would appear to others at death. Of course, such a decision need not be based on aesthetic considerations but it clearly could be.

Narrative aesthetic responses, in contrast, are responses either to a portrayal of a narrative series of events, or to a narrative series of events

2 Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (Vintage, 2009), p. 262.

themselves.³ In the first case, when we respond to a *portrayal* of a narrative series of events, we see it as someone's creation, as a *telling* of a narrative series of real or fictional events. We realize that the creator of the narrative has made a wide range of choices as to how the events should be portrayed, and we can judge her success in doing so. Our aesthetic responses to literature and film are, at least in part, responses to the structure and flow of the created narrative that the work follows. In praising the creators of the film *Ikiru* for their portrayal of the death of a Tokyo civil servant, for example, we are praising not the death itself, but how it is represented in the film.⁴ We judge the narrative to be well-paced or unified, with a stirring climax or a satisfying resolution.

However, it is possible to focus upon—and aesthetically respond to—not the portrayal of a series of actions and events, but the actions and events *themselves*. Here, our focus is (some aspect of) what I will refer to as a *narrative series of events*. This distinction, between a narrative portrayal of a series of events and the events themselves, is not often made in the philosophical literature on narratives, but it is readily made, and important to the concerns of this paper. We can speak of (respond to, judge, etc.) a portrayal of a narrative of a hike or climb, for example, but we can also speak of (respond to, judge, etc.) the narrative events that comprise that hike or climb. The short story narrating the hike or climb may be beautiful, but, equally, the hike or climb itself may be beautiful. The same is true of a life; in different circumstances, we may find ourselves aesthetically judging either a portrayal of a life—a biography—or the life itself.

Of course, my response to a narrative series of events could not exist in the absence of a narrative portrayal; I could not aesthetically respond

³ The claims of this paper depend only upon a pre-theoretical conception of narratives, and I am neutral as to what qualifies a portrayal or series of events as a narrative portrayal or series of events. Two of the main contenders are Noël Carroll, 'On the Narrative Connection', in his *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 118-133, and David Velleman, 'Narrative Explanation', *Philosophical Review* 112:1 (2003) pp. 1-25.

⁴ *Ikiru (To Live)*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, written by Shinobu Hashimoto, Akira Kurosawa, and Hideo Oguni (Toho Films, 1952).

to a narrative series of events were I not to conceive of it as such, were I not utilizing a narrative portrayal of it. Furthermore, it may be that there is no way to identify, even in principle, a narrative series of events without making reference to an actual or potential portrayal of that series of events; that is, we may have to be *anti-realists* about narrative series of events.⁵ Nonetheless, whether we are realists or anti-realists about the nature of narrative series of events, we should readily agree that it is possible to focus upon, and aesthetically respond to, a narrative series of events. It is possible to see not the portrayal of a death but the *death itself* in an aesthetic light. It is this kind of aesthetic response—namely, to a death conceived of as a narrative series of events—that will interest me in this paper.

In the light of this, I will need in this paper to understand ‘dying’ quite broadly, to include not only the event of death itself, but also the actions and events that occur in the light of imminent death. An event of dying, for the purposes of this paper, may include not only the biological processes involved in the termination of life, but also the events that bring about biological termination (e.g., disease, car accident), events that happen to one in virtue of one’s impending biological termination (e.g., hospitalization, visitations from family), and actions that one takes in the light of impending biological termination (e.g., deciding to leave the hospital, reconciling oneself with family members). Taking that long-desired trip to India can be as much a part of an event of someone’s dying as is the cancer that she knows is terminal.

2.

My aim in this section is to convince you that the narrative series of events of or surrounding someone’s death can be appropriate targets for aesthetic response. I will look at some examples of situations in which it feels natural for us to aesthetically respond to the way in which someone

⁵ An account of narrative-portrayals that depends upon meaning or emotions, like Velleman’s, may be committed to this kind of anti-realism.

dies, to the events that happen to her as she is dying, or to the active choices that she makes leading up to her death. My argument that such responses are *aesthetic* relies upon the similarity between certain of our responses to deaths and other, uncontroversially, aesthetic responses; namely the kinds of evaluative narrative responses we make to literature and film. In particular, our responses to both literary narratives and deaths share, at times, the same content: both are concerned with *form*, broadly construed, with how a series of actions and events plays out within a certain overall structure. In the case of literature or film, the overall structure is the narrative portrayal that comprises the work; in the case of death, the overall structure, as we will see, is the narrative series of events in which we see a life.

Narrative portrayals (e.g., films or novels) are often judged for being *unified* or *coherent*, but we can also judge a narrative series of events in the same way. So, we might judge that someone's death is in *unity* with her life. Her death fits with her life, in that it 'retains' her past, her life leading up to her death. This might be our response, for example, to someone who dies in the name of a cause in which she strongly believed, or to someone who dies doing something she loves. My grandfather died of a heart attack while hunting, something he had done and loved his whole life. While devastated by his death, my grandmother said that this was the best way for him to have died. I have always seen her approval as being more aesthetic than anything else: his dying *fit* with his life, it was the right kind of ending given the life he led. This kind of aesthetic response might also be playing a role in some of our mythologies about death, for example, of the aged Native American who goes off to die alone. The power of this image—whether it is true of any American peoples or not—lies in the aesthetic realm, as a representation of a people who recognize that death is something we do on our own, and whose practices cohere with this recognition.

One feature that we expect from narrative portrayals—an important source of their unity or coherence—is that a character's actions are seen to flow from or are a development of her *character*. Similarly, there can

be something pleasing about deaths that, in some way or another, flow from or reveal a dying person's character, a pleasure that can only be described as aesthetic. We can think of a hermit who dies as she spent her life, quiet and alone. We can think of Socrates, whose death flowed with a strict and pleasing necessity from his character.⁶ Or we can think of someone who in death reveals a fortitude that she always had, or perhaps, always wished or hoped she had. In these cases, features of the person's death flow from features of herself, and the result can be aesthetically pleasing.

We often criticize narrative portrayals for either coming to their endings too soon or dragging the narrative out too long. This is yet another source of narratives' unity and coherence. The narrative that ends too soon is truncated, missing the further development that would make for a pleasing whole. The narrative that drags on too long is overloaded with superfluous material; less development, we think, would give us the pleasing whole that we expect from our narrative portrayals. The same is true of the narrative series of events that comprises a life and how it ends. Our responses to lives that end too soon will, more often than not, not be aesthetic. On the contrary, they raise in us a *personal* sadness for the person who dies too young; lives that end too soon can be *irredeemably tragic*, in a way that makes them inappropriate objects for aesthetic response.⁷ Lives that go on too long, however, are more appropriate objects for (negative) aesthetic response. Here I am thinking of a person who, in her life, has completed her important projects, and who is either uninterested or unable to engage in any further projects; she is, in addition, perhaps not particularly enjoying her life, nor bringing personal pleasure to those around her. There is a displeasure that such a life brings us, displeasure that it seems to me can only be aesthetic; her 'story' is, quite simply, dragging on too long.

6 Costica Bradatan, 'Philosophy as an Art of Dying', *The European Legacy* 12.5 (2007), 589-605.

7 With enough historical distance, perhaps, a life that ends too short can be responded to aesthetically, but I am not sure about this.

We often praise narrative portrayals for bringing about *closure* to their events in an appropriate or interesting way. Death-related closure is a recurring theme in film. The main characters in the films *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*⁸ and the recent *Beautiful*⁹ learn that their deaths are impending, and the narrative is structured around their attempts to bring appropriate closure to their lives before their demise. The aesthetic success of each film depends heavily upon the way in which this closure is carried out. In a related manner, we can judge not the portrayal of a death or the events that precede it, but a death itself as bringing about an appropriate or pleasing closure to someone's life. Someone may finish some of her projects before her death, or she may re-connect with long-lost family or friends; or her death may itself bring about peaceful closure to a life that has been filled with strife or pain. If we know the person well, then our pleasure may be more than aesthetic; we may be pleased for her in virtue of her satisfaction at having completed her projects or at having re-engaged with long lost family. However, as is revealed by our possible pleasure in simply hearing that someone's death came about in the midst of an appropriate closure to her life, or that it brought a peaceful end to a difficult life, such pleasure need not be personal.

Some of the deaths discussed so far can also be said to have followed, or amounted to, a *climax* in her life. If someone completes a life-long project in the light of her impending death,¹⁰ or if she dies in the name of an important cause, this can bring about the same kind of aesthetic pleasure that we feel on reading a novel with a successfully climactic ending. Our pleasure here is in a life that was able to reach a climax in death, or in events leading up to an impending death.

Lastly, we come to what is in many ways the most challenging aesthetic response to a death: that of finding it *ironic* or *humorous*. We saw above that

8 Directed by Gary Fleder, written by Scott Rosenberg (Miramax, 1995).

9 Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, written by Alejandro González Iñárritu, Armando Bo, and Nicolás Giacobone (Focus Features, 2010)

10 Also a familiar theme in film, e.g., Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (*To Live*).

Camus declared that the most meaningless death would be in a car accident, yet he died in one. The modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan, known for using flowing gowns and scarves in her dances, died when the scarf she was wearing caught in the back wheel of the convertible she was driving. Our response to such deaths is, as it is to all ironies, complex. Some ironies give us pleasure, others are merely notable; some are funny, others, like those characterizing the deaths of Camus and Duncan, are more tragic. Nevertheless, it is clear that noting and responding to an ironic death is to take an aesthetic response to that death. It is to notice and respond to the disparity—the incongruity—between some feature of a person's life and the way in which she died. This is equally vivid in the deaths that we find humorous. The dark-humor internet website called the Darwin Awards, for example, invites us to laugh at those who do very stupid things that result in their deaths; for almost twenty years, the website has been collecting such stories from around the world.¹¹

I have gathered the above imagined and non-imagined examples of our responses to deaths, and compared them to our analogous aesthetic responses to narrative portrayals, in order to reveal our practice of thinking about death or dying in aesthetic terms. That they are aesthetic responses is indicated by their striking similarity to our responses to literary and filmed narratives; they are targeted at the formal features of events understood in the larger narrative structure of a life. In the aesthetic responses to death that I have been discussing, we respond to a death in virtue of its relation to the overall narrative of a life, and we evaluate a death or its surrounding events analogously to how we would a narrative portrayal of it. While we may not, in any one response, use aesthetic concepts, it is familiar enough for us to think of a death in terms of whether it brings *unity* to a life, of whether it was or resulted in a *climax* to a life, of whether it brings about *closure* in a life, whether it flows from the agent's *character*, or whether it disrupts *narrative coherence* by coming too late in a life.

¹¹ www.darwinawards.com. Started by Wendy Northcutt in 1993.

The *narrative aesthetics of human action* (as we might call it) strikes me as a rich and underexplored area in philosophical aesthetics. Philosophers of aesthetics have, in the past twenty years, paid more attention to narrative portrayals and our aesthetic responses to them, but I have come across little work on our aesthetic responses to actions undertaken and events occurring, as it were, in a life.¹² The narrative aesthetics of human action raises deep and important questions, perhaps the most fundamental of which is: Why are the kind and sequence of elements in a human life—like dying—aesthetically notable? Why do we respond in the ways I have described in this section? I will return to this question in Section 4.

3.

Aesthetic responses to dying can be taken either from the third-person or from the first-person perspectives. From the third-person perspective, one judges the event of, or events surrounding, someone else's dying. First-person aesthetic responses to death are to one's death as one imagines it. To see one's own death aesthetically is to imagine the process of dying that one might undergo, and to aesthetically judge what one imagines. This thread of imagination and judgement might lead someone—if she had foreknowledge and time—to *plan* to die in such a way that her death would deserve a positive aesthetic judgement. In this section, I discuss some of the issues that arise from this peculiar kind of practical reasoning.

For someone to act in such a way that her action is to be aesthetically appreciated is for her to *perform*. This is not to say that her action must be aesthetically appreciated *as a work of art*, that is, that it must be viewed as one would a dance or theatre. The thriving and fruitful recent discussion of the aesthetics of natural environments has clearly revealed that there are modes of aesthetic appreciation distinct from those we

¹² Even work on the 'aesthetics of the everyday' (a movement that derives from the work of John Dewey) tends not to be about aesthetic responses to *how lives are lived*, but rather to the *appearance* of common features of our lives: clothing, gardens, food, etc.

utilize in appreciating works of art, and it is plausible to think that the aesthetic appreciation of human action—outside, of course, of the realm of theatre and dance—will occupy one such mode.¹³ Nevertheless, the fact that someone who acts so that her actions will be aesthetically appreciated need not be viewed as a work of art does not detract from the fact that she is performing. She is presenting herself and her actions as for an audience, as something to be spectated.

We very commonly perform actions on the basis of *non-narrative* aesthetic considerations. We very often decide to wear certain clothes, to drive a certain car, or to live in a certain kind of house so that we, *in the context of* these clothes, that car, or that house, will be aesthetically appreciated. The idea of acting in order to be the object of *narrative* aesthetic appreciation, however, will strike many of us as peculiar. To see this, we can return to an example from the previous section. I suggested that we can have a positive aesthetic response to someone who, say, dies in a manner that fits with her life—the nature lover who dies outdoors or the person who dies in the service of a cause that has dominated her life. Such deaths do not, by themselves, seem strange. Note, however, that the lack of strangeness derives from a particular story about why, say, our nature lover decided to die outdoors; she does so because she loves being outdoors and she wants to be outdoors in her last moments. It *would* strike us as odd for the nature lover to have chosen to die outdoors *so that* it would bring about unity to her life; that is, so that her death would fit with her life. This is certainly *possible*; it is in no way an incoherent choice to make. Nevertheless, many of us, I suspect, would find such a choice deeply peculiar.

In part, the peculiarity of this last decision derives from the fact that our lover of nature is not choosing to die outdoors *because* she loves nature and simply wishes to spend her last moments there. Her love of the outdoors is—we are imagining—an enduring love, but she has chosen to

13 See, for example, the essays collected in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Broadview Press, 2004).

die outdoors so that her life will take on a unity. This choice both ignores her love of nature—because it is not motivated by that love—and is dependent upon it—because dying outdoors would not unify her life if she did not love the outdoors. She decides to die outdoors because of her love for nature, but not, we might say, in the light of that love. Rather, she has had something like the thought, ‘I loved spending my time in nature, but I do not particularly want to be outdoors when I die; nevertheless, I do want unity in my life, and so it seems appropriate that I should die outdoors’. This appropriateness, as we have seen, has something intimately to do with how her life as a whole will *appear*, namely, as unified. Her dominant concern, it would seem, is not with her enduring love of *being outdoors*, but with having a death that coheres with her life, one which is aesthetically better in virtue of that unity.

As I have granted, it is possible to approach one’s death as a performance, as something to be aesthetically appreciated. Indeed, we can readily imagine people who would be *rational* in planning their deaths by thinking of how that death will appear in the light of their lives. Certain *public figures*, those who wish for their lives to convey a kind of message, may do this. It is possible, for example, that Socrates, a public figure in Athens at the time of his death, chose to die in the way in which he did because his death would stand together with his life in representing ideals that he held dearly. Alternatively, certain *cultures* may place a high value on death as a performance. Indeed, in the lines that follow the passage with which I began this paper, it would seem that Jean Améry took himself to be a member of such a culture.

The intellectual, and especially the intellectual of German education and culture, bears this aesthetic view of death within him. It was his legacy from the distant past, at the very latest from the time of German romanticism. It can be more or less characterized by the names Novalis, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Thomas Mann. For death in its literary, philosophic, or musical form there was no place in Auschwitz. No bridge led from death in Auschwitz to *Death in Venice*. Every poetic evocation of death became intolerable...¹⁴

14 *At the Mind's Limits*, p. 16.

Améry's references to romanticism and the 'poetic evocation of death' suggest that he saw German intellectual culture as placing a significant value on the aesthetic features of death or dying. If so, then the peculiarity, described in the previous paragraph, of carrying out one's death so that it will be aesthetically appreciated, may be a cultural matter. Some cultures may value a death, for example, that is in unity with one's life highly enough such that choosing to die in some way rather than another may take precedent over other considerations; the Germanic intellectual outdoorsman of Améry's generation may have chosen to die outdoors for the coherence that doing so would add to his life.

Culturally-sanctioned or not, however, acting so that one's death will be aesthetically appreciated has its *dangers*, dangers that I suspect accompany any choice to live segments of one's life so that they will be aesthetically appreciated. A first danger is aesthetic, that lives lived to be aesthetically appreciated will be overly self-conscious, and thus *mannered*. Johan Brännmark raises this threat towards the end of a paper on narrative meaning:

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, there would ... seem to be something *aesthetically* unappealing with such self-absorption. To start treating one's life as were it [a performance] might actually make our lives worse, since even if we would achieve certain special things through this frame of mind, these things would still get a mannered quality. It would... build into one's life a self-centeredness that is very far from attractive...¹⁵

While Brännmark is right to point out the aesthetic dangers inherent in acting so as to be aesthetically appreciated, he is overstating his case. In the first place, it is far from clear that acting in one's life so as to be aesthetically appreciated makes one 'self-absorbed' or 'self-centered'. Aesthetic appreciation can, after all, be pleasurable on the part of the spectator, and it may be this pleasure that an aesthetically-minded actor is striving to bring about. Someone who acts so as to bring about

¹⁵ 'Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning', *Philosophical Papers* 32.3 (2003), p. 342.

pleasure (aesthetic or otherwise) in others is not, at least not in virtue of *that* motive, 'self-absorbed' or 'self-centered'. Secondly, Brännmark's claim that if one were to treat one's actions as a performance, they '*would* get a mannered quality', is too strong. It is far from obvious that an action intentionally meant for aesthetic approval cannot be undertaken without being mannered, stilted, or affected. An action's being undertaken self-consciously for aesthetic appreciation is not obviously *sufficient*—as Brännmark seems to claim—for it to be mannered, stilted, or affected as well. Nevertheless, a weaker version of Brännmark's claim seems right: an action that is undertaken self-consciously for aesthetic purposes is in danger of being mannered, stilted, or affected; thus undercutting the chances for aesthetic approval that it was aiming to achieve. This, however, is a contingent claim about the likelihood of self-consciousness affecting the aesthetic success of actions: self-conscious actions are more likely to appear *as such*, and thus are more likely to appear mannered, stilted, or affected.

Two further dangers of actions undertaken in order to be aesthetically appreciated are ethical, rather than aesthetic, dangers. First, acting so as to be appreciated brings with it the dangers of immodesty and self-centeredness. To perform one's death, to die in such a way that one's death will *appear* in a good aesthetic light, is to call attention to oneself. To do so is not, *ipso facto*, to be immodest or self-centered, but acting *in order to be viewed* always runs that danger. Second, and more deeply, acting so as to be aesthetically appreciated runs the danger of inauthenticity. To see this, we can once again recall our lover of nature, who decides to die outdoors because doing so would cohere with her life. As we saw, there is something quite central that she is not following in her decision to die outdoors, namely *her own love of nature*. Even though she is aiming to unify her death with her life, there is a deep discontinuity in her decision, for she is not acting out of her love of nature in deciding to die outdoors. Rather, she is performing an action that will merely *appear* to cohere with previous decisions to spend time in nature, but which is missing a

central element of those previous actions: being in nature because she loves it. Her action is, in this sense, inauthentic, not true to herself. Not all cases of choosing to die in such a way as to be aesthetically appreciated will be like our lover of nature; they may have multiple motives, for example, choosing to die outdoors because it unifies their lives *and* because they love nature. Nevertheless, it is clear that paying too much attention to the aesthetics of one's decisions will leave one performing an action that is not true to oneself.

While it may be that, for some of us, choosing our deaths so that they will be aesthetically appreciated is possible—even rational—the dangers I have been describing should, perhaps, lead most of us to avoid choosing how we die for this reason. Performing one's death need not be mannered, immodest, or inauthentic, but these dangers await the actor who wishes to die in a certain way in virtue of its promising aesthetic value. The alternative is that those who have some choice over how they die follow not aesthetic norms, but some other set of values. Even if one does not act in order to achieve an aesthetic response, it may still be that another person will respond to one's death aesthetically. Were this to happen, then we would have a situation in which one person aesthetically responds to another's death even though the dying person did not choose how she died for aesthetic reasons. That is, we will have one person evaluating another's action, but in terms that the latter did not intend for it to be evaluated. This is not problematic *per se*, but it does press the question, raised at the end of the previous section, of why the observer would respond in this way. Why would we aesthetically respond to a death, when the person dying intended no such thing to happen? What are we doing, in short, when we aesthetically respond to deaths?

4.

In recent work, Alexander Nehamas has defended a theory of the normativity of aesthetic judgment, in which the main feature of our positive aesthetic reactions to something is our recognition that it will

add non-aesthetic value to our lives from personal interaction with it. 'The judgment of beauty,' he writes

is a guess, a suspicion, a dim awareness that there is more in the work that it would be valuable to learn. To find something beautiful is to believe that making it a larger part of our life is worthwhile, that our life will be better if we spend part of it with that work.¹⁶

Roger Scruton defends a position not too distant from Nehamas', writing that:

Lovers of beauty direct their attention outwards, in search of a meaning and order that brings sense to their lives. Their attitude to the thing they love is imbued with judgement and discrimination. And they measure themselves against it, trying to match its order in their own living sympathies.¹⁷

One thought common to both Nehamas' and Scruton's remarks is that responsiveness to aesthetic features of the world is, ultimately, to be understood as responsiveness to a realm of value that is more readily conceived as *personal* or *ethical*. The person who seeks beauty, says Scruton, is someone who is on the search for value outside of the realm of the aesthetic, namely the meaningful and the sacred. To find something beautiful, Nehamas says, is to find something one believes a future engagement with will improve one's life; the thing that strikes me as beautiful is a thing that strikes me as having the potential to make my life better.

Nehamas and Scruton are not trying to *reduce* aesthetic value to other kinds of value; their claims are consistent with their holding that aesthetic value is, on occasion, both *sui generis* and intrinsic. Nevertheless, as I understand them, Nehamas and Scruton are denying the *autonomy* of aesthetic value, for they claim that part of the importance of our aesthetic responses is that they indicate value in *non-aesthetic realms*. To evaluate something aesthetically and positively is, at least in some cases, a matter of finding something whose value can be

16 'An Essay on Beauty and Judgment', *The Threepenny Review* (Winter 2000). This is the major theme running through his book, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton, 2007).

17 *Beauty* (Oxford, 2009), p. 187.

described, at least in part, as residing outside the realm of the aesthetic. To see a thing as aesthetically valuable is, at least some of the time, to see it as containing non-aesthetic value.

On this picture, at least some instances of aesthetic evaluation serve to point out, to bring to our awareness, other kinds of value. This is something that, in particular, we would expect from the kind of narrative aesthetic responses I described in Section 2. We have no option but to see our own and others' lives as following narratives; to see the trajectory of a life, either prospectively or retrospectively, is to see the narrative of that life playing itself out.¹⁸ It is inevitable that we will find some life trajectories to be more valuable than others, and that a complex and pervasive system of cultural practices for exploring, promoting, and communicating such desirable trajectories would have arisen.¹⁹ It should not be surprising, then, that one such cultural practice is aesthetic, and that we would find some life trajectories more aesthetically appealing than others. Accordingly, my suggestion is this: we have developed a system of aesthetic evaluative concepts that we find natural to apply to life endings (e.g., unified, climactic); such evaluations *themselves* are aesthetic, but they have an ethical content: they point to valuable life endings in the light of the lives that preceded those endings.

Taking my cue from Nehamas and Scruton, then, I am suggesting that our aesthetic responses to instances of death or dying serve to indicate valuable or disvaluable ends to lives. Using the ancient notion of *eudaimonia*—the state of having an objectively desirable life—the claim is this: our positive aesthetic responses to some deaths rather than others indicate that the former, all things being equal, contribute to a life in

18 This is not, of course, to say that narratives play a large role in our life choices; as we have seen above, most of us do not, except rarely, make life choices in the light of the kind of narrative that we will play out. See Brännmark, 'Leading Lives', and Samantha Vice, 'Literature and the Narrative Self', *Philosophy* 78 (2003) 93-108.

19 It is equally inevitable that a complex and pervasive practice of judging *narrative portrayals* would have arisen in the light of our practice of judging life trajectories, and that there would be a complex interplay between these two practices.

such a way as to make it more eudaimonic. The life that ends with a pleasing closure, that does not go on too long, that ends in a way that is coherent with how it was led, is a life that is more eudaimonic than one, all things being equal, that does not. This is not to say that a unified life is more eudaimonic *in virtue of being unified*; it may rather be that the unification of a life reflects or indicates underlying features that contribute to its being more unified. Nonetheless, narrative aesthetic responses to deaths of the kind discussed in Section 2 above are also *ethical* responses, responses to how well a person's life has gone.

There is not a straightforward one-to-one mapping of *pleasure in response to life-narrative* to *valuable life-narrative*. Our responses of irony and humor to certain apparently non-eudaimonic life-endings show that we can take a certain kind of (dark) pleasure at lives that end badly. We can marvel at the paradoxical spectacle that was Isadora Duncan's demise, and snicker in disbelief at the unfortunate, stupid deaths that appear on the Darwin Awards. The phenomenon of dark humor is our strange and baffling ability to take pleasure in the disvaluable features of our lives.

In the light of this, I must emphasize that the claim I am making here is not that 'pleasurable aesthetic responses to deaths indicate valuable life endings'. Rather, my claim is the following: aesthetic responses to death bring one's attention to valuable or disvaluable endings to lives. Weakening my claim in this way does not mean that I deny that we are aware that these endings are valuable or not. For, even present in dark-humor responses to deaths is the recognition that the feature being laughed at *is* disvaluable. In humor involving the disvaluable, the disvaluable elements are not *incidental* to our amusement. To see this, focus on the following, simple joke: One good thing about Alzheimer's disease is that if you get it you can hide your own Easter eggs.²⁰ This joke would not be funny were one to replace 'Alzheimer's disease' with

20 Taken verbatim from Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 143.

'temporary amnesia'. In dark humor, we are laughing *at* the disvalue of something before us; it is not something we ignore in our laughter. Even in dark laughter at an unfortunate death, we are well aware that *it is* an unfortunate death; this is part of the evaluation that we make, and part of what makes our laughter possible. So, while darkly humorous responses to deaths reveal that it would be wrong to claim that pleasure in an aesthetic response to a death corresponds to our positive evaluation of that way of dying, a more plausible claim—namely, that the positive (or negative) evaluation inherent in an aesthetic response to a death corresponds to our positive (or negative) ethical evaluation of that way of dying—can be made. Our aesthetic responses to deaths indicate our eudaimonic evaluations of the ends of lives, that is, whether those endings of lives contribute to the life's being objectively better than it would have been without that kind of ending.

Tying the aesthetic evaluation of a death to its ethical evaluation opens the door to an objector who contends that our responses to deaths are not aesthetic *at all*. Our responses to deaths are *only* ethical evaluations of the life's playing out as it did. Our approval, for example, of a death that is in unity with a life is not aesthetic approval, but only ethical approval of a life that is more eudaimonic than it otherwise would have been. According to this objector, the whole aim of this paper has been misguided; the responses of Section 2 all belong to a non-aesthetic category of evaluation. A first problem with this objection is that it cannot account for our ironic and humorous responses to deaths. As we saw above, darkly ironic and humorous responses to deaths include a *pleasurable* response to a *disvaluable* death. Clearly, there is something aesthetic going on in these cases beyond an ethical evaluation of a death. Secondly, the position advocated by our objector does not—without more work, at least—explain the uncanny resemblance—which we saw in Section 2 above—between our responses to deaths and our responses to literary and film narratives. Lastly, our objector's position is in danger of not allowing us to aesthetically respond to life narratives at all, because our objector's alternative account of our responses to deaths—namely, as

only ethical—could be applied in a blanket way to *all* of our responses to features of persons' lives. That is, for any evaluative response to a life narrative, the objector would say that the response is wholly non-aesthetic, and this would close the door to *any* of our responses to the events in others' lives counting as aesthetic. But such a blanket denial of the possibility of aesthetic responses to others' lives lacks motivation. While we may want to say that some things cannot or should not be aesthetically responded to, it is by no means obvious that the ways in which other peoples' lives play themselves out is one such thing.

5.

In the quotation with which I began this paper, Jean Améry says that, for the intellectual in Auschwitz, 'The first result was always the total collapse of the *aesthetic* view of death.' What, exactly, is the loss that Améry experienced at Auschwitz? It could be understood as the inability to *perform* one's death, that is, to die in such a way as to invite aesthetic response. As we saw above, this may indeed, be the loss that Améry himself is recording in his essay. However, it is not clear that, for many of us, such a loss would be all that notable. I, for one, do not feel any more inclination to perform my death than I do to perform in choosing where to live or in brushing my teeth. In addition, even if I had an inclination to perform my death, I might be well-advised not to do so, as doing so has its dangers; it would be in danger of being mannered, of making me appear self-centered, or of being inauthentic.

Nevertheless, those whose death is impending—the elderly and the terminally ill—and who have some choice over how they die have been in the background of all that I say here. What would it mean, I have wanted to know, for them to follow aesthetic norms in acting so as to die in some particular way rather than another? My answer has been this: the ability to die aesthetically is not, at bottom, the ability to *follow* aesthetic norms in dying. That, I have said, is something that we may find peculiar and which we have reason to avoid altogether. Rather, to have the ability, or the opportunity, to die aesthetically is to have the

ability to die in a way that would merit a positive aesthetic response. And that, I have suggested, is merely to have the chance to die well.

Accordingly, one general thought that falls out of my discussion is that the phenomenon of aesthetically responding to deaths is not important in virtue of the action-guiding potential of such a response. It is, rather, being able to die in a way that would deserve a positive aesthetic response. What Améry saw is that those in Auschwitz knew that their deaths had no possibility of generating such a response. Their deaths would be ugly: they would be murdered prematurely, anonymously, out of hatred, or even worse, because they were no longer useful to their captors. Most fundamentally, furthermore, an ugly death is a bad death, a death that is, objectively, a bad ending to a life. The extreme ugliness of an Auschwitz death is an indicator of this badness, of the fact that all of the captives who died at Auschwitz died in ways that made their lives less eudaimonic. That, surely, is the real tragedy of the loss that Améry experienced in the ‘collapse of the aesthetic view of death’.²¹

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