

# The Midlife Crisis

Kieran Setiya

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IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT “to philosophize is to learn [how] to die”<sup>1</sup> — the thought being that one task of philosophy is to reconcile us to death. There have been arguments with that intent. Taking death as the inevitable, permanent end of our existence, Epicurus wrote:

So death, the most terrifying of ills, is nothing to us, since so long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since for the former it is not, and the latter are no more.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the force of this reasoning, which is still much discussed,<sup>3</sup> and without having done the surveys needed to confirm this, I suspect that it convinces few and comforts even fewer. I doubt, too, that many philosophers now agree with Montaigne about the point of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> What they give us are philosophical arguments, and you cannot argue someone out of being afraid to die. If they are to be trusted, some people do not experience the electric, halting terror that the thought “I will no longer be” elicits in others — in me — but for those who are kept awake by it, philosophy comes too late. The fear is in one’s bones.

Nothing I say here will change this; my concern with death is more oblique. For we can be disturbed by death not just in being afraid to die, but in a feeling, inspired by the prospect of mortality, even in the middle distance, that life is empty, or hollow, or futile — just one thing after another, and to what end? What does it all add up to if we eventually come to nothing, as I assume we do?

It is a matter of conjecture how far back these questions date. Philippe Ariès locates their origins around the fifteenth century, though he draws a contrast with us:

1. Montaigne 1595: 56; the phrase is borrowed from Cicero.
2. Bailey 1926: 85.
3. See, for instance, Bradley 2009.
4. Montaigne himself had doubts: “If you don’t know how to die, don’t worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don’t bother your head about it.” (Montaigne 1595: 805)

[The] man of the late Middle Ages was very acutely conscious that he had merely been granted a stay of execution, that this delay would be a brief one, and that death was always present within him, shattering his ambitions and poisoning his pleasures. And that man felt a love of life which we today can scarcely understand [...]. (Ariès 1974: 44–5)

Even if he is right about the Middle Ages, I doubt that the contrast with the present is so sharp: that “[the] certainty of death and the fragility of life are foreign to our existential pessimism,” as Ariès claims (Ariès 1974: 44). Life may seem less fragile to those of us who live in relative affluence; we are less surrounded by death. But its certainty is just as clear. In the essay that gave a name to the phenomenon that interests me, Elliott Jaques connects the recognition of inevitable though not imminent death to a crisis of value that occurs “around the age of 35 — which I shall term the mid-life crisis” (Jaques 1965: 502).

The paradox is that of entering the prime of life, the stage of fulfilment, but at the same time the prime and fulfilment are dated. Death lies beyond. [...] It is this fact of the entry upon the psychological scene of the reality and inevitability of one’s own eventual personal death that is the central and crucial feature of the mid-life phase — the feature which precipitates the critical nature of the period. (Jaques 1965: 506)

This is my topic: a crisis of meaning I hope you recognize firsthand — if not for your sake, for the sake of my discussion — and that is less about fear of death than about what to make of mortal life. In approaching it, I won’t assume that everyone feels this way.<sup>5</sup> Those for whom there is no midlife crisis can think me of as treating a pathology

5. On the one hand, there is cross-cultural evidence of a U-shaped pattern in reported happiness over time (Blanchflower and Oswald 2008). On the other hand, the explanation of this pattern and the frequency with which it

they lack — unless, perhaps, I induce it in them. Nor will I assume, at the outset, that philosophy can help. Philosophers have almost never addressed the midlife crisis, at least not by name,<sup>6</sup> though they must often have experienced it. Perhaps they have shared the sense expressed above, in relation to the fear of death, that philosophy comes too late. The difficulties of midlife are best left to experts in medical sociology, or to journalists and therapists.<sup>7</sup> I will argue, however, that the midlife crisis calls for philosophical treatment, not forgetting that there are aspects of the problem philosophy cannot touch.

In order to begin, I need to identify some features of the midlife crisis, as I understand it. My account is stipulative, in part; but I think its outlines are familiar. As we have seen, what elicits the crisis, for many, is a confrontation with mortality. Something about the fact that we will eventually die, that life is finite, makes us feel that everything we do is empty or futile. It is essential to the experience I have in mind, however, that this sense of emptiness or futility is not an apprehension that nothing matters: that there is no reason to do one thing instead of another. Even in the grip of the crisis, I know that there is reason to care for those I love, read the books and watch the movies I admire, do my job well, if I can, be responsible, help and not do harm. It does not seem worthless to prevent the suffering of others, or impossible to justify action. Yet somehow the succession of projects and accomplishments, each one rational in itself, falls short.

I don’t deny that reactions may be more extreme. When Tolstoy documents his crisis in “A Confession,” he complains that “there was no life in me because I had no desires whose gratification I would have deemed it reasonable to fulfill” (Tolstoy 1882: 30). It is possible to feel that way. But it is the more qualified, more elusive experience

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reaches the level of crisis are very much in dispute; see Lachman 2001; Brim et al. 2004.

6. A rare exception: Christopher Hamilton’s compelling quasi-memoir, *Middle Age* (Hamilton 2009).

7. For medical sociology, see Lachman 2001; Brim et al. 2004; for journalism, Sheehy 1976; and for psychotherapy, Polden 2002.

that strikes me as more typical and more interesting. Its content is obscure enough to raise philosophical questions. What distinguishes the emptiness of the midlife crisis from the unqualified emptiness in which one sees no reason to do anything, no reason to prefer one outcome to another? What kind of value is missing, if practical reasons remain? There is work for philosophy to do here, if only to articulate what we have lost, or never had.

In the form that will concern us, then, the midlife crisis is an apparent absence of meaning or significance in life that allows for the continued presence of reasons to act. Although it is often inspired by the acknowledgement of mortality, the crisis can occur in other ways. It may be enough to prompt the midlife crisis that you see in your future, at best, only more of the achievements and projects that make up your past. Your life will differ only in quantity from the life you have already lived, a mere accumulation of deeds.

Since it is independent of death, the midlife crisis is not solved by the prospect of living forever. Unlike some, I doubt that self-interest speaks against eternal life, or that, if we never died, we could not lead lives structured by the values we actually have.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps we could, and in doing so remain who we are. But that would do nothing to quell the sense of repetition and futility that marks the crisis; the sense that our worthwhile projects, however numerous and varied, are not enough.

Nor does the crisis turn on having failed in one's ambitions. There are distinctive trials in the recognition, mid-way through life, that your desires have been frustrated and that it is too late to start over. Not everything is possible now. This experience, and the consequent urge to escape one's life, quit one's job, buy a fast car, have an affair, may be central for some of us — and my treatment may cast light on it. But the crisis that interests me is consistent with getting what you want. The puzzle is that even success can seem like failure.

8. For the first claim, see Williams 1973; and for the second, Scheffler 2013: Lecture Three.

A final note on the scope of my discussion. I have focused on a single element in the midlife crisis: a perception of futility in life, often provoked by awareness of death. I have set aside the issues of failure and regret. And I will not deal directly with distress at lives unled, dreams never to be won. The sense of diminished possibility, that the spacious world of youth has contracted to a single path, may be felt without conceiving that one's present life is empty. One can be vividly aware of how much of what is valuable one's life will never encompass, even though it seems as full as any life one could have lived. This experience strikes me as different from, though perhaps related to, my topic. Most likely it makes sense to speak of many midlife crises, of which I will treat only one. I take the liberty of using the definite article, mainly for stylistic reasons, but I make no claim to have followed every thread in this tangled knot.

We are left with a problem of interpretation and a number of constraints. The problem is about the content of the midlife crisis: how to identify what is lacking in someone's life when they come to feel this way — that the procession of projects is empty, even if the projects succeed. The constraints are: first, that the crisis does not involve a total absence of value; second, that it is commonly, though not only, elicited by reflection on one's own mortality; and third, that despite this fact, it is not assuaged by immortality as such. What we need is a finer template of ethical concepts — carved by distinctions of the sort philosophers make — in which to articulate what is wrong. Although my language is sometimes etiological, asking for the cause or origin of the midlife crisis, my project is not empirical. Our task is not to survey the history of those who claim to experience the crisis, but to understand more clearly the evaluative phenomenon at which I have gestured above. The feeling that marks the midlife crisis responds to a defect in one's life. Can we state with precision what the defect is, and how it could be repaired? In what follows, I make two attempts at this, the second more successful than the first. But the first has an interesting history, which will lead us to Aristotle from the case of John Stuart Mill.

## I

The facts of Mill's early life are as remarkable as they are well-known. The child of James Mill, a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill was subjected to an extraordinary education: Greek at age three, reading Plato by seven; Latin at eight, Newton's *Principia* at age eleven; the teenage years devoted to logic, political economy, law, and psychology; then Bentham and philosophy at fifteen. It was, as Isaiah Berlin remarked, "an appalling success" (Berlin 1959: 175). "Success" because Mill went on to be the most influential British philosopher and public intellectual of the nineteenth century. "Appalling" both for the loneliness and deprivation of Mill's childhood, and for the nervous breakdown of which it must have been a cause.

It may seem perverse to use Mill's breakdown as an example of the midlife crisis, or to mine it for insights, as I propose to do. Mill was only 20 when he suffered the depression he recounts in his *Autobiography*. But in this, as in many things, Mill was precocious. The "crisis in [his] mental history" is a model for the crisis we are trying to understand, and it has the distinction of being exposed to sustained philosophical reflection. Mill purports to analyze his breakdown and recovery, drawing morals for moral philosophy. His chapter is a precedent for the project undertaken here.

Mill describes the crisis, at first, in terms both stark and unenlightening:

I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent. [...] In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: "Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And

an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, "No!" (Mill 1873: 112)

The mystery is *why*. Why would the achievement of one's deepest desires be a matter of indifference? How did things turn out this way? Mill offers two explanations. According to the first, his experiences "led him to adopt a theory of life, very unlike that on which I had before acted":

I never, indeed, wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way. (Mill 1873: 117)

An interesting concept, this—the so-called "paradox of egoism," according to which the exclusive pursuit of happiness prevents you from being happy—but as a diagnosis, quite bizarre. Whatever lay behind Mill's crisis, it was not excessive devotion to himself. His "conception of his own happiness" was already "identified with [an] object" distinct from being happy: "to be a reformer of the world" (Mill 1873: 111). Mill aimed at the benefit of others, not simply or directly at his own. He did not need to learn the lesson of the paradox. And yet the crisis came.

What holds for Mill holds for the rest of us. It is no defence against the emptiness of the midlife crisis that one's mind is fixed on objects other than being happy: on learning French, starting a family, doing one's job. This is true even if those objects are pursued as ends, not just as means. My attitude to the essay you are reading is not purely

instrumental: I am not just writing it for its effects but “as itself an ideal end.” Still it evokes the critical response. So I finish this essay; perhaps it is published. Then I write another, and another, and another. Is that all there is?

Mill’s second diagnosis is more subtle and more promising, though its interpretation will take work. What Mill describes as the “other change” in his opinions is a shift in how he conceives “the prime necessities of human well-being” on which they come to include “the internal culture of the individual” (Mill 1873: 118). It took some time before Mill experienced this first-hand, in the poetry of William Wordsworth, about which he writes one of the most lyrical passages of the *Autobiography*.

What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind. From them I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed. And I felt myself at once better and happier as I came under their influence. (Mill 1873: 121)

This passage is both moving and profound. It is in Mill’s turn to the culture of the feelings, and in the reasons for it, that we find his most perceptive claims about the crisis in his mental history. The challenge is to explain his argument — what is missing in life without poetry, for Mill? — and to say what we can learn from it.

It is in this context that I want to mention, briefly, a reading of Mill’s insight that is not wrong, but partial, and partial in a way that limits its relevance here.<sup>9</sup> On this interpretation, Mill suffered from the propensity of critical reflection — in which he was so singularly trained — to separate ideas and feelings that have been united by mere association. Analysis brings out the accidental or contingent character of associative connections, their lack of necessity, and in doing so destroys them. Thus Mill had been conditioned to associate pleasure with reforming the world, a connection his analytic habits wore down. The effect is more general. According to the psychology Mill learned from Bentham, *all* desires flow from associative conditioning, with the effect that analysis dissolves them all. What Mill discovered in Wordsworth is that there are sources of feeling and desire that transcend association that do not rest on mere conditioning, and so resist the dissolving influence of analysis. The cause of his nervous breakdown was the absence of such sources; the solution was to find them; and the lesson is that Bentham’s psychology fails.

As I said in introducing it, this reading is not exactly wrong. But it is no use to us. We are taking Mill as a model for the midlife crisis, so we need to set aside features of his circumstance that do not generalize. Whatever happened to Mill, Bentham’s psychology is not the cause of our predicament; nor is there reason to fear that our desires are all the products of association, which analysis has dissolved. Understood in this way, the interest of Mill’s breakdown is parochial at best.

The reading is in any case incomplete. It makes something of Mill’s turn to poetry and the culture of the feelings, but there is more than that in the passage quoted above. This passage responds to what Mill had come to perceive as “a flaw in life itself”: that its pleasures are “kept up by struggle and privation” (Mill 1873: 120). The question that vexed him was: what happens if we succeed? If injustice could be eradicated, if there was no need for further reform, what sources of happiness would remain? What would we do with ourselves in a just society?

9. For this reading, along with much else, see Anderson 1991: 15–20; relevant passages of the *Autobiography* appear in Mill 1873: 114–5.

Poetry matters to Mill not just because its pleasures arise without conditioning but because they have “no connexion with struggle or imperfection.” They are not the pleasures of hardship overcome but “perennial sources of happiness” that will survive “when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed”: “I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation” (Mill 1873: 121). The problem with Mill’s life before the crisis was that it contained no hint of what is worth doing except to reduce the suffering of others. If the best we can hope for is a life without suffering, a life that is not positively bad, why bother to live life at all? Better, or just as good, not to be born.

Mill’s argument echoes Aristotle in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, though as far as I know, the echo has gone wholly unremarked. Aristotle, too, favours the contemplative life over that of moral virtue — and on the very same ground.<sup>10</sup>

[The] activity of the practical virtues is exhibited in political or military affairs, but the actions concerned with these seem to be unpleasurable. Warlike actions are completely so (for no one chooses to be at war, or provokes war, for the sake of being at war; anyone would seem absolutely murderous if he were to make enemies of his friends in order to bring about battle and slaughter); but the action of the statesman is also unpleasurable, and aims — apart from political action itself — at despotic power and honours, or at all events happiness, for him and his fellow citizens — a happiness different from political action, and evidently sought as being different.<sup>11</sup>

10. My reading of Aristotle is indebted to Korsgaard 1986: 231–5, Lawrence 1993, and Lear 2005, though I do not agree with them on every point, and indeed they disagree with one another.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b5–16; Ross 1908: 195.

As Mill might add: it would be insane to foster suffering and injustice so as to create the need for moral reform! The activities characteristic of moral virtue are ones that respond to difficulties in human life, to scarcity, injustice, suffering, greed. If life is worth living, there must be more to it than this. There must be activities that do not simply ameliorate our lives but give them positive value. These non-moral activities are what would occupy us in the ideal world in which our troubles have been solved. In that sense, they are themselves ideal. According to both Aristotle and Mill, the paradigm of such activity is contemplation.

You might ask whether “contemplation” means the same thing for both philosophers. Aristotelian contemplation is an exercise of understanding or theoretical reason made possible by the completion of scientific inquiry: it consists in reflection on the causal structure of the world, and on God as final cause. Mill is thinking of poetic appreciation. Art is, in fact, strikingly absent from Aristotle’s conception of the good life, even in its practical or political form.<sup>12</sup> But we can set this contrast aside. Our question is whether the Aristotelian account of Mill’s breakdown can illuminate ours. Does it give a general clue to the origins of the midlife crisis? It might. Unlike Mill, most of us do not devote ourselves to selfless, single-minded moral virtue. But we are engaged in practical lives, lives of day-to-day striving, not of tranquil contemplation. The question Mill asked about himself — what would remain to make him happy if his ends were achieved? — could be asked about us. Think of Schopenhauer, “On the Suffering of the World”:

Work, worry, toil and trouble are indeed the lot of almost all men their whole life long. And yet if every desire were satisfied as soon as it arose how would men occupy their lives, how would they pass the time? (Schopenhauer 1851: 43)

12. He mentions “artistic contemplation” once, in the *Eudemian Ethics* (1245a20–22; Kenny 2011: 138).

We have the outlines of a possible diagnosis of the critical experience, one that has the appropriate shape. It makes a distinction in value, between what is worth doing, on the one hand, and on the other, what makes it good to live a human life. Our activities, like Mill's, make sense: there is reason to fight against suffering and injustice, to engage in the daily grind of work, worry, toil and trouble. But something is missing: the activities that make life worth living in the first place, that give us reason to be glad that we were born. And so our lives fall short. The solution is to recognize this, to find what is missing — whether poetic appreciation, philosophy, or something else — and to bring it into our lives.

What should we make of this suggestion? In assessing it, we are helped by the fact that Aristotle presents his verdict on the political and contemplative lives as the application of a general criterion for the best or highest good. The activities of moral virtue fail this test; those of contemplation meet it; and the test can be applied elsewhere. Is the test defensible? What does it show? And what happens when we turn on it on ourselves?

The test is introduced in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, directly before the more celebrated “function argument.”<sup>13</sup> According to Aristotle, some ends are worth choosing merely for the sake of others, as wealth is worth choosing for the sake of what it can buy. Others are “more final”: worth choosing for their own sakes, but also for the sake of other things. The highest good is not of this kind. It must be “final without qualification”: worth choosing only for its own sake and never for the sake of anything else. It is this condition that contemplation meets: “this activity alone would seem to be loved for its own sake; for nothing arises from it apart from the

13. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a25–35; Ross 1908: 10. The conclusion of the function argument in fact returns to the condition of finality discussed below: Aristotle holds that the human good is “activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, and if there are more virtues than one, in accordance with the best and most complete” (1098a15–18; Ross 1908: 12) — where the word translated “complete” is the same word rendered as “final” earlier on.

contemplating, while from practical activities we gain more or less apart from the action.”<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle's test is initially puzzling. How can it be an objection to morally virtuous actions that as well as being good in themselves, they improve the lives of others? Why is it better to be useless? These questions read Aristotle through the lens of instrumental value: the value something has as a means to an end. On this interpretation, he is distinguishing merely instrumental goods; goods that have value both as means and ends; and ones whose value is non-instrumental. These distinctions make sense. But why should we agree that the best or highest goods are in the third group, not the second?<sup>15</sup>

But the puzzlement turns on a misreading. When Aristotle says that one thing is chosen for the sake of another, he means that the value of the first thing is explained by the value of the second.<sup>16</sup> Instrumentality is one form such explanation takes: wealth is valuable as a means to further ends, and it derives its value from its relation to these ends. But there are other possibilities. Think of symbolic value. A wedding ring is valuable not just financially but because it stands for a relationship that, if all goes well, is itself something of value. The ring is not a means to an end in this relationship, but the relationship explains the value of the ring.<sup>17</sup> Or think of the relationship itself. Why do we do things with and for those we love? For the sake of the relationship or

14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b1–3; Ross 1908: 194.

15. See Korsgaard (1986: 230) and Lear (2005: 31–2), who cite Book II of Plato's *Republic*, in which it is agreed that the second class of goods — those that have value both as means and ends — is certainly the best.

16. Again, I follow Korsgaard 1986: 231–2. What she calls “conditional” and “unconditional” value, I call “derivative” and “underived.” Note that the terminology differs in Korsgaard 1983, where “intrinsic value” lines up roughly with underived — though see Langton 2007: 162–4 for crucial amendments — and “unconditional” means valuable in every circumstance. I avoid “intrinsic” because it suggests an appeal to intrinsic properties that is not relevant here (compare Korsgaard 1983: 254 on G. E. Moore). I avoid “unconditional” because it is not clear that Korsgaard's definitions coincide. Why can't the value of a derivative good — “conditional” in the sense of Korsgaard 1986 — be “unconditional” in the sense of employed in the earlier paper?

17. The example is due to Langton 2007: 162–3.

the person with whom it is shared. It is the value of the relationship or the person that explains the value of our actions, but not as an end to which they are means.<sup>18</sup> It is only when a relationship is fragile that it serves as an “end to be effected”: a condition to develop or sustain as a result of what we do.

Once we see that one thing can be valuable for the sake of another without being a means to an end, we can reinterpret the Aristotelian framework. Aristotle’s distinction is not between ends that have only instrumental value, ends whose value is purely non-instrumental, and ends that have value of both kinds. It is between ends that have only instrumental value, ends whose value is non-instrumental but derivative — their value is explained by their relation to the value of something else — and ends whose value is underived.<sup>19</sup> The pursuit of wealth has value of the first kind: it is just a means to an end. This is not true of morally virtuous action. It is worth doing the right thing even apart from its effects. But the value of acting justly, courageously, and temperately derives from its role in making possible the positive goods of human life.<sup>20</sup> The value of morally virtuous action is derivative but not purely instrumental. Finally, for Aristotle, contemplation is special because it is the only activity whose value is underived. It is not valuable for the sake of another activity to which it relates in some distinctive way.

Having worked out the basis of Aristotle’s test, we turn back to the midlife crisis. The diagnosis put forward was that, while our activities, like Mill’s, make sense, we have lost contact with the kind of value that makes life worth living in the first place, the kind that gives us reason to be glad that we were born. What is the connection between

18. For this point, see Stocker 1981: 754–5 on acting from friendship.

19. What about ends whose value is derived, but not from something else: ends that explain their own value? If it makes sense at all, this prospect is absent from Aristotle and plays no part in our discussion. It may figure in Korsgaard’s reading of Kant; see Langton 2007: 177–80.

20. And perhaps from the fact that it approximates the highest good: the exercise of practical wisdom is the closest thing to contemplation in the practical sphere. For this account, see Lear 2005.

underived value and value of this “existential” kind? It is not direct. From the fact that an activity has underived value it does not follow that it is enough to make life worth living. After all, it doesn’t follow from the existence of underived value that life is worth living at all. Still, we can at least say this: if life is worth living, the explanation lies in the underived goods; and if there is just one, it explains the value of everything.<sup>21</sup> Hence a revised conjecture: the origin of the midlife crisis is an estrangement from underived value, an alienation from the source of everything good in human life. In what remains of this section, I argue that, although there is much to learn from it, this diagnosis fails.

We begin with a question: how, exactly, are we estranged from underived value in the midlife crisis? Do we deny its existence, or fail to believe in it? That can’t be right. To experience the futility and emptiness at the heart of the crisis is not to doubt that there is underived value. If one had such doubts, they would be too radical: without underived value, there is no value at all.<sup>22</sup> That violates a key constraint on our interpretation of the midlife crisis: that even in the grip of it, one sees oneself as having reason to act, and one’s activities as worthwhile. There is some further way in which life falls short.

The thought must be, not that one doubts the existence of underived value, but that one’s life is marred by its absence. That is how Aristotle thinks about the highest good, even as he admits that a life of pure contemplation is less human than divine:

But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best

21. This inference assumes that explanations of value cannot be circular, and that they must come to an end.

22. As Aristotle insists at the very beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1094a19–23; Ross 1908: 3.

thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.<sup>23</sup>

It is not at all clear, however, that we must aim, here and now, to make ourselves immortal. Or to generalize away from Aristotle, it is not clear why we must aim, here and now, to include in our lives activities of underived value. In sufficiently bad conditions, the best life might be one of activities whose value is wholly derivative, devoted solely to the good of others. Suppose that Mill had never had his breakdown — we have been given no reason, so far, to think it inevitable — and that he had continued to work for a single aim: the improvement of the world. Would that have been a mistake? Should he have sacrificed derivative for underived goods, the relief of suffering for a poetic appreciation of which (in our imagined scenario) he feels no need?

Perhaps the view is not that we must aim at activities whose value is underived, no matter what the circumstance, but that they constitute the ideal life, the life it would be best for us to have, if only we could.<sup>24</sup> But again, this is unclear. To begin with, it is not clear that the best life would consist solely, or primarily, of underived goods. It is true that *some* derivative goods — those of moral virtue, according to Aristotle — rest on trouble and imperfection. They solve problems we would rather be without. But not all derivative goods are like that. At least in many cases, the value of creative activity is not final without qualification; it is not underived. The value of composing music is explained by the value of listening to it, and perhaps by the value of performing it. If there were no reason to perform or listen to music, there would be no reason to compose it: the value of composition, though not merely instrumental, is derivative. Still, it does not turn on difficulties we ought to wish away. The complaints against moral virtue do not apply. Why, then, should it not be part, perhaps a central part, of an ideal life?

23. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b32–1178a2; Ross 1908: 195.

24. See Lawrence 1993.

There is a tempting but illicit argument to the contrary. Suppose a life contains the greatest possible extent of underived goods. It might seem that this life is bound to be ideal. In particular, it might seem that a life of this kind could not be improved by the addition of derivative goods. After all, their value comes from that of the underived goods: the derivative goods contain no value that is not already there. But the model behind this argument is flawed. Perhaps it works for means to ends. You cannot make an end better by taking further means, if the value of the means is purely instrumental.<sup>25</sup> (If you could, there would be reason to pursue ends in the most elaborate and indirect ways.) But nothing like this holds elsewhere. Suppose the value of listening to music is underived: it is good in itself. The value of composing music is explained in terms of this. It does not follow that one should never compose music if one can listen instead, that if one could always listen, composing would add nothing to one's life.

If this is right, it is even unclear that the best life could not consist solely of derivative goods. At any rate, that doesn't follow just from the logic of derived and underived value. If a derivative good can add to a life whose activities have underived value, why not exceed or replace them? In the particular case, this may not be plausible. The best life would not be one of composing without listening to music, as if the paradigm were Beethoven, deaf. But that is a substantive claim and not a platitude. Nothing in the concept of underived value implies that the value derived from it cannot be greater, or sufficient on its own for the ideal life.<sup>26</sup>

So far, I have argued that derivative goods may figure in the best life, and might even exhaust it, so far as the logic of value is concerned. This casts doubt on our conjectured explanation, according to which the cause of the midlife crisis is the apparent absence in one's life of the

25. The qualification matters; see Frankfurt 1992: §9.

26. On a natural reading, the criterion of "self-sufficiency" proposed in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* — that the best or highest good "on its own makes life desirable and lacking nothing" (1097b15–16; Ross 1908: 11) — is thus distinct from that of being final without qualification. For an interpretation that ties sufficiency more closely to finality, see Lear 2005: Ch. 3.

activities that make life worth living: ones whose value is underived. It does not follow from that absence, at least not automatically, that one's life is not ideal.

But the diagnosis has a deeper, more significant, flaw. It is not just that a life of derivative goods could be, in principle, ideal, but that the apparent presence of underived goods does not prevent the crisis — as it should, if their absence is the cause. Imagine someone who accepts the underived value of intellectual progress. It matters in itself, according to her, whether we answer scientific questions and solve mathematical problems. These things are worth doing apart from their relation to anything else. As she sees it, the value of discovering truths and proving theorems does not derive from their technological applications. It does not even derive from the prior value of knowing. What matters most fundamentally is finding out. Her days are dedicated to pure science, replete with activities of these kinds. Does she thereby differ from Mill? Is she safe from the critical moment? Not at all. Our scientist can think the very thoughts that generate the crisis: that while her projects are worthwhile, their value underived, their progress is somehow empty. She solves a problem, makes a discovery, shifts her research, moves on. Each step makes sense to her, but the whole seems like a mere succession, an endless striving. What does it come to, in the end? Nor would it help if she could complete her inquiry, answer every question, locate a final theory. For then what would she do?

The appeal to underived value fails, too, because it obscures the connection, registered from the start of our discussion, between the midlife crisis and recognition of death. What prompts the crisis, often enough, is a vivid awareness of one's own mortality, on the horizon though not close up. What does this have to do with the explanation of value? Why should the fact of death suggest that our activities draw their value from elsewhere? The concept of finality seems irrelevant here. What death communicates is not that our lives have value of a certain kind, but that they are finite. Our achievements, whatever they are worth, are always numbered. The midlife crisis has to do with our

relation to time. Think of the way in which I brought the crisis into the life of the scientist, despite her faith in the underived value of what she does. No matter how important her discoveries, they generate a sense of repetition and exhaustion. Each one is completed, left behind, replaced by another project, and the whole is a mere accumulation. Again, the crisis has a temporal aspect that death makes vivid. This dimension is lost in the Aristotelian view.

Mill may be right that we need to know "what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed" (Mill 1873: 121). We need a conception of the positive goods in human life, beyond the relief of suffering. We may even agree with Aristotle that the perennial sources of happiness will be sources of value whose value is underived. But the appearance of underived value in our lives is not sufficient to protect us from the midlife crisis. And so our task remains. We must explain why the temporal finitude of human life provokes the midlife crisis. We must distinguish it from fear of death. And we must confront the paradox, noted once before, that the crisis is not solved by the prospect of immortality alone. It is this paradox that makes the midlife crisis seem both inevitable and incoherent. What do we want in relation to time if neither finitude nor indefinite extension offer it? What kind of infinity do we desire? Can it even be conceived?

## II

You may already be impatient. Isn't it clear what is missing in a life that is "just one damned thing after another"?<sup>27</sup> What is missing is narrative unity: a story of development and progress over time, not just of repetition. This is what the scientist lacks.

The idea that — as a matter of psychological fact — we are disposed to narrate our lives, and the ethical claim that doing so contributes to a life well-lived, have been recently influential.<sup>28</sup> Like Galen Strawson,

27. Attributed to Elbert Hubbard; see Knowles 2009: 417.

28. An important source in moral philosophy is MacIntyre 1981.

I am sceptical on both counts.<sup>29</sup> No doubt some of us go in for self-narration; some of us don't — except to the extent that it is called for by particular projects we have. Once we complete those projects, we formulate new ones, without caring much about the shape of the whole. At the same time, a life that lacks narrative unity can be fulfilling. The failure of narrative need not precipitate the midlife crisis; nor does narrative prevent it.

The argument for these conclusions is, in effect, the account developed below. Once we understand the explanation of the midlife crisis, on the lines that I propose, we will see that the crisis and its solution have nothing to do with self-narration. There are problems involved in living an episodic life, a life devoted to consecutive, limited projects, but the answer does not lie in the construction of a larger story into which the episodes fit. My description of the scientist anticipates this point, since it does not rest on the absence of an overarching narrative. Even if she has a consuming goal, the search for a grand theory of widgets, and she is convinced that the search has underived value, the scientist may wonder what, in the end, she will have achieved. Suppose she has the final theory. Now what? Or think back to Mill. Whatever the reason for his breakdown, it was not for want of narrative. The script of his life was all too clear: he was raised to be a reformer of the world. But he too could ask, "Suppose all your objects in life were realized [...] would that be a great joy and happiness to you?" And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!'" (Mill 1873: 112)

When we first read this passage, it seemed baffling. How could the achievement of your life's ambition fail to be a source of joy? Hearing an echo in Mill, we turned to Aristotle on the finality of the highest good. And there we ran aground. But there is a different echo to be heard, not of the distant past but of Mill's contemporary, Arthur Schopenhauer. The problem with getting what you want, for Schopenhauer, is that it means your pursuit is over: you are finished. If this end is all you

29. Strawson 2004; his essay cites many advocates of "narrativity" in its descriptive and ethical forms.

cared about, you now have nothing to do. Your life needs direction; you must have desires, aims, projects that are so far incomplete. And yet this, too, is fatal. For wanting what you do not have is suffering. As Schopenhauer writes in *The World as Will and Representation*:

The basis of all willing [...] is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin [the animal] is therefore destined to pain. If, on the other hand, it lacks objects of willing, because it is at once deprived of them again by too easy a satisfaction, a fearful emptiness and boredom comes over it; in other words, its being and its existence become an intolerable burden for it. Hence it swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents. (Schopenhauer 1844: I.312)

The argument is apparently simple. Either your will has objects or it doesn't: you want things or you don't. If you don't, you are aimless, and your life will be empty. This is the condition of boredom. If you do have desires, they must be for outcomes so far unattained. These are the targets of your pursuit, and thus of the activities that constitute your life. But it is painful to want what you do not have. In staving off boredom by finding things to do, you have condemned yourself to misery.

Schopenhauer's bleak depiction of human life may seem unjustly cynical. Perhaps we must avoid boredom by having goals, and if we achieve the ones we have, we will need to make new ones. But the pursuit of one's ends is not pure suffering. Consider, again, the relentless scientist. Right now, she wants to solve a certain problem; that is what she is working on. While it may follow from this aim that she takes a positive attitude to the outcome in which she has solved the problem and a negative attitude to the present circumstance, in which she hasn't, that attitude may be one of dispassionate preference. To call her experience "suffering" is to give an exaggerated sense of

the emotional impact of unsatisfied desire. Nor is it clear why the scientist cannot enjoy her progress towards the goal, the incremental steps by which she constructs her solution. Most likely, that is how you imagined her life — at least until the crisis came.

These rejoinders strike me as basically fair. Schopenhauer's rhetoric of suffering is misplaced, both as a description of as-yet-unsatisfied desire, and as an account of the midlife crisis. But I believe there is something right in his despairing conception of our relationship with our own ends. Think of it this way. What gives purpose to your life is having goals, aims, objects of will. Yet in pursuing them, you either fail — which is not good — or in succeeding, extinguish their power to guide your activities. If what you care about is achieving *X* — making this discovery, solving this problem, writing this paper, ending this war — the completion of your project may constitute something of value, but it means that the project can no longer give purpose to your life. Sure, you have other ends, and you can formulate new ones. The problem is not the risk of running out, of reaching the aimless state of Schopenhauer's boredom. It is that your engagement with value is self-destructive. The way in which you relate to the projects that matter most to you is by trying to complete them, and so to expel them from your life. Your days are devoted to ending, one by one, the activities that give them meaning. The fact that you will never finish this process of elimination does not help. Nor does the fact that you feel satisfaction, perhaps for some time, when each project is checked off. It remains true that your relationship with the values that structure your life is antagonistic to itself: by engaging with them in the mode of pursuit and completion, you aim at outcomes that preclude the possibility of such engagement. When you are done with a project, you have to move on. In pursuing a goal, you are trying to exhaust your interaction with something good, as if you were to make friends for the sake of saying goodbye. It is this structural absurdity that we learn from Schopenhauer, even if he is wrong about the phenomenology of desire.

This reading invites pressing questions, not just of clarification. One is how the paradoxical character of our relation to the projects we value bears on the explanation of the midlife crisis. A second is whether there is any way out. Is there a mode of engagement with value that does not undermine itself? We can make progress here by drawing another distinction, which again has roots in Aristotle. Begin with what we do, with the activities that occupy our lives, picked out by bare infinitives: walk home, prove a theorem, study philosophy. Not every activity is worthwhile, or is believed to be, but some are. The scientist holds that discovering certain truths, solving certain problems, is not only valuable, but that its value is underived. The distinction we need at present is not about the value of activities, or its source, but about their orientation to a final state. What I will call a "telic activity" includes in its nature a terminal point, the point at which it will be finished and thus exhausted. The scientist's activities are telic in this sense. They are finished, and exhausted, when she has proved the theorem, discovered the truth, solved the scientific problem. Walking home tonight is a telic activity, since it aims at getting home. So is writing this essay, since it is over when the essay is done. Almost anything we would be inclined to call a "project" will be telic: buying a house, starting a family, earning a promotion, getting a job. These are all things one can finish doing or complete.

Importantly, however, not all activities are like this. Some do not aim at a point of termination or exhaustion: a final state in which they have been achieved and there is no more to do. For instance, as well as walking home, getting from *A* to *B*, you can go for a walk with no particular destination. Going for a walk is an "atelic" activity.<sup>30</sup>

30. The vocabulary here is drawn from the study of linguistic aspect (Comrie 1976: §2.2). A question arises in the case of non-durative or instantaneous acts, like starting a race or reaching the summit, which Comrie counts as neither telic nor atelic. Since they aim at completion, I classify such activities as telic. The same goes for projects that have a terminal point one cannot reach, like enumerating the primes or squaring the circle. An earlier terminology is due to Zeno Vendler (1957), whose "activities" are essentially atelic; "accomplishments" are telic activities that take time; and "achievements" are instantaneous acts. More recently, Sebastian Rödl (2007: 34–43) has distinguished

The same is true of hanging out with friends or family, of studying philosophy, of living a decent life. You can stop doing these things, and you eventually will, but you cannot finish or complete them in the relevant sense. It is not just that you can repeat them, as you could repeatedly walk home, but that they do not have a telic character. There is no outcome whose achievement exhausts them. They are not in that way limited.

Although it is hard to be sure, the contrast I have just drawn may be the topic of a notoriously difficult passage in *Metaphysics*  $\theta$ . Here Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of action, or *praxis*: ones that are “incomplete,” such as learning or building something, since “if you are learning, you have not at the same time learned”; and “that sort of action to which its completion belongs,” such as seeing, understanding, thinking, or living well. The former are examples of *kinesis* and are by nature telic. Knowing such-and-such is the terminus of learning it, at which point this particular act of education is complete. The latter seem atelic in that they do not by nature “come to an end” and are not “incomplete”: “at the same time, one is seeing and has seen, is understanding and has understood, is thinking and has thought.”<sup>31</sup> In just the same way, going for a walk does not by nature come to an end, since it contains no point of termination or exhaustion: you can always keep wandering. Nor is it incomplete: at the same time, one is walking and has walked.<sup>32</sup>

This way of putting things brings out an important aspect of atelic activities. In defining such activities, we could emphasize their

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“finite” and “infinite” ends, which correspond roughly to telic and atelic activities. There are some contrasts, though. Rödl counts as an infinite end the state of health, which is not an activity at all. And he argues for claims about the unity of such ends that play no part in our discussion.

31. This reading of the passage follows Aryeh Kosman (2013: 39–45), whose translation I adopt. According to an alternative reading, *energeiai* are essentially static, not things that can be done; see Graham 1980. On this interpretation, even atelic activities, such as contemplating God, will be kinetic.
32. Confusingly, Aristotle gives walking as an instance of *kinesis*, but as Kosman argues, we can take him to mean walking from A to B; see Kosman 2013: 43–4.

inexhaustibility, the fact that they do not aim at a terminal point. But we can also emphasize the fact that there is nothing you need to do in order to perform an atelic activity than what you are doing right now. If you are going for a walk, hanging out with friends, studying philosophy, or living a decent life, you are not on the way to achieving your end. You are already there. Likewise, we could emphasize the fact that telic activities can be completed, once and for all. But we can also emphasize the fact that pursuing them makes sense only if they are not complete, at least not yet, so that you lack what the completion of the activity would bring.

We are almost back to Schopenhauer. What he is assuming, in effect, is that the ultimate objects of the will are telic. We may engage in atelic activities — go for walks, hang out with friends, study philosophy — but only as a means to something else. We are walking from A to B, or going for a stroll in order to regain our energy for some other endeavour. We are hanging out with friends in order to get something done, if only to watch a film or play a game together. We are studying philosophy in order to learn things, solve problems, or come to terms with death. These ends do “[spring] from lack, from deficiency,” if not from pain: the lack or deficiency that consists in being at a distance from the terminal states at which they aim (Schopenhauer 1844: I.196). And our relation to them has the self-destructive character marked above.<sup>33</sup> In pursuing them, we are pursuing ends for which success can only mean extinction. It is as if we are striving to eradicate meaning from our lives, frustrated only by the fact that our ends are too numerous or that we keep on adding more. Our way of engaging with the activities we find worthwhile is to exhaust and then discard them. Is that the best we can do?

It is what we are doing when the midlife crisis comes. This is my diagnosis. The crisis is explained by, and follows from, an excessive investment in telic activities, not as means but ends. Those who are subject to the crisis may value activities that are atelic — the harmless

33. On the self-destructive nature of *kinesis*, see Kosman 2013: 44, 67.

pleasures of walking or talking to friends – where these are the objects of final desire. But the activities that matter most to them, the ones that give meaning to their lives, are ones that aim at terminal states. To be oriented in this way is a normative defect, and the experience of crisis is a distressing though often inarticulate awareness of this defect in one's life. This is what disturbed the scientist: not that her ends had only derivative value, but that they were projects she would complete, one after another. Hence the feeling of repetition and futility. Again and again, her engagement with what she cares about removes it from her life, as a completed task, and she is forced to start over. This explanation applies to Mill, though in a different way. When he asks how he would feel if his aims were realized and answers with despair, he is responding to the achievability of his primary ends. The problem is not that he is likely to complete them any time soon, but that the project of reforming the world, however significant, is one to which he relates as a task to be exhausted and set aside. His work is devoted to destroying its own purpose. It is not a mistake to have ends like this. But it is a mistake for them to dominate one's life. Mill was governed by an overriding aim, to bring about reforms that would make society just and minimize human suffering. Imagining how he would feel if this aim were achieved is a way to bring out its telic character, and so the fact that his relationship with the good was turned against itself.

Unlike the diagnoses we have considered before, the appeal to telic ends explains the connection between death and the midlife crisis. Pausing in the midst of the life, in the rush of demands and deadlines, I know that I am half way through. Death is not imminent. I am not afraid that I will not finish the projects I am engaged in right now. But the best I can hope for is another forty years. In the end, my works, whatever they count for, will be numbered. This is distinctive of telic ends. One asks how many, not how much. How many essays published? How many books? How many students taught? To think about the finitude of life in the face of death is to see that one's ends are telic, if they are. It is in this mood that I imagine looking back,

counting my achievements and failures, wondering "What do they add up to, after all?"

If the problem is that our ends are telic, we can see why death elicits the crisis and why immortality does not help. Gaining infinite duration does not affect the nature of our projects. It does not change how we engage with them; nor does it give us atelic ends. Unlike the diagnosis in terms of derivative value, this argument explains how the midlife crisis involves our relation to time. The distinction between telic and atelic ends is one of temporal structure. And it is at midlife that the telic character of one's most cherished ends is liable to appear, as they are completed or prove impossible.<sup>34</sup> One has the job one worked for many years to get, the partner one hoped to meet, the family one meant to start – or one does not. Until this point, one may have had no reason to dwell on the exhaustion of one's ambitions.

We can even see why, in light of the midlife crisis, one might urgently reject the projects in which one is presently engaged, grasping for others – a new job or a new relationship – as if the problem were not that they are telic, but their particular aims. There may be misfortunes to which that is a rational response. Maybe you do you have the wrong occupation, or a loveless marriage. But as a way of dealing with the crisis I have identified, a crisis in the temporality of one's ends, it is confused. Acknowledging a problem with your present ends, but not perceiving its source, you blame it on what they are, and attempt to start over. So long as your new ambitions are telic, however, they will at most distract you from the structural defect in your life. Fast cars and wild affairs are not the answer.

Finally, the present view allows for the persistence of value in the midlife crisis. Even if you fail to acknowledge or articulate the significance of atelic ends, you may insist that your projects are worthwhile. There is reason to act as you do in pursuit of telic ends. At

34. Only *liable* to appear: the crisis may come earlier, as it did for Mill, and it may come later or not at all. A reflective adolescent might see that the projects with which she could occupy her later life are telic before she embarks on any of them, and sense the perversity of their pursuit. Others may be indifferent, or rely on ends whose scale obscures their telic character.

the same time, you may sense that your relationship with such ends is subtly self-destructive or absurd.

The solution is in a way obvious, though not on that account easy. You can resolve the midlife crisis, or prevent it, by investing more deeply in atelic ends. Among the activities that matter most to you, the ones that give meaning to your life, must be activities that have no terminal point. Since they cannot be completed, your engagement with atelic ends will not exhaust or destroy them. Nor does it invite the sense of frustration Schopenhauer found in telic ends, the sense of being at a distance from one's goal, that fulfillment is always in the future, or the past. An atelic end is realized in the present as much as it can ever be realized. What you want from it you have right now: to be going for a walk, hanging out with friends, studying philosophy, living a decent life.

We should picture here a shift in the order of reasons assumed in Schopenhauer's argument. Instead of spending time with friends in order to complete a shared project — building a matchstick model of Forbes Field — one pursues a common project in order to spend time with friends. Instead of studying Aristotle in order to write an essay, which is a telic end, one writes an essay in order to study Aristotle. This should be our advice to the scientist. Do not work only to solve this problem or discover that truth, as if the tasks you complete are all that matter; solve the problem or seek the truth in order to be at work. When you relate to it in this way, your life is not a mere succession of deeds. There is no pressure to feel that the activities you care about are done with, one by one, and so to ask, repeatedly, what next? The projects you value may end but the process of pursuing them does not.

Alternatively, we may picture someone who interacts with valuable outcomes not, or not just, in the mode of pursuit but of appreciation. We should urge the scientist to care not just for the completion of her projects but for their retrospective contemplation. This prospect answers an objection to the argument above. According to this argument, there is something self-destructive in pursuing telic ends, since the completion of a project expels it from your life. The objection

is that you can still engage with a project when its aims have been achieved, not by pursuing them, but by reflecting on their achievement. This is true, but it confirms my point: such affirmation is atelic.

If this is the answer to the midlife crisis, it is clear why narrative is not the point. The defect of the episodic life is not that the episodes do not fit into a larger structure of development and growth, but that their temporal structure is telic. The remedy is to engage in them for the sake of atelic ends, in a life that need not have variety, suspense, or drama. The contemplative life may be quite dull from a novelist's point of view. But if it is shaped by a concern for contemplation that is not purely instrumental, it is not subject to the sense of exhaustion and emptiness that marks the critical phase.<sup>35</sup> A focus on atelic ends, which have no future goals, may even conflict with the desire for narrative. Stories differ in many ways, and I have no theory of narrative to propose. But it tends towards closure: beginnings, middles, and ends. If what you care about most of all is that your life have a certain arc, then in travelling along that arc you are moving towards a point at which the arc is complete and your purpose is lost. If you are telling the story of your life, and you hope to avoid the midlife crisis, better not to tell a story of this kind.

In effect, I am urging a philosopher's version of a self-help slogan: *live in the present*. This advice is reminiscent of the turn to "mindfulness" in clinical psychology.<sup>36</sup> But although there are connections, and the topic is worth exploring further, we can note some differences, too. Advocates of mindfulness emphasize attention to the present as a source of liberation from automaticity, from unreflective patterns of

35. The fact that contemplation is atelic may tempt us to re-interpret the *Nicomachean Ethics* as concerned not with finality but teleology. Perhaps the problem with morally virtuous action is that it is incomplete. But while particular acts of virtue may be telic, the activity of living well, even in its political form, is not. What is more, the argument of Book X is not that virtuous acts are marred by their telic character but that the life of politics has an aim beyond itself: a kind of happiness that does not consist in political activity.

36. Langer 1989 is a classic account of the psychological research behind the clinical practice; Kabat-Zinn 1994 relates mindfulness therapy to meditation.

routine that foreclose one's possibilities and lead one to miss out on life. What I take from Schopenhauer, via Aristotle, is not the need to attend to what is happening right now, or an objection to habitual behaviour, but a call to structure one's values in certain ways. In principle, one could meet this call by orienting oneself towards atelic ends one performs habitually or inattentively. On the other hand, attention to the present may suffice for non-instrumental interest in atelic ends. Attention is not just cognitive but a matter of one's evaluative focus. Absorbing oneself in the present is a way to find value that does not depend on the terminal structure of telic ends.

I said that the solution to the midlife crisis, while obvious, is not easy. You cannot simply decide what to care about. And if your life has been structured for many years around the execution of projects and the achievement of ambitions, that will not change overnight. But the mechanics of this process — how to engineer the transformation or reversal that solves the crisis — are not my topic. What I have done is to identify the object of the change you need to effect in yourself, however difficult it might be.

Nor would I pretend for a moment that the idea of living in the present, understood through the concept of an atelic end, is any sort of panacea. What it speaks to, I believe, is the form of midlife crisis identified, partly by stipulation, in my opening remarks. It will not prevent you from being afraid to die; nor will it reconcile you to failure and the lives you will never live. There is a kind of frustration from which you are protected by atelic ends, the kind in which you are doing something, but never get it done. It does not follow that atelic ends are easy — think of doing philosophy well — or that you will be able to engage with the ones that matter most. There are forms of finitude my diagnosis does nothing to address: the temporal finitude of life, the finitude of our capacities in the face of everything there is to do. There are more worthy ends than any of us has time or talent to embrace.

A final question. I have argued that there is a normative defect in your life if the activities that give it meaning, the ones that matter most to you, are telic ends. The midlife crisis is an apprehension of this

defect. The solution is to invest more deeply in atelic ends, treating them not as trivial entertainments, but as sources of significance for you. This leaves open, in some degree, your attitude towards the activities you aim to complete. Should your concern for them be wholly instrumental? Are they simply means through which you engage with atelic ends? Or if they have non-instrumental value, is it always less than the value of the atelic ends by which they can be subsumed? My answer in each case is no. Telic ends may have non-instrumental value, and it would be a mistake to neglect or deny this. Nor does anything follow, directly, about the weight of this value in any given case. Still, I am tempted by a weaker claim, which can be framed by contrasting, once again, the ideal life — the life it would be best for us to have, if only we could — with the life that is best in the circumstances. The self-destructive quality of our engagement with telic ends may not show that they lack non-instrumental value, or that their value is limited. But it is regrettable. I am inclined to say, with some anxiety and much self-doubt, that the best life, the ideal life, would be one in which we could, without evaluative error, treat telic activities purely as means.

But why stop there? Suppose that we achieve this life, giving up on telic ends. We pursue projects with friends in order to spend time with them, write essays in order to do philosophy. Our final ends remain, preserved and inexhaustible, in our lives. But there is a catch. Even though they are just means, we still engage in telic activities. We cannot simply spend time with friends, we have to spend it in some endeavour. We cannot simply do philosophy: we have to read a book, work through a problem, write a paper. There is an ineluctable strain of self-destruction not in atelic ends but in our way of relating to them, even now. Perhaps, if we were gods, we could contemplate the world through basic action, just like that. But we are not. There is an ideal to which we are directed by the normative defect of pursuing telic ends, though this ideal is necessarily out of reach. Our relationship with atelic ends is inevitably mediated, perpetually threatened and renewed, never wholly freed from the paradoxical character Schopenhauer finds endemic to the will. Schopenhauer's theory is too bleak, but it contains

a grain of truth, a truth present in the observation that walking, going for a walk, that humdrum instance of an atelic end, is always scarred by imperfection, marred by telic means, one foot placed in front of the other, an obstacle over-stepped, that walking is at best, for us, “a constantly prevented falling” (Schopenhauer 1844: I.311).<sup>37</sup>

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