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Compassion, Mourning and Sharing the World*

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Abstract. It is widely recognized that adopting an emotively charged attitude to others comes at a cost. An obvious example is the phenomenon of ‘compassion fatigue’ suffered by care-workers who frequently deal with human suffering and undergo considerable emotional strain as a result. A comparable but more widespread phenomenon occurs with the loss of someone close. In this paper I compare two attitudes to death, and two ways of understanding mourning: one emphasizes the need to move on after loss has been suffered, the other stresses the need to reaffirm the value of what was lost. I argue that the former approach, which has dominated recent thought on this topic, represents a potentially damaging withdrawal from the social-emotional grounds of compassion and related values.

It is widely recognized that adopting an emotively charged attitude to others comes at a cost. An obvious example is the phenomenon of ‘compassion fatigue’ suffered by care-workers who frequently deal with human suffering and undergo considerable emotional strain as a result. A comparable but more widespread phenomenon occurs with the loss of someone close, and in particular, the practice of mourning.

‘Mourning’ denotes a range of human responses to the loss of another person, paradigmatically, though not necessarily, through death. For many people, this experience is characterized by a sense of emptiness, which has taken the place of a source of value and meaning, like the companionship of another, a way of life, or a sense of innocence. The two most influential ways in which reconciliation with loss has been described in philosophical, psychological, and sociological literature contrast strongly with one another. One emphasizes liberation from one’s attachment to the source of value, the other emphasizes a reaffirmation of that value, albeit in a transfigured form. Accordingly, the former focuses primarily on the individual who has suffered the loss

while the latter stresses the value of the original bond, and its significance for human interrelatedness.

In the twentieth century, influential work on mourning has typically been of the former kind, emphasizing the psychological trauma an individual suffers due to the absence of the valued object, and on her inability to overcome this and 'move on' with her life. In this paper, I will argue that despite its easily recognizable advantages, this approach, taken on its own, encourages a potentially damaging withdrawal from the social-emotional grounds of compassion and related values.

I will begin by looking at some of the more influential accounts of the development and historical significance of these models, and will compare standard views of their sociological and psychological underpinning. I will then advance some reasons for thinking that the dominant model of reconciliation encourages us to let go of our attachments both too hastily and too fully, and that this involves a potentially damaging failure to reaffirm the value of what has been lost. I will present grounds for thinking, further, that this may contribute to the disintegration of bonds that constitute a frame of reference through which the mutually affirmed meanings and values of a community are established.

The contrasting approaches to mourning distinguished here can be usefully represented in philosophical thought by Freud and Kierkegaard.¹ Freud describes mourning as a process of liberation from the psychological burden of the cherished object which inhibits the ego. In his famous essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia', he describes 'the work which mourning performs' as a means of achieving psychological reconciliation with loss, following the withdrawal of the libido from its attachment to the lost object.² This process, according to Freud, is resisted by the ego, which remains bound to the absent source of value, and withdrawn from the world, until it can finally suppress its loss in the unconscious.

Freud proposes that the inability to overcome loss, and to lay its object to rest, results in a state of melancholia. In this state, the ego, unable to find fulfilment and recognition in the absent object of

¹ The comparison between the anthropology developed by Freud and Kierkegaard has been made before, and notably so by Ernest Becker in his famous 'The Denial of Death'. I follow Becker in suggesting that Freud and Kierkegaard address similar issues in human psychology, but in my view with different conclusions. See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, The Free Press, Macmillan, London, 1973.

² Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). In J. Strachey ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914-1916): *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), pp. 237-258.

affection, turns to self-hatred, making new life, new loves and new engagement with the world difficult if not impossible. In the most severe cases this state of utter dejection and self-doubt may even lead the melancholiac to suicide. In healthy mourning, on the other hand, the fault is not found in the ego but rather in the world which has come to be viewed as deficient and alien. By gradually dispelling the illusion of the world's hostility, the mourner may then attain reconciliation, and reclaim her place in it. Ultimately, on Freud's view, the object which is a source of value and meaning, once lost, becomes a burden which needs to be shirked in order that the world can again become familiar and manageable.

Kierkegaard presents a very different approach to mourning. In an important section of 'The Works of Love', entitled 'The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who is Dead', he suggests that on the contrary, we have a duty towards the object of our affection, even after it is gone. In particular, we have a duty to keep it alive through our love towards it.³ Our ability to carry out this duty, on Kierkegaard's view, is constitutive of our moral character as human beings – if we struggle to do so, this may be a sign of deeper emotional and spiritual problems, barring one from enacting genuine love and compassion in the first place. To illustrate his point Kierkegaard draws a parallel with parents who only feel affection for their children insofar as they expect to benefit from this in the future. He contrasts this utilitarian attitude with the clearly more commendable attitude of parents whose love for their children is not contingent on any such reward. Likewise, Kierkegaard views mourning as an especially important expression of the moral character of human beings. This is because in mourning, we enact our love in a circumstance in which any question of reward has become void. Thus, when properly exercised, mourning is the act through which we may express our love most fully and confirm the lasting nature and sincerity of our attachment.

The contrast between these two approaches exemplifies a radical shift in the perception and role of mourning, as well as attitudes towards the dead more generally, which Philippe Ariès describes in his major work on this topic, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Early Middle Ages to the Present*.⁴ Ariès identifies four periods in the

³ Soren Kierkegaard, 'The Work of Love in Recollecting One Who is Dead' in: *The Works of Love*, Howard V. Hoang, Edna H. Hong ed. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 345-359.

⁴ Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

evolution of the Western treatment of death and attitudes towards the dead. The first three periods are all characterized by the recognition of death as a necessary part of life, and as formative for various dimensions of living. During the first period, dominant until the late middle ages, and referred to by Ariès as 'Tamed Death', there is an emphasis on the inevitability of death, and on preparation for it; in the second period, 'One's Own Death', the dying individual rather than the phenomenon itself comes to the forefront; and from the early eighteenth century, in a period Ariès calls 'Thy Death', the intimate dimension of death is accentuated and the focus shifted to the death of those closest to us. The fourth stage, however, marks a fundamental change in that death becomes a taboo.⁵ Ariès argues that this period, 'Forbidden Death', grows out of the previous one, where death and mourning were sentimentalized, with spontaneous displays of heightened emotion. These eventually led to the practice of sheltering the dying from the reality of their condition, in order to spare them the weight of the emotional burden the mourner is forced to undertake. Eventually this protective attitude is extended to cover the relation between the mourner and the rest of society. As a result, grief becomes shameful, and its expression is treated as a sign of bad manners, or even mental instability.

Michelle Vovelle, although critical of many aspects of Ariès' analysis of the phenomenon, reaffirms his conclusion, suggesting that a significant factor in bringing about this striking change in the perception of death and mourning was the shock European societies underwent as a result of the Great War.⁶ The extreme emotions that survivors expressed, Vovelle argues, were soon replaced with an equally extreme avoidance of death, leading to the suppression of emotions associated with it. This response quickly became the accepted standard in the twentieth century. Both anthropologists agree however that this revolution is undergirded by a more general transformation in European perceptions of value.

Ariès argues that first, the advance of medical science has elevated life to the status of the highest value, to be protected at all costs, making death into a failure rather than a natural end; and secondly that life itself has become something that should above all be happy and

⁵ Ariès quotes the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, and substantiates his claim that death has replaced sex as western society's greatest taboo. He suggests that since Modernity children are more likely to be openly taught about sex, but have become shielded from issues connected with death. See Ariès op. cit. pp. 92-93.

⁶ Michelle Vovelle, *La Mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris, Gallimard, 1983 ; rééd. 2001).

untainted by negative emotions, with mourning becoming an obstacle to this. He claims that the growing popularity of cremation is witness to this transformation. This is because cremation is usually relatively informal, reducing the ritual aspect of burial to a minimum, and denies any permanent location to the remains of the deceased – symbolically depriving the dead of any place amongst the living.⁷ Vovelle proposes that a further relevant factor is the modern ‘cult of youth’, an apotheosis of life which views death as a scandal and accordingly sees old age as a threat and an embarrassment. He also draws attention to the dissolution of the connection between death and religious belief, which previously gave it a proper place in society’s broader understanding of human existence.⁸

The shift described by Ariès and Vovelle however is arguably also visible within the religious communities themselves. Comparing the old and the twentieth century Liturgies of the Dead, Richard Conrad argues that the new Office of the Dead is in part a prayer for the living and in part a meditation on the Paschal Mystery intended to give the living comfort; by contrast the old Office constituted a prayer *for the dead*.⁹ Conrad notes that the new Office of the Dead has been made to conform exactly to the standard pattern of the Office eradicating any sense of *difference* concerning the time for which it is intended. By contrast, this difference, as Conrad points out, was emphasized in the old Office, which carried with it a sense of fear, bewilderment and anger that God should permit death. Moreover, the old Office of the Dead was intended as a prayer *in persona defuncti*, thereby symbolizing the inclusion of the dead in the praying community and our company with the dead in spirit when this is no longer possible in the flesh. In a sense, this amounts to a refusal to let go completely. Of course, mourning our losses has sometimes been considered irreverent by theists, in light of God’s wisdom and omnipotence. But the old Liturgy of the Dead emphasized that God’s will is not always easily understood, and suggests that it might be equally irreverent to doubt the reality of the loss entailed by death.

It seems, then, that a consistent and widespread change has occurred in prevailing attitudes to loss. The consequences of this changed

⁷ See Ariès *op. cit.* p. 91.

⁸ See Vovelle *op. cit.*

⁹ Richard Conrad ‘Complaining to God or Soothing the Grief? – The old and New Liturgies of the Dead Compared’, Lecture given to the Association for Latin Liturgy, Leicester, October 2002; also ‘Thomas Aquinas on when not to accept God’s will’ forthcoming in *The Meaning of Mourning* ed. Mikołaj Sławkowski-Rode.

perspective have been evaluated critically in many contexts including the ethical, the psychological and the spiritual. I would like to propose a new perspective in which the negative consequences of unfulfilled mourning include a lowered axiological¹⁰ sensitivity associated with a closing down of the possibilities of experience. I will argue that as a result the framework of mutually affirmed meanings and values, which constitutes the 'shared world' of human communities, is threatened, damaging prospects for virtues like compassion at both the individual and community level. This does not mean that the model of mourning represented by Kierkegaard should be adhered to exclusively. Loss is an extremely complicated issue, and so it is probable that one-sided approaches are overly simplistic. This is what the renowned British sociologist Tony Walter means when he proposes that all societies must both deny and affirm death.¹¹ But even if there are times when some kind of 'denial', evasion, or avoidance of death is inevitable, this does not mean that the negative effects of denying death should be ignored, let alone welcomed.

In the second part of this paper I will consider the nature of the loss, and the process of reconciliation in phenomenological terms by developing an account of 'shared experience' and how it relates to the creation of meaning and value. I will look at how a shared world of value and meaning is created through our encounters with others, and how the other's death threatens this shared world. Furthermore, I will suggest that through the process of mourning, understood as a reaffirmation of the original bond, the value and meaning of the shared world may be preserved in the experience of the individual and the community.

Józef Tischner, a Polish existential theologian, greatly influenced by Kierkegaard, considers the key to axiology (the study of value) to be the moment of meeting another human being. He describes this moment as the 'source experience' of human ethical self-knowledge.¹² In the tradition of Levinas, Tischner explains how the other person is revealed to us through her face, and how this enables dialogue in which the world is disclosed to both as shared in their mutual experience of it as

¹⁰ e.g. concerning value; normative.

¹¹ Tony Walter, 'Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?', *Sociology*, Vol. 25 No. 2, (May 1991), pp. 293-310. Walter argues, following Dumont and Foss, that death is an inherently problematic experience and that 'society must deny death if it is to get on with its everyday business, yet it must accept it if its members are to retain contact with reality'. C.f. See R. G. Doumont and D. C. Foss, *The American View of Death: Acceptance or Denial?* (Cambridge, Mass, Schenkman, 1972).

¹² See Józef Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości* (Kraków, Znak, 1982).

the *Lebenswelt* – or the ‘life-world’. According to this picture, the *Lebenswelt* is inherently shot through with meaning and purpose, given to the most mundane of things by the place the other occupies in relation to them, and in relation to ourselves: ‘the other’s smile calls for us to respond to it with joy; the other’s expression of pain prompts spontaneous concern; their suffering necessitates action’. Tischner describes the relation we have with the other, and the moral demand it places on us, as a ‘dialogue’. This dialogue amounts to an act of offering to the other the world itself – transformed by the communion in which we exist with each other as human persons. This communion can be understood in terms of the shared world love creates between individuals and the broader sharing of values within a culture.

The picture advanced by Tischner is closely related to the psychological phenomenon known as ‘joint attention’. In joint attention an object attended to by multiple persons becomes irreducibly shared in the sense that it is perceived as an intentional object for the other. In ethics, an analogous phenomenon has been described as the ‘second person standpoint’, notably by Stephen Darwall.¹³ A central phenomenological component of this experience, I suggest, is aptly described as the expansion of an individual’s horizon of possible experience. Borrowing a term from Angelika Kratzer, we can conceptualize this as a matter of ‘projected possibilities’.¹⁴ Kratzer observes that we move through the world projecting possibilities. For example, imagine you are leafing through a university prospectus, with the intention of choosing a course of study. Central to this experience is a sense of different possible outcomes projected into the future. The same, it might be argued, to a greater or lesser degree, is true of all experiences.

There is a sense, of course, in which all the possibilities opened up by encountering objects are already contained in the initial set of possibilities with which each of us is born. In a very real sense, as we progress through life encountering objects in the world, the possibilities we have keep on diminishing – having chosen one university course, I have forfeited the others. On this view the feeling of the ‘opening up’ of new sets of possibilities seems to be an illusion generated by our limited first personal perspective on our lives.

¹³ See Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint, Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass, HUP, 2006).

¹⁴ See for example, Kratzer, Angelika; Pires De Oliveira, Roberta; Pessotto, Ana Lúcia. ‘Talking about modality – an interview with Angelika Kratzer’, *ReVEL*, especial issue 8, (2014).

I want to suggest however that there is an equally real sense in which some situations do open new possibilities before us: in particular those situations that involve encounters with others. The reasons for this are twofold. First, it should be noted that our *experience* of possibilities, their phenomenology, does not track *mere possibility*, but possibility that has a non-negligible chance of becoming actualized. For example, before I am accepted for a course of study at university, all the possibilities attendant thereon figure only moderately in my experience, if at all. But once I have been accepted, the degree to which those possibilities determine my experience is amplified along with their likelihood. We can summarize this by saying that the phenomenology of possibility tracks the metaphysics of probability. Consequently, there is a clear sense in which the feeling of the ‘opening up’ of a new set of possibilities is veridical. It is not just an illusion that I am subject to due to my limited knowledge, but a matter of fact about the world as it is present in my experience.

Secondly, some of the possibilities that open up for us in this way are of a special kind. These are the possibilities that arise from our encounters with others. In contrast to inanimate objects, others relate to the world intentionally just as we do; hence the possibility of joint attention. Furthermore, like us, they exercise agency over which possibilities are to be actualized. As a result, the possibilities opened up in our encounters with others are not merely possibilities *for* us, and possibilities to be actualized or not *by us*. They are also possibilities *for another* which can be brought about or prevented *by another*. The impact this has on our experience of the world is deeply transformative. By sharing an intentional attitude towards an object, we have an opportunity to share in the possibilities it opens up before the other as well as before us. And just as we are free to choose which possibilities are actualized, so is the other. As a result, those possibilities we experience jointly with others differ radically from those that concern us alone, being as they are, dependent on another’s freedom. And so, in our encounters with others, our horizon of experience is expanded beyond what was projected by our potential encounters with the world alone.

We can describe this in terms of mediated and unmediated possibility. The possibilities inherent to our very presence in the world may be thought of as ‘unmediated possibilities’. These are the possibilities that enter our experience wholly in virtue of the objects in the world that we may come across. The mediated possibilities are those opened up by our encounters with others. An encounter with the same

person (even in identical circumstances) will bring with it a different set of new possibilities for each individual: Matthieu's encounter with Marcella will change his life in a different way to how Daniel's encounter with Marcella will change his. This is not merely because of the different possibilities Matthieu and Daniel themselves have (as would be the case with any inanimate object), but also because Marcella's possibilities differ with respect to the two encounters.

This describes, in reasonably straightforward terms, a way in which the intentionality brought into our experience by the other makes the world meaningful to us in new ways, and transforms our own experience of it. If this is correct, then it seems inevitable that the possibilities opened up by our encounters with others, and the values and emotions attendant upon them, will contribute to one's formation as a person.¹⁵ And the result of many such encounters between a large number of persons will give structure to a 'shared world' of meaning and value, uniquely constituted for any cultural community, and to a degree, for any human relation.

Having advanced this picture, I now turn to its implications for our experience of loss, and the attitude that is appropriate to that experience. In short, if something like this picture is correct, then without the *other* the very possibility of one's experience of value, at least within an appropriately circumscribed area, is threatened or precluded. Tischner describes the inability to feel emotions in response to value as an 'axiological autism'. It is not only the inability to recognize the other as an autonomous subject, but also as an inability to see the world as a place where value is realized. Another way we might become unable to share the world with another is by a 'closing down' of possibilities of experience through loss; a time when the influence of the other's intentionality on our experience of the world is abruptly removed.

It has often been pointed out in both secular and religious contexts that value is inseparable from suffering, and that openness to it always involves the risk of loss and the pain associated with it. John Cottingham stresses this point in his book 'Why Believe?' when discussing the problem of evil.¹⁶ He invokes a fragment of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets which encapsulates it:

'Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name

¹⁵ I develop this idea briefly sketched here in a forthcoming work on shared experience.

¹⁶ John Cottingham, *Why Believe?*, Continuum, London, 2009, pp. 145-151.

Behind the hands that wove
 The intolerable shirt of flame
 Which human power cannot remove'.¹⁷

Cottingham suggests that free of this burden, relations with others would be rendered shallow by the absence of a degree of tenderness that necessitates vulnerability. This may be true, but at the same time the other person is not simply a shining meteor passing through our existence leaving behind it the same darkness that it briefly illuminated. With the encounter with the other our world, defined subjectively as our horizon of experience, has been permanently changed. And through one's memory of the other and her companionship the values and meanings which were once established continue to be accessible. As such, an approach to mourning which seeks to reaffirm the strength of the original attachment, though it may be painful, has the potential to reconstitute the meanings created by one's experience of the shared world and to preserve the values inherent to that world.

If the picture developed here is correct, this process will be important, not only at the level of the individual, but also that of the community. This is aptly depicted in another poem, Book I of Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, originally entitled *The Ruined Cottage*.¹⁸ In that work we are presented with a struggle to come to terms with loss that becomes a ground for forming a community through reconciliation, linking mourner to mourner and mourners to the mourned. Consequently, mourning is portrayed as a way both to accept the reality of death and to challenge it, making revisitation and the renewal of bonds possible. Consolation, in the end, comes from affirming the value of what has been lost, and an openness to the possibility of the preservation of this value, albeit in a transfigured form, in the life of the community. This view of a community's culture as the space of shared value and meaning connecting the living with those still unborn and those already dead has been advanced previously in many contexts. The phenomenological analysis I propose, provides a mechanism by which this shared value and meaning may emerge from the mutual encounters of a community's members, and the fragility entailed by this.

The proposal put forward here seems to capture a central way in which our experience of loss is connected with the emergence of shared value and meaning. If it is correct, this suggests that the dominant

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding* [1942], Lines 207-11; in *Four Quartets*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1959).

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage* [1814], in *The Excursion Book First, The Poems of William Wordsworth*, (London, OUP, 1911).

approach to mourning, represented above by Freud, recommends a dangerous withdrawal from the grounds upon which those shared values and meanings rest. It follows that something closer to the contrasting approach to mourning, represented above by Kierkegaard, may be more desirable; though of course our rejection of one extreme would not warrant jumping straight to the other. Rather, a less one-sided approach that aims both to mitigate the suffering of the individual experiencing loss *and* to reaffirm the value of the original bond may be advisable.

*This article draws on my work on shared experience, and the breakdown of the shared world in totalitarian regimes published in *Synthesis Philosophica* Vol.32 No.I August 2017.

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