

Finding the Good in Grief: What Augustine Knew that Meursault Couldn't

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Albert Camus' existentialist novel *The Stranger* ends with its protagonist, Meursault, awaiting his execution. His ostensible crime? The murder of an Arab whose name Camus never discloses.

But it is not the facts surrounding the murder that ultimately seal Meursault's fate in the eyes of his jury. Rather, what transforms him from a mere criminal to a condemnable person is that he does not grieve his mother (whose death serves as the tableau that introduces the novel). The warden of the home for the aged where Meursault's mother died testifies that he was surprised by Meursault's "calmness" on the day of her funeral, explaining that Meursault had not "wanted to see Mother's body, or shed a single tear," and had left immediately after the funeral, not "lingering at her grave." Another witness attested that after declining to see his mother's body, Meursault cavalierly smoked cigarettes and drank *café au lait*, facts the prosecutor alleges show that Meursault had no "respect for the dead body of the poor woman who brought him into the world." (Camus 1946: 56-57) Subsequent testimony about Meursault's lack of grief turns the screws further. His mother's elderly companion, Perez swears that Meursault was completely indifferent to his mother's death. The prosecutor concludes from the testimony of Meursault's

girlfriend Marie and his neighbor Raymond that Meursault, having engaged in “shameless orgies” only a day after his mother’s death, was far from grief stricken. (Camus 1946: 60)

By this point Meursault has already deciphered the prosecution strategy and recognizes, as we the readers do, that “for the first time I understood that I was guilty.” But it takes the prosecutor’s lurid description of “the type of man the prisoner is” to finally provoke Meursault’s lawyer to interject:

“Is my client on trial for having buried his mother, or for killing a man?” he asked.

There were some titters in court. But then the Prosecutor sprang to his feet and, draping his gown round him, said he was amazed at his friend’s ingenuousness in failing to see that between these two elements of the case there was a vital link. They hung together psychologically, if he might put it so. “In short,” he concluded, speaking with great vehemence, “I accuse the prisoner of behaving at his mother’s funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart.”

These words seemed to take much effect on the jury and public. My lawyer merely shrugged his shoulders and wiped the sweat from his forehead. But obviously he was rattled, and I had a feeling things weren’t going well for me. (Camus 1946: 60)

By highlighting Meursault’s indifference to his mother’s death, Camus intended to emphasize Meursault’s iconoclastic and unbridgeable alienation from societal expectations. As Camus later said of the novel: “I summarized *The Stranger* a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical: 'In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.' I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game.” (Camus 1968: 335)

Yet I must confess that my own reaction is not admiration for Meursault’s putative ‘heroism’. For one, most of us hope that we will be grieved after our deaths, so Meursault’s callousness at the death of *maman* seems to betoken moral vice. Why grief seems to be ‘owed’ to the dead, particularly on the assumption that bodily death is the permanent cessation of a

person's existence and cannot be survived, is too intricate a question to be credibly addressed here. But our misgivings about Meursault's lack of grief may have a prudential, rather than a moral, basis. Meursault seems worthy of pity because he was not *able* to grieve. For he is bereft of the very attachment to his mother (or apparently, to anyone) that would make grief an intelligible response to her death. And by not grieving, Meursault seems to be missing out something valuable. Shelly Kagan has recently observed that the pains of grief somehow seem better than Meursault's indifference:

To be sure, normally you would rather not have lost your loved one in the first place. But given that you have, is it really the case that you would prefer not to experience any grief at all? That seems wrong; when you are aware of the death of someone you love, it hardly seems better for you to be indifferent to that fact.

On the contrary, it seems better for you to be *pained* by the loss. (Kagan 2014: 267)

If Kagan is correct, then if we care about someone like Meursault — if we want what is best for him for his sake — we should want him to be able to undergo genuine grief for his mother. For despite being emotionally, and even physically, distressing, grief is a valuable part of the human condition. That grief in some manner makes our lives *better* would also explain why we should be reluctant to think that grieving indicates some underlying mental illness, as a panel of psychiatrists recently proposed.¹ For critics of this proposal, such as the prominent psychiatrist and medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman, 'treating' grief, including the use of medications that "deprive death of its sting for the survivors and make the experience of loss as painless as possible," would have the unfortunate side effect of depriving us of a uniquely valuable

¹ The panel was one of several charged with revising the primary diagnostic guide for American mental health professionals (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The panel's recommendation to remove the "bereavement exclusion," (a provision stating that despite grief sometimes satisfying the diagnostic criteria for mental illnesses such as depression, it should instead be seen as a normal and expected response to loss) was incorporated into the guide. Its recommendation to introduce a new diagnostic category of "prolonged grief disorder" was rejected however.

emotional experience. (Kleinman 2012: 609) No doubt grief can be a hardship – but except in rare cases, isn't it a hardship we recognize as part of a normal and healthy response to others' deaths? There would, I contend, be something amiss in the life of a person who never grieved. To call grief "a game," as Camus does, reducing it to a set of *pro forma* rituals mandated by the expectations of social etiquette, seems to trivialize a vital and valuable human experience.

But sober philosophical analysis should invite us to second guess such gut reactions. For the pity we may feel for Meursault's inability to grieve runs headlong into some obvious facts about grief. First and foremost, grief is nearly always painful. As we shall see later on, there is often much more to grief than pain alone. But the deaths of those who matter to us can lead us to prolonged anguish. Grief is also extremely stressful. Stress researchers have repeatedly found that the deaths of those close to us (parents, siblings, children, and spouses) are the most stressful life events we can undergo, dramatically surpassing even divorce, imprisonment, and unemployment in this regard. (Holmes and Rahe 1967, Miller and Rahe 1997) And not infrequently, grieving is associated with adverse physical 'symptoms,' including intestinal problems, insomnia, shaking, heart palpitations, chest pains, shortness of breath, and oversensitivity to noise. Sometimes grief even proves fatal. (Carey et al 2014) Given this evidence, why not conclude that instead of pitying Meursault, we ought to *envy* him? After all, his alienation and detachment from other human beings saves him from one of life's most agonizing experiences.

Our purpose in this article is to determine how best to navigate the tension between these two reactions. Is grief a welcome or unwelcome feature of human existence? Should we be glad for the opportunity to grieve, or instead lament our vulnerability to grief as a side effect of our apparent need for social attachment?

1. Grief's painfulness

The case for Meursault (and against grief) largely rests on grief's painfulness. The pain in question is primarily psychological rather than 'bodily'. Some might contest our calling this state 'pain.' Maybe this state is better captured by calling it 'distress', 'anguish', or 'suffering'. But 'pain' seems like a good enough term to capture the bad feeling, negatively tinged emotional element of grief.

Answering Meursault, that is, showing that grief can be good or worthwhile, seems to require showing that grief is good despite its being painful. Now we must keep in mind here that when we speak of grief being good, we have in mind that grief is good *for the bereaved*. It could (again) be true that grief is good from a moral point of view. For instance, perhaps grief is morally valuable because it helps people bond with one another during times of sorrow. The issue at hand is more pointed: To put the matter first personally, how can my grief be good *for me* — valuable, worthwhile, conducive to my well-being, etc. — despite its being painful *to me*?

First, let us consider two ways we might try to answer this question, both of which will prove inadequate, before turning to what I contend is a third and better way to account for how grief can be good despite its being painful.

Most everyone will agree that pain is usually unwelcome. But we are not *necessarily* averse to pain. Masochists, for example, find pleasure in otherwise painful experiences. How this combination of attitudes or sensations is possible has long puzzled philosophers. (For a recent account, see Klein 2014.) It seems unlikely, though, that grief is a species of masochism. Masochism is rare, for one, grief nearly ubiquitous. Moreover, masochists (and again, this is a difficult mindset for the non-masochist to imagine) somehow take pleasure in certain painful

experiences. They come to experience pleasure *through* and *because of* pain. Central to masochism, then, is that one and same experience is both pleasurable and painful all at once, with the pleasure being somehow inseparable from the pain. But this does not seem faithful to the reality of grief. Individuals are often drawn to grieve, even in full awareness of its painfulness, but the pain of grief is not *also* pleasurable at the same time. Grieving is therefore not a painful pathway to pleasure, as pain is for the masochist.

So we cannot make sense of how grief can be worthwhile despite being painful by claiming that the pain is masochistic in character, a pain in which we nevertheless take pleasure. A second way we might show that grief could be good for us despite being painful rests on the observation that we sometimes tolerate pain in the belief that it will result in greater good. Consider a painful inoculation: The pain itself is bad, but is a cost worth bearing for the greater good it proves (immunity from contagious disease). Perhaps the pain of grief simply *is* bad, but can be outweighed by greater pleasures or goods. Grief's pain, then, is the cost of bereavement.

This second answer about grief's value does not succeed either. For one, if pain is the cost we pay for grief, what are we paying *for* — what, in other words, is the good we get in exchange? In the case of the painful inoculation, the answer is apparent: protection against the disease(s) for which one is immunized. Yet it is far from evident what we might get in return for the pains of grief. As it will turn out, there is a good that grief provides us (as I will try to persuade you later). Yet for the moment, in the absence of an explanation of the good we get in exchange for the pains of grief, this answer is incomplete at best.

This second answer also has strange implications. If pain is the cost of grief, then all other things being equal, the less pain associated with an episode of grief, the better that episode is for us. But that doesn't seem right. Imagine two siblings whose father has died. The siblings

have similar relationships and histories with their father, so we would expect them to grieve in similar ways. Is one sibling better off if she undergoes the psychological pains of grief less intensely or for a shorter time? That is far from obvious. Conversely, it is far from obvious that being pained by grief longer or more intensely is necessarily worse for a person. In cases where the bereaved and deceased were particularly close (think of spouses married for a half century), grief *should* be intensely painful. And if this explanation were correct, the very ‘best’ episodes of grief would be entirely *painless* – and those, I propose, hardly even qualify as episodes of grief. In any event, there does not seem to be any correlation between how long or how intense the pain of a grief episode and how good or bad it seems from an intuitive point of view. That’s enough to cast doubt on this explanation of how grief can be valuable despite its painfulness.

This answer also faces a third challenge. On this account, the pain of grief is bad in its own right but can nevertheless lead to a greater good overall for oneself. The mental anguish of grief, according to this account, must be *tolerated* in order to attain the goods grief affords us. Again compare grief’s pains to the pains of an inoculation. The pains of an inoculation are undeniably painful. We put up with them in exchange for some greater good. But some bereaved individuals do not perceive the pain of grief as a state merely to be tolerated. Rather, they seem drawn to it. The Christian philosopher Augustine relates in his *Confessions* his grief at the death of a close friend he had known since childhood:

My heart was black with grief. Whatever I looked upon had the air of death. My native place was a prison-house and my home a strange unhappiness. The things we had done together became sheer torment without him. My eyes were restless looking for him, but he was not there. I hated all places because he was not in them. ... I had no delight but in tears, for tears had taken the place my friend had held in the love of my heart. (Augustine 2006: book IV, chapter iv, 59-60)

Augustine is clearly haunted by his friend's death. Surprisingly though, he does not refrain from the activities that remind him of his deceased friend's death. On the contrary. Augustine was "restless" in *seeking out* reminders of the friend. He finds "delight" only in the tearful pains of grief. Put in the language made familiar by Harry Frankfurt (1999), Augustine has a second-order desire to do what he would otherwise have a first-order desire to avoid, that is, to undergo "unhappiness, "tears," and "torment."

Augustine therefore does not seem merely to tolerate the pains of grief. Nothing Augustine says suggests that his seeking out his friend is pleasant. The pains of grief are undoubtedly painful for him. Still, he is attracted to these pains. Augustine thus perceives them (in ways he clearly struggles to articulate) as *good pains*. That the pains of grief are perceived as good gives us further reason to reject the thought that those pains are the cost we pay for the larger goods made possible by grief. For if Augustine and his ilk are to be trusted, then these pains are not costs at all.

Still, that these pains might in some way be good may well strike us as mysterious. But we are in fact acquainted with good pains.

2. *Good pains*

In my younger days, I ran: 30 or miles per week, five- and ten-kilometer races, the whole bit. Veteran runners will regale you with stories of "runners' high." But running also has its lows: sensations of overwhelming fatigue are common, for instance. At times, such sensations strongly tempt a runner simply to give in and stop. Over time however, I came to judge that these

painful sensations were not in fact bad. Indeed, I began to look forward to those pains, and while I did not necessarily hope that my daily runs would be *maximally* painful, I nevertheless found that painless runs were somehow ungratifying.

This shift in judgments regarding such pains was not because they were not *bona fide* pains. The pain itself — the raw physiological sensation — had not changed, and outside the context of running, I would have avoided it. And nearly always, I would attempt to counteract the pain that lingered once I completed my runs. My attitudes toward running were not that of the masochist though. I wanted my runs to have some measure of physical pain or distress, but not because I found the state of pain to be simultaneously pleasant or desirable. When a particularly arduous run neared its conclusion, I did not take pleasure in the growing pain I was undergoing. It remained unalloyed pain, unmixed with any pleasant sensation. But nor did I straightforwardly view these pains as costs to be borne for some larger good. I *wanted* to undergo these pains despite their being pains *simpliciter*. I did not judge these pains to be bad despite their being painful.

How I could have been in such a state — welcoming a genuine pain that was neither admixed with pleasure nor a cost to be borne for the sake of some greater good — may seem puzzling. Pain is a more complicated condition than we often recognize though. Although pain feels bad, how we feel about it — the judgments we make about whether it's good or bad, desirable or undesirable — depend on a wide array of other psychological facts about us. (Swenson 2009) Specifically, how we feel about pain can depend on our beliefs and attitudes about the larger situation in which the pain occurs. In my own case, the positive attitudes I had toward running painted the pains of running in a warmer hue. Something about the context

within which I underwent the pains made them good — while still being pains all the same. The positive awareness of feeling one's own fitness, of testing one's body's limits, etc., made it the case that the pains of running were good pains for me. They still felt bad, mind you. But they did not play the role that pain usually plays in our practical thinking and decision making. Rather than the pains of running being a reason not to train, they became integrated into the positive reasons I had to train. I endorsed the mantra “no pain, no gain,” but not because the pain was the cost of the gain. The pain was instead an indispensable element in an activity I found gainful.

And it would no more have made sense to suppose that extracting the pain from those positive activities would make them better than it would make sense to suppose that removing the tragic denouement from a Shakespearean tragedy would make the play better. Removing Juliet's suicide from the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet* would not make it a better aesthetic encounter for the audience. It would simply be a different play, much in the way that running would have been a different activity without its accompanying pain. Just as the pain contributes non-additively and organically to the positive activity of running, so too does Juliet's suicide — itself a lamentable event — contribute non-additively and organically to the quality of watching Shakespeare's play.

Painful but positive activities, in which the pain is valued insofar as it is essential to the nature of the activity, are not uncommon in human life. I've mentioned distance running, but I suspect that a similar pattern will be found in other forms of athletic activity. Powerlifters no doubt undergo strain, even pain, in their favored activity. But some evidently welcome these

unpleasant sensations. So too firewalkers and aficionados of hot chilis. (Rozin 1990)² They look forward to the pain of such endeavors thanks to their overall attitude toward those endeavors. Many women opt for natural childbirth, free of pain medications. While their reasons no doubt vary, I would speculate that some desire the pain of labor inasmuch as it is seen as integral to the unalloyed experience of childbirth. And in each of these instances, the pain retains its painfulness but is axiologically essential to the larger good at hand.

Now one might discount these observations by proposing that the positive judgments of the painfulness in these cases is a kind of trick played on us by our biology. From the standpoint of impartial observers, the pains of distance running, powerlifting, childbirth, and the like clearly are bad. But we are biologically constituted so as to be psychologically disposed to find the pains associated with these experiences desirable. We thus recategorize these pains as good even though they are in fact bad from a more impartial perspective.

In reply, note that a biological or psychological explanation of why we find some pains good or desirable, particularly pains embedded within larger complexes of goodness, does not show that our positive attitudes toward such pains are misguided. In fact, it may only be because of such biological or psychological facts that we are in a position to have these positive attitudes in the first place. But the availability of such an explanation does not show that these attitudes are false, any more than the fact that there is a biological or psychological explanation for our ability to visually perceive geometrical shape or for our awareness of our own levels of hunger shows that our beliefs about objects' shapes or our own levels of hunger are false. More than a

² This is not to preclude the possibility that *some* who engage in firewalking, chili eating, etc., are masochists or bear these pains simply as the costs of some larger good. For our purposes, it is sufficient if the analysis of the 'good pains' in question applies even to a few who participate in such activities.

biological explanation of our positive attitudes toward certain pains is therefore needed in order to show that those attitudes are systematically misleading. And in the absence of additional evidence on this front, the evidence based on our first-personal experiences of these ‘good pains’ still stands.

If this picture of how pains can contribute to worthwhile activities is plausible, then this suggest a possible model for explaining why we are drawn to grieve: Grief’s pains are good insofar as they occur within, and are indispensable parts of, an activity which it itself good or desirable in some way. Grief’s pains *are* genuinely painful. Yet just as we welcome pains associated with particularly worthwhile activities, so too do many, including Augustine apparently, welcome (and even seek out or cultivate) the pains of grief. Hence, because Meursault cannot undergo the pains associated with grief, he is thereby missing out on a valuable human activity of which psychic pain is an essential part.

All the same, a good deal more would have to be said to vindicate this explanation of how grief can be both valuable and painful. For one, we do not yet have an account of the activity of grieving, of which pain is an essential part. Moreover, we lack an account of how this activity could be valuable or worthwhile. In the case of the other activities I have cited, it seems clear how the pains fit into some larger good. In the cases of running or powerlifting, chili eating or childbirth, it’s not too hard to identify what may be good or valuable about those activities. But if the pain of grief is good due to its being part of some larger valuable experience, what is that larger valuable experience? To address these issues, we need to delve more deeply into the nature of grief itself.

3. Who we grieve for

Pain is essential to grief, but there is more to grieving than just psychological pain. The work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross popularized the idea that grieving follows a five-step process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Few of those who study grief (including Kubler-Ross herself) accept this five-stage model in so simplistic a form. Many people do not experience these particular five steps, do not experience them in that particular order, or have grief episodes that include other emotional states (for instance, joy or anxiety). Nevertheless, there is wide agreement that overwhelmingly, grief is not a single state but a complex set of states of which emotional pain is only one part. Grief, as they say, is a structured process ((Goldie 2011, Higgins 2013), but one that varies from individual to individual and from episode to episode. For one person, grief might begin with acceptance, but for another, it might begin with anxiety. And one and the same person could have different grief reactions to different deaths (the grief she undergoes at the death of her sister may consist of a different set of states or stages than the grief she undergoes at the death of her neighbor). The variability of grief is unsurprising. Human beings vary, and so too do the relationships they have with those they grieve. (Cholbi 2017)

In order to grieve someone, we need to have a certain kind of relationship with them. We do not, after all, grieve every death. When you scan a newspaper's obituaries, you may feel sorrow as you read about the lives of the deceased. But your reaction to the deaths of strangers, while doleful, lacks the personal dimension of grief. Their deaths are important because their lives, like all human lives, were important. But their lives, and hence their deaths, are not

(usually) especially important *to you*. The deaths that generate grief, on the other hand, are felt as losses *to us*.

The most common sort of loss that prompts grief is the deaths of family or close friends. The advent of social media has made it clear, though, that many people also grieve the deaths of entertainers or politicians. 2016 saw outpourings of public grief for pop stars (Prince, David Bowie), actors (Gene Wilder), athletes (Arnold Palmer), activists (Elie Wiesel), and athletes-cum-activists (Muhammad Ali). Only a handful of those who grieved the deaths of these public figures had any first-hand familiarity or intimacy with these figures. Usually, grief occurs between individuals who are familiar or intimate with one other in a bidirectional sense: spouses grieve one another's deaths, siblings grieve one another's deaths, etc. In the case of public figures, the grief is unidirectional. It is no knock on David Bowie to point out that he would have grieved the deaths of very few of the fans and admirers who ultimately grieved his death.

That we primarily grieve for those with whom we have intimate relationships but also grieve for strangers we revere points to the *scope* of grief. What do those for whom we grieve have in common? When we think about our lives and the stories we tell about them, certain people stand out much more than others. These will likely include our parents, children, romantic partners, family members, close professional associates, long-standing friendships, and so on. But people for whom we are essentially strangers can be crucial to the stories we tell about ourselves. A musician who had no relationship with David Bowie might nevertheless have modeled her music or her aesthetic ideals on his work; an otherwise secular minded Jew might have been moved by Wiesel's Holocaust memoirs to investigate his Jewish heritage; an American Muslim may look to Ali's life for a picture of how to express his faith in a culture

traditionally hostile to Islam. Such examples illustrate that we do not have to have an especially close or mutual relationship with a person for them to be central to our self-understanding and to the stories we tell about our lives. We can have *identity-constituting relationships* with strangers and intimates alike. An identity-constituting relationship is one that figures prominently in our autobiographies and in what Christine Korsgaard calls our “practical identities,” the descriptions of our values, concerns, and commitments that explain why we feel and act as we do. (1996:101)

Notice that an identity-constituting relationship is more than just any relationship that might have shaped what we are like. An adult who was adopted as a young child was no doubt shaped by his genetic relation to his biological parents. But he may or may not have an identity-constituting relationship with his biological parents. He may, for instance, be largely uninterested in them and see them merely as part of the causal background through which he came into existence. In that case, he lacks an identity-constituting relationship with them despite his identity being in part constituted by his genetic relationship with them. To have an identity-constituting relationship with another is to conceptualize her not merely as shaping who one is but also what one cares about. Such relationships depend on the past, yes, but they also shape our futures. Our identity-constituting relationships reveal who we want to be and to become. They are the relationships that, in Korsgaard’s terms, matter to how we value ourselves.

When someone with whom we have an identity-constituting relationship dies, we thus suffer a peculiarly acute loss. On the one hand, we suffer the loss of the various goods that person may have provided. Their deaths can mean the loss of one’s dining partner, co-parent, or artistic role model. Their deaths thus deny us the opportunity to pursue various goods we pursued in concert with them. In this regard, their deaths are losses *to* our selves. But one distinguishing feature of grief, one that seems closely related to the anxiety or distress many bereaved people

experience, is that the deaths of those with whom we have identity-constituting relationships also feel like losses *of* our selves. Many grieving persons report that they no longer recognize themselves – that the death of someone to whom they are attached has changed them in some fundamental way. (Morey 1995, Parkes and Prigerson 2010) Others’ deaths force us to change our relationship to them. (Andersen and Chen 2002, Shapiro 1994, Walter 1996) After all, we cannot relate to the dead as we can to the living. Our relationships with them can continue in some guise. Keeping a picture of a deceased loved one on your desk is a way to ensure that at least your end of the relationship continues. To remember someone is, after all, a way of relating to her. Yet we cannot participate in shared activities, communicate with them in the normal way, form plans with them, and so on. That we feel changed via grief should therefore not come as a surprise. For the death of someone standing in an identity-constituting relationship with us necessitates a change in what sorts of goods are available to us and what we might hope or plan for. Grief thus disorients us, inasmuch as patterns of feeling and acting with which we are familiar are no longer available to us. Our lives cannot proceed in precisely the same manner as they did before. When another’s death forces us to confront the question “what would I do without you?”, many of us do not have a ready answer.

This sense of disorientation helps explain why grieving can be emotionally multifaceted, even tumultuous. As we noted above, emotional pain is only one element of the grieving process, a process which can vary from person to person and from grief episode to grief episode. That process may also include anxiety, bargaining, fear, anger, even joy. No doubt part of the reason grief is a stage-like emotional process is that we often harbor complex feelings toward those for whom we grieve. The death of a parent, for instance, marks a turning point in a relationship that is nearly always identity-constituting for a child. Rarely are the relationships

between parents and child dominated by a single emotional dynamic. It would thus be surprising for a child's grief to exhibit a single emotional tenor either.

Grief, therefore, is a multistage emotional process that results when someone with whom we have an identity-constituting relationship dies. And because these relationships cannot continue as they did before, the others' death feels like a loss of self, that is, the bereaved individual's practical identity seems to rupture because she can no longer orient that identity around the deceased individual. Our grief reactions may seem unruly, even chaotic, in part because we are trying to make sense of who we are and what we care about in the aftermath of the other's death. The observation that we grieve for those with whom we stand in identity-constituting relationship inches us closer to a refutation of Meursault. We now know whom we grieve for, and (roughly) why. But we have not pinpointed the good that grieving can provide us, the good that can make the pains essential to grief good and worthwhile pains. For that, Augustine again comes to our aid.

4. Grief as a motivator and source of self-knowledge

In the course of his evidently arduous grief, Augustine interrogates his own soul. "I became a great enigma to myself," he wrote, "and I was forever asking my soul why it was sad, and why it disquieted me sorely. And my soul knew not what to answer me." (2006: book IV, chapter iv, 59) Augustine's grief was disorienting too. He does not know entirely how to react or why. And upon introspecting — upon consulting his own 'soul' — Augustine does not find the answers he seeks. His soul cannot explain what is happening to him. He wants to understand his

own sadness, to grasp not only its origins but also its personal significance. Sadly, answers to his query were not forthcoming.

I want to suggest, however, that in the midst of his grief, Augustine was perhaps unknowingly asking the right kind of question. For grief is a particularly fruitful opportunity for an important human good: *self-knowledge*.

How does grief enable self-knowledge? For much of our lives, our outlook on the world operates on autopilot. We go about our daily business, pursuing our goals, trying our best to live well, and so on. We develop habits that reflect what we called earlier our practical identities. These habits easily become entrenched and normalized, and when they do, we can lose sight of how our practical identities assume a stable everyday environment in which to act upon them. Of course, we know that much in our everyday environment is contingent. We ‘know’, for instance, that our homes can be felled by earthquakes or other disasters, that our professional lives depend on institutions and practice that can totter, that our bodies may betray us via injury or disease. And we also ‘know’ that others, including those with whom we have identity-constituting relationships, are (like us) mortal. But in the day-to-day shuffle, these facts, though known, are often not fully appreciated, taken for granted and placed somewhere on our mental backburners. Our practical identities – the way we understand ourselves and what is valuable in our world — tend to assume a background reality. But that reality is metaphysically contingent. Those facts can change, even disappear entirely.

And when those facts change, those changes can jolt our evaluative systems. It may no longer make sense to care about particular places, people, or things if the reality in which our caring for them makes sense undergoes a shift, particularly when that shift is abrupt. When such

shifts occur, we must adapt to new material realities. But such shifts also motivate us to interrogate ourselves. After all, few things can do more to raise self-doubt than the sudden realization that your existing attitudes depend upon contingent realities, most of which are outside your control. To be reminded that the world could be different — nay, to have that fact vividly demonstrated through a profound change in the parts of the world that matter most to you — is also a reminder that *you* could be different. Just as the facts that make your practical identities feasible could change, so too could your practical identity change. And once that possibility arises in your consciousness, we begin to ask just who we are and what matters to us. We are thus set on a path toward self-knowledge.

The deaths of those whom we grieve can therefore motivate a search for self-knowledge. Recall again how grief disorients us. Others' deaths are felt as loss both to and of the self. Their deaths remind us in particular of how our self-conceptions — who we believe ourselves to be — are predicated on the existence of particular others. When those others die, we can be reminded that our practical identities, which hinge upon their continued existence, are not inevitable or pre-ordained. The disorientation of grief will tend to put our practical identities, and our very selves, under the microscope. And just as Augustine interrogated his soul, we interrogate ours in order to figure out who we are and how our lives should continue. Grief is therefore a powerful *motivator* of self-knowledge.

At the same time, grief is an aid to self-knowledge because its emotional richness makes it an especially robust *source* of self-knowledge. Grief episodes contain many emotions, all of which are focused on the relationship one has with the deceased. Different emotions disclose different aspects of our personalities and practical identities. In experiencing anger, we are given

hints as to what we regard as injurious or harmful to ourselves. In experiencing fear, we are given hints as to what we regard as threatening to ourselves. In experiencing joy or peace, we are given hints as to what we regard as providing security or stability. And so on for each of the emotions. Our emotional responses are revelations of different components of what matters to us.

Because grief episodes usually contain many distinct emotional stages, those episodes enable us to interrogate different elements of our selves. A grief episode that contains moments of anger, fear, and joy (say) provides us evidence about what we find valuable or worthwhile. To learn that we feel anger when we ponder how the deceased person hurt us informs us about what we care about. For example, anger at recalling an instance where the deceased person failed to attend an important event (your wedding or college graduation, say) tells us about the importance of that event in our lives and about our yearning to share it with others. Likewise for feeling fear, joy, or other emotions people experience in the course of grief. They too inform us about what who we are, what we care about, and the place of particular others in our network of cares. This is not to imply that this data needs no interpretation. Our emotions draw our attention to evaluatively salient facts, but they do not always immediately disclose to us the nature of those facts. Suppose that a child feels anxiety at the death of her parent. This anxiety could be the result of the child losing a relationship with the parent that was very secure. The parent's death thus elicits anxiety in the child because a source of existing security was lost. Conversely, that same anxiety could reflect a child's more checked history with her parents. A child with an emotionally distant parent may experience this anxiety as a kind of traumatic memory of past situations in which the parent did not provide the desired security. This example underscores that grief sets a task of self-understanding for us. A given emotional reaction (anxiety in this case) does not wear its object on its face. To know what this anxiety signifies requires interrogation of

one's own biography. Making sense of grief's emotional elements thus requires making sense of ourselves, i.e., attaining a form of biographical self-knowledge.

Grief thus looks like our psyche's way of instigating an emotional data dump. We would be wise to seize the opportunity to make sense of that data and thereby attain deeper levels of self-knowledge.

The pain of grief, I propose, is genuinely painful but one to which we can be attracted through a recognition that by fully engaging with that pain and with the cavalcade of other emotions we feel in the course of grief, we can enhance our knowledge of ourselves and our practical identities. Perhaps surprisingly, although grief is prompted by the deaths of others, it can put us in a position to relate to ourselves in more profound ways. In proposing that the value of grief — the value that makes even the pains of grief worth bearing — is self-knowledge, I am not suggesting that those who grieve know this or have self-knowledge as their conscious aim. Often we can pursue a good we recognize only inchoately. For we can know *that* something is valuable without yet knowing *how* it is valuable. With respect to grieving, we can be moved to grieve (and even be moved toward experiencing the more painful aspects of grief) without knowing what is moving us. But retrospective examination of grief episodes supports the thought that we often come to see that grief can provide us self-knowledge. When people talk of 'putting their lives together,' 'figuring out how to go on,' or 'reaching closure' (note in this last phrase the suggestion of finality, of 'closing the book' on the past), they are engaging in activities that betoken the search for self-knowledge. Moreover, whether an episode of grief has been valuable may only be discerned after the fact, by considering whether or not it culminated in self-knowledge.

The pains of grief can thus be vindicated by the self-knowledge grief can provide. Grief can therefore be instrumentally valuable, a special opportunity to improve our lives. Of course, those whose grieving does not result in self-knowledge may not appreciate that fact and may live out their lives ignorant of this lost opportunity. Yet the thought that our pains may in effect go to waste, that is, that those pains end up being simply painful without being redeemed or made good through self-knowledge, is itself a painful thought.

5. Conclusion: Answering Meursault?

In order to refute Meursault — to show that his inability to grieve is to be pitied rather than envied — we have had to rethink how we ordinarily think about pain. The pains of grief, I have argued, are good pains because and to the extent they are part of a larger activity that can catalyze the good of self-knowledge. Note the ‘can’ here: It would certainly be surprising if grief were *necessarily* good or worthwhile, since it certainly seems possible for grief not to culminate in self-knowledge. How successful grief is in that regard will depend on how grief unfolds and the degree to which the bereaved individual can embrace grief as an opportunity for self-knowledge.

Note also that on my model grief’s value is not intrinsic. The value of grieving is not to be found in properties that grief has as such. My suspicion is that the contention that grieving is intrinsically valuable endures because the ends invoked to make sense of grief’s supposed intrinsic value (that grief provides ‘closure’) are sufficiently vague or thin as to invite the inference that grieving *just is* worthwhile apart from whatever other goods it might foster. That said, I have not attempted to show that grief cannot be intrinsically good. But my claim that grief

can provide self-knowledge is sufficient to vindicate our sense that grief is worth undertaking, and I see little to recommend the thesis that grief is intrinsically valuable.

One final point of clarification: It may be assumed that because grief has instrumental value in enabling us to order to acquire the greater good of self-knowledge, the pains associated with grief can only be unfortunate pains or 'costs', a claim I earlier denied. This assumption does not withstand scrutiny though. Granted, there is a sense in which the pains of grief, by virtue of being essential elements of grief, are instrumentally valuable with respect to self-knowledge because grief is instrumentally valuable with respect to self-knowledge. But it does not follow that these pains are themselves intrinsically bad, costs of grieving we tolerate in order to grieve. For one, relations of instrumental value do not only hold between bads and goods. Sometimes X may be instrumentally valuable with respect to Y without being bad at all; sometimes instrumental 'goods' are good, or at least neutral in value. Moreover, the value of grief's pains need not bear the same relation to self-knowledge as it does to grief itself. We do not suffer grief's pains so as to attain a good found in grief, I have argued. And in those instances where grief does not culminate in self-knowledge, grief's pains have not been vindicated. They are, in effect, uncompensated pains. This illustrates that the value of grief's pains is contingent upon grief episodes being themselves valuable, i.e., yielding self-knowledge. But it does not entail that grief's pains contribute instrumentally to good grief, to grief that generates self-knowledge.

There are crucial philosophical questions I have not addressed here. For one, I have not said *how* to grieve so as to attain self-knowledge. It is unlikely that every episode of grief results in enhanced self-knowledge. But if so, then the question arises of what should be done in order for grief to effect self-knowledge. Should a bereaved person enter therapy? Meditate? Memorialize the deceased? Which of these are most likely to yield the rich self-knowledge grief

affords us? Unfortunately, I have said little on this score. Nor have I addressed the obvious *next* ethical question: Even if grief is a powerful opportunity for self-knowledge, what's so good about self-knowledge? That question will also have to wait for another occasion as well.

We might, finally, wonder what the best message is for us to convey to Meursault. After all, that grief is good, — and that the pain of grief can be worthwhile — because it augments our self-knowledge is not likely to be a message that resonates with him. As we noted at the outset, Meursault seems to lack the very identity-constituting relationships that make grief possible. Indeed, it is not even clear that Meursault, with his nihilistic tendencies, has a very robust practical identity, for there is not anything to which he appears committed in any lasting way. Hence, using grief as a way to increase his own self-knowledge does not seem to be a path available to Meursault, and any attempt to convince him to see the error of his ways would almost certainly not lead him to lament, or even rethink, his inability to grieve. While he cannot regret his inability to grieve, we can find it regrettable and worthy of pity. Nevertheless, the arguments offered here give *us*, the non-alienated, affectionate, interrelated and interdependent non-Meursaults of the world, reason to be glad for the opportunity to grieve. We should therefore be reassured in our convictions that grief is a crucial element of human life and that we have little reason to envy Camus' protagonist.

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