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REPLY



Grief, alienation, and the absolute alterity of death

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ABSTRACT

Disturbances to one's sense of self, the feeling that one has 'lost a part of oneself' or that one 'no longer feels like oneself,' are frequently recounted throughout the bereavement literature. Engaging Allan Køster's important contribution to this issue, this article reinforces his suggestion that, by rupturing the existential texture of self-familiarity, bereavement can result in experiences of estrangement that can be meaningfully understood according to the concept of self-alienation. Nevertheless, I suggest that whilst Køster's relational interpretation of alienation as the withdrawal of heteronomy *can* be applied to the experience of world-collapse in bereavement, what sets bereavement apart from other limit situations is the fact that it involves an intersubjective relation between the living and the dead. In contrast to Køster, therefore, I suggest that the experience of self-alienation that is distinctive to bereavement results from the fact that the bereaved is exposed to, and co-opted by, the absolute alterity of death itself.

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Disturbances to one's sense of self, the feeling that one has 'lost a part of oneself' or that one 'no longer feels like oneself,' are frequently recounted throughout the bereavement literature. Understanding what is involved in this diminution of the self, and what such an experience might mean, has become an increasing concern for philosophers of grief. Bereavement can disrupt one's sense of belonging in the world, as well as one's capacity to construct reflexive narratives about the meaning and significance of one's experiences. In particular, disturbances to temporal, spatial, bodily and inter-subjective experience have been shown to induce a feeling of profound disconnection, such that one no longer feels at home in the world. Compounding this sense of estrangement, the inter-corporeal and inter-affective relation between the bereaved and the deceased continues to inform the relational identity of the bereaved. As a result, the bereaved is confronted with the absence of their loved one in a sustained and ongoing way, for example, through the loss of habitual practices, contextual affordances and future possibilities that were established together in life. All of these aspects have been shown to contribute to the disorienting feeling that one has lost a part of oneself in bereavement (Fuchs 2018; Hughes 2022; Ingerslev 2018; Køster 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Ratcliffe 2019, 2020, 2022; Ratcliffe and Byrne 2022).

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In his recent article, 'Self-alienation through the loss of heteronomy: the case of bereavement,' Allan Køster (2022) gives an insightful existential-phenomenological analysis of this experience of losing oneself through the loss of a loved one. In line with other recent philosophical research, Køster considers that bereavement disrupts the existential texture of one's self-familiarity, which is grounded in one's embodied, practical, distributed and habitual immersion in the world. It also disturbs the reciprocal and inter-reliant dyadic identity that one shares with the deceased other. Rupturing both subjective and inter-subjective self-familiarity, one becomes estranged from oneself and from the world, such that both become distressingly unfamiliar. Wrenched out of the world in which one was immersed, the bereaved is now forced to navigate between two worlds: a past one in which their loved one was present, and a present one in which their loved one is now absent (See Attig 2011). The experience of defamiliarization is therefore held in place by a profound ontological ambiguity, 'a wavering between presence and absence,' which grounds the feeling that one has lost a part of oneself (Køster 2022, 8).

As well as extending and clarifying his important work on the existential texture of self-familiarity and the complex ways in which it can be disturbed in bereavement, Køster's novel contribution in this article is to conceptualise this experience of self-unfamiliarity according to a particular interpretation of self-alienation. As he notes, on the traditional view, alienation results from the unwanted *intrusion* of heteronomy or otherness, the imposition of an alterity that 'exceeds the autonomy of the subject.' However, what bereavement demonstrates, according to Køster, is that alienation can also result from the absence of alterity, from the unwanted *withdrawal* of heteronomy or otherness (Køster 2022, 3). Drawing on the relational interpretation of alienation given by Rahel Jaeggi (2016), Køster contends that self-alienation in bereavement results from a relation of deficiency, a loss of otherness, which can be understood as 'a relation of relationlessness' (Køster 2022, 4).

Overall I am sympathetic to Køster's existential-phenomenological analysis of losing oneself in bereavement: the rupturing of the existential texture of one's embodied, practical, distributed and habitual immersion in the world, as well as the inter-reliant dyadic identity that one shares with their loved one. Nevertheless, whilst the concept of alienation caused by the unwanted withdrawal of heteronomy signals something important about the experience of world-breakdown in limit-situations more generally, my view is that the 'standard philosophical account of alienation,' in which the 'self is increasingly overtaken by or absorbed in otherness,' is more accurate in attempting to conceptualise what is distinctive about the limit situation of bereavement in particular.

Considering firstly the relation between the bereaved and the deceased other; if we agree with Køster's interpretation of the existential texture of self-familiarity as I do, then for the most part, the pre-reflective, inter-corporeal and interaffective nature of human inter-subjective relationships appears to resist the concept of heteronomy or otherness altogether. In intimate relationships between the living and the living, the intricate intertwinement of self and other mean that the sense of self of one is, in many ways, difficult to extract from that of the other. Alterity is no doubt operative, but in indistinct, relative ways such as relational conflict or dissonance; unless, of course, one of the dyad dies. In line with Levinas, I want to suggest that the death of a loved one forces the bereaved to confront *absolute* alterity in a way that is arguably not possible when the

loved one is still living (See Levinas 2017, 1987, 1969). As death imposes its radical heteronomy upon the bereaved, the pre-reflective dyadic relationship becomes painfully reflective, and the bereaved is forced to reckon with the deceased loved one as *other*. Yet, because of the existential texture of the inter-subjective relationship, the deceased other continues to be present in their absence. As a result, the self-familiarity of the bereaved is co-opted by the unfamiliar absence of their deceased loved one, which leaves them feeling fundamentally alienated from themselves and from the world. Introduced through the death of the other, I suggest that this experience of absolute alterity is better conceptualised according to the standard philosophical account of alienation, as an intrusion rather than withdrawal of otherness.

Secondly, if we consider the relation between the bereaved and the world, there is another sense in which alienation in bereavement can be seen to result from the intrusion rather than withdrawal of otherness. Caught between the past world in which the deceased loved one was present and the present world in which they are painfully absent, it is common for the bereaved to feel a profound sense of disconnection from the world. One aspect of this experience involves the sense that others are not capable of understanding or empathising with the depths of one's uniquely painful loss, which they themselves find in many ways inexplicable and unutterable. Indeed, it is increasingly understood throughout the bereavement literature that a perceived lack of recognition of one's loss (itself a feeling that one has been absorbed by alterity) can result in the experience of disenfranchisement and a diminished sense of self. Broader societal and cultural views on death and mourning can also involve significant incursions upon the bereaved one's sense of self. For example, it is often presupposed that bereavement should be a time-limited process after which one relinquishes their relation to the deceased and rejoins the world of the living in a timely manner (Kenny et al. 2019). For those who are unwilling or unable to do so, however, these presumptions can be experienced as a distressing imposition, accompanied by the fear that if one grieves too long or too intensely, one's grief will be deemed pathological. Indeed, whilst the withdrawal of social support during the Covid 19 pandemic has had a devastating effect upon many of those suffering bereavement, there is evidence that some people have nevertheless felt a reprieve from the intrusion of heteronomy upon their grieving process. Somewhat counter-intuitively, therefore, being socially isolated has helped some people to feel less alienated in the midst of their grief, because this intensely intimate and painful experience could not be overtaken by the otherness of societal and cultural norms (See Ratcliffe 2022, 179–83).

These constitute two important ways in which self-alienation in bereavement involves the intrusion rather than withdrawal of alterity both in relation to the deceased other and to the world. Though these examples reinforce the standard philosophical approach to alienation rather than Køster's relational interpretation, it is arguable that the two conceptions are not incommensurable, but rather two sides of the same process. As the existential texture of self-familiarity breaks down, alterity could plausibly be experienced both as a result of the withdrawal of one's feeling of situatedness in the world *and* from the imposition of death upon life, and societal and cultural norms upon grief. Nevertheless, if we are to delineate the experience of self-alienation in bereavement from that of other limit situations involving a similar experience of world-collapse, then I suggest the task of differentiating between the two conceptions of self-alienation becomes

more pressing. Like bereavement, limit situations such as melancholia, schizophrenia or trauma can all involve the disruption of one's situatedness in the world and the withdrawal of *relative* heteronomy or otherness. Yet, bereavement is unique in that it also involves an intersubjective relation between the living and the dead, through which the dyadic identity of the bereaved is exposed to, and co-opted by, the *absolute alterity* of death itself. Distinct from experiences of self-alienation in other limit situations therefore, when the bereaved describes the feeling that part of them has been lost, or indeed that part of them has *died* as is also common in bereavement, it is important to take seriously the possibility that this could be a literal rather than metaphorical description.

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