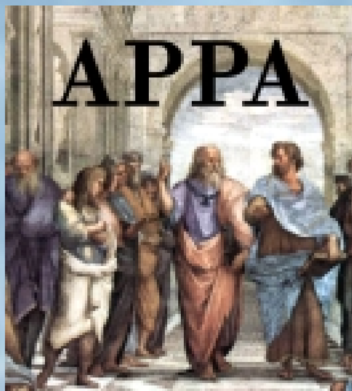

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Nemo Veritatem Regit
Nobody Governs Truth

On Grief: an Aesthetic Defense

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"Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows."—William Shakespeare

Abstract

In Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the passion of grief yields a fascinating case of pleasurable pain: it is a state of pain resulting from the absolute cessation of pleasure, yet somehow still ensuring a peculiar form of pleasure, which justifies one's lingering on grief. Different from any positive pleasure, grief is also unlike any other positive pain, for its pain is the outcome of a "lost pleasure." It is my contention that Burke's intuition is a viable hypothesis on the nature of grief. On the path opened up by Burke, what follows is a defense of grief as an aesthetic emotion and emotional process. My claim is that grief belongs to the sphere of the sublime and its "delightful terror." My aim is to suggest an aesthetic reading of grief able to transcend the normal/pathological distinctions of the therapeutic school.

Keywords: a*esthetics, Burke, delight, desire, grief, irrationality, pain, pleasure, sublime*

Introduction

Is there a limit to grief? Are we sick or in need of help if we grieve too long or too much? And what would 'too long' and 'too much' be, anyway? How are we supposed to understand grief?

The confined engagement of philosophers with the emotion of grief is an interesting phenomenon. Even in psychology, the claim has been made that "discussions of grief are conspicuously rare … for the behavior of the bereaved is not explicable within current models of emotions" (Averill, 1968, p. 721). More recently, grief has gained consideration among psychologists for what I would call the obvious reasons. By obvious reasons, I mean a shared understanding of grief as a potentially dangerous emotion. Treatment is encouraged even as a preemptive intervention on the subject, in order for her not to lose her 'normal', healthy, balanced functioning. Has grief become a threat to our well-being?

In what follows, I will defend grief—as an aesthetic emotion and emotional process. I will consider Edmund Burke's analysis of the passion of grief, as an intriguing case of pain mixed with pleasure. It is my contention that Burke's is a viable hypothesis on the nature of grief, and one which is worth pursuing. I will read Burke's comments on grief alongside his reflections on the nature of the sublime. My claim is that grief can be understood as an aesthetic emotion of the sublime kind. My aim is to suggest an aesthetic reading of grief able to transcend the normal/pathological distinctions of therapeutic school.

A few clarifications are in order here: What do I mean by aesthetic emotion? What do I mean by transcending the normal/pathological distinctions of therapeutic school? Finally, which instances of grief will I consider within the space of this paper?

I refer to aesthetic emotion as the emotional response arising from our encounters with the beautiful or the sublime. The emotion one feels as a response to the beautiful is—typically—a pleasant and calm emotion (so calm, as Hume notices, that we tend to believe beauty to be a property in the object rather

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than a feeling in the subject). As such, the beautiful could help us understand typically positive emotions, such as love, joy, or hope. Were we working on the premise of emotions being of two kinds, positive and negative, we could infer from this that the ugly (as what provokes the aesthetic emotion of displeasure) would be, in fact, closer to a negative emotion such as grief. I believe this is not the case. And the reason is twofold. First, such an either-or premise (of emotions as either positive or negative) lacks sophistication (Solomon, 2007). Second, there is a specific aesthetic emotion which does in fact rise up to the task at hand, and this is the sublime. In its dual nature, as a pain tinged with pleasure, as a form of "delightful terror," the way philosopher Edmund Burke vividly describes it, the sublime is close to the paradoxical nature of the emotion of grief.

If we take the discourse of grief outside therapeutic concerns dictated by standards of normality and what is socially acceptable—and adopt an aesthetic reading instead, we may be able to re-adjust, not our emotions, but our understanding of what is good or bad for us and our well-being. Mine is the invitation to abandon the divide between paradoxical, unhealthy, socially inconvenient, on one side and rational, healthy, socially acceptable patterns of emotional behavior, on the other. With an aesthetic reading of grief, I intend to defend the rationality of grief, and the irrationality that comes with it as well. In fact, as I will make clear later, I will defend the irrationality not of grief, but of our desire for grief, as good for us.

Finally, as to the instances of grief: grief, as discussed in this paper, is the emotional response to an irreparable, definitive loss (1) of a significant person (2). The feeling we may experience at the loss of someone important for us (e.g. a national/religious leader), yet not a part of our "functional relationships," is, as James Averill (1968) suggests, an example of "abbreviated grief reaction," something similar to sorrow or sadness (p. 726). Divorces, break-ups, losses of properties, wealth, or reputation, etc. will not be considered as instances of grief either. I will limit grief to the emotional reaction to an irreparable role- (not person-) loss (Averill, 1968). In other terms, the loss I am grieving for is not solely the loss of the person, as the loss of the meaningful relationship I had with such person.

The 'Delightful Terror' of Grief

In his 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, section I.V, "On Joy and Grief," Edmund Burke speaks of the passion of grief as follows:

> It must be observed, that the cessation of pleasure affects the mind three ways. If it simply ceases after having continued a proper time, the effect is *indifference*; if it be abruptly broken off, there ensues an uneasy sense called *disappointment*; if the object be so totally lost that there is no chance of enjoying it again, a passion arises in the mind which is called *grief*. Now there is none of these, not even grief, which is the most violent, that I think has any resemblance to positive pain. The person who grieves suffers his passion to grow upon him; he indulges it, he loves it: but this never happens in the case of actual pain, which no man ever willingly endured for any considerable time. That grief should be willingly endured, though far from a simply pleasing sensation, is not so difficult to be understood. It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all the circumstances that attend it, even to the last minuteness; to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each, and to find a thousand new perfections in all, that were not sufficiently understood before; in grief, the *pleasure* is still uppermost; and the affliction we suffer has no resemblance to absolute pain, which is always odious, and which we endeavor to shake off as soon as possible. (I.V)

Section I.V of the *Enquiry* precedes the paragraph on the "most powerful of all passions," the passions of self-preservation, which are origins of the sublime. As a prelude to his investigation on the beautiful and the sublime, Burke lays down a fundamental axiom regarding the "simple ideas" of pain and pleasure. On the one hand, pain and pleasure, Burke claims, have a positive nature, which is to say they are independent from each other (he calls them 'positive pain' and 'positive pleasure'). For most of the time, the mind is in a state of 'indifference'; from indifference, it can move into either pleasure or pain. On the other hand, those states which result from the removal or diminution of either pain or pleasure do not yield any positive pleasure or pain. The "agreeable" feeling resulting from removal of pain will be not pleasure, but 'delight'—meaning, a 'relative pleasure', "the sensation," quoting Burke, "which accompanies the removal of pain or danger" (Burke, 1757, I.IV).

The passion of grief yields a fascinating case: it is a state of pain resulting from the absolute cessation of pleasure, yet somehow still ensuring a peculiar form of pleasure, which justifies one's lingering on pain. Different from any positive pleasure, grief is also unlike any other positive pain, for its pain is the outcome of a "lost pleasure." In Burke, the passion of grief does not read as an example of the sublime (his examples being objects from nature, animals, and death), yet it has all it needs to become one. What follows is an excerpt from Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*, Part I, Section VII "Of the sublime":

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (I.VII *original italics*)

Sublime, in Burke, is the confrontation with terror; it is the response to the threat of our finitude. In other words, sublime is a call on our vulnerability. Vast objects, infinity, or great power typically evoke the passion of the sublime; but a lack of objects is equally frightening, as we may experience in any form of privation, darkness, silence, or solitude. As emotion, the sublime is the strongest aesthetic emotion (Burke, 1757, I.VII); it is an emotion so strong as to deprive the mind of its power to act and/or reason. The sublime in Burke comes with "pain, shock, and terror," yet it is also paradoxically accompanied by a relative pleasure, which is called 'delight'. This "delightful horror," as Burke (1757) calls it, is "the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (II.VIII).

Although Burke's take on the sublime blurs the distinction between the sublime as an object (that which is the cause of confrontation with our vulnerability), and the sublime as an emotion (the pain suffered from the above confrontation with our vulnerability), in the end he seems to privilege the latter reading, the sublime as the emotion stirred in us by the terrifying object. Only our distance from the threat can account for the 'delight' we feel in terror. Now, what is grief but the terrifying confrontation with our vulnerability? Our life *per se* is not in danger here, yet the loss of a significant person is the loss of our life as our horizon of meaning. It is the threat posed not by the presence, as by the absence of object—a person in this case: the privation, the solitude, and the silence, causing the acute and prolonged pain and the fear in the grieving subject. In grief, we experience the sense of helplessness in front of death, when the death of another signifies also the death of one's own self. It is a terrifying pain. Yet, such pain, the result of a lost pleasure, knows of some peculiar kind of pleasure, which turns into delight. Here, the paradoxical pattern of behavior of a pain "willingly endured": the desire "to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each, and to find a thousand new perfections in all, that were not sufficiently understood before," as Burke puts it.

Grief is an aesthetic emotion of the sublime kind for a similarity between the terrifying object of the sublime and the likewise terrifying object of grief; for a similarity in the emotional response to such object (the threat and the confrontation with our fragility); for the similar dual nature of the two emotions, as intense, devastating pain tinged with pleasure in a very peculiar and distinctive manner. Moreover, in grief, as in the sublime, pain and pleasure do not simply co-exist, but succeed in an eloquent narrative (as I will discuss later). The narrative of grief gives us that 'distance' from the threatening (lack of) object which makes pleasure possible. All this said I return to the original question of my paper: Is there any 'reasonable' time for the subject to be in her grieving process? Is there a limit for grief before it becomes a pathological episode or behavior in the life of the grieving subject?

Grief: Normal or Pathological?

Despite claims such that "grief is an entirely normal response to loss, grief is positively healthy, grief involves cognitive good, grief is a rational response to loss, grief ought not to be treated or 'medicalized', [and] grief has a 'distinct sustaining cause'" (Wilkinson, 2000, pp. 291-292), the border between normal and pathological grief remains quite blurred. Are there necessary and sufficient conditions for a 'normal response to loss' to become pathological? Consider how the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (APA, 2000) defines mental disorder:

> A clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress (e.g. painful symptom) or disability (i.e. impairment in one or more important areas of functioning) or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom. (p. xxxi)

A normal phenomenology of grief clearly meets the disjunctive criteria of mental disorder: it comes with 'painful symptoms' and some impairment in functioning (be it a form of apathy, anxiety, distress, or other). Yet, the DSM-IV takes grief to be an exception to its definition of mental disorder: it is grief *qua* "expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event," the loss of a loved one in this case (APA, 2000, p. xxxi).

Depression associated with bereavement is considered a 'normal' reaction to loss, provided that it does not last too long. A two months span traces the time boundary between the normal and the pathological. Beyond that span of time, grief may turn into a 'major depressive episode' and may lead to a 'major depressive disorder'. Differences among various cultural groups notwithstanding, "if the symptoms begin within 2 months of the loss of a loved one and do not persist beyond these 2 months" (APA, 2000, p. 352), what we have is not a case of 'major depressive episode'. When further symptoms appear, such as "(1) guilt about other things than actions taken or not taken … at the time of the death; (2) thoughts of death other than the survivor feeling that he or she would be better off dead…: (3) morbid preoccupation with worthlessness", bereavement becomes a 'major depressive episode', under code V62.82 in the *Manual* (First, Frances, & Pincus, 2004, p. 404).

Thus, a few painful symptoms of a psychological and physical nature are accepted as normal, if time-bound; (normal) grieving subjects would experience an extreme fatigue, apathy, disturbance in sleep and/or appetite, along with the psychological pain of the loss.

I am perplexed as to the manner in which those criteria can in fact sever the normal from the pathological. Can we legitimately put a time line to what is undeniably one of our most extreme emotions? And, even if we could, would a time line be enough to free grief from the charge of irrationality? I believe not. And, grief has been labeled irrational, at least in one important respect.

The Irrationality of Grief

In his seminal paper on grief, Donald Gustafson (1989) speaks of the degree of rationality and irrationality in the four dimensions of grief: cognitive, affective, volitional, and motivational. While grief "cannot be irrational in its cognitive dimension," it "can be irrational in its affective dimension." Then, it is irrational in its desire, and by this Gustafson means the desire the grieving subject holds that the loved one may not be, in fact, dead. As far as the fourth dimension goes, Gustafson points out the passive character of grief: contrary to other emotions, grief lacks a motivational drive. Grief is truly *pathos*: "one suffers grief" (Gustafson, 1989, pp. 466-67).

Clearly, unless the information I received about my loved one's death somehow turns out to be false, I cannot be irrational in my cognitive dimension of grief. There has been a death and thus a loss of which I am cognitively aware or made aware of. Typically, Gustafson claims, there can be no irrationality in the cognitive element of grief. In its affective dimension, grief may be more or less irrational, depending on the "duration, depth, and extent" it acquires. However, this is not of much interest as a distinguishing trait of grief, as Gustafson admits, for any other emotion seems to be liable to analogous 'deviations'. By way of example, my love when still directed to my ex partner, with the same care, concern, and expectation I had while in the relationship, may be targeted as an irrational kind of love. Analogously, the way I fear, hope, or hate may be labeled as irrational when lasting too long, reaching too far, or lacking a sense of proportion.

With the further traits of grief, its volition and motivation, the plot thickens. Grief, Gustafson claims, is irrational with respect to its desire (Gustafson, 1989, p. 466). Once we agree with Gustafson on the irrational, hence impossible desire of grief, then the step is a short one to grief as an emotion which holds no motive to act. There can be no motivation in grief for my action would not change anything about my loss. The loss is final.

While I share Gustafson's big picture, I believe his depiction of grief's volitional and motivational sides lacks in one important respect. In fact, which kind of desire are we talking about here? Basically, my desire is irrational for, Gustafson argues, it is a desire about a literal undoing of things past. I do not just *wish* that p (as in sorrow); I *want* that p (where p means 'my loved one is not dead'). To want what is irrevocably lost is a "robust" desire versus the weaker wishing that things were not the way they are. That I may wish my loved one were still alive is something hardly irrational. To want it, on the other hand, is hardly within the bounds of reason. However, a reading like Gustafson's overlooks the narrative structure of grief and, accordingly, the narrative structure of its desire, to which I will now turn.

The Narrative of Grief

Grief is an emotion (an episode), but it is also and more importantly an emotional process, endowed with an internal narrative. Recent scholarship on grief shares the idea of a narrative structure of the emotion. According to Averill (1968), for example, (normal) grief develops in three stages: "shock, despair, and recovery" (p. 723). Shock is the phase of disbelief, usually associated with feelings of anger and separation-anxiety; despair denotes the depressive stage, caused by the (acknowledged) loss of "a long established and highly motivated behavior" (p. 737), and usually comes with withdrawal and apathy; finally, recovery gets the subject back to her function (once a new relationship with the object has been established, e.g. religious/spiritual). Famously, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (2005) reads five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

The narrative of grief takes us to my second point: the narrative of the volitional component of grief. The desire Gustafson addresses as irrational, as a desire about a literal undoing of the past, may belong to the earlier phases of grief: denial, anger, and bargaining; in fact, it is what defines the bargaining moment. Yet, in the later phases of grief, depression and acceptance, such irrational desire is overcome by either the absence of desire at all (in depression) or by a different kind of desire (in acceptance). I will go briefly through the five stages and their specific desires (or lack of).

Disbelief toward the death of our loved one is the defining trait of the first stage of grief: denial. In denial—not a 'literal' as much as a 'symbolic' denying the facts (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 8)—we are still learning how to deal with our grief. The threat of the loss at this point in time is so overwhelming that we do not allow ourselves to believe the evidence. Irrationality, if there is one here, would be in the cognitive dimension of grief. And since we cannot fathom the death, we cannot (consciously) hold the (irrational) desire of undoing it. In the second phase of grief, anger—anger toward anybody who may be responsible for the pain, directly or indirectly: God, friends, ourselves, or even the one we are grieving for—, we are still processing the emotion of grief. We allow ourselves to believe the evidence only by getting angry at whatever or whoever can be held responsible for it. It is in the third phase, bargaining, that our volition gets patently irrational. We literally try to bargain with our past and our loss: we want our loved one back and are ready and willing to do the impossible (literally) to get it.

In the next two phases, depression and acceptance, the volitional aspect of grief gets modified again. In depression, "we don't care enough to care" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 21). The only desire here is to have no desire at all, for everything seems pointless, from our getting up in the morning to going through any of our daily activities. The next and final stage, acceptance—wrongly understood, as Kübler-Ross (2005) points out, as "being all right or okay with what has happened" (p. 24)—is the moment in which the subject gets back into life and living again. This phase is not the ending of grief, not in the least. It is rather the beginning of grief at a new level, and this may go on indefinitely. Now we may experience a new appreciation of grief as well as a new kind of desire, a desire this time for the emotion of grief rather than for the object of the emotion.

At this point, we can speak of two kinds of desire: the irrational desire toward the object of grief (i.e. undoing the loss and having our loved one back) and the (seemingly) irrational desire toward the emotion of grief itself. A 'robust' desire for undoing the past is the irrational desire Gustafson is concerned with, which may inhabit the two stages of denial and anger, and clearly inhabits the stage of bargain. The second kind of desire is a desire for grief to last. We may not want grief as an emotion within our repertoire—that seems almost a truism—yet there is an important value difference between two kinds of wanting: what we may want before and what we may want after the death of a loved one. Whereas before the tragic event I hold a first order desire (of which I need not be consciously aware of) which says 'I do not want to be feeling grief,' after the event a second order desire may come along, in which what I want is, in fact, the continuation of the feeling of grief. I want to hold on to the past in my memory; I want to celebrate the deceased; I want the 'dedicatory' aspect of grief (McCracken, 2005). This paradoxical pattern of behavior is what Burke (1757) seems to suggest when he says:

> It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all the circumstances that attend it, even to the last minuteness; to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each, and to find a thousand new perfections in all, that were not sufficiently understood before. (I.V)

The apparent irrationality of grief is not in its desire; it is in the desire of its continuation. I may (irrationally) want that, as Gustafson argues, but that desire of mine belongs to the first phases of grief, denial, anger, and bargain. Subsequently, I wish my loved one was not dead, but I am not delusional about it. The desire does not come with the belief that what I wish may in fact happen. Wishing life rather than death is a way of expressing the emptiness and lack of direction in one's horizon of meanings left behind by his or her death. I had life and meaning, and now my horizon is empty. That grief is not an emotion we wish for us and for our well-being seems undisputable, yet again things are different once we happen to suffer the emotion. The point is that grief is not a negative emotion *simpliciter*; the negative is not in the emotion, as in the event which is at the source of the emotion (the irreparable loss of a person I had significant bonds with) (Solomon, 2007). One does not suffer grief, one suffers the loss; yet, it is easy to blur the distinction between the emotion and its object. And, analogously, it is easy to blur the distinction between the two kinds of desire, the one toward the emotion of grief and the other toward the object of the emotion. It is not grief what we want to get rid of. Actually, a continuation of grief, a voluntary prolongation and intensification of pain, is what we may desire, as irrational as this desire of ours may appear.

Conclusion

The paradoxical character of grief is reminiscent of the phenomenology of a sublime experience. When confronted with the death of a loved one, the grieving subject goes through the shock of the event, the painful symptoms caused by the loss, and the terror of a life without that someone who gave meaning to one's horizon. Grief "involves nothing else than the loss of one's self" and so it asks for the rebuilding of one's self (Solomon, 2007, p. 76). The delight, the paradoxical delight we feel in grief is a modified form of pleasure, the outcome of a lost love. Grief is a painful, terrifying love: the last and only opportunity we are given to remember, honor, praise, and commemorate the dead one. The pain of memory is the *conditio* of the pleasure of remembering the one who deserves to be remembered and honored. The deep pain of grief comes with the longing for its continuation, for any attenuation of the pain would signify a betrayal toward the deceased. Forgetting is more painful than remembering.

As aesthetic emotion, grief belongs to the sublime. It cannot be beautiful; it does not possess the calm, the positive pleasure, and the rationality of beauty. The sublime, as Burke understands it, has at its source the passions of self-preservation. The sublimity of grief has an inherent trait toward self-preservation in front of the terror, the awe, and the shock of death, as the interruption of what one used to be. The paradoxical nature of grief takes into the sphere of the sublime, the sphere of powerful, overwhelming, exquisitely aesthetic emotions. Sublime terror somehow invites its own preservation and such paradoxical behavior is furthered rather than condemned or, conveniently, adjusted to more rational, healthy, socially acceptable patterns of emotional behavior. I am not denying the irrationality that comes with grief. In fact, I am defending grief, especially for the (seemingly) irrational desire of ours toward its continuation. My invitation to think of grief as an aesthetic phenomenon suggests a way for grief to be understood beyond the normal/pathological distinctions of therapeutic school. Grief is nothing more than an extreme, modified form of love. The irrationality that comes along with it is a form of irrationality which our well-being requires.

Afterword

I am no stranger to grief. I hope this attempt of mine to an aesthetic understanding of grief will cause no offense in any of my readers. I had to wait a long time before being able to talk and write about such a powerful emotion, for which I believe aesthetic appreciation to be more consonant and respectful rather than a clinical approach and cure.

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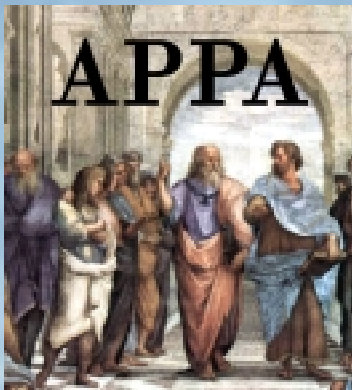

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