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Love and Grief (Loving better through Grief)

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Abstract

When, in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York more than two decades ago, the late Queen Elizabeth II expressed her sentiments with the words: 'Grief is the price we pay for love', she was making a reference to British psychiatrist Dr Colin Murray Parkes's book *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life.* In the book, Dr Parkes states an obvious, albeit often ignored, fact that the pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love. Following the death of the Queen in September 2022, Joe Biden, the current president of the US, used the same quote as an opportunity to express his own personal sadness about her passing. It was also an opportunity to participate in public grief about the loss of a popular leader, and of innocent lives. It is not uncommon for leaders, religious ones including, to speak of love, especially during such poignant moments. But it is somewhat less common for public figures to bring to our attention the close connection between grief and love. Even when they do, grief is commonly seen in a negative light. Philosophers provide another example of what is, I shall argue, a mischaracterization of grief.

Introduction

The philosophical story of love began with Plato's *Symposium* (385–370 BC). There, he proposes the idea that different kinds of love can be ordered hierarchically, where the highest form of love requires our apprehension of its absolute beauty. By this concept, Plato means the shape or form of beauty, 'from which all other beautiful things are derived' (210a–212c). He then unveils to us 'the realm of love', which begins 'with beautiful things in this world, and using them as steps, returning ever on and upwards for the sake of that absolute beauty' (ibid.). And while Plato introduced a systematic, unified, account of love, the hierarchy of love and its connection to beauty, he did not say much about grief.

> Iris Murdoch, an Irish and British novelist and philosopher … argued that love is a way out of grief. Why should grief be seen just as something we ought to get out of? Do we not, perhaps often, lose something important when we try to rush ourselves out of grief? Murdoch is half-right; grief, which essentially involves devaluing the loss of a loved one, in the sense that it represents the loss of something valued, should not be the reason to love less. On the contrary, it provides us with reasons to love more. However, her emphasis on the negative side of grief masks what is valuable about it: grief is an opportunity to love not just more but also better by understanding better what love is. In other words, grief is a learning opportunity to climb up the Platonic 'love ladder'. What it is to love, and to

love well, varies significantly across cultures and time. But independently of such contingencies, love, like many other emotions, plays a universal role in human lives. Thus, the question of what it means to love well pertains to its normative dimension – the function that love ought to play.

The main aim of this article is first to outline briefly Plato's account of love, in advance of explaining the cognitive aspect of grief, and finally to suggest how Murdoch's claim about the relationship between love and grief can be accommodated within a cognitivist approach to emotions, while being also compatible with Plato's theory of love.

Plato on love

Plato, who was born in Athens, a democratic Greek city-state (*polis*), grew up in a time of war, which ended in the defeat of Athens, the collapse of democracy and a period of tyranny. Very quickly, he learned about the danger of high passions: wars have been waged for the love of God, freedom, one's nation and much more. How about the love of knowledge? Plato was disappointed with politics and bad leaders whom he saw as lacking true wisdom and passion for knowledge. Indeed, the aim of Plato's *Republic*, and the same can be said about the writings of philosophers from Aristotle to Kant, was to construct an art of living that universally applies to all, and that embraces the love of knowledge.

As a rationalist philosopher, Plato believed in the power of reason or intellect – what he describes in *Phaedrus* (360 BC) as the best part of our souls – over what he deems the lower parts of our soul, which include emotions and desires. Plato tells us that we are rational to the extent that we can free ourselves from emotions. Not surprisingly, in the *Republic* (375 BC), which was typically written in the form of dialogues, and speaking through his teacher Socrates, Plato declares that grief can and should be eliminated by the fully virtuous, rational, people and good citizens. His main focus in the *Republic* was the question of what justice is. What makes a city-state just? What makes a person just?

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‘Plato declares that grief can and should be eliminated by the fully virtuous, rational, people and good citizens.’

In the *Symposium* (385–370 BC), a Platonic dialogue which describes a symposium on the nature of love or eros, Plato does offer a more positive account of love, but again without making any significant references to its connection to grief. The *Symposium* starts as a symposium at a men’s banquet involving philosophical discussions in praise of Eros, the Greek god of love and sexual desire. Socrates summarizes the speeches of five of the guests, before recounting the teaching of the priestess Diotima, who tells him the secrets of love using the ladder metaphor to describe the ascent from purely physical attraction to something beautiful, to eventual contemplation of the Form of Beauty itself.

Plato’s main goal is to vindicate what he sees as the supreme kind of love. In contrast to the typically Socratic method of defining love by finding the feature common to all types of love, Plato argues that different types of love should be ordered hierarchically, where those who seek to understand true love and its absolute Beauty regard it as the final goal of all their previous efforts to love.

What does it mean to say that Beauty is love’s ultimate aim? We cannot understand this idea properly, Plato says, unless we first progress from love of physical beauty in a person, to love of all physical beauty, and then to love of beauty in the soul, which leads to awareness of beauty of activities, institutions and sciences. Finally, we will be led to a glimpse of human activities whose object is absolute Beauty, where we do not perceive individual things that have beauty, but rather apprehend them by Beauty’s ideal form or shape. This emotional attention, whose sole object is absolute beauty, is the final step on the Platonic ladder.

Furthermore, Plato identifies beauty with the good. When describing the proper aim of a philosopher (the lover of knowledge) in the *Republic*, Plato refers to the Good. A philosopher’s final aim is achieved through ascent from the cave of this world into the light of reality. Building on the idea of goodness, Plato then offers his definition of love as the desire for the perpetual possession of the good.

We can get a sense, given this definition, that Plato was more than a moral rationalist, being mesmerized by the alluring nature of love. As Murdoch notes, Plato, who often returned ‘ardently to the importance and the ambiguity of love, cannot be called a cold or abstract or purely intellectualist moralist’ (Murdoch 1992: 17).

Given the mesmerizing ambiguity in Plato’s writing about love and its relation to beauty, we could ask whether he doubted that grief plays a role in an ascent to a supreme kind of love. Why think that grief can be part of our learning journey, and thus epistemologically significant by opening our eyes to the value and absolute beauty of love? Isn’t grief the state that can dull our desires for the good?

A positive answer, as I will suggest, is supported by the cognitive nature of grief and its normative dimension, which determines its relation to other mental states in our cognitive system. Briefly, by a normative relation between different mental states I mean something like this. One’s fear directed at a bear in the woods can justify the belief that the bear is dangerous. On the other hand, one’s desire for bears to be harmless cannot rationalize the belief that bears are harmless. Therefore, while an emotion that p, by itself, can rationalize the belief that p, the desire that p can rationalize intention (to do something), but not belief, that p. Likewise, grief, as a cognitive emotion, has a unique normative connection to other emotions, beliefs and desires in our mental system. Grief cannot rationalize the desire for the loved one to be brought back to life, although this irrational desire can be present. Crucially, grief can deepen our understanding of the value of love and its different modes, including the love of

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humanity that we all share. This said, it is appropriate to note, at least briefly, that we can relate grief to our increased emotional capacity directed at other objects such as animals, nature, or art, for example.

The metaphysics of grief

The absence of accounts of grief in the philosophical literature could be partly due to the very complexity of this emotion. The ancient Greeks were less troubled with what appear to be the complexities inherent in the emotion of grief, providing a more simplified understanding of it as a kind of pain. Since pain, whether mental of physical, can have a detrimental effect on our activities and other mental states, it seems rational to try to shake off the pain caused by a personal loss, just like Plato suggests. And yet although the pain of loss can feel overwhelming, it is not like headache – something that we ought to get rid of as soon as possible by taking a painkiller. To illustrate, being aware of one's own feeling of grief is not just being aware of that feeling. Rather, it gives a certain 'colour' to our related thoughts and memories. We think emotionally about the goodness, or value of what/who we lost, where this thought is a kind of judgement – evaluative judgement.

Thus, grief could be plausibly understood as a judgement or belief (i.e. that someone has passed away) plus the associated feeling of sadness or unhappiness. This characterization of grief illustrates a shift in philosophical accounts of emotions, especially in recent years, from Plato's reason–emotion opposition view to a cognitivist view of emotion which affirms their intelligence and logic (e.g. Solomon 1976; Nussbaum 2001). Although we should agree with cognitivists that emotions are more than feelings, we also have good reasons to be careful not to characterize emotions as states that are identical to their cognitive component and separate from their feeling aspect. Rather, it is plausible to think that emotions like grief are best understood as states that are constituted by both thought and feeling, where the latter gives that special affective 'colour' to the former. Of course, like love, happiness, pride, shame and other complex emotions, grief need not be felt at all times. For example, being happy does not imply feeling happy all the time. But it would seem odd to claim that we are happy although we never feel happy. Likewise, grieving essentially involves the relevant feeling, although this feeling may not always be consciously present.

For our current purposes, we are interested in the cognitive or normative aspect of grief and its connection to love. Inherently, grief can cause irrational desires for the loved one to return. This is because emotions can be overwhelming, and grief is no exception. However, grief is more than just a feeling that can overwhelm an agent. If grief is seen just as a feeling that can hinder our capacity for love, then, as Plato says, we need to free ourselves from it in our effort to pursue the desire for love – the desire for 'the perpetual possession of the good'.

Like grief that is more than feeling, love is more than desire, although it may involve desires. Both love and grief have content pertaining to value. Grief feels like a void or absence, but it is about someone who was respected and valued. Love, in contrast, can feel like excitement associated with the presence of a loved one who merits respect and is of value. Their contrasting features are about feeling rather than content. Furthermore, unrealized love can feel like a void, fuelling unrealistic and thus irrational desires, so even the feeling aspect of grief and love is not something that can necessarily be used to distinguish them from one another. This can be taken to indicate their intertwining nature.

The term that Plato uses when defining love – 'possession' – is also rather unfortunate. How can we rationally aim to possess goodness? Uncontroversially, we can participate in things that are good things to do. There are plenty of positive examples. But I don't see why common display of public grief couldn't be one such example, not least because of a given opportunity for shared experiences of thinking, respecting and valuing together. Like personal grief, which is undoubtedly much deeper, public grief focuses our emotional attention on things that matter, and love and respect matter more than what divides us. But as we will see, Murdoch and Plato, although acknowledging the magic power

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of love, both underplay the positive element of grief.

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Murdoch on Love and Grief

The topic of love is a crucial aspect of Iris Murdoch’s philosophy. Perplexed by the mystery of love, like Plato, Murdoch believed that love can guide us, helping us discover things in the world that we may not notice in its absence. One of the key obstacles to loving, Murdoch argues, is ego – loving is overcoming ego, and this is something which is notoriously difficult. Here is how she defines what she sees as a genuine love, love of the best kind: ‘the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real’ (Murdoch 1999: 215). The act of loving requires a great deal of effort, and a positive attitude to love, what she describes as ‘openness to love’, which she claims to be an important human virtue.

This attitude, Murdoch says, is quite important in ‘dark times’, when we grieve the loss of a loved one. Again, Murdoch’s emphasis is on the negative side of grief that involves ‘a sense of emptiness, a loss of personality, a loss of energy and motivation, a sense of being stripped, the world is utterly charmless and without attraction’ (Murdoch 1992: 500).

Furthermore, the remedy, a way out of grief, Murdoch maintains, feels for a person like returning ‘from the strange absolute country of death which he has visited, and resumes his ordinary interests, which in his grief he found senseless’ (501).

Here we find ourselves puzzled: how can openness to love be preserved without incurring moral injuries? Love can be tainted by self-concern, as Plato, but also Freud and Schopenhauer, among others, pointed out. Also, it may seem too judgemental to assert that in the times of grief we still ought to be open to love. Some people may prefer solitude, which need not hinder one’s contemplation of beauty in art and nature, for example. Indeed, solitude can be noble and virtuous without exhibiting openness to love that Murdoch prescribes.

The first worry of course depends on what kind of love the attitude of openness refers to. Seeking and finding a new love interest soon after the death of a loved one, and as a way out of grief, may be problematic; it may bring into question both the depth of the new love and the depth of the original whose place it seems to take. In other words, it makes the loved one replaceable.

The second issue is perhaps not a worry at all: it is possible to be open to love through one’s solitude, deepening one’s sense of real connectedness to others, shared values, what Kant called the moral feeling, ‘the love for human beings’ (Kant 1996/1797). For Kant, sorrow can be an opportunity to seize one’s moral capacity, the capacity for love and respect of others, treating them as members of humanity and as ends in themselves, although he does not explicitly discuss this connection. This is in contrast with what Kant describes as pathological love that involves the feeling of pleasure when the loved one is near and the feeling of suffering when the loved one is absent. Moreover, grief can be an opportunity to think deeper about respect in a specific way demanded by a particular kind of love relationship (i.e. friend, parent) and about what it means to love well.

There are relevant parallels between Plato’s understanding of the highest form of love and Kant’s conception of moral love that are worth mentioning; both philosophers thought that aiming at the attainment of this state is a proper, rational, goal of humans. I will add that the norm of respect, while constitutive of love, also makes sense, or rationalizes, the corresponding grief.

Although neither philosopher said much about the positive role of grief, their views can be compatible with Murdoch’s dictum of loving

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more following the dark times. But although grief can help us better apprehend what Plato describes as the love's absolute beauty, it does place a constraint on loving more (i.e. in the context of romantic love). This said, there does not seem to be anything inconsistent in the possibility of getting a glimpse of Platonic abstract heavenly love, via grief, in advance of, at some appropriate point, returning to the earthly love that Murdoch prescribes. Climbing up the Platonic love ladder is not intended, I think, to be taken literally. In other words, we can be 'present' simultaneously at different steps on the ladder: as knowledge-loving, lovers of justice, lovers, friends, and much more. The point is that grief can enable us to have a better view from whatever love steps we may found ourselves on in the future.

So from here, in the last section of the article, I will argue that grief, given its proper function, facilitates the right kind of openness to love, as an opportunity to love better and not just more.

Grief in the Service of Love

First, I would like to endorse a broad concept of grief that includes public grief that I discussed at the start of the article. Public grief, although quite different from personal grief, shares the same important feature that is crucial to the broadening of our capacity for love: it makes us reflect about the things we share with others, not just what we value in others. The beauty revealed through grief is the realization that we can think and act together, as rational human beings. Thus, the beauty in love is not just our object – it is what can unite us. And we cannot understand our shared emotional space unless we feel it.

Our resistance to feeling love, and loving more, could be things other than grief. Love can appear as a big commitment, an embarrassment even. It may be easier to settle for less, by saying that we like, or at least understand, other individuals, people, cultures, nations, including those that are distant from us. But as Plato might warn us, such intellectual attitudes are insufficient for knowledge, and thus deceptive; love is the requirement for truly understanding something or someone.

Also, the feeling of loss is not unique to grief narrowly understood as the death of a loved one. We can feel we have lost someone close to us due to illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease, or due to the breakdown of a personal relationship. Thus grief, broadly construed, involves the feeling of pain or sadness about someone we loved who is no longer in our lives – it is the feeling of detachment from the other. This sense of detachment is not something that should be remedied by way of replacement – a way out of grief.

There are at least five different stages of grief, the first being a shock and denial. It is this first, and the most devastating, phase of grief that Mudoch was at pains to get us out of, via love. Nonetheless, turning away from grief and all its stages can have the consequences of squandering an opportunity for emotional or spiritual growth that takes us up the love ladder.

Accepting the loss of a loved one, on the other hand, allows one to get the glimpse of the absolute beauty of love, illuminating not just the sublime Platonic abstract reality, but also the real world in which loving more but better need not be limited by the space already taken in one's heart and mind.

Conclusion

Murdoch's openness to love, situated within a broadly Platonic ethics, seems problematic in the context of grief, where it may be inappropriate to engage in a new romantic relationship too quickly.

But as I argued in this article, this limitation is due to Murdoch's emphasis on the negative side of grief – this is something which is shared by many philosophers, Plato included. The inherent limitation of Murdoch's account of love and its connection to grief can be overcome if we allow the positive import of grief grounded in its normative character. Part of the purpose of grief, its normative feature, is to overcome our own ego, and our desires for the ideal in the other. Grief can pave the way for self-improvement and an increased capacity for loving better. It can mobilize our efforts to engage better with

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others, illuminating for us the importance of respect in love. And even collective grief, to the extent that it involves genuine feelings, can prompt us to look in the right direction in the world that is too often and increasingly emotionally disorientating.

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