

## Mourning and the Recognition of Value

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1.

Each year, ancient Athens would celebrate its fallen soldiers by choosing a citizen to deliver a funeral oration. In Plato's *Menexenus*, Socrates is recounting advice that he received from Aspasia of Miletus as to what such a speech should involve. Amongst other things, she recommends instructing the audience on how to mourn the dead, recounting the following instructions given to her by Athenian soldiers concerning how their fathers should behave in case they die in battle:

If they bear their sorrows courageously, they will seem to be really fathers of courageous sons – and just as courageous themselves; but if they succumb to grief, they will provide grounds for suspicion that either they are not our fathers or the people who praise us are mistaken. Neither of these must happen. On the contrary, they above all must be our encomiasts in action, by showing themselves to be true men, with the look of truly being the fathers of true men. *Nothing too much* has long been thought an excellent adage – because it is, in truth, excellent. For that man's life is best arranged for whom all, or nearly all, the things that promote happiness depend on himself. Such a man does not hang from other men and necessarily rise or fall in fortune as they fare well or badly; he is the temperate, he is the brave and wise man. He above all, when wealth and children come and when they go, will pay heed to the adage: because he relies on himself, he will be seen neither to rejoice nor to grieve *too much*. (247d-248a)

To the modern ear, the tenor of this advice seems merciless: the bereaved are advised to avoid mourning if they can and are warned that deep mourning will be so damning of their courage that either their parenthood will be doubted or the courage of their sons will be called into question. But why should such grief impugn one's courage? The answer, it seems, relies on the particular conception of the good life expressed later in the passage: that the best kind of life is one in which one's happiness depends solely upon oneself. The truly virtuous man, it suggests, would not be moved to deep grief or mourning upon the death of his son, because he would not 'hang from other men' in the first place. On this view, deep grief and mourning suggest a lack of virtue because they indicate a life that fails to be fully self-sufficient and invulnerable.

This conception of the good life sounds utterly alien to the modern ear. Living a satisfying life, we tend to think, depends not on being wholly self-sufficient but, rather, upon finding and being committed to purposeful, meaningful things and activities. And we envisage the paradigmatic form of this meaning and fulfilment as coming from close relationships with other people. Such relationships essentially involve the possibility of painful loss. Far from thinking that profound grief and mourning are to be avoided and self-sufficiency prized, then, we tend to think that deep grief and mourning, or at least vulnerability to them, are an essential part of living well, and ought to be embraced as such.

This more modern conception of mourning finds voice, for example, in Julian Barnes' discussion of mourning his wife's death in *Levels of Life* (2013). At one point in the book, Barnes

shares a portion of a letter from a bereaved friend who expresses their own experience of mourning:

‘The thing is – nature is so exact, it hurts exactly as much as it is worth, so in a way one relishes the pain, I think.’ (Barnes 2013: 71)

on which Barnes later comes to reflect:

The second part of that sentence was what I stubbed my foot against: it struck me as unnecessarily masochistic. Now I know that it contains truth. And if the pain is not exactly relished, it no longer seems futile. Pain shows that you have not forgotten; pain enhances the flavour of the memory; pain is a proof of love. ‘If it didn’t matter, it wouldn’t matter.’ (Barnes 2013: 113)

Far from the shameful exhibition of vulnerability that Aspasia presents, Barnes sees deep grief as purposeful. Whilst not going so far as to say that he relishes the pain, he notes that it is ‘not futile’, that it reveals how much he had valued and loved his wife: ‘pain is a proof of love’. And though the final line of the passage is ambiguous, it seems to reveal that he recognizes a closer connection between love and pain as well, that love itself involves the possibility of pain: ‘If it didn’t matter, it wouldn’t matter.’

Whilst the advice recounted in *Menexenus* seems too austere and dispassionate, the line of thinking implicit in Barnes’ reflections seems to lead us to a different problem: If mourning is truly a proof of love and a reflection of the value that others have for us, how could it be appropriate to move on when one has truly loved and valued someone? Assuming that it is appropriate to value others extremely highly – perhaps even infinitely – how could it ever make sense for one’s grief to abate? Do loss and proper mourning present us with a choice between living well and loving well?

In this essay, we want to vindicate the seeming pressing nature of these questions but argue that we, nonetheless, do not usually need to choose between living well and loving well. In §2, we explain in more detail how these questions become pressing and why loving well seems to necessitate unending mourning in the case of some losses. In §3, we turn to some empirical research about how people in fact mourn the loss of partners and close family members – research that can seem to imply that we do not on average love well at all. And finally, in §4, we offer an explanation of why ceasing to mourn need not be a failure of love. In particular, we offer an account of how ceasing to mourn can be a fitting response to the object of love itself, as well as compatible with living well.

2.

In addressing the above questions, we will be assuming that living well is partially within our means and partially outside of them. The part of the ability to live well which is within our means we call virtue – excellence at living. Loss, on the other hand, is to a great extent outside of our means, in the sense that it cannot be avoided, at least not completely. As we have seen in *Menexenus*, however, *profound grief* in response to such loss can be avoided, at least in principle. We can resist fully or wholeheartedly loving anything, and thus resist making ourselves vulnerable to

grief. On the assumption that doing so is no way to live, however, vulnerability to loss and grief, if not loss and grief themselves, is necessary for living well. If such vulnerability is not a virtue, virtue at least entails it.<sup>1,2</sup>

To say that virtue requires being vulnerable to loss, then, is just another way of saying that the good life requires love, since making oneself invulnerable is plausibly only achieved by failing to love or value, or at least to love or value fully and adequately.<sup>3</sup> We are thus taking for granted that our lives should involve fully and wholeheartedly loving and valuing, at least some things and at least sometimes. Our question is “What is the appropriate response to losing a thing which one has loved wholeheartedly?” – or, more specifically, “Is *any* response appropriate, apart from unending grief and mourning?” The question arises in part because of the nature of virtue and in part because of the nature of love.

Virtue, on a common conception, involves both acting well and having appropriate affective responses. For our purposes, the latter is the relevant aspect of virtue. For example, the virtuous person will admire those things that are genuinely admirable and feel angry at injustices, because these are fitting emotional responses to have. Since anger is understood as being directed at actual or perceived injustice, it is objectively fitting when the object of anger is in fact unjust, and it is subjectively fitting when the object of anger is perceived to be unjust. Anger disproportionate to the injustice it is about is unfitting, as is anger disproportionate to one’s perception of injustice; so, both are *prima facie* unvirtuous. And this is the case whether the anger is wholly misplaced or not, and whether the agent feels too much or too little anger: anger directed at a just action is inappropriate, but a lack of anger at an egregious injustice can also suggest a lack of virtue, such as insufficient care for the victim.

Similar to anger, though more attitude than affect, love is directed at what is valuable, and it is appropriate in proportion to the actual and perceived value of the thing loved. Grief and mourning, in turn, are love’s converse: they are aimed at (or ‘about’) the loss of something valued or loved. They are objectively fitting when something truly valuable has been lost, and subjectively fitting when something truly *valued* is lost. So while one might love one’s guinea pig and also love one’s mother, and therefore mourn the loss of each, mourning the loss of one’s guinea pig more than the loss of one’s mother would usually be unfitting, both objectively and subjectively.

Being virtuous, then, seems to entail mourning for things that we love and have lost. The possibility of unending grief and mourning thus seems to arise because it seems both possible and desirable that we should value certain things (paradigmatically other people) extremely highly, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Lear ascribes a similar view to Freud: ‘Freud seems to be moving in the direction of treating mourning as a virtue – in Aristotle’s sense – a way of living well with loss and death and destruction. We can certainly imagine an Aristotelian voice speaking of mourning as striking the mean: not caring too little about the loss of a loved one, but not going to excess of permanently exiting from life and world’ (Lear 2018: 7). It is worth noting that Lear himself seems also to be moving in this direction, in this and other recent work (e.g., Lear 2017).

<sup>2</sup> One might conceive of the particular part of virtue that entails such vulnerability along the lines of what Alasdair MacIntyre has called ‘virtues of acknowledged dependence’ (MacIntyre 1999: 18). He suggests that the self-sufficiency mentioned above can never be more than the illusion of self-sufficiency, an illusion that can exclude one from certain valuable types of relationship.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Frankfurt, for example, writes: ‘A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses.’ (Frankfurt 1988: 83)

perhaps infinitely. If mourning for a week can be fitting after the loss of a guinea pig, say, then given that we value other people not merely a few times more than this, but with an altogether different order of care, how could infinite mourning not be called for – or, at least, mourning until the end of our lives? The idea that mourning is an appropriate response in proportion to loss seems to have the implication that in some cases virtue requires unending mourning.<sup>4,5</sup>

3.

The point that another's value could only be adequately recognised by unending mourning seems especially worrying when we consider recent psychological research regarding mourning the death of partners and close family. That literature seems to suggest that the bereaved rapidly return to 'baseline functioning', slewing off their grief and mourning after only a few months on average.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, such literature suggests that after a few months, the intense emotional turmoil and sadness of initial mourning is usually overcome and that the bereaved can once again live a fairly normal life, both functioning in similar ways to before the bereavement and experiencing similar psychological well-being. Far from unending mourning, this evidence suggests that people tend not to mourn for a very long period at all.

A plausible response to these findings would be to take them as evidence that people do not in fact love, value, or care about their partners or close family members very deeply. And this response would plausibly be based on an idea we have expressed above: that the difficulty of enduring a loss is proportional to one's love. We value most those whose loss would be most difficult for us to endure. Relative indifference to a loss thus seems to reveal that we were wrong to think that we valued the thing very deeply in the first place. Dan Moller (2007) considers and rejects this conclusion. He argues that there is good reason to think that people do love and value their partners whilst they are alive, as evidenced by people's deep empathy with their partners and their willingness to make sacrifices for them (*ibid.*, 307-308).<sup>7</sup> He argues that it seems both intuitively implausible and in tension with our other behavioural evidence to conclude that people do not usually love and value their partners and close family members.

Instead, Moller comes to the following conclusion: not that we do not really love our loved ones but that we often fail to *recognise* their importance to us. He argues, that is, that people's ability

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<sup>4</sup> Marušić (2017) poses a similarly question to ours: 'I realize that when my mother died, I had very good reason to grieve. I also acknowledge that today, a decade after her death, I am not wrong not to grieve. But I find it puzzling why this should be so — since it does not seem that her death is any less of a loss' (4).

<sup>5</sup> Na'aman (forthcoming) suggests that some attitudes are 'rationally self-consuming', by which he means that the longer they endure, the less fitting they become, despite the initial reasons for them persisting. He cites grief alongside attitudes such as resentment and anger as examples of these. One potential response to the worry we have described would be to accept this view of the rationality (or appropriateness) of attitudes. However, we think that this will not resolve the problem, since we can value other people very highly, such that even if the aptness of grief diminishes over time, it remains apt throughout a lifetime.

<sup>6</sup> For a selection of such papers, see Bonanno et al. (2005), Fetterman et al. (1991), Lund (1989). Moller (2007) summarises their findings as follows: '[T]he cumulative evidence seems to show quite clearly that most people do not experience significant long-term distress when they lose the person they have committed their lives to' (Moller 2007: 304). We are, for the moment, taking this research at face value.

<sup>7</sup> He also notes that the pattern of 'resilience' implied by this research is not particular to bereavement; people recover astonishingly rapidly from losses of all kinds of things that they take themselves to care about (Moller 2007: 305-307).

to move on after the death of a loved one indicates a deficiency, not of love, but of recognising how much they loved and cared for those they have lost:

Our “emotional immune system,” while promoting our interests by allowing us to continue functioning in the face of trauma, also renders us unable to take in and register fully the significance of our losses. Part of what being the vulnerable creatures of flesh and blood that we are means is that we are subject to staggering losses in the form of the deaths of those we love, and yet our reaction to those losses is utterly incommensurate with their value, especially after the first month or two have passed. The good of a happy relationship with a lover is one that we value more highly than almost any other, and yet when we lose that good, our response over time does not seem to reflect its preciousness to us. Resilience thus seems to deprive us of our ability to care about those we love to their full measure after they are gone, and so deprives us of insight into our own condition. (Moller 2007: 310-311)

Moller concludes that though the ability to move on from deep grief and mourning may have important benefits for the bereaved, it is nonetheless a ‘profound reason[] for regret’ (Moller 2007: 301).<sup>8</sup>

Whichever of the above explanations one prefers, however, each only compounds our worries about mourning. In §2, we offered an argument from plausible considerations about virtue and valuing that seem to suggest that we should mourn unendingly for those we care about. Namely, we argued that the virtuous person’s affective responses are fitting generally, that mourning is fitting in proportion to loss, that some losses are vast or infinite, and, therefore, that some mourning should be vast or lifelong. In the present section, we have noted some evidence to think that people rarely mourn in this way and, in fact, that most bereaved people recover relatively rapidly from their losses. Whether one explains this as a lack of love or a lack of recognition of value, the implication would seem to be that we are lacking in virtue.

4.

We think, however, both that this conclusion is too fast and, thankfully, that recognising the value of someone or something need not entail unending grief. Indeed, we think that one’s grief at the death of a loved one abating after a short period is fully compatible with virtue. Fully recognising the value of loved ones, we think, does plausibly entail a period of mourning, and it does plausibly entail *some* form of ongoing and active recognition of the value of the loved one, but this need not take the form of grief. In particular, mourning can, and properly does, transform into other states (such as honouring the dead) which are also apt responses to the value that people have for us. The virtuous person, then, need not be condemned to endless grief and suffering,

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<sup>8</sup> We actually find it plausible that a failure to *recognise* the importance of something to oneself is a *kind* of failure to love well or adequately, but we will not take up that point here. (Relatedly, see n.2 above.) It is also worth noting that though we have made Moller out to use “importance” synonymously with our “value”, he understands “importance” as specifically ‘functional importance’, such that someone is important to me to the extent that they fulfil a significant and unique function in my life. We think that any functional (or instrumental) notion of importance comes up short of the value that a loved one has for us.

since they can engage in other forms of ongoing activity that recognise the value of what they have lost.

To see why this should be, let us look more closely at the argument that was offered in favour of the idea that only unending grief and mourning adequately recognise the value that loved ones have for us. That argument began with the thought that the virtuous person's affective responses to the world must be fitting. Grief, we suggested, is aimed at the loss of something that is conceived of as valuable and is thus fitting when the thing lost is indeed valuable. We further suggested that grief is fitting in proportion to the value of the thing lost: the more valuable the thing, the greater the grief should be. Together with the idea that people should be (and often are) extremely highly valued, these thoughts seemed to lead to the conclusion that our grief at their loss should be prolonged, even lifelong.

However, at this point the analogy with anger with which we introduced the idea of fittingness should give us pause. Anger, we noted, is aimed at injustice, and is fitting when the object at which it is directed is indeed unjust. However, whilst too little anger usually indicates a lack of virtue in the form of complacency about injustice or a failure to even acknowledge it, it need not do so. This is because there are other ways of responding to injustice that *also* acknowledge it as injustice. For instance, particularly after an initial period of indignant anger, one might instead begin to feel sadness at the injustice. This sadness could be an apt way of recognising the injustice of the object. Alternatively, one may focus not on the injustice itself, but on what can be done about it, and one might instead primarily feel determination not to allow such injustices in the future. Again, this would be an appropriate response to injustice. Whilst anger is one fitting response, then, it is not the only one. Lack of anger *can* indicate a lack of virtuous motivation and a failure to acknowledge the gravity of injustice, but it can also be a sign only that the agent is acknowledging the injustice in some other way.

The same holds for grief. Grief is a fitting response to the loss of something valuable, but it is not the only fitting response. There are other ways of recognising the value of what is lost that are also apt. For example, a recognition of the value of some who has died, and of how much one valued them, can take the form of celebrating their life. Such celebration seems to make sense only if the thing being celebrated is of value. Similarly, honouring can also be a way of acknowledging value. Such honouring involves appreciative recollection of them, alongside action or activity that is taken or engaged in 'for their sake': taking up a project that they cared about, acting in ways that they would have wished one to, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

If grief is not the only way to acknowledge others' value, then moving on from grief need not suggest that one has failed to properly love or value the person who died. There seems something right about the idea that the greater the value a thing has the more demanding it must be to fully recognise and acknowledge that value. This suggests that a fully adequate recognition of the value of other people may well require *something* of us unendingly. But such recognition of

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<sup>9</sup> A similar line of thinking is offered in Preston-Roedder and Preston-Roedder (2017). They, too, argue against Moller that moving on from grief need not indicate that the deceased lacked 'importance' for us. Their use of "importance" however, is Moller's (understood as fulfilling a unique and significant functional role within one's life), and though it is of course worthwhile responding in Moller's own terms, we are doubtful that such a use of "importance" captures the sense in which other people are valuable to us.

value need not specifically take the form of grief. Unendingly honouring the life of the person who has died, for example, is another fully adequate way to recognise the value that they had for one. Mourning is thus one way among many of acknowledging the value that others have for us, and moving on from mourning to a different kind of recognition of value does not necessarily indicate any failure in valuing.

We began by considering Barnes' claim that 'pain is a proof of love'. We still agree with this statement. We simply think that there are other activities and affective states that are *also* proofs of love; that is, we think that pain is not a unique proof of love. As such, pain is not the only response to loss that is compatible with full virtue: other responses to loss can be fitting.

At this point, it is worth noting that this view is not necessarily a complacent affirmation of human limitations in regard to love; the view remains fairly demanding of the bereaved. On this view, it would not be fitting or virtuous to move on and return to life *exactly* as it was before; some kind of ongoing activity of remembrance remains appropriate. And these broader kinds of activity, we think, might well be required for the rest of one's life. We might compare and contrast this conception of adequate mourning to that suggested by Freud in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1953). He contrasts mourning, which he conceives of as a healthy response to loss, with melancholia, which he conceives of as being pathological. One important difference between the two, he thinks, is that mourning is a transitional state whereas melancholia is not.<sup>10</sup> He writes, for example, that "normal mourning...overcomes the loss of the object" (ibid., 255), and that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (ibid., 245). We agree that mourning is an appropriate reaction to loss, as well as that ceasing to mourn after a time is also be appropriate. Nonetheless, one might read Freud as suggesting that once a period of mourning has passed, the bereaved can return to the very same state as before, free to inhabit the world no differently, simply independently of the thing lost. His idea that once one is no longer grieving, the ego becomes 'free and uninhibited' suggests a breaking of ties with the loss, a moving on from a loss that is itself left behind. On the contrary, we think that the end of grief ought to signal not a return to one's previous state and life, but to a less grief-filled way of being that continues to be shaped by one's recognition of the value that the other had for one. One may wish to think of this continued recognition as a kind of mourning, simply transformed – but even if so, it will be a kind of mourning no longer incompatible with living well.

Returning to the psychological research mentioned earlier, we suggest that, far from being reason for regret, the position we have expounded here is compatible with this research being completely innocuous. Given that there are many ways of recognising value, the fact that the bereaved cease to grieve after a short time may simply indicate that they are recognising the loss of the loved one in other ways. And, indeed, though the research suggests that a large portion of bereaved individuals cease to feel *painful* grief after a period of only a few months, these individuals often understand themselves as 'grieving' in other ways. Moller, for instance, reports that they "sometimes report grieving for a substantial length of time, though this reported grieving appears to have little connection with measures of happiness or subjective well-being" (2007, 304). On our account, this kind of 'grieving' that is compatible with emotional well-being can be a fully adequate

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<sup>10</sup> He does not regard this as being the only difference between the two. Another significant difference he identifies is the 'direction' of one's sorrow: "In mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (ibid., 246).

acknowledgement of the value that the one who died had for us.<sup>11</sup> Whilst full virtue is, of course, vanishingly rare if possible at all, we thus think that these particular results do not suggest that humans fail to love appropriately, nor that they are, in that respect, lacking in virtue.

We have discussed virtue as involving appropriate affective responses to the world, and we have said that grief at the loss of something loved is one such appropriate response. We have now argued that there are other appropriate responses as well. However, it is important to note a further point in favour of thinking that virtue, at least eventually, *requires* moving beyond painful grieving: in most cases, the thing grieved is not coextensive with the valuable things in the world.<sup>12</sup> Usually, there are other valuable things, and the virtuous person will – if not in every moment, at least generally – recognize them as such in their activities as well. Deep grief usually obstructs one’s ability to recognise the value of other things, and this provides further reason to think that unending grief is a barrier to living well.<sup>13</sup> If we can love well in other ways, however, as it seems we can, loving well need not itself be such a barrier. If we recognize that loving well requires being able to grieve well, loving wholeheartedly can remain the essential aspect of the good life which we moderns more often take it to be.<sup>14</sup>

5.

To finish, we return once more to Plato. We began by noting that the exhortation which he reports seems unduly austere and valorising of an unappealing self-sufficiency. It is worth noting that this is not the only advice that Aspasia offers. A few breaths earlier, she passes on the following advice from the same Athenian soldiers:

And as for those of our fathers and mothers who still live, one ought ceaselessly to encourage them to bear the sorrow, should it fall to their lot, as easily as they can, instead of joining them in lamentations. For they will stand in no need of a stimulus for grief; the misfortune that has befallen them will be enough to provide that. A better course is to try to heal and soothe them, by reminding them that the gods have answered their most earnest prayers. For they prayed for their sons to live not forever, but bravely and gloriously. And that – the greatest of boons – is what they received. It is not easy for a mortal to have everything in his life turn out as he would have it. (247c-d)

This passage suggests that the parents of the dead ought to celebrate, for they have received the great good of their sons being valiant soldiers. Their sons have lived honourable lives, and this should be a cause for celebration, or at least satisfaction. When read alongside the earlier

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<sup>11</sup> Moller also notes that the bereaved generally retained “photographs and trinkets of remembrance” (301) and may retain “a special place in their hearts” for the person who has died (310). We think that his scepticism about such practises is misplaced, and they can involve an apt recognition of the value that the one who has died had for us.

<sup>12</sup> Lear’s (2006) example of the devastation of an entire way of life is a plausible exception.

<sup>13</sup> Berislav Marušić (2018) says: “Temporal distance does not merely make us grieve less; in many cases it seems that we are not wrong to grieve less. Indeed, there is something wrong with being stuck; there is something wrong with persistent grief” (9). We agree with at least the latter sentence.

<sup>14</sup> This is an idea – at least implicit – in much work of Lear’s (e.g., 1990, 2006, 2017, 2018). We see our arguments here as contributions to that idea.



valorisation of self-sufficiency, the present advice acquires some of its taste, but we think that it nonetheless contains truth. Whilst sorrow is one appropriate way to recognise the value of something lost, appreciative honouring or celebrating is another. And as engaging in the latter activities, unlike engaging in unending grief, is compatible with living a life that recognizes the value of the rest of life as well, that is something to be grateful for.

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