On the Temporality of Emotions
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An Essay on Grief, Anger, and Love

BERISLAV MARUŠIĆ
For Marko, Petra, and Niko
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Preface

I feel vulnerable in writing this book. The book is an attempt to explain something that I find puzzling about emotional experience in general and, specifically, about the surprisingly rapid diminution of grief for my mother, who died unexpectedly in 2007 at the age of 55. It seems to me that the diminution of my grief was not a response to a change in my reasons for grief but that, nonetheless, the diminution was reasonable. In general, it seems to me that emotions can change in ways that do not respond to a change in our reasons for them but that such changes can, nonetheless, be reasonable. Yet how could this be?—This, in a nutshell, is the puzzle I aim to address in what follows. It is a puzzle about how to make sense of resilience—how to comprehend and to anticipate it in our self-consciousness.

But I worry: Is my experience of grief universal enough, so that this book is not just about an idiosyncrasy of mine? Even if, as Stanley Cavell has said, philosophy is always autobiography, it surely isn’t just autobiography.¹

A related, but distinct and much bigger worry is that, to echo Iris Murdoch, in philosophy no less than in moral life, “the enemy is the fat relentless ego” (1970, 51), that is, “the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world” (58).² Is my puzzlement over the diminution of grief a morally objectionable assertion of self?

Still, the very fact that one describes one’s own experience does not make one’s philosophy idiosyncratic, or an objectionable assertion of self.

¹ In A Pitch of Philosophy (Cavell 1994).
² Richard Moran writes, “[T]his ego is fat because in its self-satisfaction it stores up and accumulates its impressions, prejudices, and habits of thought and rather than risk finding them inadequate compared to the actual multiplicity of life, instead spreads this accumulated life-material upon experience, upon others, until this accumulation of its own personal history and culture is all that can fall within its range of vision” (2012, 194).
self. I take it to be characteristic of a particular kind of philosophy—call it phenomenology—that it proceeds through a description of a personal experience that others can see themselves in. When a philosopher says “I,” others think “I,” just as when Descartes’s meditator says, “I,” his readers think “I.” At least this is what I hope for in describing my puzzlement over my course of experience.

Yet I worry further: Have I really understood my own experience? Self-knowledge is hard, and relationships with mothers especially so. I am by no means immune to self-deception. Also, emotions don’t arise on their own but in concert with others, so that it is hard to identify them as clearly as I claim to do in this book. Moreover, they are dynamic; they vary greatly with the time of day, the level of blood sugar and fatigue, and, most importantly, with social interaction and conversation. Have I merely told a fantasy story here, which does not even reflect my own reality, never mind something universal enough to be properly regarded as an object of philosophical reflection?

I also feel vulnerable, because I take as a point of departure the phenomenology of a particular emotional experience. I then seek to understand this experience neither by providing a theory of the emotions nor by studying emotions in an empirical or scientific way but rather by increasingly abstract and theoretical reflection on this experience. I count on readers to share, or at least to understand this experience. Yet I have been struck by how strongly and viscerally some people reject my reflections. Here is how an anonymous reviewer responded to my attempt in an earlier paper—now published pretty much in the form that the reviewer rejected it—to formulate the main question of this book:

The paper is on a complex topic. Its treatment of the topic is superficial and largely confused. The author does a lot of opining about various matters related to grief; there is little in the way of significant philosophical work. The opining sometimes takes the form of the author’s quoting passages from some famous writer and then expressing agreement. The thought the author attributes to the writer is then used repeatedly later in the paper as if the author had established it rather than merely expressed agreement with it. Perhaps the author thinks
anything said by a writer with a reputation for profundity must be true. The same goes for the author’s use of empirical research. The author quotes from an empirical study on the duration of grief. But the author did not actually look at this study to see whether it was well-designed to support its conclusions, or even what the criterion was that the researchers used to measure how long grief lasts.

This is harsh. But to be honest, there are days when I, too, think that my treatment of the emotions is superficial and largely confused. But not on all days. And on one of those other days, I want to defend myself. (On the days that I do think it, I have not done much writing.)

To start: What is “significant philosophical work” on the emotions? Whatever emotions may be, they have something to do with felt experience. Any reflection or theorizing on the emotions, which does not in some way speak to felt experience, fails to make contact with its topic. To ensure that my work at least makes contact with its purported topic, then, I start with felt experience. But not just any experience will do: I start with something puzzling about felt experience. I strive to explain the puzzle and then I do what, I take it, a philosopher does—I theorize it. I theorize it in my own words and on my own terms, in my own social, historical, and philosophical circumstances. I do not deny that I find myself in such circumstances; I do not pretend to express universal, timeless truths about the emotions that any sentient creature might experience. However, I do not theorize my social, historical, and philosophical circumstances (or my theorizing about such circumstances, or further theorizing about such theorizing—as long as the present remarks don’t count.) I simply want to try to understand my own felt experience in my own terms, and I hope that in doing so, I can say something that will resonate with the experience of others—or at least something that will strike others as interestingly wrong, so that it can bring into relief something about their own felt experience. Is that not significant philosophical work on the emotions?

Three methodological assumptions frame my reflections: First, I begin with the phenomenology of emotional experience; second, I theorize this experience; and, third, I do not theorize the context in which this experience arises. The first assumption is a condition for the possibility
of making contact with my topic. The third assumption is what I regard as the liberating method of analytic philosophy (or what remains of analytic philosophy). The second assumption requires some further elaboration: In theorizing my emotional experience, I inevitably abstract from the particulars of my situation. I abstract from the particulars of the relationships in which this emotional experience arises, and I abstract from other emotions that proceed in concert with the experience that is the theoretical focus. As I like to think of it, I stylize my emotional experience, thereby overemphasizing some aspects and deemphasizing others. (For example, I do not say anything about the relief over my mother’s death that accompanied my grief—as long as the present remark doesn’t count.) Such interpretive work is, I think, inevitable: There is no unvarnished description of emotional experience, much less an unvarnished theorizing of it. However, the stylizing gives rise to the two worries I identified at the outset: The worry that I may not be speaking for others and the worry that I may not even know my own emotional experience. What I do, to assuage these worries, is to look to others, some of them famous, who have identified what I take to be similar moments in their experience. For the rest, I hope for attunement with the reader. To invoke Cavell one more time:

The philosopher . . . turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say. . . . [T]he implication is that philosophy, like art, is, and should be, powerless to prove its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own. (1969, 95–6)
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I dedicate this book to my three kids—Marko, Petra, and Niko—with, obviously, endless love.
PART I
The Puzzle of Accommodation

My mother died on November 30, 2007—suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 55. In light of her death, I immediately experienced intense grief. And this seems as it should be: My reason for grief was that my mother had died, not exactly young, but too young. Indeed, if I had not experienced such grief, something would have been wrong with me. Contrast me with Camus’ character Meursault in The Stranger who, a day after his mother’s funeral, goes to the movies with a new love interest (1942/1988).

Yet now, many years later, I experience hardly any grief at all. This, too, seems as it should be. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud puts it with apparent simplicity: “[A]lthough mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time” (1917/1999, 243–4). In a similar vein, DSM-5, the contemporary American standard for classifying mental illnesses, states: “The dysphoria in grief is likely to decrease in intensity over days to weeks and occurs in waves, the so-called pangs of grief” (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 126, n.1). Yet I find the diminution and eventual cessation of my grief deeply puzzling. This chapter aims to articulate the puzzle.

1.1 The Puzzle: Diminishing Grief

Here is a first pass at my puzzlement over the diminution of my grief: Plausibly, I grieved for a reason—that my mother had died. Her death did not change over time. However, it was not wrong for me to grieve less over time. Yet how could the diminution of my grief not be wrong, if my reason for grief did not change?
4 THE PUZZLE OF ACCOMMODATION

This is the puzzle in a nutshell. As it stands, it is oversimplified. Let me unpack it a bit in a second pass. My grief was my response to my mother’s death: I grieved in light of her death. My response can be contrasted with a mere reaction like a fever, which I don’t have in light of anything. This means that my grief was responsive to a reason—however exactly we are to understand the reasons-responsiveness of emotions. Indeed, it was responsive to what was in fact a good reason for grief: In light of my mother’s death, my grief was fitting. If I had not grieved, I would have been like Meursault.

Moreover, as time passed and as I grieved, the fact to which I was responding—the fact that my mother had died—did not change. And, to now remove the oversimplification, its significance did not change either, or at least not very much: I did not stop loving my mother. Admittedly, she played a less central role in my life.¹ For example, I no longer called her on Saturdays, I no longer planned my holiday travels around seeing her, and I no longer spent any time in her company. But I did not become unconcerned with her, as I might have become unconcerned with someone with whom I no longer shared an emotional bond. Indeed, I want to say, my love for her did not diminish at all, even as her death receded into the past. The ongoing significance of her death thus suggests that I continued to have good reason to grieve.²

Nonetheless, it was not wrong for my grief to diminish. If it had not, I would have suffered from what DSM-5 classifies as “persistent complex bereavement disorder” (American Psychological Association 2013). I would have been a statistical abnormality. In common terms, I would have been stuck. And it is not wrong not to be stuck.

In this way, we arrive again at my question: How could the diminution of grief not be wrong, if my reason for grief persists? How can I make

¹ See Nussbaum (2001, 80) for a thoughtful discussion of this. I address Nussbaum’s view in sections 3.2 and 3.5.
² Schönherr (2021) distinguishes between a metaphysical and a psychological problem concerning the reasonable diminution of grief. The metaphysical problem is that grief reasonably diminishes, even though the past facts, which constitute reasons for the diminution of grief, don’t change. The psychological problem is that grief reasonably diminishes, even though the continuing evaluative facts don’t change in proportion to the diminution. Since it is the continuing significance of loss that I take to be crucial for the puzzle, I take my puzzle to be the psychological problem of fitting grief. I discuss Schönherr’s view in section 4.3.
sense of the diminution of my grief as reasonable, since it seems to be incongruous with my reasons.

1.2 Three Guises of the Puzzle: Surprise, Anticipation, Retrospection

I want to acknowledge: the puzzle is elusive. But it also arises in different guises, depending on where, in the grieving process (if we can call it that—more on that in due course), one finds oneself and what one knows about grief. Here I want to describe three different ways in which the puzzle might strike one, or three different guises of the puzzle.

When my mother died and I initially felt intense grief, it seemed to me that my grief would remain a deep part of my life. I was convinced, naively, that my life would always be infused with pain over her death. However, it was not so. I recovered from grief very quickly. Moreover, I was surprised by how quickly this happened and how thorough the recovery was.—I’d like to think that this does not reflect a peculiar callousness on my part but is a common phenomenon. Empirical studies suggest that we typically come to terms with others’ deaths, and many other misfortunes, surprisingly quickly. Here is how George Bonanno, a leading researcher on grief, puts it at the opening of his book, The Other Side of Sadness:

The good news is that for most of us, grief is not overwhelming or unending. As frightening as the pain of loss can be, most of us are resilient. Some of us cope so effectively, in fact, we hardly seem to miss

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³ Although there is a large literature on grief in which some elements of the puzzle of diminishing grief are discussed, I take the puzzle I describe to be novel. Nussbaum (2001, ch.1) and Moller (2007) have been especially influential in my thinking. It is Nussbaum who first uses the term “diminution” (2001, 79–85). See also D’Arms and Jacobson (2010), Moller (forthcoming), and Na’aman (2021) for related discussion.

⁴ See especially sections 3.4, 3.5, and 4.2.

⁵ Some form of surprise or disorientation seems characteristic of grief. Augustine, famously says that, in his grief, he became a great riddle to himself (Augustine 2018, IV.9). For perceptive discussion of disorientation in grief, especially in the writing of C.S. Lewis (1961), see Atkins (2022a).

⁶ See, for instance, Bonanno et al. (2005) and the extensive references in Bonanno (2009), as well as the discussion in Moller (2007).