



Meaningfulness and grief: you don't know what you got till it's gone

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Abstract

What makes a life meaningful and how do we know when our lives have meaning? This paper draws on the experience of grief to provide answer to these questions. It is argued that grief is a unique kind of transformative experience that gives us access to facts about the depth of meaningfulness and value that even the most seemingly mundane aspects of our day-to-day lives have had which often goes largely unrecognized until the source of that meaning is lost.

Keywords Grief · Transformative experience · Meaningfulness

Broadly speaking, there are two philosophical approaches to understanding the good-life. One approach focuses on maximizing subjective states or experiences such as pleasure or happiness.¹ According to some hedonists, pleasure and happiness are considered the most choice-worthy and valued human goods, as evidenced by the fact that humans almost universally seek them out.² It could then be taken to follow that a flourishing life for humans can be had in acquiring them. But even if these subjective experiences are a necessary part of the good life, it isn't at all obvious that living a life consisting merely of pleasure or happiness is a desirable way to live. If all that really mattered to us were the subjective experience of happiness, we would be content to be hooked up to a machine that fed us all and only pleasant experiences. And as Nozick has pointed out, few people would choose that kind of life.³

An alternative approach to the good life identifies necessary properties that are recognizable from a third-person perspective. One widely discussed example is the

¹ Familiar examples include Bentham (1789/1948) and Mill (1861).

² Mill (1861).

³ Nozick (2006). Nozick claims moreover, that it seems that much more matters to us than the total amount of happiness in our lives. For example, we also care at least about how that happiness is distributed.

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property of meaningfulness. On this view, a good life isn't just a happy life, it is a life that is meaningful. Meaningfulness is thought to be independent of subjective states like happiness or pleasure. For instance, people say their lives are meaningful even when they are not happy. And meaningfulness is often sought after for its own sake. Empirical literature shows that people choose to pursue things that make their lives meaningful even if it requires they compromise happiness. This suggests that meaningfulness is even more important to some for a sense of fulfillment than is happiness.⁴ And people who claim to live lives high in meaning continue to rate life satisfaction higher even when they are less happy.⁵

As for what meaningfulness consists in, there are numerous philosophical views. C.S. Lewis claimed that meaningfulness involves appropriately relating to God through belief in God.⁶ Martela says that lives can be judged to be meaningful when they contribute to something beyond themselves.⁷ Other views ground meaningfulness in whether one is able to live in accord with their preferences and desires, whether one is able to accomplish what they believe to be important, or that one has pro-attitudes like love, caring, satisfaction, or other affective states.⁸ A feature that all of these views share in common is that they make judgements about whether one leads a meaningful life equally as easy to make for anyone with access to the relevant facts. And since those facts are third-person accessible facts, one implication is that first-person judgments about the meaningfulness of one's own life have no distinctive epistemic authority.

To the contrary, here it will be shown that, in at least some cases, subjects do occupy a unique epistemic position with respect to the meaningfulness of their own lives. Although facts about meaningfulness may not always be directly accessible to reflection, elements common to the experience of grief can provide the basis for insight about the meaningfulness of one's life. Grief turns out to be, in many cases, a unique kind of epistemically transformative experience. It is an experience whose distinctive phenomenal character is unknowable before undergoing it and so it acquaints the subject with new information about what the experience is like. It will be argued that in doing so, the experience of grief can also provide a subject with unique access to facts about the meaningfulness and value that their life has had. This is something that can go under-appreciated or even unrecognized as such until after a loss. Finally, the epistemic proposal offered here about how meaningfulness can be known also suggests an account of what makes life meaningful. This is an account distinct from those that are discussed in current philosophical literature, and one that would make living a meaningful life much more common than has been thought.

The next section introduces the experience of grief, paying close attention to first-person descriptions of its phenomenal character. One phenomenal feature that has particular epistemic relevance is identified. Section 2 then shows grief to be a kind of personally and epistemically transformative experience in virtue of that feature.

⁴ For example, having children is associated with a decrease in happiness but an increase in meaningfulness. See Glass et al. (2016).

⁵ Baumeister et al. (2013) found that negative experiences are positively correlated with meaningfulness but negatively correlated with happiness.

⁶ Lewis (1986, 1995).

⁷ Martela (2017).

⁸ See for example, Frankfurt (1988).

Section 3 applies this account of grief's transformative nature to explain how grief can be a source of retrospective knowledge about the meaningfulness of one's life. Section 4 makes a proposal about why loss and the resulting experience of grief may be a necessary catalyst, in at least some cases, for this insight about meaningfulness. And Sect. 5 gestures at the contribution this may make to answering the question, 'what makes a life meaningful?'

1 The experience of grief

Grief is a natural response to certain losses. Not all losses are grieved. Some paradigmatic examples of losses one may grieve include loss of a partner, a child, a parent, a pet, or a friend. However, the range of potential objects of grief is actually quite broad. For one thing, although paradigmatic cases involve bereavement, it is not necessary for the loss to involve a death. The loss need not even be of a concrete object. A person who has lost their belief in God might grieve their lost faith.⁹ Nor does the object of grief have to have been something that had been appreciated or admired. If one's life concerned protest to a political figure or ideology, the downfall of a regime could be accompanied by grief.¹⁰ It is even possible to grieve something that does not yet exist such as something one aspires to if one's aspiration is permanently thwarted.¹¹ What appears to matter to whether something becomes an object of grief, as we will see, is not the type of object that it is but rather the role that it played in one's life.¹²

Much of the philosophical discussion about grief focuses on the metaphysics of grief- what grief is. Some identify it with a standing state like an emotion or mood. Grief does share in common with emotions that it has an object; just as in love something is loved, in grief something is grieved. But grief would have to be a special kind of composite emotion because the experience of grief is itself constituted by, among other things, other emotions like sadness and anger.¹³ That might lead us to think of grief as a process that is triggered by loss and which involves a sequence of emotions and states as the stages of grief literature supposes.¹⁴ Alternatively, Cholbi and Goldie

⁹ Some psychologists contend that God is an attachment object and how a person imagines their relationship with God is a matter of their own attachment style. (Kirkpatrick 1992, 1999). This would make whether and how one grieves during deconversion a matter of their relationship to God and their attachment style (Simpson, 2013). Additionally, a person who loses faith in their religion may grieve the loss of the various social and community goods that their religion had provided (Withrow, 2015).

¹⁰ See Cholbi (2021). "Indeed, we need not even like those whose deaths we grieve. Fidel Castro was the target of forty-two assassination schemes by the Kennedy administration, but Kennedy's death reportedly caused Castro sadness. Enemies or rivals can therefore grieve each other" (26).

¹¹ Grief over the loss of an imagined or desired future is discussed in the context of romantic partner break-ups, acquired disability, loss of a child, and loss of career. More recently, researchers have discussed the phenomenon of ecological grief, a response to the impending climate disaster and loss of an habitable environment. See, Cunsolo and Ellis (2018).

¹² The importance of the role that an object plays in one's life for this issue will be discussed in the final section.

¹³ See Ratcliffe 2022, Chapter 2.

¹⁴ See, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) for the original presentation of the 'stages' theory of grief. The stages theory of grief has been much criticized. Much of that criticism focuses on the resistance of grief to

argue that grief is as much an activity as anything else.¹⁵ For the purposes here, it is not necessary to settle anything more about what grief is. Rather, our focus will be on elements of what the grief experience is like to undergo, its phenomenal character.

Experiences of grief are almost as diverse as its objects. Yet if we look at paradigmatic examples, certain elements emerge that, although not necessary, are common. Although formal empirical studies into the phenomenology of grief are few, there are many first-person accounts of grief documented in memoirs, interviews, and cultural products on bereavement. This collective testimony is more than anecdotal, it constitutes what I shall consider an evidential source for what the experience of grief is like. One phenomenal element that emerges as common to at least the more profound episodes of grief such as in bereavement, enough so that the DSM V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), considers it among the diagnostic criteria in profound cases, is the feeling that one's life, or at least parts of it, are newly bereft of meaning, significance, value, and purpose. To be clear, the claim is not that every experience of grief will feel this way. But it stands out as a common feature and it has epistemic implications. Consider the following,

After the loss of his wife, C.S. Lewis wrote a memoir titled, *A Grief Observed* in which he describes his experience with grief and the felt pointlessness of his familiar activities.

I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading is too much. Even shaving what does it matter whether my cheek is rough or smooth? (1961, p. 8)

Later, in the same memoir, Lewis described the way that the loss of meaning and value to his ordinary activities influenced his experience of time. Prior to the loss, time was experienced as the medium for meaningful action and as such it felt fleeting and scarce. But the loss left him feeling that there are no longer any worthwhile ways to fill time and he became acutely aware of the empty duration itself.

Up until this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time. Empty successiveness. (1961, p. 29)

In a related vein, novelist and poet Helen Humphreys, focused on the effect that the loss of her brother had on how she experienced just about all facets of her life,¹⁶

Death feels a bit like a vanished city, like wandering through a landscape I used to recognize but that has now been radically altered. It was a mistake to think that life was solid ground under my feet and that every day I would be able to step back down onto the same earth. To have you gone, who went clear to the bottom of my world, has thrown me off balance, has left me wandering like a ghost in my own life (2013, p. 58)

Footnote 14 continued

fitting neatly in a linear sequence of stages, although this was not how the stages theory was intended to be understood. For a crucial perspective see Konigsberg (2011).

¹⁵ See Goldie (2012) Chapter 3, Cholbi (2021). Cholbi discusses these various possibilities about grief in an attempt to distill what is essential to grief from its diverse manifestations in pp. 28–46 of the second chapter of his, *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*.

¹⁶ As quoted by Ratcliffe in (2016).

Humphreys suggests that the lost object, her brother, played a grounding function for the meaning and intelligibility of practically every facet of her life.

Michelle Kuipers, alpinist Marc-Andre Leclerc's mother, describes a similar experience after her son's death,

Without Marc-Andre something was suddenly and irrevocably wrong with the universe. That's just not how it should be. In some indefinable way you're moved to another place and you have to live there (2021).¹⁷

Another related experience often reported involves evaluative changes in how features of the physical world appear. For example, C.S. Lewis remarks,

I hear a clock strike and some quality has gone out of the sound. What's wrong with the world to make it so flat, shabby, worn-out looking? Then I remember. (1961, p. 30)

And Joyce Carol Oates describes the way that the material objects that populate her day-to-day life seem to have lost their meanings after the death of her husband.¹⁸

Not yet have I realized, this will take time as a widow I will be reduced to a world of things. And these things retain but the faintest glimmer of their original identity and meaning as in a dead and desiccated husk of something once organic there must be discerned a glimmer of its original identity and meaning (2012, p. 63)¹⁹

This sampling from published first-person accounts of grief is representative of a large body of testimony. If the first-person reports on grief are to be taken as authoritative, we can note that significant losses often result in one's life, projects, activities, and even the material objects one is surrounded by, suddenly seeming to be bereft of significance, meaning, and value. The question why exactly grief should feel this way will be addressed in the final section. For now, the focus will be on the special epistemic significance of this experience.

2 Grief as transformative experience

It is helpful to look at the experiences of grief described in the previous section as examples what L.A. Paul has called transformative experiences.²⁰ A transformative

¹⁷ From the documentary on Marc-Andre LeClerc *The Alpinist* (2021) at 1 h:22 min:38 s.

¹⁸ As quoted in Ratcliffe (2019b).

¹⁹ Why should grief feel like this? Some philosophers have pointed out that phenomenal experience presents intentional objects as having evaluative properties. An evaluative property is a property that evaluates an object in a normative, prudential, or aesthetic way. It presents it in its significance for us. So we might not only see the apple as red, but also as being edible. Or we might hear a sound as charming or threatening. One philosophical explanation for how this can be so is the phenomenon of evaluative perception, where these evaluative properties are conceived of as represented in the content of perceptual experiences. For examples see Stokes (2018), Matey (2016), Audi (2018), and Noordhof (2018). Another view attributes evaluative features to low-level intuition rather than perception. Both Chudnoff (2015) and Lyons (2018) argue that evaluative properties are represented in low-level intuitions rather than perception.

²⁰ Paul (2014), (2015).

experience is an experience that is so unlike any experience that one has had previously that one is not able to tell in advance of having it, either by deduction, induction, or by imagination, what it would be like to have. So transformative experiences are epistemically transformative because in having them we gain new knowledge about what they are like. In the paradigmatic case, they are also personally transformative; they bring along changes in what I will refer to as one's 'evaluative stance'. An 'evaluative stance' is a set of evaluative dispositions one holds which include one's preferences, values, what things one takes to matter, how they matter, what is taken as worth pursuing, what is valued, and also its overall meaningfulness or significance. A person's evaluative stance is associated with who they are in a deep sense since these are the kinds of things that we associate with our identity. Some paradigmatic examples of personally transformative experiences, those that change us in this deep way, include becoming a parent, converting to a religion, and embarking on a career.

In the typical case of transformative experience, the change in evaluative stance is productive in that it involves the creation of new values, new goals, and new preferences. Things come to newly matter or to matter in new ways. Productive changes can be either positive or negative. For instance, one might find oneself newly liking things that one had previously disliked and newly disliking things that one had previously liked. In the case of becoming a parent for example, one might be surprised to find oneself newly enjoying staying in on the weekend and newly disliking going on trips that take one from home for extended periods. These personally transformative experiences not only teach us about what they are like to have, but they also teach us about how we are transformed by them such as how our goals, preferences, values, and the like, are changed. As Paul remarks,

The combination of the epistemically and personally transformative experience of having one's own child brings with it profound changes in other epistemic states. In particular because you cannot know what it is like to have your own child before you've had her, you also cannot know what emotions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions will be caused by what it is like to have her. (2015, p. 157)

Grief experiences, like those described in the examples of testimony, seem to be both epistemically and personally transformative, albeit in an atypical way. As in the paradigmatic transformative cases, these grief experiences involve a deep personal transformation, a change in one's goals, preferences, values, valuations, and what and how things matter to one. But whereas in the more paradigmatic cases of transformative experience the changes are productive, in the grief case one does not gain new positive or negative attitudes or evaluations, at least not initially.²¹ More often, as is suggested in the first-person accounts, people experience a sudden absence of goals, preferences,

²¹ People who undergo traumatic events that are correlated with grief can experience what Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) have referred to as post-traumatic growth. "Post-traumatic growth is the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. It is manifested in a variety of ways, including an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, challenged priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life." (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) Although it isn't clear that grief is required for this sort of growth it is correlated with experiences that often result in grief.

and of things mattering in the ways they had, etc. Moreover, grief also involves a deep and profound awareness of one's activities, pursuits, and life in general, as suddenly lacking in meaningfulness. This is to say that the personal transformation in the grief experiences is destructive rather than productive.²²

Although the grief experiences are atypical vis-à-vis personally transformative experiences, they are none-the-less epistemically transformative in the same way that paradigmatic transformative experiences are. If we are to take the first-person descriptions of the experiences of grief seriously, then in having the experience one often gains new access to what-it-is-like to experience the destruction of one's evaluative stance. It is often reported that one is surprised by how grief feels.²³ Note Lewis's surprise,

How often will it be for? How often will the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty? (1961, p. 46)

And Joan Didion's description after the death of her husband,

Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. We anticipate (we know) that someone close to us could die, but we do not look beyond the few days or weeks that immediately follow such an imagined death. We misconstrue the nature of even those few days or weeks (2005, p. 188)

Didion specifically describes having been unable to know about the resulting feeling of meaninglessness following the loss.

We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect the shock to be oblitative, dislocating to both body and mind... (Nor can we know ahead of the fact and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself (2005, pp. 188–189).

In summary, grief can be a distinctive kind of personally and epistemically transformative experience, one which involves destruction of a person's evaluative stance, causing them to learn what-it-is-like to find their life and pursuits lacking in meaning and value. But there seems to be more to what one is capable of learning from these experiences with grief. Many people report that part of their grief experience involved the realization that previous to the loss, their life had meaning and value that only

²² Identity disturbance is also one of the diagnostic criteria for complicated grief. If we associate the kinds of evaluative dispositions that make up one's evaluative stance with a person's core-identity or who one is in a deep way, we have an easy explanation for why it should be common to the grief experience to involve a lost sense of who one is. See Ratcliffe 2022 Chapter 6 and Cholbi (2021) Chapter 3, for some discussions of the link here.

²³ It might be thought that the phenomenon of anticipatory grief undermines the claim that grief is epistemically transformative for if we can anticipate what a loss will be like then the loss will not teach us anything new. However, I think that anticipatory grief is better understood as grief experienced prior to a loss, rather than foreknowledge of what grief after the loss will be like. Moreover, in the testimony cited people report that no matter how much one thinks that they can anticipate what grief will be like, it is always different from what was anticipated.

came to be fully appreciated with the loss.²⁴ As with other facts about grief's phenomenology, the evidence for this realization is widespread in first-person accounts. In fact, to say that many report this realization is to significantly understate the reality. This realization about the unappreciated or newly realized depth of meaning and value discovered in the context of loss is deeply entrenched in our collective folk wisdom as evidenced by its many manifestations in platitudes, artistic, and other cultural products. Consider the trope in the title of this paper. As for cultural products, it would be hard to select a representative sample given just how common, but we can observe a few samples from diverse cultures and time-periods.

The Sufi poet Rumi's, *Let's Adore One Another* (2020, p.10) describes the potential of appreciating the value of something in a new way after loss,

Once you think of me.
Dead and gone.
You will make up with me.
You will miss me.
You may even adore me.

Some 600 years later, on a different continent, Lord Alfred Tennyson wrote, *In Memoriam* (2012 verse XXVII) in elegy to his friend on this theme, claiming that in sorrow and loss the most profound insight about the value of what is lost is to be found,

I hold it true, whate'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost.
Than never to have loved at all.

And in a more contemporary example from his song, *San Diego Serenade* (1974), Tom Waits describes gaining an appreciation for the lost object only in its absence

I never saw the morning till I stayed up all night.
I never saw the sunshine till you turned out the light.
I never saw my hometown until I stayed away too long.
I never heard the melody until I needed a song.

The reason this idea continues to appear in literature and continues to be so effective is because it taps into a universal experience. But given the figurative nature of poetry and song, some might hesitate to take the content of these expressions as determinate enough to ground philosophical claims about what grief teaches. On the other hand, I take it as an assumption that we should take introspective reports to be authoritative when it comes to what our conscious experiences are like to have and that the best way to understand folk wisdom is as the sum of humanity's introspective based reports. At the very least, let us consider these expressions as conferring some prima-facae warrant for the claim that grief offers retrospective insight to some about the meaningfulness and value of their life. The following section considers an account of the epistemic value of grief that corroborates these reports.

²⁴ This is to say that in having the experience one learns something new about what the experience is like and part of what the experience is like to have includes that it brings with it information about the meaningfulness of one's past experience.

3 Grief as a source of retrospective knowledge

Loss is typically experienced as a misfortune. This is true of grief. But first-person reports about grief suggest that those grieving a significant loss often learn more than what-it-is-like to lose their evaluative stance, they also gain retrospective insight about the meaningfulness and value of the past, coming to understand it in a new way. It might at first seem that there isn't anything unique about grief that it would provide such insight. Consider that people with major depressive disorder also report feelings of meaninglessness alongside other experiences such as estrangement from others, hopelessness, and changes in the experience of temporality. But unlike the grieving subjects, those with major depression do not in general report gaining insight about the meaningfulness and value that their lives have had. If anything, depressed subjects experience meaninglessness as seeming inevitable. So if grief can provide such insights, the account of how and why should point to some feature or features of grief that are not shared by major depression.²⁵

One notable phenomenological dissimilarity between major depression and grief concerns the ability to have access to modes of valuing. While both depressed and grieving subjects find particular activities, goals, and fixtures of life, to be meaningless or valueless, major depression but not grief involves the loss of access to these modes of thinking.²⁶ This is to say that not only is one no longer capable of finding things to matter in the specific ways that they previously had, but they are not able to access hope nor to take things to matter at all. So although both grief and depression can involve a loss of one's evaluative stance, we should expect the way this manifests phenomenologically to differ in the two cases.

This is in fact the case. Because major depression involves a loss of access to hope and a loss of the capacity for finding significance or value in one's activities, depressed subjects have difficulty engaging in forms of counterfactual imagining with respect to the lack of meaning and value they experience. They have difficulty imagining what a perspective outside of their current one would be like. They also feel hopeless that their own perspective might change. And the inability to imagine counterfactual situations with respect to these states affects not only the experience of the present and future, but also the past. Because depression causes subjects to be unable to access these modes of imagining, major depression affects the ability to relive, in an autobiographical way, that experience as different from the present. This sense that the present state is permanent and inevitable is a hallmark feature of depression as the following first-person accounts from a recent research project on depression attest,²⁷

²⁵ There has been disagreement over whether grief and major depression should be treated separately as two different syndromes. According to DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), a diagnosis of 'grief' rather than depression should be made if symptoms are attributable to bereavement. In the lead-up to the publication of the DSM-V, some researchers supported removing the grief-exclusion based on the fact that symptoms of grief and depression were similar. But others, Zisook and Shear (2009) noted that symptoms of grief are often different from those of depression and moreover, in cases where they are the same it is more appropriate to diagnose a subject with both grief and major depression.

²⁶ Ratcliffe (2019a).

²⁷ These quotations are collected by Ratcliffe in his AHRC and DFG funded study, "Emotional Experience in Depression: A Philosophical Study" and reprinted in Ratcliffe (2019a, b).

When I'm depressed life never seems worth living. I can never think about how my life is different from when I'm not depressed. I think that my life will never change and that I will always be depressed. Thinking about the future makes my depression even worse because I can't bear to think of being depressed my whole life. I forget what my life is like when I'm not depressed and feel that my life and future is pointless.

When depressed I feel I have no future and lose any hope in things improving in my life. I just feel generally hopeless.

There seemed to be no future, no possibility that I could ever be happy again or that life was worth living.

Life will never end, or change. Everything is negative. I lose my imagination, in particular, being able to imagine any different state other than depression. Life is a chore. (2019a, p. 543)

In contrast, grieving subjects whose symptoms are caused by a loss and not another underlying disorder like major depression don't experience the loss of meaning as inescapable. Rather, they experience it as dependent on the lost object. And because they retain access to modes of valuation, it is possible to retain the ability to imagine counter-factual situations where the loss had not occurred. They can relive the past in autobiographical memory as it had been. And in fact, shifting perspectives between the reality of the loss and a counter-factual situation in which meaning is restored is a normal part of the grieving process and is part of the phenomenology of grief for many. Ratcliffe writes,

Grief on the other hand involves intensified interaction between contrasting and often conflicting perspectives. It is not the case that someone dies and a system of possibilities vanishes instantaneously. The bereaved person continues to anticipate things in a habitual, practical way, drifting into a pattern of activity and thought that somehow implicates the deceased. These are then disrupted by the dawning recognition of the loss. (2019b, pp. 544-555)

I propose that this dynamic shifting between the experience of one's life, or significant aspects of it, as bereft of meaning and the counterfactual perspective in which the loss has not occurred is the foundation for the grief-experience's unique epistemic value. First, note that we can distinguish between the information carried by an experience, and what we can come to know on the basis of that information as when what is presented entails some further facts. Phenomenal experience, or how things seem for one, is an evidential source that disposes one to have beliefs with matching content. So in grieving, one's experience of meaninglessness disposes one to believe that their current life lacks meaning. Yet we should expect that the dynamic perspective shifting process characteristic of grief would also dispose further beliefs. The process involves the observation of a contrast between the present state and the counterfactual situation reflecting the past, a time at which the object had not been lost.

The gulf and conflict between the world at time 1 and at the world at time 2 is integral to the experience when recalling time spent with the deceased, memories are infected with the present. Yet they also include a sense of one's

current perspective as contingent or as something that differs in a profound way from how they might have been. (Ratcliffe, 2019a, b, p. 545)

The contrast reflects a difference with respect to the phenomenology of meaninglessness. Assuming that the phenomenal difference is accompanied by a representational difference, as is customary, the contrast suggests to the subject a difference with respect to the property of meaningfulness.²⁸ If a current experience differs from a past experience with respect to some property, this suggests there has been a change with respect to the property. In the current case the change involves an absence of meaningfulness, something that presumably was not absent before. If there is an absence of something that wasn't previously absent then this suggests there has been a loss. If one's experience justifies one in not only believing its contents, but also in what obviously followed from that content, then the experience of a loss justifies one, not only in believing that one has suffered that loss, but also in believing that one used to possess the lost property. Thus, the grief experience justifies one in believing that one's life used to possess meaningfulness. And hence the experience of grief is one from which a subject is disposed to form a justified belief about the meaningfulness and value that may not have been appreciated but was nonetheless present prior to the loss.

Alternatively, it may seem that what grieving subjects learn isn't that their experience lacks something that it previously had, but rather that what they now experience it to lack is something that it must never have had to begin with. What grief teaches on this alternative account then, is that one's life had always been meaningless. But this explanation doesn't fit as well with first person facts about grief as the one offered above. There are two problems of fit with those facts. The first is that the experience doesn't reflect what people report. In the testimony on grief, people report acquiring an appreciation for what their lives had, rather than a realization about what their lives lacked. The second problem of fit is that this would have predicted things about counterfactual reasoning that are not what happens in grieving. Once one comes to believe that things not only aren't, but never were meaningful, we would expect that this would influence the sort of counterfactual thoughts one has. First, it doesn't seem one would easily be able to think that things could have been otherwise if not for the loss. We would expect that knowing things were never otherwise, such a belief would strike one as false. One's thoughts about the past would be similarly impacted by the new belief. One would likely have difficulty remembering the past as not meaningless knowing now that it was. Or one might remember experiencing it as seeming not meaningless, but at the same time think this memory to be inaccurate. But this isn't how grieving subjects experience memories of the past. They experience the past as neither meaningless nor inaccurate. Since the engagement in counterfactual thoughts that take meaninglessness to depend on the object's loss is an integral part of the grieving process, this alternative cannot be a lesson that is learned from grief.

In summary, an account has been given of the epistemic value of grief that follows from phenomenological facts about grief presented in first-person testimony from a representative sample of memoirs, interviews, and cultural products. This raises a further question: why would that loss be necessary for gaining retrospective insight

²⁸ This process has some resemblance to the steps in what is referred to in philosophy of mind as an argument from phenomenal contrast. See for example Siegel (2006), Matey (2016).

about the meaningfulness of one's life when it would seem more useful, and hence possibly more adaptive, if these insights had been more available in the present? The following section looks at a potential explanation. The final section, then, takes a brief look at the implications that the epistemic account offered here has for understanding the source of meaningfulness.

4 The experience of meaningfulness

The previous discussion rests on the assumption that the meaningfulness of one's day-to-day life is not something one is easily disposed to be aware of. To the contrary, it often requires something remarkable like a significant loss for one's awareness to be brought to it. But why would knowledge of something so significant depend on an experience so disorienting? Why isn't it more readily knowable directly by introspection? One possibility is that one doesn't confront the meaningfulness of one's own life readily by introspecting because the property of meaningfulness is not, in general, represented in phenomenal character. For if we make the customary assumption that what is phenomenally manifest is introspectable, then it follows that meaningfulness is not phenomenally manifest.

However, this conflicts with the evidence. Recall that the phenomenal contrast between the grief experience and the phenomenally divergent counterfactual state justifies the retrospective judgment about one's life's meaningfulness. This suggests that meaningfulness is manifest in one's conscious experience in some way. Why then isn't it more amenable to introspection? Although this question cannot be answered definitively here, I want to offer one proposal: the experience of meaningfulness goes unnoticed not because it is not manifest in conscious experience, but because it is not manifest in the *right way* to be available to introspection. I follow several philosophers and cognitive scientists in acknowledging at least two ways in which a property can be phenomenally manifest. Something can be manifest in consciousness either as something we have focal awareness of, or as something we have tacit awareness of. To develop this we must look closer at the structure of consciousness.

Consciousness has an intentional structure. Whenever a subject is conscious, they are conscious of something.²⁹ What the subject is conscious of is referred to as the intentional object. Another way of describing the awareness one has of the intentional object is to say that the intentional object is something one is focally aware of. Whenever someone is focally aware of something, there are also numerous other things of which they have tacit awareness. Tacit awareness is awareness that one has of things that form the background or context for what one focally attends to.³⁰ An example helps to bring this out. When focally aware of the garden, one might also be tacitly

²⁹ For canonical discussions of the intentional structure of consciousness and the intentional object see Brentano (1874), Husserl (1900), 1913).

³⁰ This distinction can be attributed to philosopher Michael Polanyi (1964, 1967) who claimed that the structure of consciousness is such that in it we can distinguish between the object of consciousness and other aspects of the background or context that we apprehend tacitly. One way of understanding this could be in terms of the contents of those experiences. Aspects of phenomenal consciousness pertaining to focal awareness of intentional objects dispose us to have beliefs about those objects because they have contents pertaining to those objects whereas aspects of phenomenal consciousness pertaining to what we are just

aware of contextual aspects of the physical scene such as the sky, the background setting, sounds, smells, etc. This tacit/focal distinction doesn't just concern what we are aware of in perception. We are also tacitly aware of ourselves as the subject to whom things appear when we are perceiving (or to whom thoughts appear when thinking). One can also be focally aware of a goal directed action one is performing, and in being so they are at the same time tacitly aware of themselves as the agent of the action.

An important difference between what occupies focal awareness and what occupies tacit awareness is that what one is focally aware of is manifest in the content of conscious experience in a way that makes it available for verbal report and disposes one to form beliefs about it. But the same is not necessarily true of the things of which one is just tacitly aware, not without first a shift in attention that makes them to be objects of focal awareness. So it could be that, more often than reported, people do experience their lives and actions as meaningful, including even the most routine and mundane elements of them, albeit in a tacit rather than a focal way. This would make one much less likely to be disposed to form the kind of beliefs about meaningfulness that would lead to direct knowledge. Those facts about meaningfulness are not manifest in the right kind of way to become the content of belief. There are, on the face of it at least, good reasons for representing meaningfulness this way. The tacit sense of meaningfulness, value, or significance, may inject even the most routine and mundane actions with a sense that they are worth the effort of doing and so provide some of the momentum necessary for getting things done, while not distracting from what one must focally attend to for completing those tasks. Even so, to understand why loss would play a special role it may help to consider an analogous case.

We can sometimes get a clearer grasp of the existence or role of a component of a system by looking at cases in which there is a disruption in that system's typical functioning. This method of analysis, drawing on atypical cases to shed light on how things work typically, has been useful in both philosophy and psychology for understanding various aspects of conscious experience.³¹ As an illustrative example, consider Sass and Parnas's analysis of the phenomenology of agency and delusions in schizophrenia.³² In typical experience, we have an awareness of ourselves as agents of our actions whenever we engage in goal directed action. But the awareness of oneself as agent is something one is tacitly rather than focally aware of. We can come to know about the experience of agency by looking at cases in which there is a breakdown in the typical tacit/focal structure of awareness with respect to this feature. Sass and Parnas argue that this breakdown is responsible for the various types of delusions of agency in psychosis including, thought insertion, thought control, and hearing voices. They propose that these delusions result from a subject's ceasing to adopt an outwardly focused and engaged orientation to the world. One's focal awareness comes to be directed inward instead, to aspects of oneself which had previously only been tacitly

Footnote 30 continued

tacitly aware of do not dispose us to form beliefs about the objects of tacit awareness because those objects are not represented in the content of phenomenal character in the right way.

³¹ A noteworthy example is Heidegger's (1962/1927) discussion of the uncanniness of the broken tool used to illustrate that typical conscious experience is of objects as ready-to-hand, which is to say that they appear first in their functional significance and only as 'things' after their functionality is somehow impaired or disrupted. See also Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962).

³² Sass & Parnas (2003).

experienced such as the stream of conscious thought and motor activity. Hyper-focus on aspects of oneself leads experiences that had previously been experienced as the medium through which subjects encountered the world to be alienated and objectified to the point that they are eventually no longer experienced as belonging to the self, but rather as belonging (thought insertion) or as being controlled by (thought control) someone else. As the tacit sense of agency over them then diminishes that absence becomes noticeable, and we can infer about its previous presence.³³

The proposal that I want to make here is that transformative losses function similarly. They direct attention to a tacit feature of conscious experience whose presence is made conspicuous in its sudden absence. When the tacit experience of meaningfulness is lost, the grieving subject's focal awareness is redirected to the gap left by that loss and the absence of meaning is striking.³⁴ That experience involving the lack of meaning is also contrasted with the counter-factual state, the experience as it was before the loss, and the phenomenal and representational difference enables one to notice what had previously been unnoticed. This proposal does not amount to an argument. But it does have the virtue of fitting with the account of grief as a special kind of transformative experience. In the first place, grief is often personally transformative because in undergoing it one loses their evaluative stance. It is also epistemically transformative because one learns what-it-is-like to experience their own life as newly lacking in meaning. This lesson has the additional consequence of enabling one to recognize the meaningfulness their life has had, something that from the ordinary perspective is often unrecognizable insofar as it is experienced only tacitly.

5 Meaningfulness

This epistemic account of how we can gain insight that our lives have been meaningful also suggests something about the nature of that meaningfulness itself. On the view described, the grieving subject experiences meaningfulness as counter-factually dependent on the object of grief. Had the object not been lost, one's life would not have come to seem meaningless. This suggests that a source of meaningfulness lies in one's relationship to objects that might be grieved. But what is it about the particular relationship to grieved objects that makes them sources for meaning while other relationships fail to play this role? M. Ratcliffe offers the beginning of an answer in his investigation into the phenomenology of bereavement. Ratcliffe explains that the way things matter to us is often conditioned by specific relationships. For example, we might take on goal directed projects at the request of a spouse, or for the sake of a child. Joint projects might be undertaken in the spirit of a shared goal whose value

³³ The disruption in the tacit/focal structure that is theorized to occur in schizophrenia differs from what occurs in grief in that with grief, but not generally in schizophrenia, the subjects themselves are able to recognize what is lost.

³⁴ Superficially it may appear that the analogy of the experience of meaningfulness to the experience of agency breaks down insofar as agency is not something that is experienced independently of an action of which one would be the agent (we cannot attend focally to agency because there isn't a pure experience of agency), while we can attend focally to the experience of meaningfulness. But I don't think that it is obvious that meaningfulness can so easily be peeled apart from the activity, experience, or object that is taken to be meaningful.

comes at least partly from the fact that it is shared with a particular person. Ratcliffe writes,

Even when a project does not concern the other person in such ways, there may remain a sense that ‘I will come home to you when it is finished’ and ‘I will be able to tell you about it’. Indeed, the telling can be anticipated as an end in itself, and thus serve to motivate one’s activities (2019)

This phenomenon is not unique to goal directed activities. The object that we grieve may have been implicated in a variety of other ways. For instance, the pleasure or significance of an experience may come partly because it was shared with a loved one. Or one might enjoy something with them and the interpretation of it that arises in the shared conversation that follows.³⁵ And it should be added that there is no reason to take this to pertain only to how we relate to specific people. The same could hold true for how our lives and projects are structured by a career, a religion, or a desired image of one’s future.

If the way things matter to one depends significantly on a person, a career, a religion, etc., then we should expect the loss of that object would have reverberating effects on one’s experience of those things whose significance depended on them. Specifically, we should expect to see those things come to not matter in the ways that they had. This would also explain (at least part of) the diversity of ways grief manifests. The particular way that the object of grief was connected to various aspects of one’s life might, for example, determine both the depth and breadth of one’s grief. The degree to which something no longer matters may depend on the degree to which it was associated with the lost object and the impact of the loss will extend to those activities and projects to which the lost object was related. In the most extreme cases one’s entire world may seem to collapse. Lewis writes, “Her absence is like the sky spread over everything” (1961 p. 13). In more localized cases one might be able to escape the existential disruption by relocating to a new city, changing careers, or beginning a new relationship.

However, that things come to no longer matter in the ways that they had does not quite explain everything. Notice that in the testimony on grief, subjects do not merely report that things no longer matter in the ways that they had. Rather, there is a phenomenologically salient feeling that goes beyond this. It is one thing to say something does not matter as it did. But those things that mattered are reported to be precisely meaningless and devoid of value. “A dead husk of something once organic”. “A vanished city”. Nonetheless, there appears to be a relation between whether and how things fail to matter, and the sense of one’s life’s meaninglessness that characterizes grief. As a preliminary suggestion, it might be that the overall sense of the meaningfulness to one’s life supervenes on those other aspects of one’s evaluative stance.

This is not to say that the only way to live a meaningful life is to have a life rich in relationships that provide ways and reasons for things to matter or have value to one. This is not meant to be an analysis of meaningfulness complete with necessary and sufficient conditions. That would be to assume that there is only one path to living a meaningful life and we have seen no evidence to support this. Transformative losses

³⁵ Ratcliffe (2016).

show us that one way of having a meaningful life is to take some object or objects as unifying sources for the significance and value that we give to the things we give it to. Insofar as one takes having a meaningful life as a desirable goal then, they could aim for a life that includes such relations to meaning grounding objects. The range of what may serve as such an object is likely to be as broad as the human imagination is, including things such as: a friend, a career, a religion, a nemesis, an aspiration, a belief, etc.

The present investigation has shown grief to be a unique sort of personally and epistemically transformative experience, one involving changes in aspects of ourselves that we associate with who we are in a deep way. This includes our goals, preferences, what we value, and what matters to us. It is a unique kind of personal transformation in that it is associated with the sudden absence of goals, preferences, and significance rather than the creation of them. Moreover, not only are things experienced as no longer mattering in the ways that they had, grieving subjects report that aspects of their lives, or their lives in general, are experienced to no longer have any meaning at all. Even more significantly, grief has also been shown to be uniquely epistemically transformative, for not only does one learn what it is like to be personally transformed in the way that one is, but in the dynamic process of grieving one is confronted with the meaning and value that their life up until then had been experienced to have all along.

That grief provides such insight may come as no surprise to those who have gone through the experience. But as far as philosophy is concerned, folk wisdom and first-person testimony are not often considered secure enough to ground philosophical claims. On the one hand, it is wise to be skeptical given that people are susceptible to self-deception, confabulation, and other mistakes. But we err in the opposite direction in dismissing the introspective data entirely. Taking a wholly a priori approach to the question of what a meaningful life consists in misses important insights about the experience of meaningfulness that have implications for this question. I hope to have shown that the first-person testimony about what grief teaches is epistemically supported. And insofar as it counts as a source of evidence, it suggests a theory about meaningfulness. Specifically, it suggests that growing relationships that provide reasons and ways for things to matter and have value is one key way of living a life that is meaningful, a way that the subject themselves can appreciate.

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