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Suicide, Grief, and Authenticity

Darren Gillies

There are no codes or customs that reciprocate the grief we suffer when somebody we know or love has committed suicide, and neither are such dictates possible. As such, it remains only for us to find our way in coping with our grief in the moments that we live through it. The grief itself can never be eliminated and so we can only choose how we shall confront our situation. The aim of our discussion here is to reveal various attitudes that can be taken in response to the various aspects of the change in our world heralded by somebody's suicide. Understanding what it is to co-exist with the Other who has died allows us to show what it is to now exist with their absence. The disruption that follows is always open to our choosing whether to act in acceptance or refusal of the complications of the situation, to act either authentically or inauthentically. In our discussion, we shall see that by taking an inauthentic attitude we can overcomplicate our suffering by acting in ways that seem to simplify our grief. Considerations of these attempts to simplify will reveal that in taking an authentic attitude we avoid overcomplicating our grief and spare ourselves much unnecessary suffering. At the heart of everything said will be the freedom to choose our actions and beliefs.

> After an authentic action, it should be possible to say,
> '*Nothing* will be the same again.'
>
> — Vincent Descombes[1]

Opening

Grieving is our coping with the disruption to our everyday living created by somebody's death. It is this disruption, but specifically as beginning in suicide, which we shall be considering it in its relation to authenticity, since it seems that there is a discernible difference between how we suffer this grief when it is approached in either an authentic or inauthentic attitude. That is to say that despite our suffering being altogether ineliminable, we can nonetheless still have influence over our suffering. That we are discussing death and authenticity rightly suggests that we will pursue our considerations from the viewpoint of existentialist thought; that we are free to choose our actions and beliefs. Before we can examine exactly how suicide is a disruption and how authenticity orients it, we first require a sketch of what it is to encounter a living being; by arriving at this we can then understand what it is to encounter them as no-longer-alive, specifically as having killed themselves.

The Other

Everything in the world stands in relation to us as being what we are not; everything we discern as being *something* is because it is a separate entity from us. This is the basis of our being able to identify there to be things in the world at all. We are conscious of objects as being surrounded by a range of possibilities as to their instrumental uses; they are there as *for us* as to-be-apprehended. But there is another kind of being which appears to us in the world, which we are conscious of by a differ-

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[1] Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 34.

ent kind of affectivity upon us—*the Other*. The Other appears to us as a figure against the ground of objects in the world, such is their difference from objects that the Other affectively announces themselves as *alive*. Their activity in the world stands out to us as a being which thinks and acts for themselves, rather than being a mere object in itself. Unlike an object, they are there *for us* only in appearance but escape our plans and schemes that we project upon the world. Even our treating the Other as an object does not remove their subjectivity since we are only denying what they are and have been all along. And the specific affectivity which the Other has upon us is our sense of our own being; we apprehend their look upon us as being the value against which we measure ourselves. This affectivity reflects an aspect of ourselves back to us that is only available to the Other as they see us, which we can never establish without the Other: our own being as it is *for them*. Everyone has their own particular affective relation with the Other that they know for themselves, but in the mean we can say that any relation in which we stand with the Other always involves this affectivity upon us—the Other *is* this affectivity. Co-existence with the Other is not only our being affected by them, but also the giving and receiving of affective touches between us, for we are also affectivity upon them.

It is in the absence of such affectivity that we discern that we are alone, unobserved by the Other or no longer contending with their activities in the world; in the Other's absence our attitude differs. We may behave politely, until the Other leaves the room for a short time, and in this time we do not act in respect of politeness. If the Other we share an abode with leaves to go on holiday, we may change our routine of cleanliness because we do not expect them to be there to observe and judge us. If the Other is imprisoned for an extensive period of time, our attitude in respect of them may be that of lamenting the expected extent of this absence. The key point on which these expectations turn is the possibility of the Other returning to us; their absence is contingent and our actions are always in respect of the Other as one-who-will-return. But when we consider the possibility of the Other's return in respect of the Other's death, we find that our attitude in response to their absence is instead in respect of their return *no longer* being possible. This is the difference between grieving and lamenting the Other's departure: when the Other dies the possibility of our affectively touching each other is annihilated, while their contingent departure always sustains this possibility. It is the possibility of the Other's return, as something that stands before us as a feature of the world, which is disrupted by their death. In this disruption, we find that the Other again escapes our projects for the world, but this time in their *no longer* being alive so as to feature in our plans.

The being who has died is no longer the Other for us. The Other is only an absence for us, somebody who was once alive but is no longer and remains only in our memories, imagination and records of their life. When we refer to the Other in the past we are referring to the once living being, and to refer to the Other presently is to refer to the absence of that living being and as one-who-will-never-return. By this, we see that death is a departure of a specific kind—permanent and without the possibility of return.

Grief

If the Other has led a destructive lifestyle we may have already formed expectations about their premature death, perhaps even that they may die immanently. However, without such expectations, a particular form of disruption is created by the Other's suicide. This disruption is like the tree in the park we find cut down to a brutal torso: it has died because it has been reduced to its body and its limbs stolen, and it is shocking because we expected the tree to die with the grace of exhaustion, to gradually wither and fall apart or simply collapse. Rather than be denuded by blades the gracious death for the tree is for its branches to be scattered around it, broken or twisted where they have separated from the trunk, or for the whole tree to lie its length across the ground. But here its branches have come away from the trunk at straight cuts, what could only be achieved by intention, and there is nothing on the ground around the tree which points back to the event of its "natural" death. All the grace of death we expected for the tree has been disrupted and not because of another event of "nature", like a strike of lightning, but because of an intentional act; a sabotage. Like the tree, the sui-

cide of the Other is shocking to us because the kind of death we expected them to have was not this intentional end which became of them. The difference between the annihilation of the tree and suicide is that suicide is self-annihilation; there are signs around the scene of the suicide that point to the fact that the Other has, by their own doing, not died a "natural" death as we expected them to.

Grief is so overwhelming that it is facile to assume that any detached position on the situation can be attained and sustained while we suffer it. In grief, the world no longer admits of the everydayness of how we lived our lives prior to the Other's suicide, it does not allow us our old way of life. The suicide is antithetical to our previous way of living, since we have hitherto lived with the possibility of the Other being with us. Our old values and new projects are drawn into a *vacuum* created by the Other's suicide; there is seldom something we turn our attention to that is not pervaded by the absence of the Other. Everywhere stands out to us as being a place where their appearance is impossible, the world itself opposes and denies the possibility of their existence; the world has become antithetical to their being alive. We are thus confronted with an inescapable synthesis of our previous way of living and its being disrupted by the Other's suicide: the life we choose to live with the Other as absent-and-without-return. Regardless of what we choose to do the world carries on without the Other and so we have no choice about their absence—except to choose what do with ourselves in response to it. Yet we are also free to believe and make our choices in denial, contrary to the Other's absence. Whence arises the question of authenticity.

Authenticity

It is the great fallacy of discussing authenticity to fall into proclaiming that one can only be authentic by doing *this* or *that* specifically, when it is really only authentic to follow our own way in response to our situation. By thinking of our grieving in such a way we shall discover that by pursuing authenticity in our grief it can help to alleviate some of our suffering. Conversely, we shall discover that an inauthentic pursuit of grief only exacerbates our suffering.

The first aspect of the Other's suicide to be contemplated in respect of authenticity is death itself; thinking about death will reveal to us the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. When in response to the Other's death we say, "Well, I half-expected it," we are expressing our having prepared ourselves for that event perhaps coming to pass. In this expectation, we have taken there to be signs that pointed to the possibility of the Other's death. In such cases, we suffer the event less because we have prepared ourselves for this as an eventuality. Which is neither to say that we escape suffering altogether. To do so we would have to expect that at every next moment they will be dead, but this attitude is impractical because the world has to be taken for granted as cohesive in order for everyday living to proceed. However, where we have not expected the Other's death at all it is a greater disruption for us. Yet there was always a sign that the Other would eventually die: every living being, by virtue of being alive, will eventually die. To hold before us the possibility that the Other may die at any time is to be prepared that this possibility may be actualised and immanent, to have the best vantage point on it. The authentic attitude towards death then, as Heidegger points out, is to act in such a way that everything we do is in lieu of our eventual death.[2] To not lose sight of this involves seeing the world in its bare contingency; everyone is apprehended as being they-who-will-one-day-die. Death is to be seen everywhere as a possibility for everyone. But in so doing we are not believing something we did not already know.[3] By taking this authentic attitude we already accept the possibility of the death of the Other and alleviate ourselves of some of the grief of their death, since we do not deny that this was always possible and stand in some manner of readiness to receive it.

Distance

Where the Other has committed suicide it is not unusual to assume responsibility for them

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[2] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. by John Macquarrie (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962) 297–8.

[3] Remember?

having done so. And this is actually a question of knowledge; an epistemic gap appears to us that we struggle to cope with. On one hand, we may be remorseful that we did not do more for the Other, that if we had only made some extra effort or acted differently they might never have chosen to kill themselves. But to do so is to revisit and taint our memories as having possibilities that were never available to us at the time; we seek answers that act as solutions to the event that led to the Other's absence. It is, in fact, a masochism because we can never know, truly, whether our acting differently at the time would have led to their still-being-alive. Since the Other could have very well decided that they were going to kill themselves irrespective of what changed in their life. On the other hand, we may straightforwardly blame ourselves as being the *cause* of their killing themselves, perhaps if the suicide takes place after the end of a relationship or an argument, or if we have acted under the pretence of "being cruel to be kind" to the Other. Indeed, the Other may have made it their maxim, "If the relationship ends, I will kill myself," or, "Now that the relationship has ended I will kill myself, since I cannot bear the void in my life created by it." But it is evident too, by fact of the Other's freedom to choose, that these decisions were not created and executed by us; we did not control their maxim-making thoughts or control their bodies. We did not force them to kill themselves just as much as we did not prevent them from doing so; it was their choice alone. Their decision to kill themselves was never close to us and so neither did we push it away from us.

From this consideration, two positions are revealed: that if we had acted differently we could have stopped the Other from committing suicide, and that we could have controlled their thoughts and actions in stopping them. As such, either position is an inauthentic one. We cannot find the Other in the world as alive and we cannot reverse the event which led to the end of their life. There are two aspects to the event of their suicide, then: first, that there this is an epistemic gap that will never be filled or closed. Secondly, is a distance between our freedom within the present to reflect upon the past and the point in time in the past in which we could have acted differently, which will also never be closed, since the past cannot be changed. Let us refer to these two aspects as together being *the distance.* It is this distance standing before us, as being permanent and necessary, which is our suffering the Other's death. And in order to alleviate some of our suffering we attempt to close that distance by exploring all those possibilities we imagine were available to us at the time prior to the event of the Other's suicide. To be sure of ourselves as having been able to influence the situation all along, we place ourselves next door to the event and therefore only ever having been a step away from having made the right decision that we think would have prevented their suicide. We have all the logical steps laid out before us that show us how to solve the problem in itself. Put simply, it seems to make suffering simpler by accepting blame when it has not ever been there for us to take.

Yet it is evident that by attempting to simplify our suffering in this way we, in fact, complicate it; it is not the application of Ockham's Razor that it at first seems to be.[4] There is nothing simpler than saying, "this is complicated," and nothing is more complicated than over-complicating what is simple. By accepting responsibility for the Other's suicide we do not cancel the distance. That distance will never cease and cannot be swapped for our taking responsibility, or even covered up by it. So by our taking responsibility we are only confounding our woes. Furthermore, by assuming that the Other would not have killed themselves if we had acted differently, we are removing from them the freedom which conditioned their affectivity upon us, which made them the living being that they were, *who* they were, and that we loved and suffer the absence of. In doing so, by reducing them to a substance that was unto natural laws and upon which we could have acted, an object, we contradict and deny the being they truly were. This in itself contradicts and opposes the memories of the Other we hold on to as the last remnants we have of them. We have inauthentically pretended all along that the distance created by the Other's suicide can be closed when really it never can be.

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[4] "William of Ockham," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified 25 June 2015, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ockham/#4.1.

All of this complication comes about by our taking the inauthentic attitude of denying the truth of the situation and it only confounds our grieving. The authentic attitude, then, is to work towards accepting the fact that the Other was always going to die, at no predetermined time no less, and that they died out of the freedom they have always had to kill themselves. Furthermore, their death has created an unsurpassable distance between us and the living being they were and the event of their death. By accepting this we diminish what is to be overcome in our grieving and overcome our grief easier than having complicated it with our assuming responsibility for the Other's suicide and distorting our memory of them.

Absence

Authentically accepting all of the aforementioned does not dissolve the Other's absence. This absence, inherent in the distance created by their death, can also never be overcome. The distance we have just discussed creates the Other as an absence, by their *disappearing*. But this disappearing is not the rotting or the melting of their body, but rather the ending of everything constitutive of their being alive—the affectivity between us. Further to this, is what we shall call the *vanishing* of the *possibility* of affectivity between us. The Other's absence consists in the disappearance of the affectivity between us and the vanishing of the possibility of this affectivity taking place. Further to these terms, we can retrospectively consider the event of the Other's death as being the *vanishing point*, since it marks out where the possibility of our affectivity between each other vanished.

Similar to our discussion of the distance, the inauthentic attitude in response to the Other's absence would be to pretend that it can be filled up or closed in some way; that the affectivity between us and the Other remains a possibility through re-enactment with another Other. But in doing so we will eventually fall short of being able to put paid truth to our pretending because the denial itself already implies what is being denied. So to deny something is already to affirm it as being-there-for-us. If we throw ourselves into the arms of somebody else in order to fill the void of the Other's absence, or in the belief that our affective touches with the Other can be realised again, we do not escape our grief because the very reason for our choosing to do this in the first place was in response to the Other's absence, which is our grief itself. We will eventually return to a visceral awareness of the world as lacking the affectivity between us and the Other, of what we are denying. Since we never truly find that affectivity due to the Other no longer existing and thus their affectivity being realised again is an impossibility. That is, there is nothing which recovers the Other or their affectivity, and denying this in bad faith, as we have said, only confirms it by referring back to it. Denial in itself is an acknowledgement and so to deny something as to disclaim it is futile. This reveals to us that the authentic attitude is to make our choices in affirmation of the Other's absence, and of the impossibility of affectivity between us, rather than in denial. And by affirming this we do not complicate our grieving by developing expectations that we can alleviate our suffering in such ways we really cannot. Suffering the lack of affectivity between ourselves and the Other is not eliminated but our suffering is made easier by accepting it.

Synthesis

Our response to the Other's suicide is also a question of our attitude in becoming reconciled to our new situation without the Other, which we shall call the *synthesis*. This synthesis is conditioned by the existential anxiety we experience in our awareness of having to choose what to do next. Every choice we make in response to our situation *is* our reconciling with the Other's absence; everything we do is a manifestation of our attitude. Given the authentic attitudes already revealed to us, it follows that the authentic attitude towards the synthesis is to affirm our having to choose. To deny that we have to choose is inauthentic because this seeming choice about the possibilities we can choose from —that there are none—is itself a choice about what we believe about choice. And as we have already discussed, denial is an acknowledgement of what is being denied; for us to deny that we have any possibilities to choose from there would first have to be those possibilities in order for them to be

denied. In believing that we cannot choose we consign ourselves to being fated, to being doomed in some way. This reveals another complication for our suffering: it is a belief that denies the possibility of our acting in ways that help us accept our grief. It follows, then, that the authentic attitude is to affirm our freedom to choose. This alleviates us of any such suffering because it maintains the possibility of our grieving being suffered less by itself being a choice to suffer less. Affirming our freedom to choose liberates us from the confines of our belief that we have no choice and as such avoids complicating our suffering further.

Reconciling with the Other's suicide, however, is not a simple task. Beyond establishing what is an authentic and inauthentic attitude toward our situation, there is no dictating exactly what we ought to do in choosing how to grieve and what to choose in reshaping our life without the Other. Having accepted the situation and its complexity, it is as reasonable to religiously devote several hours of the day to the memory of the Other as it is to kill ourselves; such is our freedom to choose. What we have discussed serves only as considerations for those who are grieving the Other's suicide and wish to alleviate their suffering.

Closing

Our discussion has revealed how embracing an authentic attitude in grieving the Other's suicide goes some ways to alleviate our suffering. Further, we found that accepting the complexity of the situation also aids in alleviating our suffering by avoiding confounding it in the first place. Such is the authentic attitude to the situation we have identified. It only remains for us to say that there is no moral attached to the strategy of coping chosen by anyone so long as their own suffering is concerned; it is just as well for somebody to grieve authentically as it is inauthentically.[5] We only set out to show that grieving authentically can alleviate our suffering and is of potential value to anyone who wishes to suffer less in their grief. ■

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[5] That said, there is an entire account still to be given, elsewhere, as to how our choice of how to grieve can also create suffering for others, such as in how our choosing self-destruction affects those whom we invite to care about us, in forcing them to witness us do harm to ourselves.