

Love, Loss, and Finitude

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In this paper I offer some existential-phenomenological reflections on the interrelationships among the forms of love, loss, and human finitude. I claim that authentic Being-toward-death entails owning up not only to one's own finitude, but also to the finitude of all those we love. Hence, authentic Being-toward-death always includes Being-toward-loss as a central constituent. Just as, existentially, we are "always dying already," so too are we always already grieving. Death and loss are existentially equiprimordial. I extend these claims to a discussion of the four forms of love identified by the ancient Greeks, contending that the nature of a loss experience will depend complexly on the forms or dimensions of love that had constituted the lost relationship. I argue that authentic solicitude can be shown to entail one of the constitutive dimensions of deep human bonding, in which we value the alterity of the other as it is manifested in his or her own distinctive affectivity, in particular, in those painful emotional states disclosive of authentic existing. Lastly, I explore the ethical implications of these claims.

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.

—Anais Nin

Philia begins with the possibility of survival. Surviving—that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited.

—Jacques Derrida

[W]hat one calls by the somewhat tarnished term love is par excellence the fact that the death of the other affects me more than my own.

—Emmanuel Levinas

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Authentic Being-Toward Death

Heidegger (1927/1962) contends that by authentically (ownedly) comporting itself toward death, Dasein (the human being) recognizes "in this distinctive possibility of its own self [that] it has been wrenched

away from the ‘they’ [*das Man*, conventional everyday interpretedness]” (p. 307). Furthermore, he argues that this “ownmost possibility is non-relational [in that] death lays claim to [Dasein] as an individual Dasein” (p. 308), nullifying its everyday relations with others. This is because in everyday relating governed by *das Man*—fulfilling conventionally defined role requirements, for example—any Dasein can substitute for any other. One’s death, in contrast, is unsharable: “No one can take the Other’s dying away from him.... By its very essence, death is in each case mine” (p. 284).

Other existential philosophers object to Heidegger’s claim about the non-relational character of death. Vogel (1994), for example, suggests that just as finitude is fundamental to our existential constitution, so too is it constitutive of our existence that we meet each other as “brothers and sisters in the same dark night” (p. 97), deeply connected with one another in virtue of our common finitude. Critchley (2002) points the way toward a second, and to my mind essential, dimension of the relationality of finitude:

I would want to oppose [Heidegger’s claim about the non-relationality of death] with the thought of the fundamentally relational character of finitude, namely that death is first and foremost experienced as a relation to the death or dying of the other and others, in Being-with the dying in a caring way, and in grieving after they are dead.... With all the terrible lucidity of grief, one watches the person one loves—parent, partner or child—die and become a lifeless material thing. That is, there is a thing—a corpse—at the heart of the experience of finitude. This is why I mourn.... [D]eath and finitude are fundamentally relational, ... constituted in a relation to a lifeless material thing whom I love and this thing casts a long mournful shadow across the self. (pp. 169-170)

In my own work (Stolorow 2011), I claim that authentic Being-toward-death entails owning up not only to one’s own finitude, but also to the finitude of all those we love. Hence, I contend, authentic Being-toward-death always includes Being-toward-loss as a central constituent. Just as, existentially, we are “always dying already” (Heidegger 1927/1962, p. 298), so too are we always already grieving. Death and loss are existentially equiprimordial. Existential anxiety anticipates both death and loss. This claim is captured in my poem, “Finitude” (Stolorow, 2009a):

If we’re not self-lying,
we’re always already dying.

If we're not self-deceiving,
 we're always already grieving.
 The answer to the existential quiz?
 "Good-bye is all there is."

Support for my claim about the equiprimordiality of death and loss can be found in some works by Derrida. In *Politics of Friendship* (Derrida 1997), for example, he contends that the "law of friendship" dictates that every friendship is structured from its beginning, *a priori*, by the possibility that one of the two friends will die first and that the surviving friend will be left to mourn. In *Memoirs for Paul de Man* (1989), he similarly claims that there is "no friendship without this knowledge of finitude" (p. 28). Finitude and the possibility of mourning are constitutive of every friendship. Derrida (2001) makes this existential claim evocatively and movingly in *The Work of Mourning*:

To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other.... That is the ...infinitely small tear, which the mourning of friends passes through and endures even before death.... (Derrida 2001, p. 107)

[This is] the mourning that is prepared and that we expect from the very beginning.... (p. 146)

From the first moment, friends become ... virtual survivors. Friends know this, and friendship breathes this knowledge ... right up to the last breath. (p. 171)

Such authentic Being-toward-loss of those we love actually deepens our love relationships, insofar as owning up to the "good-bye" that is built in to our finite human existing makes possible the saying of an authentic "Hello."

Consider, with regard to the relationality of finitude, the emotional impact of collective trauma, such as the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 (Stolorow 2009b). As we watched the twin towers of the World Trade

Center collapse right before our eyes and witnessed the instant death of more than three thousand people, did we experience terror only about our own finitude and the possibility of our own deaths? Or were we terrified as well, or even primarily, for the lives of those we loved—our children for example.

It might be objected that Being-toward-loss cannot be a form of Being-toward-death because, whereas the uttermost possibility of death is “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all” (Heidegger 1927/1962, p. 307), loss does not nullify the entirety of one’s possibilities for Being. Yet, I would counter, in loss as possibility, all possibilities for Being in relation to the lost loved one (other than imaginary and symbolic possibilities) are extinguished. Thus, Being-toward-loss is also a Being-toward-the-death of a part of one’s Being-in-the-world—toward a form of existential death. Traumatic loss shatters one’s emotional world, and, insofar as one dwells in the region of such loss, one feels eradicated. Derrida (2001), once again, captures this claim poignantly and poetically:

[T]he world [is] suspended by some unique tear ... reflecting disappearance itself: the world, the whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up.... (Derrida, 2001, p. 107)

[A] stretch of [our] living self ... a world that is for us the whole world, the only world ... sinks into an abyss. (p. 115)

The nullification of central possibilities of Being in the experience of a traumatic loss may be seen as an analogue pointing to the grasping of death proper as the possibility of the impossibility of any existing at all.

Varieties of Loss Experience

Notice that in my discussion so far I have intermingled and not sharply differentiated the four forms of love identified by the ancient Greeks: *Philia* (friendship), *Eros* (romantic, sexual love), *Storge* (parental affection), and *Agape* (love of humanity, of our fellow human beings). In my view, these forms of love are most often complexly intermingled. In the

richest and deepest romantic relationships, for example, we may experience a lover fluidly and flexibly as an object of our erotic desire and as our best friend, as our parent and as our child, as our brother or sister and as our soul mate, and, in existential kinship, as a fellow human being. The richer and more multidimensional a love relationship, the more traumatically world-shattering will be its loss.

More generally, the nature of a loss experience will depend complexly on the forms or dimensions of love that had constituted the lost relationship. For example, relationships differ according to the extent to which self or other—two experiential foci within the unitary structure Being-in-the-world—occupies the emotional foreground. The experience of the loss of someone who primarily had been loved narcissistically, serving as support for the survivor's sense of selfhood, will differ from the loss of someone whose alterity had been recognized and deeply treasured. In the former case one's sense of selfhood will be weakened, whereas in the latter one's world will be emptied out and impoverished. When Derrida (2001) contends that in the loss of a friend, "[A] stretch of [our] living self ... a world that is for us the whole world ... sinks into an abyss" (p. 115), he obscures the important differentiation that I am proposing. The difference is, of course, a matter of predominance rather than one of mutual exclusivity. Here are two examples of loss experiences at the extreme ends of the continuum.

Vivid instances of narcissistic love and loss can be found in those parents who look toward their child to be a "jewel in their parental crown," relying on the child's excellence to enhance their own sense of grandeur.¹ One such mother characterized her deceased 18-year-old son as her "heritage" whose role had been to insure that she evoked endless admiration from members of her Christian fundamentalist community. When he died in a tragic skiing accident while on a trip with his secret male lover, his homosexuality was publicly exposed. Instead of devastating grief, the mother experienced seething rage at him, as her borrowed grandiosity was replaced by searing shame before her community. She declared bitterly that if there had been a prenatal test that could have detected his sexual orientation, she would have aborted him.

Compare this woman's experience of loss with that of a man whose young wife of five years also died in a tragic accident. She was no perfect being, not physically, intellectually, or emotionally. Yet he had imagined that she had been created with him in mind, and he had loved her fully—body, mind, and soul. He experienced no loss of self-esteem following her death. Instead his world became dark and empty, and he seemed to wander

about endlessly, searching for his lost love. Frequently he would dream of being blissfully reunited with her, only to awaken in the morning to the devastation of her absence.

There is no loss more horrific than the death of a beloved young child. What is not generally recognized, however, is that loss is experienced by a loving parent throughout the course of his or her child's development. At each newly emerging stage, the parent experiences both joy in the child's developmental achievement and grief over the loss of what is being left behind. My poem, "Emily Running" (Stolorow 2003), captures this phenomenon:

My favorite time of day
is walking Emily to school in the morning.
We kiss as we leave our driveway
so other kids won't see us.
If I'm lucky, we have a second kiss,
furtively, at the school-yard's edge.
My insides beam as she turns from me
and runs to the building where her class is held,
blonde hair flowing,
backpack flapping,
my splendid, precious third-grader.
Slowly, almost imperceptibly,
a cloud begins to darken
my wide internal smile—
not grief, exactly, but a poignant sadness—
as her running points me back
to other partings
and toward other turnings
further down the road.

An adolescent child's rebelliousness and massive disengagement can entail a nearly unbearable loss for a parent, as the loving little boy or girl of earlier developmental eras is experienced as being lost forever and must be painfully grieved.

Love and Finitude

There is a certain thinness in Heidegger's (1927/1962) conception of "Being-with" (*Mitsein*), his term for the existential structure that underpins the capacity for relationality. Authentic Being-with is largely restricted in Heidegger's philosophy to a form of "solicitude" that welcomes and encourages the other's individualized selfhood, by liberating the other for his or her own authentic possibilities. At first glance, such an account of authentic relationality would not seem to include the treasuring of a particular other, as would be disclosed in the mood of love. Indeed, I cannot recall ever having encountered the word *love* in the text of *Being and Time*, although references to other ontically experienced, disclosive emotional states—such as fear, anxiety, homesickness, boredom, and melancholy—are scattered throughout this book and others written during the same period. Authentic selfhood for Heidegger seems, in this context, to be found in the non-relationality of death, not in the love of another.² Within such a limited view of relationality, traumatic loss could only be a loss of the other's selfhood-liberating function, not a loss of a deeply treasured other.

I now wish to show how authentic solicitude entails something like friendship or love, even though Heidegger himself did not explicate such entailment. I begin with his distinction between the two modes of solicitude—inauthentic and authentic. With regard to solicitude in the inauthentic mode:

It can, as it were, take away 'care' [our existentially constitutive engagement with ourselves and our world] from the Other and put itself in his position in concern; it can leap in for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the Other that with which he is to concern himself.... In such [inauthentic] solicitude the Other can become one who is dominated and dependent.... (1927/1962, p. 158)

In contrast to this, there is also the possibility of a kind of [authentic] solicitude which does not so much leap in for the Other as leap ahead of him in his existentiell potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away his 'care' but rather to give it back to him authentically as such for the first time. This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care—that is, to the [authentic] existence of the Other,

not to a “what” with which he is concerned; it helps the Other ... to become free for [his authentic care].... [Authentic solicitude] frees the Other in his freedom for himself.... [It] leaps forth and liberates. (pp. 158-159)

Authentic solicitude, in Heidegger’s account, frees the other for his or her authentic care—that is, to exist authentically, for the sake of his or her ownmost possibilities of Being. But recall that, for Heidegger, being free for one’s ownmost possibilities also always means being free for one’s uttermost possibility—the possibility of death. Heidegger does not explain how authentic solicitude accomplishes this emancipation.

In Heidegger’s account of authentic existing, authentic Being-toward-death is disclosed in the mood of anxiety (*Angst*). How can we free the other for a readiness to experience this disclosive anxiety? In earlier work (Stolorow 2007, 2011) I show that the two essential constituents of existential anxiety—loss of the significance of the everyday world and a feeling of uncanniness or not-at-home-ness—are also characteristic of the experience of a traumatized state. I contend as well that such an unbearable state can become more bearable and more integrated only if it finds a context of emotional understanding, a “relational home,” in which it can dwell and be held. Thus, if we are to leap ahead of the other, freeing him or her for an authentic Being-toward-death and a readiness for the anxiety that discloses it, we must Be-with—that is, understandingly attune to—the other’s existential anxiety and other painful emotional states disclosive of his or her finitude, thereby providing these feelings with a relational home in which they can be held, so that he or she can seize upon his or her ownmost possibilities in the face of them. Is not such understanding attunement to the other’s emotional pain a central component of friendship or love? Authentic solicitude can indeed be shown to entail one of the constitutive dimensions of deep human bonding, in which we value the alterity of the other as it is manifested in his or her own distinctive affectivity.

Ethical Implications

I suggest that owning up to our existential kinship-in-finitude has significant ethical implications insofar as it motivates us, or even obligates us, to care about and for our brothers’ and sisters’ existential vulnerability and emotional pain. I close on an Agapean Kantian note.

Kant's (1785/1996) "categorical imperative," which he claimed to be the ground of all binding ethical precepts, enjoined, "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (p. 73). Applying Kant's criterion to the ethical maxim to which I just alluded, imagine a world in which the obligation to understandingly attune to and provide a relational home for others' existential vulnerability and pain—i.e., for the potentially traumatizing emotional impact of our finitude—has become a universal law. In such a world, human beings would be much more capable of dwelling in their existential anxiety, rather than having to revert to the defensive, destructive, de-individualizing evasions of it that have been so lamentably characteristic of human history. A new form of individual identity would become possible, based on owning rather than covering up our existential vulnerability. Vulnerability that finds a hospitable relational home could be seamlessly and constitutively integrated into whom we experience ourselves as being. A new form of human solidarity would also become possible, rooted not in shared ideological illusion but in shared recognition and understanding of our common human finitude. If we can help one another bear the darkness rather than evade it, perhaps one day we will be able to see the light—as individualized, finite human beings, finitely bonded to one another.

Notes

1. Another such vivid example can be seen in Heidegger's passion for Hannah Arendt. When she ended their romantic relationship, his sense of selfhood collapsed into a crisis of personal annihilation that contributed to his fall into Nazism (see Stolorow 2011, pp. 88-93).

2. In certain other contexts, both personal and philosophical, Heidegger (1929/1977) does write quite eloquently of love. However, the "love" of which he wrote seems a wholly narcissistic affair, concerned more with the enhancement of selfhood than with the valuing or even the recognizing of the other.

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