Stolen grief

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This paper offers an account of stolen grief. The phrase has not, to my knowledge, been used in the philosophical literature or the scholarly literature more generally. It's cribbed from Burkett & Whitley's *Stolen Valor* (1998). As the concept has been articulated, someone steals valor when they claim to have done, been awarded for, or suffered for various courageous actions in the context of war, especially combat. Such actions and the experiences resulting from them are often transformative, the sort of thing that someone encounters only once or a few times in their lives and that remakes them for the better or the worse. As such, these experiences take on special significance, both for the individual and for the community to which they belong. Like military valor, intense grief is an experience that most of us experience only a few times. It is often transformative, and it has a special significance for the grieving individual and for the community to which they belong. In this paper, I explain what I mean by grief and its relation to love. Then I adumbrate what I understand by *owning* grief, a necessary prerequisite to any account of stolen grief. I conclude by diagnosing the distinctive wrongs of stealing grief, as opposed to other kinds of theft.

1 Introduction

In 2015, my twin brother died. He had flown from his home in Bangkok to the UK for a work trip. Before he left, his wife begged him not to go rock climbing in Wales, an experience he had enjoyed for years and at which he was adept. She was pregnant with their first child, and she wanted him to take better care of his own safety. He said that this would be his last climb. He wasn't wrong. While leading an ascent with several friends, he lost his grip, fell, got his leg caught in the rope, flipped upside down, and landed on his head. I've estimated the gravitational acceleration his body underwent — first mentally, then on paper, then with a calculator. He had just enough time to think, "Oh shit."

How do we come back from such experiences? The fact of the matter is that we don't. Grief transforms you, if you really let yourself stare at it, savor it, submerge yourself in it (Paul 2014; Markovic 2024). If you force yourself to sit with the permanence of loss. Honest grief doesn't make you stronger. It makes you tender, like a wound that won't heal. That tenderness can make you sensitive to the tenderness and vulnerability of others. It can also make you callous and defensive. Importantly, it also makes you vulnerable to people who act as if they are as wounded and tender as you are: people I'll call *thieves of grief*.

In this paper, I offer my reflections on stolen grief. The phrase has not, to my knowledge, been used in the philosophical literature or the scholarly literature more generally.[1] It's cribbed from Burkett & Whitley's *Stolen Valor* (1998).[2] The argument in that book is that certain military imposters, especially Americans who claimed to have been combatants in and received awards for their actions in the Vietnam war, as well as those who claimed to have been prisoners of war, took credit for what they hadn't done or endured. I take no stand on the politics of *Stolen Valor*, which inspired the US Congress to pass both the Stolen Valor Acts of 2005 (subsequently struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court) and 2013. But I do think that the underlying diagnosis illuminates what I am calling stolen grief. As the concept has been articulated, someone steals valor when they claim to have done, been awarded for, or suffered for various courageous actions in the context of war. Such actions and the experiences resulting from them are often transformative, the sort of thing that someone encounters at most once or a few times in their lives and that remakes them for the better or the worse. As such, these experiences take on special significance, both for the individual and for the community to which they belong.

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[1] A google search for the phrase on 21 July 2024 turned up just a few hundred hits, most of them to a video game.

[2] A related phenomenon has been characterized as "stolen pride" (Russell Hochschild 2024), which occurs when formerly dominant populations see their relative prestige being eclipsed. This book in particular attempts to explain the rise of the far right in American politics (especially among white men) through the lens of (perceived) stolen pride.

Like military valor, grief — at least intense grief — is an experience that most of us experience only a few times. It is often transformative, and it has a special significance for the grieving individual and for the community to which they belong. In what follows, I explain what I mean by grief and its relation to love. Then I adumbrate what I understand by *owning* grief, a necessary prerequisite to any account of stolen grief. I conclude by diagnosing the distinctive wrongs of stealing grief, as opposed to other kinds of theft. Why, we might ask, do people steal grief in the first place? There is more than enough loss in this world. No one is capable of grieving or even pretending to grieve all of it. The question is parallel to Aristotle's question about why people attend tragic theater. Why do we subject ourselves to such unpleasant emotions? In fact, we face two questions. First, why over-grieve or at least pretend to over-grieve the loss of someone to whom you were not sufficiently close and attached? Second, why — while doing so — demand the attention and comfort precisely of the people who have a greater claim to ownership of that grief, and might reasonably expect comfort and soothing? In response to these questions, I can only speculate, but I will offer a few tentative answers: stupidity, inexperience, need for community, and need for admiration.

2 What is grief?

Grief is an unavoidable experience, arguably one of the things that distinguishes behaviorally modern humans from our evolutionary ancestors (White et al. 2017), though some of our near ancestors and evolutionary cousins seem to have engaged in funerary practices that can plausibly be interpreted as expressions of grief more than a quarter million years ago (Berger et al. 2025). I conceptualize grief as an emotional experience of irreversible loss, typically to a person or other object to which one was attached (Wonderly 2016).[3] (In this paper, I focus on grief for other people, though I am not committed to the claim that we cannot experience grief for non-human animals, cities, cultures, or artifacts.) This emotional experience of loss typically occurs in combination with a profound disturbance of life prospects. There is a broad consensus that grief is a temporally extended process (Cholbi 2021) that influences various agentic and cognitive processes. It is characterized by the recognition and negotiation of the loss of a significant person — someone who *mattered* specifically to me (Wonderly 2016) — and a substantial disturbance of prospects (Ratcliffe 2017, 2023).

Scholars disagree about the formal object of grief, that is, the entity or phenomenon to which grief refers. Cholbi (2021), for example, holds that the formal object of grief is the loss of a significant social *relationship* that the bereaved had established to the deceased. Ratcliffe (2023) instead holds that the formal object of grief is the loss of those *life possibilities* that were connected to the continuance of the deceased. This loss of prospects and affordances can refer to different objects across time. Whereas Cholbi emphasizes the aspect of grief that attaches to the self in an important way, Ratcliffe says that there are "self-directed, other-directed, and relational

[3] This account of grief draws heavily from Fabry & Alfano (2024).

aspects of grief and loss" (Ratcliffe 2023, p. 159). A bereaved person might grieve the possibilities that they have lost as a result of the death. Alternatively, the bereaved might grieve the lost potentialities of the deceased. In still other cases, the bereaved grieves the possibilities for connection that have been irreparably lost, including relationship, attachment, and joint commitments. This sense of a loss of prospects and potentialities can take various forms, including "[l]ocalized and nonlocalized experiences of tension, conflict, negotiation, lack, absence, unreality, and being cut off from a shared world" (Ratcliffe 2023, p. 8).

There are several prominent accounts of the relation that the bereaved forms with the deceased. According to the closure account (Freud 1917), grieving is a process of reducing one's cathexis with the deceased. According to the continuing bonds account, the bereaved continues their affective connection and attachment to the deceased (Klass et al., 1996). This connection must be reconfigured and transformed, given the loss of the deceased. Millar and Lopez-Cantero (2022), for instance, point out that loving relationships typically involve reciprocity, but such reciprocity is no longer possible after someone has died (unless one believes in communication with people in the afterlife). Millar and Lopez-Canter argue that what needs to happen is some sort of acknowledgment of the love that preceded death, which needn't require reciprocity. In other words, love for the deceased is a form of unrequited love, which usually focuses on the character and personality of the deceased.

We engage in a kind of emotional wayfinding when responding to irreversible loss, especially of another person to whom we were attached through action, sociality, and emotional connection (Markovic, 2022). One of these challenges concerns the regulation of our emotions during distress. In such contexts, we usually lean on other people who knew but were less closely connected (or connected in different ways) to the deceased to help us remake our agentic, relational, and emotional lives. Thieves of grief, I argue, not only fail to offer this support but instead demand it for themselves from those they should be comforting.

3 Who owns grief?

We own all sorts of things — things we (and others) consider ours. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis (1942/2001) pointed out that we use "my" in multifarious ways, "from 'my boots' through 'my dog', 'my servant', 'my wife', 'my father', 'my master' and 'my country', to 'my God'." For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the sense of ownership we have over our emotions. I contend that this is derivative from the ownership we have over our values and attachments. In many cases, especially in the case of adults, the investment we put into our values and attachments over the course of our lives determines whether we count as owning relevant emotions.

To get started, let's consider a range of cases of inapt emotion where the inaptness seems to be downstream from a disconnect between the agent's values, attachments, and investments, on the one hand, and the experience they have, on the other hand. Because emotions and reactive attitudes play a crucial social and communicative role, expressing or simulating or masking them in inapt ways is likely to cause moral harm (Strawson 2008). The account I offer is broadly Aristotelian in the sense that I suggest that people can get it wrong in at least two ways: excess or deficiency.

Disappointment/excess: I'm a fair-weather fan of my country's football team. When they are performing well, I get excited about upcoming matches, read commentary, watch the games with compatriots, cheer their successes, express dismay over their setbacks, and so on. But most of the time I forget that they exist. In a big tournament that I'm following, they lose pathetically. I break down in tears while watching the game with friends who religiously follow the team, know every player's name, and often attend even inconsequential games in person. Clearly something has gone wrong here. I have not, as Locke (1689/1988) might have put it, mixed my emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993) enough with the team to deserve to feel this way, especially among these people.[4] I have stolen disappointment that others were entitled to.

Disappointment/deficiency: I spend six years pursuing a Ph.D. I put in serious effort and time, teaching myself various statistical techniques and responding to often-harsh criticism from advisors and peers with humility. In the end, my dissertation just isn't good enough. I fail at the defense in front of family, friends, and colleagues who have invested their time and effort and emotions in my dismal attempt. When the bad news comes down, I shrug, move to another country, start a job as a line cook, and leave them all behind. Again, something seems to have gone wrong. I mixed my and others' emotional labor in this project enough to be seriously affected by its failure. But I don't care about the outcome, nor do I acknowledge the legitimate feelings of others. I have stolen disappointment that others were entitled to.

Above, I mentioned the Lockean notion of ownership through labor. I should emphasize that there are other ways to come to own an emotion, just as there are ways beyond labor to come to own money, property, and other goods. One is inheritance. For instance, my parents can pass down family heirlooms to me even if I haven't put in any work to deserve them. (This point raises the difficult question of wealth taxes, but I assume that it is fairly uncontroversial to think that decedents can legitimately pass at least some of their property — especially objects with sentimental value — to chosen individuals, whether they are family or not.) Likewise, when it

[4] The phenomenon of emotional labor has been theorized in a wide variety of ways. Originally, the concept was used to refer to burdensome work that people in the service industry, e.g., those dependent on tips for their income, contribute (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993). Is smiling at a customer worth three dollars? The notion has since metastasized to include even the loving care that parents and partners put into their relationships (Manne 2020). I here use the phrase in the latter sense.

comes to owning one's emotions, mere attachment can be enough to establish ownership. A young child who loses a parent to whom they are attached may not have put in emotional labor in any significant sense, but they are still entitled to their grief. And someone who suffers from severe cognitive and affective deficits might still become attached to their caretaker in a way that would mean that losing the caretaker entitles them to grief.[5]

The cases of excess and deficiency are interestingly different. If I express an emotion that I'm not entitled to, especially in the presence of others who are more entitled to it, I make an implicit claim of ownership that I don't deserve. This sort of case is primarily what I have in mind when discussing stolen grief. By contrast, if I fail to express an emotion that I'm prima facie obligated to feel, especially in the presence of others who reasonably expect it from me, I implicitly deny their ownership of their emotional lives. I delegitimize their experience, suggesting that they are not entitled to the emotion that both of us should, by rights, experience and express. In both cases, I engage in affective injustice (Srinivasan 2017; Archer & Mills 2019).

Affective injustice occurs when people are presented with a false dichotomy between apt emotion and prudential social behavior. Both Srinivasan and Archer & Mills use the example of anger in the face of injustice to illuminate this phenomenon. Someone who faces systemic injustice would be aptly angry about their situation, and perhaps at their oppressors. But to express that anger can be dangerous, provoking retaliation and further injustice. This puts the victim in a double-bind where they need either to express apt anger or smile and eat crow, regulating their emotions in ways that can be damaging over time (Tessman 2005). This arguably amounts to a form of theft. The theft can occur in at least two ways: denying another person's emotional privilege or asserting an undue emotional claim (Hohfeld 1919). If someone else is entitled to an emotion, and I do something that delegitimizes or otherwise undermines their feeling or expressing that emotion, I steal it. And if I am normatively expected — if not fully obligated — to feel and express an emotion, but I do not feel or express it in trusted company, then I steal it.

To shed further light on emotional ownership, let's consider a few further examples:

Pride/excess: I'm a delinquent dad. I neglect my offspring, regularly failing to pay alimony, call them on their birthdays and other major life events, or express interest in their individuality. Despite my inadequacy as a parent, one of them goes on to have a career as an Olympic swimmer. Not only that — they even win a gold medal in both the butterfly and the individual medley. I am overjoyed by this outcome. I send them a text message of congratulations, then share their news on my social media feeds, expressing my parental pride. Here again it seems that something has gone wrong. It's already a bit suspect to take credit for the achievements of one's children. But to take credit for their achievements after neglecting them for years crosses a

[5] Thanks to Jesse Prinz for pressing me on this point.

line (which Eminem refers to in the track *Cleanin' out my Closet*). I didn't invest enough in their life and projects to deserve to feel this kind and intensity of pride. I have stolen the pride that they, their teammates, their coaches, and their mother were entitled to.

Pride/deficiency: Things can also go wrong in the opposite direction. I take on the supervision of a student whose first language is not English. She needs three times as much effort and attention as someone who happens to have grown up in an English-speaking home. I put in the work despite the fact that most of it is not compensated or recognised by my university. She is relentless and eventually produces a dissertation that wins official honors and informal accolades. Her efforts are central, but she wouldn't have achieved what she did without my supererogatory assistance. At her doctoral defense ceremony, after the committee awards her honors, I shrug and go home rather than continuing on to a celebratory dinner with her. In this scenario, my student would rightly feel hurt and resentful, asking why I put in so much work on her behalf if I couldn't feel vicarious joy at her success. I have stolen pride that she was entitled to.

Indignation/excess: Online, I generally waste my time watching videos of cute cats and rabbits. But sometimes enough of the accounts that I follow get riled up about a genocide. I've never expressed interest in the population currently struggling through genocide. I might not even be able to spell the name of the group or name a single individual among them. But because I see so much outrage being expressed on their behalf, I become apoplectic, show up at a couple of street rallies, and act like I've been an ally for years. In this case as well, members of the group and their real allies might question my emotional reaction. They might legitimately wonder whether I'm showing my commitments and values and investments, or simply seeking recognition at a convenient moment. I have stolen indignation.[6]

Indignation/deficiency: Many of my friends are women. I often tell them that I'm an ally. I even get invited to the semi-secret feminist reading group in my city as one of their two "male allies." It's flattering, and I enjoy the attention. I show up to the meetings and bask in my ally-glory. At some point, one of my friends faces horrific sexual discrimination and harassment, both at work and in her personal life. She comes to me seeking comfort and solidarity. I offer a few perfunctory words then mention that I'm busy and can't get involved with this kind of stuff because it could undermine my professional standing and career prospects. And anyway, maybe it was just a misunderstanding and she's overreacting. My friend might reasonably question whether I not only failed her but also delegitimized her outrage. I have stolen her indignation.[7]

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[6] A related example: during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, a lot of online "slacktivists" used the #blacklivesmatter hashtag and changed their profile pictures to depict simply a black box. This overwhelmed efforts by dedicated street protesters to capture and direct attention to the movement.

[7] For further discussion of this kind of problem, see Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell (2024).

These cases are meant to illustrate what I take to be a moral fact: people are entitled to but also pro tanto obligated to certain apt emotional reactions in part based on their demonstrated values, virtues, investments, and attachments, which reflect underlying commitments. There are multiple ways to come to own an emotion, but many of them — especially when we are talking about adults — require work. When someone doesn't put in the work but claims the entitlement to the emotion, that may constitute a form of injustice, namely theft. Likewise, when someone puts in the work but then doesn't show up to the party (or the funeral), they delegitimize the emotions of others, which again seems to constitute a form of injustice, namely theft.

Using this framework, I would like to explore the phenomenon of stolen grief and the moral psychology of the thieves who take what is not theirs. On this understanding, someone is entitled to and prima facie obligated to feel and express grief at the loss of another person to the extent that they were attached to them, especially to the extent that they valued, appreciated, and were invested in the decedent's life and flourishing.

This way of understanding the ownership of grief is essentially relational and graded. I can be close to someone in some aspects of their life (e.g., family, lover, friend, colleague, teammate) and not other aspects of their life. On each of these dimensions, I might be closer to or further from them than someone else. Ownership of grief thus depends on both the mode of attachment and the strength of attachment to the decedent. For instance, I might be deeply invested in a student's academic flourishing without knowing much about the rest of their life. In such a case, were they to die, I would own an aspect of grief for them — perhaps even more than anyone in their personal life owns it. At the same time, I could not reasonably claim the grief that their family or life partners had for them, even if those people didn't understand or contribute to their intellectual life in the same way that I did.

In this relational and graded framework, we can understand grief as the extension of love beyond the lifetime of the beloved (Solomon 2006; Pismenny & Brogaard 2022). Love, as I here conceptualize it, is a commitment. More specifically, it is a commitment to the flourishing of the beloved. In fortunate circumstances, love is reciprocated, but that doesn't always happen. Someone can love their infant child who is not yet capable of such a commitment, feel unrequited love for another capable adult who simply doesn't return it, or love an aging parent suffering from dementia. Importantly, it's possible to love someone even after they have died. Such a love attachment could, in theory, be formed or strengthened after the beloved dies. But in the vast majority of cases, love endures loss. This is why I find the Lockean metaphor of mixing one's (emotional) labor with another person's life, flourishing, and projects helpful in understanding the ownership of grief. In many cases, when someone steals grief, an understandable retort would be, "But you never loved him!" or "But you didn't appreciate her the way I did!" or "But you weren't there for her when she needed you!" These retorts, I suggest,

reflect the fact that ownership of grief is derivative from love, which is itself a matter of valuing, appreciating, investing in, and being committed to the flourishing of the beloved.

4 Stolen grief

As mentioned above, love and grief are relational and come in degrees. There is a somewhat tired cliche about the paramour attending (or not attending) the funeral of their lover, in full sight of the grieving spouse. Is this a case of stolen grief? In many cases, probably not.[8] Setting such bourgeois concerns aside, we can ask about clearer cases. Is a loose colleague entitled to the same grief — and the accompanying comfort and soothing, including from other grievers — as a best friend from childhood or a lifelong romantic partner? Is a great-aunt who doesn't know the decedent's middle name and thinks he was a devout Christian entitled to the same grief — and the accompanying comfort and soothing, including from other grievers — as the decedent's twin brother who knows he was an atheist? I contend that, at least when we are talking about adults, those who didn't put in the time and effort are not entitled to such feelings, emotions. expressions, or claims. When they express such feelings and make such claims anyway, they steal grief. In this, I am joined by Aristotle, who said that "bad men have no right even to praise" Plato after his death (Jaeger 1927).

What is distinctive of the theft of grief? I think the answer to this question has multiple parts, which have to do with the relational, graded nature of grief, as well as the permanence and non-fungibility of grief. Let's start with permanence and non-fungibility. Grief is distinct from sadness generally, though a species of it (see Gotlib 2017). Both respond to loss. But in many cases of sadness, there is at least the possibility of restoration or recovery. In grief, we lose forever. For this reason, grief is especially meaningful. I can lose my keys and then find them a few minutes, or a few years, later. I can lose my keys and resort to a copy. But when my beloved dies, she's gone forever, and anyone else — no matter how dear — just isn't her. This is one of the things that makes the book of *Job* so emotionally jarring. Jahweh allows Job's children to die, then consoles him by blessing him with new offspring. Setting aside the wanton disregard for life that Jahweh exhibits in the first instance, his attempt at restoration is obviously inadequate, callous, even monstrous.

We can liken the theft of grief to the theft of other non-fungible property. Imagine you have an otherwise-unremarkable wedding ring that your grandmother passed down to you. She managed

[8] This sort of phenomenon has been discussed in clinical settings under the heading of "disenfranchised grief" (Doka 1999, 2020). Disenfranchised grief may arise because of prejudice — think, for instance, of gay men who lost their partners during the AIDS epidemic but were unable to freely grieve at the funeral. The phenomenon of disenfranchised grief is subtly different from the phenomenon of stolen grief insofar as the former involves exclusion and lack of recognition, whereas the latter more typically involves inapt expressions of excessive grief and demand for recognition.

to hold onto it despite being imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp for nearly a year. It was a precious memento to her because her husband died in the Holocaust, and so it has become precious to you as well. I steal it, pawn it for cash, and buy you an indistinguishable gold band. In this scenario, you would be rightly outraged by my behavior. I have taken something that wasn't mine, sold it, and attempted to restore your loss with something that does not have the right causal history for it to be meaningful to you in the way that the pilfered property was meaningful. I have broken your attachment to an object that really mattered to you and tried to replace that with some metal bent into the right shape.

To offer another example, imagine that an occupying army invades your homeland. But they have a deal to offer: they will take your land, including the orchards your ancestors planted and the herds that your family tended for generations, but they will set you up in some distant locale with other land and herds. Even if the monetary value of this exchange were somehow defensible, there would still be a moral residue because the values involved aren't fungible (Tetlock 2003). The thief of grief, I want to suggest, is like the antagonist in these two examples. Even if the thief offers something in return, they cannot replace the non-fungible good that has been taken because grief is essentially about our attachments to particular people and other objects of value.

Let's turn next to the relational and graded dimensions of grief. In moments of loss, we lean on others for support. We do so because we deserve it, because we have legitimate normative expectations of the people with whom we are close, and because those same people would be understandably distraught and concerned if we did not ask them for help in our moment of need.[9] And we lean on those *particular* others because they don't deserve it too much more than we do. I don't want to be too strict about this. Some people are perhaps simply better at coping. And some people may be worse. We need to allow for individual differences. But at the same time, there are limits and standards: if someone who met the decedent once at a business dinner demands comfort and soothing from a close friend or family member or lover of the decedent, then something has gone seriously wrong. In the same way that someone who only did desk duty during a war does not deserve the comfort and admiration of someone who served in the muck (stolen valor), so someone who sent a yearly Christmas card does not deserve the comfort and soothing of someone who lived with and loved the decedent for years (stolen grief).

If this is right, then there are more and less egregious ways of stealing grief. When someone who has little claim to grief, because they demonstrated little love for the decedent during their lifetime, steals from someone else who also has little claim to grief, the wrong is minor. If I sneakily take your usual parking spot, to which you don't have any claim in the first place, it would be unseemly for you to complain. In the same way, if one loose acquaintance of the

[9] This is another way in which stolen grief is similar to but not whole identical with disenfranchised grief.

deceased leans on another, slightly less loose, acquaintance of the deceased, there is no ground for complaint. However, when someone who has little claim to grief steals from someone who has a robust claim to grief, the wrong is serious. If a good friend of mine is in the middle of an ugly divorce and I respond by crying about how my recent date went badly, I wrong her in a serious and specific way.

To give a bit more structure to the degrees of wrongness, we can distinguish three levels:

(1) parasocial stolen grief that has no effect on those who own their grief,
(2) stolen grief that redirects attention and comfort from those in the inner circle to the thief, and
(3) stolen grief that redirects attention and comfort from those in the circle, including those who are now deprived of attention and comfort that they deserve and would otherwise have received, and who now feel a need to provide attention and comfort themselves, to the thief.

In cases of type 1, it seems that we are merely dealing with inapt emotion, and perhaps no wrong — at least no serious wrong — has been done. In cases of type 2, we face something like cutting the queue: a deserving agent is deprived of something they have a right to, in order to accommodate an undeserving agent. In cases of type 3, the harm is more like the one described in *2 Samuel 12* (the case of Bathsheba and David), where someone is deprived of a precious, irreplaceable object of value by someone who has no right to it in the first place. Intuitively, cases of type 3 are more severely wrong than cases of type 2, though I am not here in a position to give a dispositive argument for this intuition.

Grief thieves also harm society more broadly by devaluing the expression of mourning. If just anybody can grieve the loss of a particular person, including those who had only a parasocial relationship with them, then that loss becomes less significant. Those who mourn the deaths of celebrities and other parasocial connections such as the queen of England cheapen the grief of those who have intense connections and attachments to people in their real lives. For all of these reasons, I suggest that we should be more critical of stolen grief and the thieves who perpetrate it.

5 Conclusion

Why do people steal grief in the first place? There are billions of people on this planet, all of whom will eventually die. No one is capable of grieving or even pretending to grieve such staggering loss. The question is parallel to Aristotle's question about why people attend tragic theater. Why do we subject ourselves to such unpleasant emotions? In fact, I suggest, we face two questions. First, why over-grieve or at least pretend to over-grieve the loss of someone to whom you were not sufficiently close and attached? Second, why — while doing so — demand the attention and soothing precisely of the people who have a greater claim to ownership of that

grief, and might reasonably expect comfort and soothing from you? In response to these questions, I can only speculate, but I will offer a few tentative answers: stupidity, inexperience, need for community, and need for admiration.

Start with stupidity and inexperience. Some people are bad at monitoring and regulating their emotions (Bonanno & Burton 2013). The same people tend to be bad at monitoring the emotions of others (Laukka et al. 2021). Add the meta-cognitive burden of not only monitoring my own emotions and the emotions of others but also evaluating the aptness of my own emotions and the emotions of others. Compound these challenges with the fact that most of us don't get a lot of practice at grief and grieving, so we're almost all novices when it comes to this important cultural ritual (Doughty 2014). Suddenly, the spotlight comes on, and people react stupidly, inaptly, perhaps in ways that they subsequently regret. We steal each other's grief because we lack the hermeneutic resources to make sense of our own and each other's experiences.

Beyond stupidity and inexperience, the need for community or belonging surely accounts for some episodes of stolen grief. As Strawson (2008) pointed out, expressing and responding to emotions is a large part of what it means to be part of a moral community. Grieving with others is a way of expressing solidarity with that community (Corvo & De Caro 2019). In this sense, there is something touching, if unfortunate, in the motivations of the grief thief. It's better to be and want to be part of a loving community than to spurn others. The thief may simply be attempting to mimic, mirror, or affirm the grief of others. In this assessment, I am joined by Milligan (2008), who argues that what he calls false grief can come from a misguided but well-motivated desire to experience genuine grief. Milligan goes on to suggest that, at least in some cases, false grievers manage to fake it till they make it, and that therefore false grief is not to be universally condemned. This seems like the right result. However, when false grief of this sort combines in toxic ways with stupidity and inexperience, it can easily go awry, leading to hurtful theft.

Finally, I'd like to suggest a less innocent answer to the question of why people steal grief. If grief is an extension of love, and love of the good is admirable and even constitutive of virtue (Adams 2008), then there is a social incentive to at least pretend to grieve (and thus to have loved) the deceased, especially when the deceased was worthy of love. "I loved him (who was good and admirable), and this makes me good and admirable." In grieving, the thief signals that they were close to the deceased, perhaps that their love for the deceased was reciprocated, and that they have a well-tuned sense of what makes people admirable. But when these signals are not expressive of pre-existing attachment, commitment, and love, they are unreliable, perhaps hypocritical. As Piovarchy (forthcoming) and others have pointed out, allowing unreliable signals into our moral ecosystem erodes trust and reasonable cooperation. This cynical motive of some grief thieves is surely what Aristotle was calling out when he said that bad men had no

right to praise Plato after his death. And it may also be why grief for the best among us is the most theftworthy and thus so common.

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