**Grief and Pessimism**

*Christmas Lecture, York, 12/12/23*

1. **Preliminaries**.

This talk explores the relationship of grief to pessimism.

Initial difficulties: different conceptions of G, P, and different ways of relating them (causal, expressive, etc.)

Further difficulties: (i) relative absence of comparative work and (ii) possibility that the richest connections of G to P are located at a deep, tacit level, apt to be occluded by focus on theoretical accounts of G and P.

My tentative theses:

1. experiences of G are primarily concerned with lost possibilities and G extends to many kinds of non-bereavement or non-death losses.
2. human life is suffused with an inchoate sense of (actual, unfolding, and potential) losses, a sense we are typically prone to suppress.
3. the ‘sense of loss’ is expressed, however indirectly, in certain kinds of philosophical doctrine, especially kinds of pessimism.

To establish (3), I distinguish two conceptions of pessimism: *particularism* and *perennialism*.

Upshot: philosophical pessimism becomes more compelling if seen as an expression, albeit indirect, of an inchoate sense of the actual, unfolding, and potential losses inherent to our commitments, relationships, and life-projects.

Further upshot: a pessimistic sense of inchoate losses is incompatible with ‘default’ modes of life, but compatible with others.

1. **Grief and loss.**

First thesis: G as an emotional response to the loss of possibilities that were central to the developing structure of one’s life (Ratcliffe, Richardson).

Distinction:

* **death losses** – incl. ambiguous, anticipatory (eg Cholbi).
* **non-death losses**

Life-possibilities: integral to the structure of our life; interrelated and structured in dynamic ways; integrated into the practical and interpersonal structure of our developing life; integral to our experiential world.

**Living** as the constant personal and interpersonal activities of receiving, creating, exploring, actualising, and negating this changing structure of individual and collective life-possibilities (Lear on Crow).

Sustained by kinds of existential **hope** and **trust** (Ratcliffe)

Comments on **loss of life-possibilities**:

1. associated with many events, processes, and experiences

natural processes

one’s own actions and omissions

actions and omissions of others

contingent social developments and worldly events

unpredictable vicissitudes of life (cf. Carel and Kidd).

1. experienced in many ways, according to diverse evaluative criteria

natural, inevitable, unfortunate, tragic, devastating

‘my fault’, ‘your fault’, ‘our fault’, ‘their fault’, ‘no-one’s fault’

Upshot: grief as emotional response to loss of possibilities integral to the developing structure of our life. However, experience of loss is not confined to (i) death losses, (ii) actual losses, (ii) specific, definable objects of loss.

1. **A sense of loss.**

Second thesis: (i) human life is suffused with an inchoate sense of loss; (ii) we are typically prone to suppress this sense. So, what is a ‘sense of loss’?

It is not the (i) explicit endorsement of propositions or (ii) calculations about the durability and integrity of things.

Suggestion: our experience of things incorporates a tacit sense of the **modes** **of loss** appropriate to those things (incl. persons, practices etc.)

Many modes of loss:

* death, destruction, collapse, deterioration, corruption, etc.

Modes of loss specific to interpersonal relationships:

* ‘grow apart’, ‘fizzles out’, ‘becoming different people’, etc.

Proposal: everyday activity of living involves constant tacit actions aimed at avoidance, suppression, or denial of these pervasive possibilities of loss.

1. ‘happiness…has blindness and insensibility to opposing facts… as its instinctive weapon for self-protection against disturbance’ (William James)
2. ‘My *life* consists in my being content to accept many things’ (Wittgenstein)

An acute sense of loss will jeopardise our ability to imagine, initiate, sustain and expand our actual and possible alternative life-structures.

Compare: Carel on **bodily certainty**—a tacit, unreflective trust or faith in one’s body that enables comfortable immersion in a world of possibilities; loss of this certainty entails **bodily doubt**, which precludes the prior modes of comportment—certain possibilities disappear, others become less salient and the whole mood of the world changes:

‘A new world is created, a world without spontaneity, a world of limitation and fear: a slow, encumbered world to which the ill person must adapt. All people fear this issue arising through ageing. In illness, this new, bizarre, alienated world emerges, sometimes overnight. This is a world of negotiation, of helplessness, of avoidance.’ (Carel)

One experiences one’s body in terms of newly-salient kinds of loss: the loss of transparency and continuity, acute anticipation of further losses, of losses experienced as ‘permanent’, ‘irreversible’, ‘irresistible’ (Byrne).

Bodily doubt reveals that our prior modes of life depended on a tacit, contingent, fragile trust in our body, which, while intact, could suppress a sense of bodily fragility/vulnerability (**operative obliviousness**).

Obliviousness to deep facts about our embodied existence is a precondition for a range of existentially satisfying modes of life.

* ‘Bodily doubt … pierces the normal sense of bodily control, continuity, and transparency in a way that reveals their contingency. It shows our tacit faith in our own bodies to be a complex structure that becomes visible when it is disturbed. It destroys the normal experience of continuity, transparency, and trust that characterizes this structure’ (Carel)

Loss of bodily trust is compatible with other modes of life, but these will be ones that incorporate a disquieting sense of their fragility, of the modes of loss particular to embodied existence:

* ‘Illness can also be likened to a loss of innocence; it is impossible to return to the naïve (and, in retrospect, gullible), state of confidence one was in before. There is no turning back once genuine bodily doubt has been experienced; one’s basic orientation in the world has changed and the possibility of catastrophic bodily failure is now part of one’s experiential horizons.’ (Carel)

Upshot: our lives incorporate a tacit sense of the modes of loss to which they are subject – certain modes of life are only sustainable insofar as they successfully suppress / deny this sense of loss, enabled by bodily certainty.

1. **Pessimism.**

A sense of loss refers to an experience of things in terms of the modes of loss specific to them—a loss of the permanence, stability, on-going-ness, and durability of persons, things, relationships, social arrangements, etc.

Many existentially satisfying modes of life are only sustainable insofar as one is oblivious to these pervasive possibilities for loss – ‘innocence’.

Thesis 3: a submerged and inchoate sense of loss, is expressed, however indirectly, in certain philosophical doctrines, including **pessimism**.

Many conceptions of P – distinguish two main conceptions:

1. **Particularism**: P as a response to contingent personal or cultural events which disrupt entrenched moral-existential certainties (see Beiser, Dienstag, van der Lugt – eg ‘collapse of theism’).

Corollary: sources of pessimism are contingent features of particular ways that one’s life or culture happened to develop.

Distinctions:

* + - 1. contingent routes into P
      2. contingent ways of articulating P
      3. perennial aspects of the human condition

Doctrines of P should acknowledge both (i) contingent and (ii) perennial aspects of human life.

1. **Perennialism**: P a response to entrenched features of the human condition, including a sense of loss pervading our activities, habits, commitments and projects (cf. Buddhism on ‘impermanence’).

Doctrines of P consist of (i) explicit responses to contingent life-events, (ii) an implicit sense of loss, of which one is not always aware (cf. Dienstag on ‘sensibility). (Buddhism as perennialist pessimism – see Cooper).

A diffuse grief-like sense of loss is one perennial feature of human life:

* It is expressed, typically, in a rhetoric of impermanence, instability, fragility, uncertainty, ‘provisionality’.
* It enriches experience of things, which now includes ‘modes of loss’.
* It is experienced as a ‘truth’, a ‘revelation’ of once-hidden possibilities
* It erodes our ability to comfortably inhabit modes of life ‘oblivious’ to the sense of loss (cf. Carel on loss of innocence).

Grief testimonies provide support:

1. "Impermanence has shown its face” (GP #210)
2. “I find the uncertainty very different. Not knowing how things will change over time, having hopes but not wanting to set myself up for disappointment” (GP #105)
3. “The world becomes bigger, the unknowns more apparent. The possibilities wider.” (GP #229)

Other testimonies:

1. Life has “a permanently provisional feeling” (C.S. Lewis, his wife’s death)
2. grief “comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that … obliterate the dailiness of life.” (Joan Didion, her husband’s death)
3. “My grief, like that of millions of others, signalled the loss of something truly vital in my life […] It punctuated the end of a time and a form of living, and marked the transition to a new time and a different way of living.” (Arthur Kleinman, his wife’s death)
4. “the lostness of the griefstruck […] everything you do, or might achieve thereafter, is thinner, weaker, matters less. There is no echo coming back; no texture; no resonance, no depth of field” (Julian Barnes, his wife’s death)
5. “My world is dark and will always be dark” (Kate Saunders, her son’s death)

This is one way to understand van der Lugt’s talk of pessimism in terms of ‘a sense of the profound and insurmountable fragility of existence’.

1. **Conclusions.**

Grief concerns the loss of possibilities. Pessimism concerns a radical and permanent loss of the ways of experiencing and relating to possibilities that are integral to ‘innocent’ modes of life, ones ‘oblivious’ to the sense of loss.

Upshots:

* + - 1. pessimism is a response to both contingent and perennial features of human life – a focus on the former should not occlude the latter.
      2. a sense of loss could enrich our experience of things, since it now incorporates various possibilities for loss – a disquieting ‘revelation’.
      3. a sense of loss alters how we appraise ‘innocent modes of life’, those we previously enjoyed and those still enjoyed by others – which could sustain feelings of bewilderment, incredulity, estrangement:

“After this my universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation […] I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life” (correspondent quoted by James).

Is this a counsel of despair? No—pessimism collapses modes of life which presupposed an ‘innocent’ obliviousness to the ubiquity of loss.

But this is compatible with the availability of other modes of life, ones which do incorporate a sense of loss (Carel on bodily doubt).

Our best existential strategy, then, is to appreciate the contingency of ‘innocent’ modes of life, to emphasise the existence of other modes, and help people transition into them in humane ways.

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

[Byrne]

[LR]

[MJR]

[York audience]

**REFERENCES**

[add later]

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Beiser W

Byrne

C.S. Lewis

Carel – **bodily certainty**

Carel and Kidd vicissitudes of life

Cholbi G

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Dienstag P

Joan Didion

Julian Barnes

Kate Saunders

Lear – RH

Ratcliffe GW

Ratcliffe **hope** and **trust**

Richardson

van der Lugt DM

William James VRE

Wittgenstein