Empathy for the Dead

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This paper defends the view that profound grief stems largely from our empathy for the dead. Much needs to be done to give a satisfying defense of this proposal — beginning with a defense of the suggestion that empathy can extend, beyond the living, to those who experience nothing. But the very suggestion that empathy plays even *some* role in grief may itself come as a surprise. In fact, the suggestion goes against the grain of much recent theorizing in philosophical discussions of grief. One of the major divides in this literature is between "agent-centered" views of grief, which claim that the loss to be grieved is a loss from the perspective of the bereaved person's life, and "object-centered" views, which claim that the loss to be grieved is an objective loss of life, not, primarily, a loss to the griever.[1] Empathy disappears from view in this setting because it straddles the divide between self (the grieving agent) and other (the objective loss); in empathizing, it is said that one feels *for* another.[2]

There is, though, in philosophical engagements with grief, a long history of seeking not only to mark but also to maintain clear boundaries between self and other. It is an effort that can become particularly insistent in response to what would seem to be a propensity on the part of those in grief to confuse such boundaries (e.g., to feel themselves joined with the dead and to have "posthumous" experiences and insights through this connection).[3] The Epicureans, for instance, who regarded our empathy for the dead as the principal source of the (avoidable) misery of grief, took this confusion of self and other to be a product of imagining oneself in the place of the dead and of failing to recognize this slippage.[4] We can detect something of this approach

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1. For representative examples of the agent-centered approach, see Nussbaum (2001) and Cholbi (2017), and for the object-centered approach, see Solomon (2004), McCracken (2005), and Marušić (2018).

2. Michael Cholbi (2017, 2022) explicitly rejects the idea that grief might take the form of empathy for the dead on the grounds that grief is agent-centered.

3. I take this phrase from Joyce Carol Oates's remark in her memoir of grief that "[T]he widow is a posthumous person passing among the living" (2011, 332).

4. See Lucretius's discussion of (i) our concern for the condition of our bodies and other apparent post-mortem harms and (ii) the grief of others in view of these (1997, 3.870–3.930). Lucretius's explanation, in the first case and,

to the boundary between self and other in contemporary discussions that treat efforts to "reanimate" the dead as integral to grief.[5] In these discussions, some such efforts are taken to be beneficial, but only those that are understood to be symbolic (i.e., akin to pretense). To fail to recognize that it is as if, *but only as if*, the experience of grief following a significant other's death is a "conjoined" experience is to fall into illusion on these views. And so, even without mentioning empathy for the dead, these contemporary approaches might be seen to be pursuing the Epicurean project of disenchanting grief.

In seeking to maintain a clear demarcation between self and other (or in urging that those in grief do so) these approaches have overlooked what is most interesting about the suggestion that grief can take the form of an empathetic engagement with the dead — namely, that the boundaries between the living and the dead can, indeed, be crossed in grief. Like the Epicureans, I shall defend the view that grief can take the form of empathy for the dead, arguing that recognizing this helps to account for many aspects of profound grief, including, for instance, those concerns for the dead that appear to originate in an immediate responsiveness to the dead themselves. But, although this tradition has rightly acknowledged the significant role of empathy in grief — an idea that ultimately finds its fullest expression in the influential account developed by Adam Smith (1759/2004) — I shall defend a "boundary-crossing" account of empathy that departs in critical respects from the traditional view, with important consequences — not only for theories of grief, but also for theories of empathy — many of which are anticipated by Smith's account. I shall argue that, although empathy for the dead does indeed rely on a confusion of self and other, that confusion is not one that requires correction. I shall suggest, rather, that it deserves a place alongside other ethically significant

confusions of self and other — including, for instance, that required to love one's neighbor as oneself.

In speaking about "grief" in this paper, I shall be restricting my attention to grief prompted by the deaths of significant others. In this, I follow common practice. I shall not, however, be assuming a categorical distinction between grief for myself or grief for another (or, for instance, grief for what is lost to the world). Too much, in my view, has been assumed in advance about what grief encompasses in the drawing of these sorts of distinctions. My aim, in developing the account of our empathy for the dead presented here, is to bring our attention back to aspects of the experience of grief that are obscured by such distinctions.

In what follows, I first present Smith's case for the claim that grief rests on an imaginative engagement with the dead — what we today would call empathy. I then compare Smith's account of this empathy for the dead with Denise Riley's first-hand account of grief in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2020) and examine her grounds for rejecting the proposal that her profound grief is (in her words) *imagined empathy*. Far from suggesting that we abandon an empathy-based account, however, I argue that Riley's concerns can guide us in addressing the shortcomings of the traditional understanding of empathy as an exercise in perspective-taking. I propose, as an alternative, that we consider empathy for the dead as involving a confusion of the boundaries between self and other of a kind that we might see in ethically transformative encounters with the living and the dead alike.[6] Finally, I defend the value of these experiences against contemporary approaches to grief that both regard the *symbolic* reanimation of the dead as integral to grief and imply that the only alternative to this symbolic form of relating to the dead is the illusion of relating to the dead.

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plausibly, also in the second, is that one unwittingly imagines oneself in the place of the corpse and "standing by it gives / Some part of his own feeling to it" (1997). I shall focus on Adam Smith's (1759/2004) more explicit development of these ideas.

5. See, for example, Higgins (2013, 2020), Fuchs (2018b), and Køster (2020).

6. One might classify these experiences as both epistemically and personally transformative in the sense articulated by Paul (2014). Unlike Paul, however, I shall argue that they do not require any essential reference to the first-person perspective.

1. Smith on Illusive Sympathy

Adam Smith used the term "sympathy" to denote the natural propensity to be moved by the circumstances of others. A critical presupposition of Smith's discussion of sympathy is that there is, for each of us, a sphere of concern that is properly our own. What calls for explanation against this background is not only the propensity to have concern for another outside this sphere — something we might be content to take for granted — but also the propensity to have concern for another *as if* for oneself. Smith recognized that in using "sympathy" as a term for this phenomenon, he was departing from standard usage. Not only did he broaden the term's scope of application beyond our sorrow for another's sorrow (its original usage, Smith supposes) in using "sympathy" to denote "our fellow feeling with *any passion whatever*" (1759/2004, I.i.1.5; my emphasis), he also claimed that sympathy crucially depends on placing ourselves in another's circumstances. What Smith called sympathy, we would today call empathy.

In the most basic case, according to Smith, sympathy requires that we enter imaginatively into the circumstances of another and, furthermore, that we imagine how we ourselves would respond to those circumstances. In many cases, the result of this imaginative exercise, Smith claims, is that we approximate the response of the other to some degree. However, given that this exercise involves coming to one's own response to the situation of another (e.g., coming to a judgment concerning whether or not it calls for anger or, instead, for understanding), there need be no coincidence at all between these responses.[7] When

there is no coincidence or harmony of response between oneself and another, Smith describes sympathy as "illusive" (1759/2004, II.i.2.5). This is not to say that it is not genuine sympathy but rather that one's imaginative engagement is, in a sense, *purely* imagined: it does not offer the insight into the significance of another's circumstances that is provided when a coincidence of feeling does occur, namely, insight into the other's actual response to the circumstances.[8] But this does not mean that this sympathy is unilluminating. Illusive sympathy may, after all, provide us with insight into circumstances that the other is unable — sometimes tragically, sometimes mercifully, and sometimes through their own blindness — to see for themselves. The illustrations of illusive empathy provided by Smith suggest as much: among them are the example of our sympathy for those who have lost the use of reason, a mother's sympathy for the total helplessness of her infant, and our sympathy for those who cannot see in themselves what is plain to others.

Smith's most striking example of illusive sympathy is not drawn, however, from our engagements with the living, but instead concerns engagements with the dead. It is on account of our sympathy for the dead, Smith claims, that we imagine that the dead suffer the misfortune of being deprived of light, of being abandoned to the cold of the grave, and of being prey to corruption (1759/2004, I.i.1.13). These particular examples emphasize the sensory aspects of our sympathy — our concern for the physical degradation of the dead — but Smith's examples are not limited to these. This sympathy also impresses on us the misery of being shut out from life and conversation, of being without the warmth of human community, and of being "obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the

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7. Nanay (2010) argues that philosophers are wrong to assume that "empathy" is an appropriate translation for what Smith calls sympathy, on the grounds that sympathy does not entail the correspondence between the mental states of the parties involved that Nanay takes to be entailed by the contemporary philosophical use of "empathy." However, philosophers do sometimes allow, as Smith does, that empathy is a matter of feeling, not exactly what another feels, but what it would be reasonable to feel in another's circumstances, or what it is more appropriate to feel in their circumstances than in one's own (leaving open the possibility that there is no correspondence). See Maibom (2014, 2) for the claim that this latter position "best captures the various usages of the term" among philosophers and psychologists.

8. In section 4, I discuss the claim that illusive sympathy is so called because it produces illusion. I should note that Smith does not claim, as a general matter, that our illusive sympathy or the moral evaluation that might be based on it (e.g., my disapproval of another's response when an exercise of sympathy reveals that there is no coincidence or agreement between us) is *necessarily* illusory. This can make "illusive" sympathy seem like a misnomer (or odd at best), but Smith does seem to suggest that, at least where our sympathy for the dead is concerned, we suffer some kind of illusion.

memory" of one's friends and family (1759/2004: I.i.1.13). Even the realization that our sympathy can offer the dead no comfort serves only "to exasperate our sense of their misery" (1759/2004, I.i.1.13), generating further illusive, and painful, sympathy. Smith accounts for the remarkable reach of our sympathy in this case, as he does in other cases of illusive sympathy, by appeal to our imagination:

> The idea of that dreary and endless melancholy, which the fancy naturally ascribes to their condition, arises altogether from our joining to the change which has been produced upon them, our own consciousness of that change, from our putting ourselves in their situation, and from our lodging, if I may be allowed to say so, our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case. (Smith 1759/2004, I.i.1.13)

Smith does not use "grief" in discussing our sympathy for the dead, preferring to speak more generally of our sympathy or fellow-feeling with the dead. This being said, and although this sympathy yields what might be regarded as a complex response — arousing our dread of death (1759/2004, I.i.1.13) and, in some cases, even the desire to avenge the dead (1759/2004, II.ii.2.5) — it is clear that the "endless melancholy" (1759/2004, I.i.1.13) that Smith describes is understood to be grief. Indeed, Smith presents a familiar portrait of grief in describing those who attempt to keep faith with the dead whatever the cost to themselves, who take the view that they can never feel too much for those they imagine have suffered such great harms in death — those who regard this response as a tribute to the dead and endeavor through such tributes to keep alive their "melancholy remembrance" of the "misfortune" met by the dead (1759/2004, I.i.1.13). In fact, sympathy for the dead would seem, on Smith's presentation, to underlie most if not all of the core features of what we would recognize as profound grief: our intense concern for the bodies of the dead; the judgment that the death of the other constitutes a great harm to

them; our misery and sorrow; our wish to make a tribute of our misery and sorrow: and our need to memorialize the dead.

Even if the suggestion that grief just *is* sympathy for the dead is too strong, it would still, I think, be fair to say that Smith's discussion highlights a phenomenon central to grief: at a first approximation, *the experience of feeling for the dead what the dead cannot feel for themselves*.[9] Despite being neglected within contemporary theoretical discussions of empathy, first-hand accounts of grief provide a fund of examples much like Smith's own.[10] In the next section, I offer Denise Riley's (2020) observations of grief following the death of her son as a point of comparison. I also consider her evaluation of the proposal that it is due to what she calls "imagined empathy" (2020, 96). These observations lend support to Smith's portrait of grief but they also present a challenge to his claim that what we are seeing in this portrait of grief is empathy for the dead.

2. Riley on Imagined Empathy

It is not difficult to feel the force of the puzzle that Smith's account of empathy is intended to address. We confront it in the course of experience when we find ourselves wondering why *we* are burdened with what seem to us on reflection to be the burdens of *others*. Nowhere is Smith's puzzle sharper, however, than in relation to the death of another person: no condition would seem to be more solitary than meeting one's own death. It is, therefore, not only striking but also

9. I have used "sympathy" in this first section for the sake of exposition but, since I take "empathy" to be a more appropriate translation of Smith's primary concern in the contemporary context, from this point on I shall use it in place of "sympathy".

10. Emily Rapp Black's memoir of grief following the death of her son Ronan includes vivid descriptions of what Smith would understand to be illusive empathy for the dead (Black 2021, 67): "The moment of Ronan's death was far worse than I expected … I can't stop imagining the crematory flames, the jump and whoosh as the door closes and Ronan's body disappears: inside the flame, inside the oven. During the day I close my eyes, trying not to see what I can't stop seeing. What happened to Ronan's tongue, his eyes, his toenails? I hear the roar of the fire in my dreams. I feel it."

suggestive to conceive of grief, as Denise Riley does, as an experience of "vicarious death" (2020, 81).

"If a sheet of blackness has fallen on him," Riley elaborates, speaking of the death of her son, "it has fallen on me too" (2020, 81). This is not simply to point to the ways in which her life has been affected by her son's death — to point, for example, to the ways in which it does not just continue on as before. It is true that grief is commonly said to inhibit one's engagement with the broader world in general, one's interest in activities that formerly gave pleasure, and one's interest in and capacity for developing new relationships; but when Riley reports that whatever has befallen her son has befallen her too she is pointing, specifically, to the emergence of novel experiential possibilities connected to his death. It is "as if," she says, she knows the "blankness after his loss of consciousness" (2020, 81).

Riley's articulation of these experiential possibilities is here, as elsewhere, prefaced by "as if" — a locution that signals both that there is a comparison being drawn and that there is something imagined (or as Smith puts it, *illusive*) in the comparison.[11] It is in this illusive fashion, it appears, that Riley is able to see her own death and the deaths of others in the immediate aftermath of loss:

> In these first days I see how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that's briefly agitated, will close again silently and smoothly over a death. His, everyone's, mine. I see, as if I am myself dead. (Riley 2020, 76)

11. Thomas Fuchs (2018b) presents "as if" as having a compositional semantics, consisting in the combination of the comparative "as" and conditional "if." For a recent argument against a compositional semantics for "as if," see Bledin and Srinivas 2019. Their account of "as if" also conflicts with Fuchs's assumption that one declares the "unreality or impossibility" (Fuchs 2018b, 60) of that to which something given is compared (within certain contexts of use perhaps, e.g., bereavement), generating intuitively mistaken entailments if these as-ifs are taken at face value (such as that there are possible worlds in which, for example, I have consciousness after death).

Again, Riley is not simply offering the platitude that life goes on or that death comes for us all. She is, rather, attempting to articulate the transformative experience of seeming to see the world after her death and the deaths of others, of confronting the calm oblivion that leads those in grief, according to Smith, to make vain efforts to keep their melancholy remembrance of these others alive. This "vicarious" experience of death in grief does not have the death of a significant other as its exclusive focus, but this enlarged scope of vision is also a feature of grief anticipated by Smith's discussion — in his claim that grief leads one, invariably, to empathize with one's own future self — the future self that will meet death. For Smith, this empathetic engagement thereby includes a distressing envisioning of one's own death — the origin, in his view, of our dread of death — but we need not go so far, just as we need not assume that misery is all that we can feel for the dead.[12] The more general conclusion that might be drawn from Smith's discussion and that is further supported by Riley's observations is that our empathy for the dead can promote an expansion of empathy, leading one, as Riley describes matters, to see death — the significant other's, one's own, everyone's — as if with the eyes of the dead.

These "as-ifs" or illusive comparisons proliferate in grief, and this is just what we should expect if (and perhaps only if) grief involves feeling on behalf of the dead what they cannot feel themselves. The result, as evidenced in both Smith's and Riley's presentations, is an experience of grief that takes the form of a densely structured conjoined experience, reflecting, as a first pass, the living person's experience of the other's death.[13] Some of the as-ifs that comprise this structure are sensory in nature. Riley's experience of the passage of time, for instance, undergoes a profound shift, which she describes (as others

12. For example, Riley's vision of death makes her feel "curiously light-hearted" (2020, 76). There is no hint of this particular emotional experience in Smith's account.

13. Cf. "Plunged in some florid jungle of 'as ifs,' you sense them roaming everywhere, blossoming like bindweed entwining you and the dead in conjoined experience" (Riley 2020, 93).

have) as producing a "sensation" of arrested time (2020, 71).[14] It is as if, she says, she shares the experience of the "timelessness of being dead" (2020, 83). Some as-ifs involve sensory experience in a broader sense, as in the sensation, which she reports, of *being with the dead*, as if grief is a kind of companionate exile.[15] Some as-ifs, as in the case of envisioning one's own death, lie at some remove from these sensory experiences but they do appear to be closely associated with or to consist in visual imagery. Others — that it is as if one has a responsibility to die oneself to be with the dead — are presented without accompanying visual imagery, but seem also to reflect an illusive impression of what the continued care for the dead would require.

Given these rather striking parallels between Smith's discussion of our illusive empathy for the dead and Riley's observations of grief, it is perhaps unsurprising that Riley herself wonders whether the puzzling "transfer of affect" (2020, 94) that she observes between the living and the dead might be understood in terms of an "imagined empathy" with the dead (2020, 96). Unlike Smith, however, Riley *rejects* this proposal. The reason she offers is that her as-if engagement does not rest on an "identification" with the dead (2020, 96): it is not one's (imagined) sameness with the dead that accounts for the experience, but neither is it one's full separateness. Instead, the transfer of affect in grief takes place, she suggests, through an engagement that *confuses* or *blurs* the boundaries between the living and the dead, as reflected in the various comparisons that Riley draws, including to being fused with her son (2020, 93); or entangled with him as are lovers who feel through the beloved's skin (2020, 94–95); or doubled, through sheltering her son inside herself (as occurs in pregnancy) (2020, 98). Whatever the best way to understand these various experiences might

be, it seems that they cannot be adequately accommodated in terms of one's identification with the other's circumstances, nor in terms of an exercise of one's independence in responding to these circumstances — as Smith puts it, by bringing the other's case home to oneself.[16]

Despite, then, entertaining the proposal that the transfer of affect between the living and the dead is attributable to an imagined empathy for the dead, Riley's own inclination is to treat the transfer, instead, as a boundary-crossing experience that, while resembling empathy, is not best understood in its terms. Riley's reservations should, in my view, be taken seriously, but so too should the proposal that we empathize with the dead, particularly given its fit as an explanation for what would appear to be a multitude of experiences of feeling for the dead what they cannot feel for themselves. In what follows, I shall argue that Riley's criticism draws our attention to the shortcomings of Smith's account of empathy — shortcomings shared by the perspective-taking accounts of empathy that have followed since — and points toward an account that better captures our empathetic engagements with the living and the dead. I shall propose that our empathetic encounters with the dead are boundary-crossing experiences the best description of which eliminates any essential reference to the first-person perspective.

3. Empathy and Other Derangements

In revisiting the issue of whether an empathy-based account can shed light on the transfer of affect between the living and the dead, we might begin with the question of whether Smith's account of illusive empathy limits our explanatory resources to our imagined sameness with, or else our (full) separateness from, the dead. The answer to this question, I shall argue, is complicated by the fact that Smith's treatment of cases of illusive empathy is not exactly continuous with his

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14. For a similar first-hand report of arrested time, see Lewis 1961. For philosophical treatments of this arrested time, see Merleau-Ponty (1945/2014), Fuchs (2018b), Ratcliffe (2019), and Mehmel (2021).

15. See Ratcliffe (2021) for an account that addresses the puzzle of how an experience of the significant other's presence might arise without specific sensory content. See Kamp *et al.* (2020) for an interdisciplinary and integrative study of such experiences.

16. It is common to see the imaginative exercise of placing oneself in another's circumstances described as "projection" rather than "identification" but since one way of identifying with another is to place oneself in their circumstances (and, indeed, placing oneself in the psychological frame of the other might be regarded in these very terms, too), I shall follow Riley in this terminology.

treatment of other cases of empathy — a point which suggests that there is something else that these transformative cases demand. Understanding what that something else is will bring us closer to seeing the limitations of these options — *our sameness*, *our separateness* — in explaining these cases of illusive empathy and in addition recommend a revision to our understanding of empathy in the direction of Riley's own inclination to treat this form of engagement as a boundary-crossing encounter.

3.1 Revisiting Smith's Cases of Illusive Empathy

Recall that Smith claims that in basic cases of empathy we enter into another's circumstances and imagine what our response to these circumstances would be. There is here a kind of imagined sameness in these cases, namely, an imagined identification with the other person and, more specifically, with the circumstances that properly concern them — precisely the kind of assumption that leads Riley to reject an empathy-based account. Smith's description of our empathy for the dead gives the impression at first glance of working in the same way. As he describes it, we join to "the change that has been produced upon [the dead], our own consciousness of that change" (Smith 1759/2004, I.i.1.13). We enter, imaginatively, into the inanimate bodies of the dead and animate them, as it were, with our own consciousness. But our empathy for the dead demands more than this. It demands that we experience the confinement of the grave, for instance, not as a harm to the living (akin to being buried alive) but as a harm to the dead. And an imaginative effort of this kind appears to require the impossible: that one imagine oneself both dead and alive.

Smith acknowledges that cases of illusive empathy appear, on his description of them, to generate impossible demands. In particular, when discussing another case of illusive empathy — our empathy for those who have lost the use of reason — Smith claims that we feel the anguish of this kind of incapacitation through imagining that we have lost the use of our reason and "what perhaps is impossible" (1759/2004, I.i.1.11) imagining ourselves arriving at this judgment through the use

of reason. That is, we imagine being mad and also judging this madness through the eyes of our sanity. Again, it seems that we meet an impossible demand.

The source of the difficulty might be thought to lie in an attempt to enter imaginatively into the perspective of another person where this proves to be an impossible task. Smith does discuss examples of empathy that require us to adopt another's view of things — examples of what is now commonly called "other-oriented" empathy.[17] These cases, it might be claimed, demand something more than the basic "self-oriented" cases of empathy with which Smith begins, and so might naturally be assumed to be relevant to this discussion. However, as tempting as this explanation is, illusive cases of empathy are not more complex because they are cases of other-oriented empathy. To imagine oneself mad is not to take up another's perspective, even if it can be said that there is a perspective here to take up (the delight that Smith imagines a fool taking in madness certainly is not the perspective assumed by those in a position to empathize).[18] Moreover, in the case

17. Smith discusses this kind of case in the following key passage: "[T]hough sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations with the person principally concerned, yet this imaginary change is not supposed to happen to me in my own person and character, but in that of the person with whom I sympathize. When I condole with you for the loss of your only son, in order to enter into your grief, I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son was unfortunately to die; but I consider what I should suffer if I was really you; and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not in the least upon my own" (VII.iii.1.4). Many have read this passage as presenting an interpretive challenge, namely, to reconcile Smith's "self-oriented" account of empathy with the other-oriented description contained in this passage. For discussions of this interpretive challenge and proposed solutions to it, see the discussions by, among others, McHugh (2011), Fleischacker (2019), and Ben-Moshe (2020). I depart from these authors in assuming that at least some of Smith's cases of empathy (the illusive cases primarily under discussion here among them) are best understood as speaking *against* an account of empathy that depends essentially on entering into another's perspective.

18. For more on the notion of perspective that may be in play here, see Fleischacker (2019), in which it is proposed that we understand a perspective as a "more or less coherent network of opinions and attitudes, formed in response to the world around us" (2019, 31). If this is the right way to view a perspective,

of our empathy for the dead, there is no person whose perspective we might attempt to adopt. The exercise of imagination discussed by Smith reflects this in describing us as entering into the corpse as if to animate it: he does not have us entering the person or perspective (character) of another.

Although it presents a problem for his account, there is something that strikes one as intuitively correct about Smith's description of our confused responses in these cases.[19] The mad person cannot know the anguish that I feel, because it depends on my possession of reason. However, to feel this anguish seems to require that I be touched by madness rather than merely look upon it from a distance. That this anguish can spread, raising the frightening prospect of my own loss of reason (as another's death can seem to become joined to my own) is

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such a view appears to undermine the claim that the mad person has a perspective that might be adopted.

19. Nanay (2010), therefore, obscures the difficulty (and interest) of these cases in simplifying them by saying that one "needs to abstract away from the psychological elements" in the other's situation so that when one imagines the person who is mad, for example, "one imagines oneself in her situation, not as actually presented to her, but as presented to her, were she to know that she is in this state" (2010, 93). The same may be said of Fleischacker who frames the issue in terms of achieving the right distance required for moral judgment: "If I try to merge with you, I will certainly fail to achieve what Smith thinks we seek to achieve by way of imaginative projection: I will fail to reach a position from which I can judge your feelings morally, in which I can assess them as appropriate or inappropriate to the situation that gives rise to them … One needs to be able to abstract from those factors in the other's emotional state that lead him or her to react too strongly, or not strongly enough — or to react, as in some of Smith's own examples, like a lunatic, a child, or an 'impudent and rude' fool" (2019, 35–36). However, in my view, the difficulty presented for Smith by these illusive cases isn't primarily moral, but rather a matter of how to make sense of the apparently conflicting demands to which they give rise. Nor do I think we can assume, with Fleischacker, that this evaluative distance is intrinsic to empathy in that we must assume that the targets of empathy in these illusive cases would themselves attempt to achieve this distance given greater awareness of their situation — or that they may, in fact, be attempting to achieve it in order to "peer beyond the limits of self-awareness that their habits or history have placed upon them" (2019, 36). After all, Smith claims that we have empathy for the dead, and yet it would not make sense to suppose that they might have a greater awareness of their situation or that they may be engaged in an effort to gain greater self-awareness.

also intimately bound up with the peculiar closeness that comes along with my becoming burdened by what Smith describes — too neatly, I think — as the other's circumstances. Even my position as a witness to another's compromised condition gives away my own proximity to it. We recognize here the possibility of a stance that does not aspire to objectivity (or reduce to chauvinism) and that, crucially, does not suggest that one has simply identified with the other. But within the terms of Smith's account, how can this notion of proximity be understood other than as a conflict between the demand that we imagine ourselves mad and the demand that we imagine ourselves sane?

The appearance of a conflict is, in fact, generated by Smith's own theory. Smith claims that we feel in these cases of illusive empathy something that the other is incapable of feeling; but it should equally be noted that we feel also something that we are incapable of feeling without the other: we seem, surprisingly enough, to have a share of the madness, blindness, helplessness, and even deaths of others when they occasion these transfers of affect. Smith has some appreciation of this second observation, it seems, but he is not able to do it justice because he limits the resources of his account to our imagined *sameness with* or *separateness from* the target of our empathy, which in the case of our empathy for the dead, comes down to our identification with their circumstances and our independence in responding to them. Smith's attempt to accommodate the insight that we feel something that we are incapable of feeling alone and entirely in our own right — something which depends on the contribution of the other to our experience — using *only* the resources of imagined identification is what, in my view, ultimately leads to the appearance of conflict. In attempting to resolve this conflict it is the other's contribution to what we can feel that is rendered hollow, precisely in the effort to make room for one's own animating consciousness. The death of another person becomes, for example, an inert condition, something that one enters as one might enter a dark room ("lodging" one's consciousness in it). The irony of this approach is that our alienation from the other's condition can present itself as a solution to a problem raised by these

cases, when what is in fact interesting about them is one's profound *receptivity* to what would otherwise be an alien condition.

3.2 Toward a Boundary-Crossing Account of Empathy

I am going to suggest a different approach to understanding these illusive cases of empathy, one that allows us to capture Smith's insight into the contribution of the other in these cases, clarifying their ethical import. I propose, to begin with, that we abandon the assumption that there is a clear demarcation between self and other in these cases.[20] We are, I think, already inclined to describe these illusive cases of empathy in terms of an entanglement of self and other (in the manner of Riley) prior to any theoretical reflection on them. There is a mutual dependency here, which is the reason for Riley's describing the transfer of affect between the living and the dead as a *crisscrossing* of affect and not, as we might have assumed, a one-way direction of influence. The affects called forth in illusive cases, in which, for example, we encounter someone lost to madness, are most accurately described in terms (including, on some occasions, images) that do not discriminate between self and other. This entanglement is compatible with the understanding that there are differences between ourselves and others that *can* be described. I might describe another as being engulfed by madness, for instance, although I am not. Still, the anguish that I feel through empathy I feel in response to a madness for which these

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20. The imagination may still have an important role to play in the blurring of these boundaries. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Joan Didion describes a dream, following her husband's death, in which she is waiting to meet him for a flight only to realize, once she is alone on the tarmac, that he must have boarded a plane without her. Didion's inclination is to say that the image of being left alone on the tarmac expresses anger and guilt simultaneously (that it speaks to an abandonment), and yet she wonders whether this *can* be so and whether she shouldn't, following theory, analyze these as separate but causally related states. Didion ultimately takes the "unexamined image" to be more "suggestive" than theory, and also holds that there need not be any hint of deficiency in this choice (2005, 161). The image does not necessarily invite discrimination between an other-oriented (anger) and self-oriented (guilt) emotion: it may be expressive of an empathetic engagement with the dead in which these are not distinguished.

discriminations — another's madness, my judgment, my sanity — carry no real significance. Riley points to this indifference as an essential feature of the transfer of affect that she describes. It can only be recounted, she claims, "*through descriptions which serve the dead and the living indiscriminately*" (2020, 93; my emphasis). My proposal is that it is entirely legitimate to take such a view *and* that empathy can take the form of this kind of confusion of self and other.

These boundary-crossing experiences can, I think, seem obscure, particularly when considered in isolation, but transformative encounters of this kind have had an important role to play in ethical and religious traditions, and this can help to cast them in a more familiar light. To love one's neighbor as oneself, for instance, arguably calls for just such a confusion or derangement of the boundaries of self and other, at least when properly understood.[21] Here, too, it would be a mistake to interpret this commandment along the lines of Smith's account of illusive empathy, without questioning the demarcation of self and other assumed by the account. We are not meant, that is, to retain a form of self-love that is prejudicial to others while also attempting to extend it to others through imagining this form of self-concern in *their* circumstances. This would again raise the question of whether it is truly possible to empathize in this manner — just as Smith had occasion to wonder whether we can imagine ourselves alive and dead, mad and sane.[22] Nor should we understand this commandment to mean that one is required to switch back and forth between the concern we would feel in another's circumstances (attempting to suspend our self-love) and the concern we would feel in our own, in the hope of recognizing a reciprocal claim on the part of another that can moderate one's self-love.[23] Smith himself offers a proposal along these lines

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21. This phrase is adapted from Jonathan Lear who applies it to Christian ethics (Lear 2017, 273): "Does not Christianity demand precisely that: a derangement of mine and thine?"

22. This is the reason for Rousseau's pessimism, in Book IV of *Emile*, concerning the demand that others love us as they love themselves (and, by implication, the demand we love them as we love ourselves) (Rousseau 1762/1979).

23. Against such views, Hume objects that no "celerity of imagination" (1751/1983,

when, placing this commandment in the voice of nature, he interprets it as requiring us to "love ourselves only as we love our neighbor, or what comes to the same thing, as our neighbor is capable of loving us," with self-love being constrained by the limits of mutual empathy (1759/2004, I.ii.5.5). It is, instead, through abandoning a clear demarcation between self and other, through abandoning our ideas of mine and thine, not in applying these distinctions more inventively, that we are meant to abandon prejudicial self-love in loving another as oneself.

The interpretation of this commandment as implying a reduction in or limitation of (self-)love signals, in my view, the distortion in the significance of this commandment produced by Smith's account of empathy. This can be brought to light through comparison with Kierkegaard's comments on the confusion of self and other that arises between "kindred spirits," a confusion that he, too, associates with the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. For these kindred spirits, there is, according to Kierkegaard, "a self-expression that is not constricted by the limitations of the other but is expanded and is endowed with a preternatural magnitude in the other's conception … and for such harmonious beings it becomes not only unimportant but also impossible to determine what belongs to each one, because the one always owns nothing but owns everything in the other" (1989, 30). Kierkegaard is here identifying an expansion of self that takes place through a confusion of self and other ("one always owns nothing but owns everything in the other"), a way of relating to another whereby one's self is not limited by the other person but enlarged. The harmony of these beings is not like the harmony that Smith described above, the harmony of those who know exactly what is theirs and what is another's and who would accommodate others by limiting their self-regard. Kierkegaard's kindred spirits do not know and are not concerned to know what is theirs and what another's. Moreover, what they possess in the other is loved because it is

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6.1) could allow us to feel both another's self-love and our own: this switching of perspectives can produce nothing more than irreconcilable perspectives; it cannot produce a melding of two.

inextricably bound up with the other and, therefore, given weight and importance beyond what it otherwise would have had ("endowed with a preternatural magnitude").

The relationship between Plato and Socrates offers a model for Kierkegaard of a relationship between kindred spirits. This relationship is especially pertinent here, owing to the fact that Kierkegaard takes the death of Socrates to have occasioned an even more profound confusion of this sort, one that might be naturally redescribed in terms of empathy for the dead. As he puts it,

> Just as Socrates so beautifully binds men firmly to the divine by showing that all knowledge is recollection, so Plato feels himself so inseparably fused with Socrates in the unity of spirit that for him all knowledge is co-knowledge with Socrates. That this need to hear his own professions from the mouth of Socrates after the latter's death must have become even more acute, that for him Socrates had to rise transfigured from his grave to an even more intimately shared life, that the confusion between mine and thine had to increase now, since for Plato, however much he humbled himself, however inferior he felt about adding anything to Socrates's image, it was still impossible not to mistake the poetic image for the historical actuality. (Kierkegaard 1989, 30)

My interest in this passage is not to assess its plausibility as an interpretation of this relationship (Kierkegaard himself regards it as certainly true) or to engage with the suggestion that Plato mistakenly confuses the poetic and historical Socrates (although I return to this kind of worry in section 4), but to note the similarity in Kierkegaard's description of this confusion of self and other between living and dead ("fused with Socrates") and Riley's; to note that there is assumed to be a continuity between this confusion as it exists among the living and as it exists among the living and the dead; and to note, finally, that there is assumed to be an intensification of this confusion of self and

other *in grief* — which despite not being named explicitly by Kierkeg-aard, can, I think, be clearly recognized here.

3.3 Receptivity

The abandonment of a clear demarcation between self and other is one facet of these transformative cases of empathy, but that alone does not settle the question of how we might achieve insight into the position of others through this empathy. While what I have said so far suggests that one does not achieve any such insight through the (imaginative) deployment of one's perspective, this is not a unique feature of these transformative examples. First-person-plural modes of relating, particularly "we"-experiences, as they are sometimes called, imply that there is no need to deploy one's perspective in the service of achieving insight into what another is experiencing; the experience is shared already.[24] Second-personal forms of relating have also been taken to imply that there is no need to deploy my perspective to "access" someone who is, on this way of thinking, already available.[25] Illusive empathy is not, however, a first-person-plural nor a second-personal phenomenon, in my view. Although Riley speaks of conjoined *experience*, this should not be understood as a first-person-plural experience: since her son does not experience, e.g., his own death, the experience is not literally shared. Nor does the second-personal mode of relating

24. For a recent analysis of "we"-experiences in terms of "feeling with" others, see Gatyas 2022.

25. Matthew Ratcliffe (2018) defends the claim that empathy is a second-person-al phenomenon — one concerned with the particularity of others, with *who* rather than *what* they are — a phenomenon involving an openness to potential difference. Unlike Ratcliffe, I do not assume that empathy is a second-personal phenomenon in this sense (consider the expansiveness of Riley's vision of her own death and the deaths of everyone else). Moreover, while receptivity is a feature of my account of empathy, I do not see this as requiring a suspension of ordinarily presupposed commonality, although I take it that openness to difference may be a good articulation of one way in which I may become receptive to another (as might attention to difference, which is often appealed to in place of this condition in Ratcliffe's account). See Darwall (2006) for an account on which empathy is a necessary feature of the second-personal stance.

capture the transformative nature of these illusive cases (which strike one as suggesting a confusion of self and other). But if it is not in terms of a "we"-perspective, or the perspective through which I meet another in second-personal address, how is this I-who-is-not-quite-myself to be understood? If my perspective is not imaginatively deployed in an effort to see things from another's perspective, how is it implicated in empathy?

A traditional idea, at least since Smith's work, is that empathy depends on the first-person (singular) perspective. On this approach, I retain the privileges of this perspective even when deploying it in empathy. I retain, for instance, the privilege of knowing what I feel through judging what I am to feel (rather than, say, being told); I am not acted *through* by another site of agency, but rather *act*; and I am aware of my sensations in such a way that I do not have occasion to wonder whether they are my own. Empathy, according to this kind of view, is just an extension of the privileges of this stance. Just as I have no need to appeal to external evidence (e.g., my body language, autobiographical statements) to know my own mind (within certain limits), so too I have no need to rely on external evidence, as would normally be the case, in knowing (or approximating) the mind of another.[26] And although there is some debate within this tradition concerning whether I imagine myself in another's situation or *as* another in their situation — about whether these are, in fact, distinct forms of empathy or whether the former is even deserving of the name of

26. Smith emphasizes the importance of considering the context of the target of one's empathy (e.g., whether one's sorrow is a response to having lost a child or profit), but this does not imply that we take a predictive or explanatory stance (a third-personal stance, as we might put it) on the matter of what another feels in this particular situation. Rather, we are supposed to take an internal or first-person perspective on the matter. In Smith's view, one considers whether sorrow is called for in the relevant context. If so, one comes to feel a degree of sorrow approximating the other's sorrow in those cases where these privileges do extend to the other. See Moran (2001) for a discussion of the claim that first-person (self-)knowledge is immediate in the sense that it is not based on evidence concerning one's psychological state.

empathy in view of the latter[27] — it remains the case that perspective-taking accounts of empathy assume both that the first-person perspective is deployed in the service of understanding others empathetically and that this in no way undermines my own claim to these privileges.

The examples of transformative empathy that I have discussed present a challenge to this tradition of thought because they are distinguished by the loss or attenuation of these first-person privileges.[28] This is illustrated most dramatically, perhaps, in our empathy for the dead, in one's indifference to the question of whether one is alive or dead, in affects and sensations that do not tell the difference, and in the envisioning of one's death alongside the deaths of others.

As dramatic as these illustrations may seem, I suspect that they also shed light on mundane cases of empathy, and that the perspective-taking tradition likewise faces challenges in capturing important features of empathy in those cases. To begin with, the perspective-taking tradition is put under pressure in cases where there is no clear basis on which one might come to a view of what an appropriate response is to the situation of another — where one does not judge, for example,

27. See Coplan (2011) for a defense of the claim that only other-oriented empathy is deserving of the name. Nanay (2010) takes the position that there is no categorical distinction between imagining oneself as another and imagining oneself in the other's situation since one's imagining of the other's situation reflects the psychological (including epistemic and emotional) situation of the other. Stephen Darwall (2004) similarly suggests that in empathy we can show our respect for the independent point of view of the other by seeking to identify with their perspective in the sense of viewing "the practical situation as we imagine it to confront her in deliberation" (2004, 132). Attempts to assimilate aspects of the other's psychology may be seen in this light as well.

28. In highlighting the loss of or attenuations in the privileges associated with the first-person position (what theorists have in mind in speaking of essential reference to the first person in various settings), my aim is not to describe another position on par with it but to describe certain limitations of this particular position. This is to be distinguished, however, from the kinds of limitations that Richard Moran (2001) has in mind in claiming that the asymmetries between self and other that define the first-person position involve as much the "*dis*privileging" (2001, 157) of this position as the privileging of it (e.g., as seen in attitudes that we may take toward others (pity, envy) but perhaps only problematically adopt (in the present tense) in relation to ourselves (pity) if at all (envy)).

that anger was called for, but simply that one may not have responded differently oneself. These are not just cases that are remote from one's experience, where it might be conceded that there are limits to empathy's reach, but cases that are normatively complex or simply personal — precisely where one may not want to position oneself as judge in relation to another.[29] But, rather than conclude that empathy plays no role in such cases, it is in these cases that one might say, tellingly, that one can *only* have empathy. These are cases, I think, where a different model of fellowship with others is needed, one that does not privilege judgment or depend on its perfectibility.[30] The traditional view comes under similar pressure where empathy may require that one rescind or hold back one's judgments — not so that one can come to better ones later but so that the concerns of others may be seen directly. Here, I think, it is difficult for those working within the perspective-taking tradition to see this requirement clearly, to see that we can obscure the concerns of others, not only in making judgments that are inaccurate, but in our very interest in coming to them. Here it may be helpful to bear in mind that "Put yourself in their shoes" is, typically, a rebuke that reminds one to hold back the force of one's own strongly held convictions, not specifically to activate one's imagination. The traditional view of empathy also struggles to capture the simple fact that in empathizing with others we often show them deference; their view becomes ours, as a matter of trusting openness. The role of deference in empathy presents the traditional theorist with a dilemma. One option for understanding this deference is to assume that we remain judges of whether another's view of a situation is correct, that is, we

29. This is so even where in one's role as judge one might be said to appeal to the authority of the other's conscience — identifying, in effect, with the other's reflective agency. See McHugh 2011 for a defense of the claim that Smith's conception of empathy calls for this kind of perspective-taking.

30. This reflects a quite different outlook from Smith's own, for instance. Smith regards empathy in this kind of case as "extremely imperfect" (on the grounds that one's knowledge of another's circumstances is far from complete) and claims, therefore, that they may only activate a disposition to empathize or produce a rather weak ("not very considerable") kind of fellowship (1759/2004, I.i.1.9).

judge that their view will be ours.[31] The problem for this approach is that this is a rather poor model of trusting openness.[32] The other option is to assume that we simply assimilate another's view despite the fact that it may have been quite different from our own. The difficulty here is that we do not, generally, assimilate such perspectives through our openness to them, as the traditional theorist also has reason to concede. After all, it is in these cases especially that theorists in this tradition have emphasized the effortful nature of empathetic perspective-taking.[33] In either case, the perspective-taking model appears to be lacking here. Taken together, these difficulties suggest that the traditional understanding of empathy may be inadequate, not only in transformative cases but also in at least some mundane cases.

I propose that we conceive of this disengagement from the whole enterprise of making judgments in relating to others empathetically as one way, among others, through which I manifest receptivity to others. This is the way that philosophers in the care ethics tradition have at times conceptualized empathy, for example.[34] In her early work, Nel Noddings (1984) had claimed, for instance, that care involves empathy so understood. Although Noddings speaks of receptivity and, more

specifically, of "engrossment" in this work (1984, 31), she has more recently favored "attention," which she now regards as a link in a chain of caring that is typically, but not necessarily, followed by empathy.[35] "Attention" is, I think, particularly apt in describing the stance that one may take in the more mundane cases of empathy just discussed, that is, in describing my efforts to see another clearly without my own judgments standing in the way (although we need not follow Noddings in thinking of empathy as its yield).[36] However, the language of engrossment is more apt, in my view, for the purposes of understanding the receptivity at issue in the transformative cases of empathy with which I am primarily concerned. Noddings's aim in speaking of attention rather than engrossment is to avoid misconstruals of receptivity as a kind of infatuation (2010, 8). But, although one's receptive dependency on another should not be understood in general in these terms, there is something instructive in this association, too. What is it to be infatuated or enthralled by another? Very simply, it is for one's involvement with another to make the difference between being something (more than oneself) and being nothing or as Kierkegaard put it, in describing kindred spirits, to be nothing if not through the other person. There is, even in this extreme something that is illuminating for my purposes, namely, that one is dependent on another in these transformative encounters in such a way that one understands *nothing* of one's experience in them *if not through the other.* So, it is an understanding of receptivity along the lines of engrossment, not attention, that comes closer to what I have in mind in speaking of one's receptivity to people and also perhaps to things.

Noddings, too, speaks of receptivity not only in relation to individuals but also in intellectual and artistic endeavors — a longstanding connection that we would do well to continue to bear in mind. She takes

31. Nussbaum (2001) offers this suggestion in drawing on Smith's account of empathy. She observes that often "love takes up the viewpoint of the loved person refusing to judge a calamity in a way different from the way in which the beloved has appraised it" (2001, 301). But even in such cases, the onlooker remains, she claims, the one whose judgment counts in that one decides to go by the other's judgment (2001, 311).

32. Perhaps in some cases, difficult and contentious, one wants to say that one "decides" to trust another person, but this would be an indication that one cannot proceed wholeheartedly or naturally. It would be strange to conclude that one only ever ("in effect" or otherwise) *decides* to trust. That would undermine the impression that one was capable of trust.

33. See Bailey (2016) for a discussion of this point and for a defense of the claim that it calls into question the idea that empathy for others generates concern for them (rather than depending on some form of antecedent concern for them).

34. Noddings claims that in empathizing "I set aside my temptation to analyze" (1984, 31) and that one's seeing and feeling with the other is a matter of receptivity.

35. See Noddings (2010) for a recent critical discussion.

36. We can see the affinities here between Noddings's account and the view of attention developed in, for example, Iris Murdoch's "The Idea of Perfection" (1971) and Simone Weil's "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" (1951/1977).

as illustrative the examples of Carl Friedrich Gauss, who described himself as seized by mathematics, and Joan Miró, who speaks of having his hand guided in painting. In such cases, it seems as appropriate to describe ourselves as *being felt into* as it does to describe ourselves as feeling our way into something, as these examples particularly emphasize. Again, when empathy is understood as I have been suggesting, as effecting a derangement of self and other, the difference between these formulations may become insignificant or may simply serve to express our own surprise at no longer directing our work. Insofar as the privileges of the first-person are bound up with our ideas of agency, these shifts in one's sense of agency are also to be expected. This is, I think, as it should be. What is striking about empathy is that it is, among the fellow feelings, the most expansive. It creates room for expansion through making space for others, an idea that can seem paradoxical if one fails to bear in mind this receptivity.

It might be wondered, though, whether empathy understood as a form of receptivity to others can make sense of what has been taken to be its defining feature, namely, that it is a matter of feeling *from another's position*? Aren't clear boundaries of self and other necessary, moreover, to distinguish empathy from those cases that pose ethical risks at its boundaries — in which, for example, one loses oneself in another's perspective or loses sight of the other in projecting one's perspective onto them? My proposal can make sense of the idea of feeling from another's position, but suggests that it must be understood differently, that is, in terms of my *dependency* on the other — a matter, in the transformative cases I have discussed, of feeling something that I alone cannot feel — rather than in terms of perspective-taking, i.e. as a matter of imagining my response in another's place. This is a dependency that allows me to accommodate or make space for another, even as it is I who am transformed through it, without suggesting the possibility that my perspective has replaced, or has been replaced by, another's. It is not the case, then, that a clear demarcation of self and other is required to avoid these pitfalls of egocentricity, as theorists of

empathy have claimed.[37] They may be avoided by abandoning the assumption that empathy is achieved through deployments of the first-person perspective in the first place. This places ethical risk on a new terrain: I cannot simply take for granted the distinction between my concerns and yours. Empathy, as I have understood it, challenges our first-person authority here, too. Ethical failure looks different (as does ethical achievement) on this terrain. Failure may consist in knowing too well what "my concerns" are, i.e., in my not being transformed in such a way that there is difficulty — a new ethical weight — in locating my concerns. When, in the course of experience, we find ourselves puzzled by empathy, and ask, "Why should *I* be burdened by the burdens of *others*?" it may be an indication that a decisive break between ourselves and others has already been made.

So far, I have defended a conception of empathy on which it is a form of receptivity that reveals itself in the loss or attenuation of the privileges associated with the first-person stance and that, in some cases, rests on an ethically significant confusion of the boundaries of self and other.[38] But the proposal that I am defending still faces a formidable challenge. I have claimed that our empathetic encounters with the dead, like the other derangements of self and other to which I have compared it, can be a source of profound insight — insight gained through one's involvement in the deaths of others and through relat-

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37. John Deigh (1995) claims that a clear demarcation between self and other is necessary to distinguish cases of empathy — or "mature" empathy (1995, 759) — from cases in which one loses oneself in another (through transferring one's ego-centricity to another) or takes the other's place (through extending one's own egocentric view to their circumstances). Coplan (2011) conceptualizes the confusion of these boundaries as a matter of "substituting" another's feelings (broadly speaking) for one's own (2011, 15).

38. In developing my proposal, I have used both language that suggests a blurring of boundaries and language that suggests a crossing of boundaries. There is, I think, a place for both ways of speaking and, more specifically, for the language of *blurring* to be particularly useful for describing the indifference to drawing boundaries of self and other in transformative cases of empathy. Likewise, the language of *crossing* is useful for capturing the insights drawn from these experiences (capturing what strikes us as being so transformative about them).

ing to the dead as such. It might be said, however, that there cannot be insight here, that there is, for instance, no relating to the dead as such but only the illusion of relating. In what follows, I shall defend my proposal against this objection, one that finds support in Smith's own evaluation of empathy for the dead and also in contemporary approaches to grief that recognize a role for the reanimation of the dead but regard this as salutary only where the reanimation is understood symbolically — where any temptation to see oneself as having a conjoined experience following the death of a significant other is overcome.

4. The Reanimation of the Dead

Contemporary theories of grief converge on the idea that there is value in the symbolic continuation of our relationships with the dead.[39] Philosophers have contributed to the defense of this idea in recent years by arguing that efforts to symbolically reanimate the dead help to establish this model relationship.[40] Within this emerging literature, the symbolic reanimation of the dead is assumed to depend on an awareness of the dead as virtually present. This awareness is sometimes assumed, for this reason, to find characteristic expression in as-if comparisons — precisely the kind of comparison on which Riley relies. These converging lines of thought might be supposed to provide broad support for a competing understanding of puzzling reports of being "fused" with the dead "as if to animate them" (Riley 2020, 95) and for understanding the value of such experiences. They might, in particular, be associated with the resolution of profound grief and the

39. This idea is typically motivated in opposition to one of two extremes: that one must let the dead go or that nothing but the return of the dead will do. See, for example, Klass and Nickman (1996), Solomon (2004), Price (2010), and Cholbi (2017).

40. I take this phrase from Kathleen Higgins, who argues that our construction of narratives around the life of someone who has died serves the dual function of restoring a sense of the person and their place in one's life and of symbolically reanimating them (Higgins 2013, 175).

realization that it is as if — but, ultimately, only as if — one is with the dead.

As is true of various forms of pretense, it is assumed that this "as-if" awareness may be more or less apparent to those in grief. In the context of discussing rituals that are designed to facilitate virtual communication with the dead, for example, Kathleen Higgins (2020) makes explicit that the rituals engage this mode of awareness and function to make the presence of the dead vivid and emotionally compelling — perhaps even, Higgins ventures, increasing our sense of the likelihood that the dead will receive our messages — but without eliminating our awareness of the virtuality of the communication, and without, in particular, requiring our belief in the possibility of any such transmission. It is this kind of variation in our awareness of the as-if quality of their presence that allows Thomas Fuchs (2018b) to claim that as-if thinking is responsible both for the ambiguity of grief, the various ways in which it can seem to us that the dead have a lingering presence despite their absence, and for the resolution of this ambiguity, culminating in the purely symbolic continuation of our relationships with them. For Fuchs, this resolution is ultimately achieved through mimetic bodily processes that foster an internal sense of the presence of our significant others (e.g., in the adoption of their mannerisms or turns of phrase), allowing us to relinquish the need for their external presence, and through practices that allow us to represent the dead as such (e.g., memorialization). To fully realize the awareness that it is as if — but only as if — the dead are present is to affirm their symbolic presence and to reject the illusion of their actual presence, which exerts a pull where this awareness cannot be fully maintained (Fuchs 2018b, 60).

It is tempting to account for Riley's own self-described efforts to reanimate the dead by appeal to this as-if mode of awareness. In fact, Fuchs's account is based in part on Riley's observations of her grief. And yet, we face serious obstacles in attempting to apply these ideas to Riley's case. Although she relies on as-ifs in describing her experiences, Riley ultimately admits that these as-if formulas "scarcely"

apply (2020, 96) — an admission that is implicit in the claim that these experiences cannot be accurately recounted except through descriptions that do not discriminate between the living and the dead. These experiences do not take the form of considered comparisons, Riley points out, but are rather direct feelings, something more intimate than straightforward analogy.[41] They are, as Riley puts it (2020, 96–97), "fleshly" and "solidly true" to the "fresh world of feeling" that she comes into following the death of her son and are, therefore, somewhat obscured by comparisons that can produce a sense of tension (at least in some readers) through creating the impression of bringing two things into relation that must also be kept apart.[42]

There are a couple of different ways that one might attempt to accommodate this "fleshly response" within the terms of these contemporary approaches. One way is to appeal to incorporation, the bodily form of identification that Fuchs views as responsible, in part, for the resolution of grief (Fuchs 2018b, 58). However, the main comparisons that Riley draws in speaking about the incorporation of her son are to pregnancy; and, while they lend support to the view that grief is to be understood, in part, in corporeal terms, as involving an incorporation of the other, they do not offer support for the view that this is a matter of identification (no more than we have reason to think that in pregnancy a mother is identified with her child or children). The other way of accounting for Riley's disavowal is to say that it represents a retreat into the ambiguity of grief. On this approach, it can be *equally* true that as-if formulations are the most natural ones in which to report these beguiling experiences *and* that they can seem to those making these reports to elude expression via these as-ifs because they

41. Riley and Fuchs both appear to assume that as-if experiences are themselves comparative (rather than assuming that comparisons help us to describe our experiences). Fuchs (2018a) assumes this explicitly in linking our competence with as-if comparisons to an "ambiguous intentionality that maintains an awareness of the difference of modalities" between a given item and what it is, e.g., hypothetically or fictitiously, compared with (2018a, 84).

42. For discussion of this tension in various contexts of use, see Fuchs (2018a, 84). For the canonical source of this idea, see Vaihinger (1911/1925).

seem to be real. To claim that the as-if awareness of another's presence can grow dimmer, for example, is to imply that one is, to that extent, vulnerable to the illusion of their actual presence, something that Fuchs traces back to the power of the wish for the other's return. "Grief," he warns, "needs the resistance and weight of reality in order to gradually let go of the wish" (2018b, 57).

Riley makes quite clear, however, that this disavowal should not be taken to indicate any "fanciful bewitchment" meant "to fight off the fact of death" (2020, 96). Far from describing a wishful flight from reality, she takes these experiences — again, direct feelings rather than comparisons — to be responsive to the new reality of her situation. And although her first-hand reports have been taken as the basis for theory when understood by theorists to take the form of as-if comparisons, it seems to me that the suspicion that Riley's ultimate disavowal of these comparisons may be a step too far (certainly, unreliable footing for the theorist) is likely to be a persistent one. The idea that the reanimation of the dead — what I have described as our empathy for the dead — depends on as-if thinking and presents an inherent risk of illusion is not novel. Nor is the implication of the disavowal of "as if," namely, that one is out of one's right mind. (These are precisely the suspicions nurtured by the Epicurean tradition and part of its polemical strategy against grief's claim to legitimacy.)

The suspicions just adverted to might be taken to be implied, for instance, by Smith's classification of our imaginative identification with the dead as an *illusive* form of empathy. Charles Griswold gestures in this direction by using "deceptive" as a synonym for "illusive" in relation to Smith's discussion of our illusive empathy for the dead (Griswold 1999, 90). The problem, as he interprets Smith, is that "the object of the imagination has no reality in this case" so that in imagining the situation of the dead we, in fact, "conjure up" their reality (1999, 101). We engage with a "fictional entity of our own imagining" (1999, 89) and mistake this fictional entity for the person who has died (a case of fanciful bewitchment if ever there was one). And yet Smith's treatment of our empathy for the dead is continuous with his treatment of

other cases of illusive empathy. They are connected by the fact that we feel something for another that they do not and, it would seem, *cannot* feel. A mother's illusive empathy with her infant, which places her in touch with the total helplessness of the infant, beyond what could be known by her child, does not suggest that she is conjuring things that are not there. Likewise, the supposition that the dead cannot feel what we feel through empathy should not be taken to undermine the possibility of our having gained insight into their condition.

Smith's own remarks on the value of our empathy for the dead might, however, be interpreted as suggesting that there is something that distinguishes these cases. While Smith credits those who sympathize with the dead with concern *for the dead* (rather than for fictional entities), he claims that this is not a concern, in many instances at least, for anything that constitutes a real harm to the dead. At the same time, he regards our empathy for the dead as inspiring the restraint necessary for justice and as instilling "an immediate and instinctive approbation of the sacred and necessary law of retaliation" (Smith 1759/2004, II.i.2.5), moving us to seek justice for those who cannot seek it for themselves. This line of thought suggests a defense against the risk of error presented by these cases, namely, distancing those judgments to which we are led by our empathy with the dead from their illusive basis. In this way, we can distinguish those principles that we would perhaps endorse on reflection from those superstitious fancies that we would not. We might, for instance, attempt to disentangle the thought that the dead ought to be avenged from the thought that they demand this vengeance — or worse, that their ashes do (Smith 1759/2004, II.i.2.5). We might also consider, to return to the contemporary approaches outlined above, that this distancing can partly be achieved through clarifying that it is only *as if* the dead demand this or through representing this "demand" through symbolism or ritual.

We should not simply assume, however, that these matters can be disentangled. I take the force of what Riley is saying when she observes that her experiences do *not* take the form of as-if comparisons

to be precisely that such concerns cannot be disentangled. One cannot tease apart the vision of one's own death from one's seeing it with the eyes of the dead, or one's conviction that the dead are entitled to be angry at being ousted from life from one's own sense of being ousted with them, or one's obligation to seek justice from the impression that this demand is rooted in the authority of the dead — which, like many forms of authority, can sometimes be localized (and sometimes, indeed, in the remains of the dead). Why should the requirements of justice be any different, say, from the requirements of love that are bound up in a derangement of self and other?

The grounds for thinking that our empathy for the dead presents a special risk of deception are, in any case, far from clear. In offering his interpretation of Smith, Griswold claims that the dead are works of fiction and, more specifically, of our own making. But it is important, I think, to reckon with the fact that this is disputed by those who report these experiences. Lucretius observes that those who fear their own death (and presumably also those who grieve the deaths of their significant others) protest that they do not imagine themselves (or others) existing after death in having these experiences. Lucretius feels free to dismiss these protests. However, contemporary theories of grief that are constructed, in part, on the basis of first-hand descriptions of grief are in a more difficult position in issuing a dismissal of this kind and come under some obligation, at least, to explain away this kind of protest. This occurs typically where an appeal to the power of the wish is made. Of course, one can speak of the power of the wish (in one form, the wish for the other's return) but our wishes do not seem particularly attractive as an explanation for the immense responsibility under which we can feel ourselves to be placed by the dead (accounting, perhaps, for a share of the misery on which Smith focuses his attention).

It is true, we suppose, that the dead do not have experiences, and that we ourselves can experience this lack as a harm. Are we, in undergoing this kind of experience, attempting to approximate what the dead feel through a kind of make-believe? This, I have argued, reflects

a misunderstanding of our relationships with the living *and* the dead in these transformative encounters. This is the force of the point that these transformative encounters are not to be understood in terms of our identification with the dead. The observation that the dead are not conscious of such things does not go so far, then, as to support the idea that the dead could only be said to have a conjured reality, or that these ways of relating to the dead are akin to our responses to characters in a fiction. Nor is it obvious why these ideas, when pressed against those like Riley who report these experiences, should not themselves invite the suspicion that an attempt is being made to work magic against the dead in seeking to assimilate them to those who never lived.

How, then, are we to describe the insight that might be gained from these experiences? These are not to be understood as insights into what it is like to be dead. This kind of insight would, after all, essentially assume the perspective-taking model that I have argued against. This sort of suggestion is especially tempting in relation to sensory reports ("the cold and dark of the grave"), but this is because one overlooks the fact that these reports speak to the degradation of the human person, the destruction of consciousness, and the like. We do not experience these things happening to us as living persons and attribute these experiences to the dead. The insight here, if any, is one into the significance of death, in which the dead, as we might put it, are still regarded as being joined to human community. To talk about the reality of the dead here is not to imply a contrast with what is imagined or imaginary. The implied contrast is with those who no longer have a claim over the living, who need not be taken into account.

5. Conclusion

This paper has defended the claim that empathy for the dead plays a significant role in the experience of profound grief. I have argued that there is precedent within the Epicurean tradition for this idea, which is developed most fully within the context of Adam's Smith's account of empathy. Smith traced the misery of grief to our empathy for the dead — an imagined reanimation of the dead, as he understood it, in

which we play the part of the other but find ourselves in danger of failing to realize that it is only a part. There is an echo of this worry in contemporary approaches to grief that regard the symbolic reanimation of the dead as integral to the grief process and that have linked efforts at reanimation to a form of "as-if" awareness that can be more or less apparent to those in grief. Against these approaches, I have proposed that empathy for the dead should be thought of as a transformative encounter with the dead, effecting a derangement of self and other that, like loving one's neighbor as oneself, can yield profound insight.

Contemporary theorists have been too quick to assume that this "reanimation" depends on as-if thinking. Where this is to be understood as empathy for the dead, I have argued that it does not. I have been guided here by Denise Riley's ultimate disavowal of as-ifs in reporting her own encounters with the dead in profound grief. She was forced, she says, to use these as-ifs after the fact in relating experiences that can only be accurately recounted through descriptions that serve the living and the dead indiscriminately. And yet, if these as-ifs convey, at best, an imperfect understanding of one's conjoined experience with the dead, what could recommend — let alone force — their use in conveying these experiences to others? The answer may lie in what this manner of speaking conceals. Dispensing with as-ifs means dispensing with the idea that grief is an attempt to relate to the living rather than a continued effort to relate to the dead and dispensing with the idea that we are fooled into believing that we have insight into death. It also means acknowledging grief's disregard for the boundaries of self and other and the living and the dead (among others that, when seen in the light of that disregard, appear parochial if not lacking any significance). It seems to me, in short, that the impression that one is compelled to speak via as-ifs should be understood alongside the urging of this form of expression.

The account of our empathy developed in this paper presents a challenge not only to current understandings of grief but to also to current understandings of empathy. I have argued that empathy manifests in the attenuation or loss of the privileges associated with the

first-person position both in transformative cases and in at least some ordinary cases as well. This presents a challenge to the dominance of perspective-taking accounts, which understand empathy in terms of deployments of the first-person perspective. The cases to which I have drawn attention present us, moreover, with an attractive alternative to the standard logic of empathy assumed by perspective-taking accounts. What these cases might be taken to suggest is that empathy does not require commonality, and that where commonality is present it is used to foster one's receptivity to others. These cases reveal, in other words, the "deranged" logic of empathy: one expands through making space for others rather than through an effort of assimilation. And this casts concerns about the unreliability of empathy outside cases where there is a great deal of commonality in a different light. Attempts to assimilate another's experience may well become increasingly difficult as the divide between ourselves and others grows, but assimilation may not, in fact, be the aim of empathy.

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