The difficulty of reality and a revolt against mourning

Jonathan Lear

Abstract
This paper considers Cora Diamond's conception of the difficulty of reality. It asks how one might think of this experience of difficulty in relation to Aristotle's conception of happiness (and unhappiness). It then takes up the phenomena of mourning and our conceptions of how to live more or less well with death and loss. It investigates whether a "revolt against mourning" might be understood in terms of the difficulty of reality.

1. Aristotle thought that happiness is an attainable goal in human life. It is not within everyone's reach, but its possibility is sufficiently available that Aristotle thought one could reasonably organize ethical and political life in terms of promoting and sustaining happiness. For Aristotle, happiness is the practical good: It is that at which we aim in all our actions and inquiries, deliberations, and decisions. And he thought that understanding what happiness is would be of great practical benefit in achieving it (Nicomachean Ethics [NE] I.1, 1094a 20–25). Happiness, he famously argued, consists in excellent and rational activity of the psyche, a human carrying out his characteristic activity in fine form (NE I.7, 1098a 1–20). Happiness, Aristotle says, is "pretty much defined as a sort of living well and doing well," but, as rational activity, it is a living well and doing well that understands itself as such (NE I.8, 1098b21). Thus, a happy life is constituted in part by the self-conscious understanding of it being the happy life that it is. This is one reason why Aristotle thinks other animals cannot be happy—in the sense of eudaimonia—though of course they may flourish as the animals they are (NE I.9, 1099b29–1100a2).

It is internal to human life that we face difficulties, obstacles, frustrations, and, sometimes, adversity. These need not—just so described—get in the way of happiness. Indeed, they may set out the field in which happy lives are lived. Practically speaking, what it is for us to live in the world is to recognize ourselves in an environment over which we have at best very partial control, an environment that poses threats, offers opportunities, and challenges us with accidents and inevitabilities. The virtuous person will be excellent in meeting life's challenges and will take pleasure in so doing. This is what living well and doing well consists in. Thus, for a certain range of difficulties, the world provides the condition of our happiness. Dealing with life's issues is not preliminary to living a happy life; it is a happy life—at least, for some range of problems and some ways managing them. The happy human life is inconceivable without a sense of there being difficulties that we need to confront and deal with well.

It is, I think, unfair to Aristotle to treat him as a Pollyana figure who treats the difficulties of reality as though they were there for our edification and growth. Aristotle discusses these difficulties in the context of his ethical treatise.
where it is his task to think through what is the best that the best humans can make of them. But he thinks the world can be the source of great misfortunes, indeed catastrophes, that will destroy the happiness of even the most resilient and resourceful, the most virtuous of us. We certainly can suffer from the massive indifferent of the world to our cares, concerns, and hopes. The truthful consolations that Aristotle thinks he can offer are, first, that the virtuous will be best able to take in their stride those difficulties thrown our way that can be managed and, second, that when the virtuous are struck down and their prospects for happiness destroyed, they will maintain a certain dignity (NE I. 10, 1100b21–1101a12).

Aristotle also believes that our happiness is vulnerable to misfortunes that might befall our friends, loved ones, and descendants—and in these cases, there might be nothing we can do (or could have done) to prevent it. And he entertains the thought that such misfortunes might get through to us even when we are dead—though he suspects that they would not make such a difference as to turn a man who died happy into a dead unhappy person (NE I. 11). Still, he seems to accept that our postmortem happiness can be affected to some extent. And though these remarks are tentative, they imply that Aristotle believes that our happiness while we are alive is affected by our thoughts about what the philosopher Samuel Scheffler (2016) has called the afterlife about how our loved ones and descendants will do after we are dead and about there being continuity in the well-being of our family and of the projects that matter to us.

In the Poetics, Aristotle shows us how certain classic disasters can be turned into great art by rendering the plot intelligible. It is this form of intelligibility that makes possible a catharsis through pity and fear. But it does not follow that he believes that all terrible misfortune can be so redeemed. There are terrible misfortunes that can just befall one, by accident. They can destroy one in an instant—along with all prospects for happiness of oneself and one's loved ones. And yet there is not much more to say than "It was a bolt of lightning." These are real dangers in Aristotle's world. He does not focus on them in the Ethics because for practical, ethical purposes, they are not the sort of circumstances from which we can learn much, and he does not focus on them in the Poetics because they are not the circumstances from which one can create great tragedy. But Aristotle's view of the difficulties of reality is anything but tame.

2. It is important to understand that Aristotle's spectrum of suffering is not truncated. That insight will help us grasp a different kind of threat to the prospects for human happiness—that which the philosopher Cora Diamond has called "the difficulty of reality." Diamond is not expanding the bandwidth of Aristotle's spectrum; she is drawing our attention to a different dimension of experience. She is concerned with "the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters." She calls the difficulty of reality "experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking or possibly even painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability." She also speaks of its "being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one's mind around," but her emphasis is not on the psychological state of the sufferer at the expense of the difficulty of reality to which that agony bears witness (Diamond, 2003, pp. 2–3). Her concern is with fit between mind and the reality it seeks to comprehend. Insight into that fit may show up in the first-personal experience of an individual sufferer, but Diamond wants to claim that what shows up is a truth about the mind in its attempt to encompass reality.

Diamond begins her essay "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy" by considering a poem by Ted Hughes, "Six Young Men" (Hughes, 2003, p. 45). Allow me to quote from the beginning of her essay (Diamond, 2003, pp. 1–2):

The speaker in the poem looks at a photo of six smiling young men, seated in a familiar spot. He knows the bank covered with bilberries, the tree and the old wall in the photo; the six men in the picture would have heard the valley below them sounding with rushing water, just as it still does. Four decades have faded the photo; it comes from 1914. The men are profoundly, fully alive, one bashfully lowering his eyes, one chewing a piece of grass, one "is ridiculous with cocky pride" (1.6). Within six months of the picture's
having been taken, all six were dead. In the photograph, then, there is thinkable, there is seeable, the death of the men. See it, and see the worst “flash and rending” (1.35) of war falling onto these smiles now forty years rotted and gone.

Here is the last stanza:

That man’s not more alive whom you confront
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;
No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:
To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One’s own body from its instant and heat.

There is no place on Aristotle’s spectrum of happiness (and unhappiness) to locate the poet’s suffering. The problem is not that the spectrum is too narrow. Aristotle famously considers the case of King Priam in the Iliad who goes to beg Achilles—his son’s killer—for the return of the desecrated body (NE I.9, 1100a4–9; I.10, 1101a1–8. See Homer, Iliad 24, 503–506). There is no answer to the question whether the poet is suffering more or less than Priam. It is rather that the structure of happiness and unhappiness, of living in the world, is upended. I imagine a situation that began straightforwardly enough and then got out of hand. The poet began by looking back through an aging photograph to an earlier moment. It is a picture of an idyllic before when the young men were gay, jostling about, and had no idea what was about to befall them. The poet is in the position of knowing what they could not have known, trying to establish his own relation to the past, and thinking about what happens to people: perhaps he was mourning. Overall, he was in the midst of orienting himself—in time, in space, and in his emotional life. Somehow, the expected process goes awry. There is disorientation. The concepts past and present, alive and dead, and here and not here cease to perform the discriminatory tasks they are normally deployed to perform.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962, p. 32, 2001 p. 12) famously said of us that we are the beings in whose being our being is an issue for us. What we have here is an eruption of the issue-laden nature of our being. What is it for us to have a past? What is it for us to be dead? These are not just puzzles that we may never solve. They are issues for us: They arrive in the manner of anxious confrontation. What the poet is experiencing—on my understanding of Diamond’s interpretation—is the breakdown of our normal use of concepts to contain the issues that are fundamentally our issues. The experience of the poet is no doubt extraordinary, and it is important to grasp its phenomenology, but it is crucial not thereby to lose focus on what the experience is an experience of: the mind’s inadequacy to encompass reality. This is what makes it a difficulty of reality—and not simply one person’s difficult experience in relationship to reality. That is why it is a mistake—perhaps an evasion—to focus exclusively on the psychological state of the person having this experience. When the poet picks up the photograph, it is as though he works his way to incoherence. The fabric of things starts to unravel. The poet insists there are “contradictory permanent horrors here”—and each word deserves emphasis. The horrors are here, confronting one; they are contradictory, and they shall never be resolved.

That man’s not more alive whom you confront
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
Nor prehistoric or, fabulous beast more dead;

This is what Cora Diamond means by trying “to bring together in thought what cannot be thought.” It is not an abstract effort to think P and not-P. Nor is the “cannot be thought” a specifically psychological limitation. It is, rather,
a self-conscious mode of unhappiness that recognizes of itself that it cannot be located within the standard structure of happiness and unhappiness.

Diamond makes it clear that it is possible to encounter the photograph so that one is not disturbed in the special way she is trying to isolate. "It is a photo of men who died young, not long after the picture was taken. Where is the contradiction?" (Diamond, 2003, p. 2). "It may be difficult emotionally speaking," I can imagine someone saying, "but it is not difficult to understand." In effect, one may insist that the concepts of life and death hold firm as we normally use them. There are four immediate lessons to take away from this example. First, it may be rare for a person to experience the difficulty of reality (as Diamond understands it) and even rarer for the person to find a way to express it. Second, there are available means within the context of life to keep such experiences at a distance. Third, if we are turned away from the difficulty of reality, it will be tempting to interpret someone who is experiencing such difficulty—in this instance, the poet—in psychological terms, in terms of his individual suffering. For if we do not experience this person's difficulty as being with reality, then the interpretive pressure is overwhelming to see the suffering as peculiar to this person. Finally, this difficulty erupts in the midst of the everyday. It is not like King Priam's situation which we easily recognize as dramatically extraordinary and at the outer bounds of human grief. The occasion of the poem, by contrast, arises from looking at a photograph—taken of people 40 years earlier; people whom the poet has long known to have been long dead. This is what we do with photographs; it is part of life as we know it. Somehow our ordinary dealings with death erupt and disrupt and—most important—make manifest in their disruption the mind's inadequacy to its task.

It should be clear by now that Cora Diamond uses the phrase difficulty of reality in an unusual sense. Normally when we think of difficulties, we think of aspects of the world that are either difficult to deal with or difficult to understand. We think of problems to be solved or resolved. Theoretically speaking, consider the difficulties—aporiai—with which Aristotle begins a scientific treatise: These are aspects of the world that are not yet transparent to us. What it is to be a world is to be a world of difficulties in this sense—difficulties that get resolved as the world becomes intelligible to us. Practically speaking, difficulties may be threatening, horrifying, or overwhelming, but they do not normally present reality as too much for our concepts. Diamond is trying to awaken us to an experience of inadequacy in human conceptual life itself.

So, there is the difficulty of reality, and then, there is the difficulty of reality. The first is a normal problem in the world; the second is an anxious disruption of those normal forms. For this latter sense, the poet (Ted Hughes) and the philosopher (Cora Diamond) talk of being shouldered out. But these two senses of the difficulty of reality are related. The latter experience can grow out of the former in a breakdown. "How could they have died?! How could they have died?!"

It is only after a while that the poet is shouldered out. Conversely, the latter experience of difficulty can evanesce back into the former, as one flees, or perhaps simply tires, of the strong experience of difficulty. Somehow one is back, ruminating about a picture of six young men.

It is also true that the difficulty of reality in the strong sense of that phrase itself has layers of meaning and can be understood with the subjective and objective genitive. The difficulty is with reality. Reality is there, difficult, a challenge to the mind's ability to comprehend. But reality is also being difficult. The poet says that even to regard the photograph might well drive one crazy.

Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and heat.

This is not merely an account of a person being driven crazy; it is mind's report of casualty from a battlefront of understanding. The wounding is internal to reality. It is not simply the failure of a transcendent mind to grasp a difficult independent object.

Such a gaze can shoulder out: what does this mean? How could this expression acquire this use? I am not here inquiring about the poet's genius but about how the word has been used so as to make it possible for the poet to
deploy it as he does. Shoulder. Soldier. Soldiers shoulder soldiers out. They have been practicing all their lives; in locker rooms, on playing fields, in gymnasiums. Perhaps times are changing, but in the history of humanity until recently shouldering, being shouldered, and acquiring the skill to avoid shoulders has been a gendered activity. Girls exclude someone from a group by talking; boys shove. Shouldering can be done playfully—as one can imagine the young men shouldering each other about as they arranged themselves for the photo. Perhaps there was a seventh young man who was shouldered out before the shutter clicked. For boys and young men, vulnerability to shoulders is among the ordinary difficulties of reality. A practical difficulty, it comes with being embodied. But then shoulders are also where soldiers learn to shoulder the stock of a rifle. This is how they learn to shoulder other soldiers out of life—shouldered out of having any further need for a shoulder. Still, even this extreme instance of being shouldered out is containable in thought, however regrettable the train of thought becomes. Humans shove each other about, we are aggressive animals, nations go to war, sometimes we kill each other on a massive scale; individual lives get caught up in historical catastrophe. We know "others die," we know "we shall eventually die," and we know it can be "tragic." And yet the poet's invitation to gaze on a photo threatens to upend all that. The permanent contradictory horrors (that smile from the photo) shoulder out one's own body from its instant and heat. The poet reports his own body shouldered out: shoved from its place in time, released from demand to keep its temperature at a differential from the environment. And yet the poet is still there to express it. Is he there to experience being shouldered out of a living body?

It helps to focus the philosopher's interest—Cora Diamond's interest—in this poem by saying what it is not. It is not that simply gazing at a photograph might drive one crazy. Nor is it that somehow the photo or the poem might bring it about that one is dead and alive at the same time, in the same respect, and so forth. It is not about beholding that contradictions abound. It is rather about expressing an experience of the inadequacy of our concepts to encompass the reality they are meant to encompass. The philosopher's interest derives from our being creatures who live with and through concepts. In our actions, we purport to understand what we are doing—and our understanding is conceptual in form. Similarly, we try to understand others and the world we inhabit—in conceptual terms. And yet there are experiences at the heart of human life that demand this form of understanding and, at the same time, threaten this fabric of intelligibility.

So, death. We cannot leave it alone. Ducks do not have the same concern for the bones of their ancestors as we have for the bones of ours (Lear, 2014). Even if we cremate the body, we have a concern for the ashes. If we scatter the ashes, we have a concern for how we scatter them and the environment into which we release them. Cultures have had practices of leaving the bodies of loved ones exposed in nature for animals to eat, but the practices contained explanation of how this was an appropriate way for them to return to nature and the spiritual world. We have rituals and customs and narratives that take death into account. And, as we have seen in the case of the photograph, there are straightforward narratives: "They were young; they were killed; they died young." These practices and narratives have been part of our enduring efforts to live with death. The concept death arises in the context of these efforts. It is part of these efforts. We live with death by trying to comprehend it. Here, I do not mean the wish that we should somehow penetrate its mysteries but simply that we have a concept—death—in terms of which we can find our way around what we do know, what we do not know, what we could not know, and so on. But what grounds our confidence that our concept is adequate to its task?

Here enters room for a thought that if the concept death is part of our attempt to live with death, then perhaps it is part of our effort to contain death, by making it thinkable. And that thought makes room for a suspicion: that when it comes to facing up to death conceptuality itself might serve as a tranquillizer. This is not simply the psychological insight that we often use thoughts about death defensively. As Kierkegaard pointed out, we can use the "common knowledge" that "we are all going to die someday" as a way of keeping our sense of death at a distance, in the name of acknowledging it. The idea I am considering here is rather that even in purportedly nondefensive uses of the concept death, there is an attempt to contain in thought something that threatens to break out. The problem is this: The point of the concept death is to be able to deploy it in judgments, judgments about death. It is internal to such acts of judgments that they are aiming to render death intelligible: intelligible in and by that very judgment. This is what
judgment tries to do—to bring death together in thought—in predications about death and in thoughtful relation to other judgments. That is what the experience of difficulty belies. So, take the most banal of such judgments—say, “All humans are mortal.” Imagine the judgment deployed in a nondefensive manner (whatever that is supposed to be). Perhaps one is going through a syllogism that concludes that Socrates is mortal. And then one looks at a photograph of six young men. What could be more straightforward? We live with photographs, we take photographs, and we pose for photographs knowing they might be seen later, and we are interested, sometimes fascinated by looking at photographs of people we know are now dead. Photography is a relatively recent invention—and its cultural uses may be replaced by some new technology—but it is part of a long history in which humans have used images to record the past, to try to make ourselves comfortable with the idea that we have a past. For generations now, photographs of young men, alive, smiling or looking determinedly into the camera have been used in myriad ways to make familiar the thought that “men go to war” and that “some die.” Ostensibly, the photograph that the poet comes across could not be more benign. It is a part of the familiar world, albeit a world that contains moments of poignancy, sadness, longing, and nostalgia. And yet it seems to carry within it the potentiality to explode the pretense of the concept death to be able to do what it is supposed to do. Judgment itself is rendered inadequate by a gaze at a photo.

3. Cora Diamond’s (2003, pp. 4–9, 11–13) essay is “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” and clearly, these are not two independent difficulties. Philosophy inherits a difficulty from the difficulty of reality, in that special sense that Diamond elucidated. As should be obvious by now, the difficulty of reality is not one more aporia whose principles and arguments need to be set out. And if philosophy’s task is to find its way to be adequate to reality, how is philosophy to find its way to be adequate to a fundamental inadequacy in mind’s effort to encompass reality? Diamond has shown that there is a tendency internal to philosophy—taken as a discipline—to evade this problem by sticking to its normal form of looking for arguments, as though this were one more problem among others.

I would like to take up Diamond’s challenge in a more explicitly practical dimension and ask a question of practical philosophy: Is there such a thing as living well with the difficulty of reality? And I would like to pursue this question in a broadly Aristotelian spirit: Is there a virtue or excellence when it comes to the difficulty of living with the difficulty of reality? One might at first think that the answer must be no. The poet’s experience—which we have been trying to track—is certainly not a moment of happiness. But the questions that concern us are, first, whether such a moment could be a constituent of a happy life and, second, whether there are ways of living well with the recognition of the possibilities of such experiences—in ourselves, in others—whether or not they are actually experienced? The Aristotelian ethical virtues, as we saw above, are based on a wide-ranging structure of happiness-and-unhappiness-in-living-in-the-world, but the difficulty of reality in this special sense is an experience of the inadequacy of this entire structure for encompassing reality. Can one be happy with that? I certainly hope so—at least, if the experience of the difficulty of reality is a truthful experience. For, there is no way to achieve Aristotelian happiness by avoiding the truth. And our situation is not that we have, as it were, a normal universe of happiness—and a tension that is internal to it.
Mourning is typically what we do when faced with the death of a loved one. We tend to withdraw from ordinary routines, become absorbed in memories, and find ways to express our sorrow. And, again typically, cultures and religions offer us forms and rituals in which to express our grief—and also to move on and eventually rejoin the social world. But Freud took the concept of mourning and turned it into a category of *psychic and social health*. In his classic essay "Mourning and melancholia," he linked mourning to melancholia, as the healthy counterpart (Freud, 1917). The melancholic is stuck in a depressed withdrawal from the world, preoccupied with his own purported failings. The mourner, by contrast, withdraws from the world in grief but eventually returns and re-engages with life. It is clear that Freud thought this is the *appropriate* response to death. So, what we typically do is taken by Freud to be exemplary of living well with death and loss. And in his essay "On transience" (Freud, 1915), which we shall discuss presently, he generalizes mourning to include living through historic times of cultural loss and destruction. So, Freud seems to be moving in the direction of treating mourning as a virtue—in Aristotel's sense—a way of living well with loss and death and destruction.¹ We can certainly imagine an Aristotelian voice speaking of mourning as striking the mean: not caring too little about the loss of a loved one, but not going to excess of permanently exiting from life and world. Is there anything to be said for this conception of mourning as virtue? Or is this image a grievous distortion of how to live and love and be with the dead? Consider Ted Hughes's poem: Is it an act of mourning, grieving those poor dead young men; or is it a revolt against mourning—a disruptive declamation of the inadequacy of any such attempt to normalize such loss?

It was Freud who came up with the idea of a revolt against mourning—and he disapproved of it. He came to the idea by reflecting on a conversation, a disagreement, he had with a poet, a different poet. Freud's essay was written in November 1915, and by the end of the essay, the author explicitly places himself in that moment, the historical midst of war. But the essay begins by looking back to a prewar scene, an image of an innocent, unknowing before. It was not literally a photograph, but it is a snapshot in words. It describes a scene that occurs at just about the same moment as the photograph in Ted Hughes's poem was snapped. Freud's essay and Ted Hughes's poem share the rhetorical structure of looking back on a prewar scene. Freud (1915, p. 305) begins:

> Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and splendor that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom.

The Editors of the *Standard Edition* suggest that Freud was on holiday in the Dolomites in August 1913 and they say that the identity of the poet and friend cannot be established. A number of authors have since suggested that this scene did not occur as described (Fachinelli, 2015; Lehmann, 1966; von Unwerth, 2005). At a September psychoanalytic congress in Munich, Lou Andreas-Salomé (1964, pp. 168–170) introduced Freud to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and they had a conversation into the night. So, Andreas-Salomé might be the taciturn friend, Rilke the young poet, and Freud might have collapsed two scenes into one, for literary purposes and to protect his interlocutors' identities. It is beyond the scope of this essay to probe the historical details; so I am simply going to consider the scene as Freud depicts it.² Freud gives a shrewd diagnosis of what was going on with his companions.

> What spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning. The idea that all this beauty was transient was giving these two sensitive minds a foretaste over mourning its decease; and since the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful they felt their enjoyment of beauty interfered with by thoughts of its transience. (Freud, 1915, p. 306, my emphasis)

The "revolt in their minds against mourning" seems to have been a spoiling activity. In response to present beauty, their imaginations leapt ahead to a future time when that beauty was no more and then that thought was used to
shut down any enjoyment they might otherwise have experienced. (Because the taciturn friend was taciturn, I shall leave her out of further discussion.) One way to look at the situation is that the poet is attacking his capacity to take joy in the present. He anticipates future doom so as to deny himself pleasure in the experience of the beauty immediately before him. And with a century’s hindsight, it is tempting to view Freud’s revolt against mourning as an anticipation of what the psychoanalyst Wilfrid Bion would famously call an “attack on linking” (Bion, 1959; see also Lear, 2015, 2017b). That is, instead of the “revolt” being an inference—a movement of thought from, say, “This beauty is transient” to “Therefore, I should not take pleasure in it”—it is rather to be understood as an anxious disruption of the capacity to experience joy, triggered by the anxiety provoked by the experience of transience. But I do not want to move too quickly here, and I would like to hold off pathologizing a moment that needs to be better understood.

The phrase “revolt in his mind against mourning” is ambiguous. In one sense, it means only that we are concerned with an expression of the poet’s outlook. He is in revolt against mourning. In a more explicitly psychological sense, though, the emphasis is on in his mind: One takes this to be a report of his psychological condition. One easily moves to this psychological sense if one assumes the poet’s reaction is irrational. It seems clear that Freud does this. He says of his own arguments that they seemed to him “incontestable,”

... but I noticed I had made no impression either upon the poet or upon my friend. My failure led me to infer that some powerful emotional factor was at work that was disturbing their judgment, and I believe later that I had discovered what it was. (Freud, 1915, p. 306)

Freud’s claims have some force, and they deserve attention, but they are far from “incontestable.” He makes two claims. First, he says:

Transience-value is scarcity-value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment increases the value of that enjoyment. (Freud, 1915, p. 305)

This may be true over a range of cases and for a variety of people, but it hardly seems an exceptionless principle. There may be occasions in which one’s experience of the limitation of a possibility of enjoyment leads one to think it is not worth it. Second, Freud (1915, p. 306) claims “the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives ....” This claim too needs argument. So, it does seem imperious to declare his interlocutors irrational in not agreeing with him. Freud says that the poet’s mind instinctively recoiled from the painful thought. But his basis for doing so seems only to be the poet’s resistance to accepting Freud’s outlook.

Freud also says of the poet that all he would otherwise have loved and admired was shorn of its worth because of their transience. So, the poet may agree that he is in revolt against mourning, but he takes his position to be justified. There is thus room to ask: shorn of what worth—and why? Obviously, we are not able to determine the poet’s position with precision if we rely solely on Freud’s account. But our aim here is not to get to the bottom of what that poet actually thought; it is rather to explore a possibility. What if the poet were experiencing a difficulty of reality? What if he was in genuine revolt against mourning? Would the psychoanalyst then be prematurely disposed to see this as a revolt in his mind: that is, predisposed to view the poet in exclusively psychological terms? This is how the poet might appear if he were experiencing the difficulty of reality and if he resolutely refused (what he took to be) the false comforts of mourning. From now on, when I speak of “the poet,” I am only working out this possibility. I am well aware that there are other “poets”: that is, other possibilities to explore.

The poet seems to be making a deeper point than that the current moment’s pleasure in the beauty of the lilies of the field is not worth the later pain of the death of those very lilies (stripped of any broader consideration of what that death means). A more serious position is this: The transience of the entire natural scene along with the transience of all human splendor and beauty that humans have or will create deprives us of confidence in an afterlife—in Scheffler’s sense. That is, it deprives us of a sense of continuity after our own death: that life will continue on with one’s loved ones living meaningful and happy lives and others living according to ideals or carrying out projects that have mattered to one. Confidence in an afterlife helps us as we mourn the death of others and as we face the prospect of our own death. It helps us to think that our loved ones live on in our memories—and that their projects will
continue into the future via shared commitments to important values. The poet’s revolt against mourning, I suspect, is grounded in a radicalization of this conception of afterlife. The radicalization has two dimensions. First, the conception of an afterlife is expanded outward from the continuation of human projects to include a person’s being able to see herself (and her loved ones) continuing on in the cycles, beauty, and expanse of nature. It is meant to be as capacious a conception of an afterlife as possible. Second, the poet insists that belief in an afterlife—even in this straightforward sense—is illusion. We wish to deal with transience by seeking continuation in other ways, but none of these other ways are adequate to do the job they would need to do. They too are all transient.

Bernard Williams cites Nietzsche with approval on this point.

\textit{Nietzsche … got it right when he said that once upon a time there was a star in a corner of the universe, and a planet circling that star, and on it some clever creatures who invented knowledge; and then they died and the star went out, and it was as though nothing had happened. (Williams, 2006, p. 138)}

From the poet’s point of view, this truth about transience exposes an illusion internal to our activities of mourning. The point has also been turned to comedy in a brief exchange in the television show “The Simpsons” (2017, Season 39, 1):

Lisa: “Even though Grandma has died she will live on in our hearts and memories.”
Bart: “And when we die it will be as though she never existed.”

Of course, there is the question of the extent to which we use the figure of grandma defensively, to ward off the thought that any of us could die at any moment—while grandma outlives us by decades. What kind of propriety are we trying to instill on the order of things by focusing on grandma? Still, in mourning, we say to ourselves that grandma will live on—in our hearts and memories; or in projects that were important to her that others will continue; or in others carrying on with the values she stood for; or even in rejoining nature in all its magnificence and spiritual meaning. But we leave it vague just how long she will continue on in these ways. For the poet, these are various ways of evading the difficulty of reality—evading the experience of the mind’s inadequacy in the face of death. Mourning may provide us with routines to cope with terrible pain and loss, it may provide cultural rituals, human company, and words of solace that have been tested through the ages, it may facilitate the slow transition from withdrawal and grief to re-engaging in life and the social world; but, from the poet’s point of view, if our task is to be truthful, the entire institution of mourning is organized for the sake of normalization and evasion. This is the basis for revolt—not the mere psychological condition of fear of pain in the future.

If this is the poet’s position, it makes sense that he should be resolute on his nature-walk with Freud. For though it is true that memories of family and friends may fade after a few generations, and the meaningfulness of human projects may fade with the centuries, one might hope that if one could just mourn grandma into nature, one would secure her an adequate form of continuation. The poet insists that this route is closed. Even nature in its most permanent instantiations is transient. We may try to ignore this—or, when it comes to mind, tell ourselves that the duration of nature is “long enough”—but, for the poet, this is how we tranquillize the experience of death.

Freud (1915, p. 306) introduces a contrast between ordinary opinion about mourning and his own:

\textit{Mourning over the loss of something that we have loved or admired seems so natural to the layman that he regards it as self-evident. But to psychologists mourning is a great riddle, one of those phenomena which cannot themselves be explained but to which other obscurities can be traced back.}

Freud’s “great riddle” seems to be why do we spend any time mourning at all? He describes the situation in terms of his conception of psychic energy, libido. When a loved one dies—or we suffer some other such loss—“our capacity for love (our libido) is once more liberated” (Freud, 1915, p. 306). Freud admits that this formulation does not do explanatory work; it just provides the terms in which the problem is set up. He continues,
But why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning. (Freud, 1915, pp. 306–307)

So, Freud takes himself to have little more to say to explain mourning than the layman does. The difference between them is that Freud thinks mourning is puzzling—an aporia—whereas the layman takes it for granted. The example Freud gives of his puzzle is that we “will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand.” Why, Freud wonders, do we not just move on? Of course, some of us do; but such seamless flow does not characterize us. Freud overlooks the other side of the puzzle: Why do we ever move on? Why is mourning something we ever come out of? Of course, it is not unusual for our lives to be altered forever by our previous lives with loved ones: for us to be changed in ways of thinking and feeling and being in the world. Still, from the point of view of social life, mourning typically serves as a finite period of withdrawal from which we eventually emerge and rejoin the day-to-day world. Why is not Freud puzzled about that: that we ever rejoin the world in any way at all? I suspect Freud has a “difficulty with reality” in the normal sense, in Aristotle’s sense of an aporia. It sets him apart from “the layman,” but it places his problem in a familiar range. The problem may be difficult to solve, but the radical inadequacy of mourning to encompass that which it is supposed to make intelligible is not in question. So, if the poet were suffering from the difficulty of reality in the stronger sense—if that is what his “revolt against mourning” consisted in—we should expect Freud to notice, but to lack the interpretive scope to understand what was going on.

And if we consider the family of uses in which the concept mourning is deployed, one can see how Freud’s encounter with the poet could be a nonmeeting of the minds. Freud assumes that what we humans typically do characterizes us, and what characterizes us provides a standard or model of human health. There is no room for the thought that all these mourning rituals that occur across cultures and throughout human history should be regarded as a cancerous growth, feeding off the human, and that far from expressing human health, they should be warded off by such resolute measures as refusing to take pleasure even in a blooming lily (see Thompson, 2008). From the poet’s perspective, the hallmark of human health is truthfulness: the exercise of our capacity to face the truth and live in it. The concept mourning, the poet thinks, is typically deployed in a cover-up. It links what people do with an image of what it is appropriate for them to do—but the image is illusion. Death, for the poet, is a difficulty of reality: It is that before which the mind—through suffering, disorientation, fear and trembling, wounding, anxiety, and, perhaps, through laughter—recognizes its fundamental inability to comprehend.

4. At the conclusion of his essay, Freud frames his conversation with the poet by locating himself in the midst of World War I.

My conversation with the poet took place in the summer before the war. A year later the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countryside through which it passed and the works of art that it met on its path but also it shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization .... (Freud, 1915, p. 307)

There is thus a striking rhetorical trajectory to the overall arc of Freud’s essay. He not only relies on the power of abstract argument but also puts himself in the role of witness, reporting from inside a maelstrom of destruction. He draws our attention to what we can all now see: that war destroys beauty and it also threatens our confidence in an afterlife. And it is in this extreme condition that Freud offers testimony: He continues to affirm his view even when it is tested at the limits. He also offers an interpretation of those who disagree. “I believe those who ... seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost” (Freud, 1915, p. 307). And given the interpretation, Freud (1915, p. 307) thinks he does not need to persuade them: “Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be comes to a spontaneous end.” So we ought to expect them eventually to recover from their outlook.
One can look at Freud’s framing in two ways. One is the intended interpretation: committed to life, return, and renewal. We see this in Freud’s (1915, p. 307) last lines:

_When once the mourning is over it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility. We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before._

But by now, we can see another way of looking at Freud’s interpretation. Freud purports to take all possibilities into account. Those who disagree with him are either irrational, as is the poet in the revolt in his mind against mourning, or they are in mourning and will in time get over it. There is no room for the thought that war discloses more than a natural cycle of civilization-destruction-and-renewal; that it wounds some with the experience of the inadequacy of the human mind to make sense of reality. Freud takes the fact that he can hold onto his position even in times of war to be evidence in its favor. But from this contrarian point of view, Freud’s steadfastness shows that, even in times of war, one can continue to avoid the experience of difficulty of reality. This is an example of how the difficulty of reality can pose a difficulty for psychoanalysis. How do we resist the temptation to assume that if the poet is in revolt against mourning this must be understood exclusively in psychological terms: as a revolt in his mind?

As a first step, I think it helps to entertain in imagination the thought that the very idea of mourning is outrageous. The idea of mourning seems to presuppose that justice requires us to return from (our preoccupations with) the dead. Justice, that is, in the ancient Greek sense of _dike_: a restoration of order. Freud called it health. Mourning has internal to it the idea of eventually restoring our proper balance in the relation of the living to the dead. In a sense, that is what looking at a photograph is all about: reaffirming that that was _before_, that was when they were still alive, that was when they did not know and could not know what we _now_ do know and cannot but know, but who, like them, cannot fathom what is to befall us or our loved ones _later_. It is one of countless ways we maintain our balance with respect to reality. And that is what we do, we who are alive and fated to orient ourselves in time and space, in history, and in reality. The revolt against mourning is a revolt against the idea that anything remotely like _justice_ or _injustice_ could apply when it comes to living with dead loved ones. Even to think a terrible injustice has been done is to bring our thought into some kind of alignment with thoughts of rectification and restoration. Achilles in the _Iliad_ is in his tent, sulking at the massive injustice done to him. He refuses to accept that any of the gifts brought to him could possibly provide adequate compensation. At first glance, a person suffering the difficulty of reality may look like that Achilles. But _our_ Achilles experiences the utter inadequacy of the concepts _justice_ and _injustice_ to encompass reality. His is a revolt against mourning itself.3

ENDNOTES

1 Since Freud’s time, psychoanalysts have expanded the concept of mourning further, to include healthy psychic development as such. Hans Loewald (1980) argued that psychological growth depends upon our capacity to mourn. For, we are creatures who do not simply move through a series of stages—infancy, youth, adolescence, and adulthood. At each stage, what it is to move on consists in _bidding adieu_ to earlier modes of relating to parents and loved ones, and we maintain these earlier forms, perhaps somewhat transformed, in memories, emotions, and styles of being. On this view, the very possibility of our maturing depends on our being mournful animals. See also Lear (2017a).

2 It would be a worthy thought-experiment to hypothesize that Rilke was the poet in question and use the first Duino Elegy as the basis for a counterpoint and response to Freud’s account.

3 I would like to thank Matthew Boyle, Michael Brearley, Susan James, Ira Kimhi, Amy Levine, Gabriel Lear, Anselm Mueller, Edna O’Soughnessy, Daniel Pick, Robert Pippin, Samuel Scheffler, Candace Vogler, and David Wellbery for discussions on these issues. I gave this as a lecture at Birkbeck College London, and I would like to thank the audience for their thought-provoking questions. I am also grateful to the reviewer of this journal, Richard Gipps, for comments on the submitted draft.

ORCID

Jonathan Lear http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1982-8759
REFERENCES


How to cite this article: Lear J. The difficulty of reality and a revolt against mourning. Eur J Philos. 2018;1–12. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12399