



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Empathy and psychopaths' inability to grieve

Citation for published version:

Cholbi, M 2023, 'Empathy and psychopaths' inability to grieve', *Philosophy*, vol. 98, no. 4, pp. 413-431.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819123000232>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0031819123000232](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819123000232)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Philosophy

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Empathy and Psychopaths' Inability to Grieve

MICHAEL CHOLBI

Philosophy, 2023 (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy>)

Joint Winner, Royal Institute of Philosophy Essay Prize, 2023

Abstract

Psychopaths exhibit diminished ability to grieve. Here I address whether this inability can be explained by the trademark feature of psychopaths, namely, their diminished capacity for interpersonal empathy. I argue that this hypothesis turns out to be correct, but requires that we reconceptualize empathy not merely as an ability to relate (emotionally and ethically) to other individuals but also as an ability to relate to past and present iterations of ourselves. This re-conceptualism accords well with evidence regarding psychopaths' intense focus on the temporal present and difficulties in engaging in mental time travel, as well as with the essentially egocentric and identity-based nature of grief.

1. Introduction

As Albert Camus' existentialist novella *The Stranger* propels its imprisoned protagonist Meursault toward his climactic confrontation with mortality, he recalls the trial that led to his being condemned to die. Meursault was tried for fatally shooting an Arab man on a beach. His material guilt is never in doubt; Meursault acknowledges he pulled the trigger but seeks exculpation in the afternoon's intense heat and sunlight. The prosecutor's strategy pivots to Meursault's character. He homes in on Meursault's behaviour in the days after the death of his *maman*; the prosecution witnesses testify that Meursault was

emotionally vacant at his mother's funeral, seemingly unperturbed by her death. They report that instead of mourning, Meursault spent his subsequent days attending movies, drinking *café au lait*, and having sex with his girlfriend. All of this, the prosecutor argues, illustrates a 'vital link' between Meursault's crime and his character: his behaviour in the days after his mother's death demonstrates that 'he was already a criminal at heart' well before he fired his revolver that afternoon.

Meursault is ultimately sentenced to die as much for being the sort of person incapable of grief as for his criminal act. That Meursault's 'grieflessness' ends up condemning him is hardly incidental. As Camus later wrote:

I summarized *The Stranger* a long time ago, with a remark I admit was highly paradoxical: 'In our society any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death'. I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game. (Carroll, 1955, p.27)

Camus describing the lack of grief on the part of Meursault as not playing 'the game' of abiding by societal expectations for grief may seem morally flippant. The prosecutor's strategy of highlighting how little Meursault grieved is admittedly cynical, but is not his lack of grief an indicator of Meursault's depraved moral character rather than a rejection of fussy social conventions? Meursault is often interpreted as an anti-hero, a protagonist suited for our alienated and ethically fragmented times. But it is worth reminding ourselves that, in the course of the novella, Meursault also cooperates with a friend's plan to seduce and humiliate a girlfriend, lies to the police about her being unfaithful, and coldly accepts a marriage proposal solely to please his own girlfriend. His inability to grieve, we might surmise, is of a piece with larger emotional deficits that manifest in

his contemptuous and manipulative attitudes toward others. For ordinary moral agents, grief feels obligatory, a way of acknowledging those who are ‘woven deeply into the fabric of our moral lives’ (Solomon, 2004, p. 3). But in Meursault’s case, grief is merely a set of social conventions that he willingly flouts.

Meursault seems to exemplify the thesis that an inability to grieve is a sign of wider moral deficiencies. On its face, Meursault’s freedom is the mirror image of his lack of *empathy*. For Meursault, others’ surfaces are all there is to them. He is free of any sense of obligation to others thanks to his utter indifference to how the world, including his own choices and behaviour, resonates with them. His indifference to even pretending to grieve is thus symptomatic of a disturbing disengagement from the larger human community. Ethically speaking Meursault is a solipsist, so for him to grieve the death of *maman* (or anyone else) would be nonsensical. Grief, after all, is an emotional condition available only to those for whom other people are ‘woven deeply into the fabric’ of their lives.

My objective here is not to conduct a psychiatric autopsy of Meursault but to investigate the provocative psychological hypothesis he seems to embody, namely, that grief is dependent upon empathy. In particular, I will interrogate this hypothesis by examining a population known for lacking both, namely, psychopaths. Is the psychopathic inability to grieve explained by a lack of empathy? I will ultimately argue for an affirmative answer to this question, but one that requires an amendment to conventional philosophical understandings of empathy. Psychopaths tend to lack the concern for others found in affectively empathetic agents, yet on its face they possess the concern for their own ends or interests needed for them to grieve for the losses they suffer when others die. Hence, if at its most fundamental level affective empathy is a deficit in emotionally valenced concern for other people, then psychopaths’ empathy

deficits will not serve to explain their diminished levels of grief. I argue that psychopaths' deficits in this *interpersonal* empathy in fact rest on a deeper deficit, one well suited to explain their deficits in grieving: psychopaths struggle to relate emotionally, evaluatively, and prudentially to past and future iterations of themselves. Their consciousness tends to engage exclusively with their present concerns, treating their concerns in the remote past or remote future as no less alien than the concerns of other people. For psychopaths, the present self *is* the self by and large. They therefore lack what I will call *exogenous* empathy, a capacity for emotional and evaluative engagement with selves beyond their own present self. This precludes their emotional and evaluative engagement with their past and future selves, as well as precluding the emotional and evaluative engagement with other people at the heart of interpersonal empathy. The psychopathic mindset thus impedes grief not because psychopaths lack empathy for others (they do), but because they lack the exogenous empathy that unites past, present, and future into a coherent diachronic sense of themselves, where this diachronic sense of self is in turn necessary in order to have the kinds of diachronic prudential commitments that make grief possible. As it turns out then, psychopaths' inability to grieve rests on a deficit that is as much metaphysical as moral: a deficit in those capacities associated with being an autobiographical person.

2. Lacking Empathy, Lacking Grief

As with virtually all psychological phenomena, psychopathy is not an all-or-nothing affair. Rather, individuals can manifest psychopathic thinking or behaviours to varying degrees. This heterogeneity notwithstanding, psychopathy's defining characteristic is the psychopath's reduced level of empathy. 'Empathy' is a term that philosophers and other theorists use in a variety of ways, so care is needed in understanding how exactly

psychopaths are deficient in empathy. For one, psychopaths perform normally with respect to *cognitive* empathy. They are largely able to understand others' mental lives and can accurately attribute emotions, intentions, *etc.* to others. Other people are thus not intellectually opaque to psychopaths, and they rarely suffer from delusions or other conditions that impede the formation of true beliefs about others' mental lives. Rather, psychopaths pair this ability to grasp others' mental lives with an emotional *cum* moral indifference to others. They show little regard for others' feelings, interests, or distress even as they acknowledge the existence of these. Psychopaths' prevailing attitudes toward others are instrumental; others represent opportunities for (or barriers to) the fulfilment of their own ends instead of possible normative checks on how they pursue their ends. Likewise, being susceptible to pain themselves, psychopaths can accurately perceive and predict pain in others, and when asked to imagine others' pain as their own, exhibit distress. But others' pain as such does not elicit similar distress in psychopaths (Decety *et al.*, 2013). Psychopaths are thus lacking in *affective* empathy (Maibom, 2020, pp. 138–41). Unsurprisingly, psychopaths will *report* feeling such empathy or regard for others. But psychopaths are often unusually talented at understanding what social norms demand and at engaging in lying or deception. Furthermore, these self-reports do not correspond well with their behavioural or bodily responses (Maibom, 2018, p. 65). Hence, their self-reported empathy should be treated as unreliable (Domes *et al.*, 2013; Maibom, 2020, p. 135). Indeed, their adroitness at manipulating others for their ends seems to rest on this combination of cognitive empathy and the lack of interpersonal empathy: an individual unconcerned with others' interests, *etc.* and willing to ignore them in favour of their own must have the ability to grasp what others' interests are in order to manipulate them accordingly. Knowing what you want is a great boon to my being able to attain what I want.

Our purpose here is to explore the relationship between empathy and grief rather than to adjudicate the particular case of Meursault. But arguably, Meursault exhibits the sort of indifference and callousness toward others typical of psychopathy. Meursault is not unable to grasp others' concerns or interests; he simply assigns little if any importance to them aside from the causal relations their realization bears to the realization of his own. Intriguingly, psychopaths also seem to share with Meursault his inability to grieve. While few systematic studies have been conducted that investigate how (if at all) psychopaths grieve, clinicians have long observed that the deaths of others do not provoke in psychopaths the powerful emotions associated with normal grief, particularly sorrow. In Hervey Cleckley's classic pioneering work on psychopathy, *The Mask of Sanity*, he reports on several of his psychopathic patients who do not grieve in response to the deaths of those close to them. In one particularly vivid instance, a psychopathic young man placed a bomb in an airplane, the detonation of which killed his mother and all the other passengers aboard. Cleckley reported that the young man was 'entirely free of sorrow over the death of his mother and also free of shame at being proved guilty of such a horrible and unprovoked mass murder' (1988, p. 266).

A particularly compelling articulation of the psychopathic perspective on pain, grief, and loss is provided by the anonymous subject of a magazine interview entitled 'My Life as a Psychopath':

Interviewer: In a day to day sense, or in your interpersonal relationships with people, is empathy or attempted empathy something you've had to teach yourself in order to relate to other people? How does that work?

Subject: Well, we have cognitive empathy. So if your mother died, I can look at you, I can see that you are in pain. I may not feel the same pain, but I can

understand you feel pain, and that series of behaviors usually warrants a certain response: comfort or interaction, engagement. And so it's a matter of honing that over time, and also making sure that I can continually consider that my reaction to things is not how other people experience things.

Interviewer: Do you feel at all that your psychopathy is an advantage to you? Do you feel lucky in any sense?

Subject: No. ... With psychopathy I constantly have to figure out people, and why they do what they do, and how to respond to them. Normal people have to deal with grief and loss and pain and heartbreak, but they also have things to make them happy. (Heaney, 2018)

The interview subject is remarkably self-aware regarding the discrepancies between others' susceptibility to loss and grief and her own. She sees that others grieve in response to loss, and knows what the norms are for engaging with others in bereavement. But she herself does not undergo bereavement and is faintly perplexed by the fact that others do. Hence, *why* comfort, *etc.*, are socially appropriate responses to others' grief largely eludes her.

The thesis that psychopaths undergo diminished, or even absent, grief would benefit from more rigorous psychological experimentation. All the same, it enjoys sufficient credibility to raise the prospect that the defining characteristic of psychopathy – a deficit in interpersonal empathy – explains psychopaths' diminished susceptibility. Assessing this claim will require deeper examination of the nature of grief.

3. Why Grief Does Not Require Affective Empathy with the Dead

Psychopaths' diminished affective empathy would seem like a plausible candidate explanation for their diminished grief: often, when another person dies, they have suffered a great loss, and so when the now-dead-but-once-alive mattered to us, we suffer a loss as well. This complex loss – the loss we suffer thanks to what the deceased have suffered due to death – can trigger grief. But in order to experience their loss as ours, we must empathize with them, engaging with their states very nearly as if those states are our own. Hence, psychopaths undergo less grief because they have less empathy.

This reasoning appears valid. Admittedly, it rests on several contentious philosophical claims: first, it assumes that death can be a harm to us, a claim that many philosophers (Epicureans, most notably) have rejected. Second, it assumes that it is possible to affectively empathize with an individual who does not have conscious states. Perhaps it is not possible to affectively empathize with the dead since (assuming death cannot be survived) the dead do not have internal mental lives. However, this reasoning is unsound even if these contentious claims are granted.

The first basis for rejecting this reasoning is that grief does not require, as a matter of fact or for its very intelligibility, that the deceased be harmed by their deaths. When someone dies who is arguably benefitted by death (when death brings relief from a prolonged and painful illness, say), grief nevertheless occurs. So too does grief occur when the bereaved believes that the deceased now enjoys the blessings of divine salvation. These may be called *no loss cases*. Another set of counterexamples are *no subject cases*. Would-be parents are known to grieve the deaths of unborn foetuses, and aspiring parents¹ undergo grief when they discover that their infertility prevents them

¹ Some may contend that death can harm simply because it is a state of non-existence, not because of any specific goods within life that a person thereby loses by dying. But this harm of *annihilation* is notoriously

from procreating. Arguably, the grief that occurs in such cases happens despite the individuals being grieved for not counting as welfare subjects, i.e., not having anything to lose due to death or non-existence. Finally, there are *no death* cases. Imagine that one's spouse has volunteered for a one-way deep space mission, and all communication with them will cease within an hour of their rocket's lift off. Grief very much like that if the spouse had actually died would seem in order all the same.

Grief thus does not demand that the deceased be harmed by their deaths.

These cases also point to a second – and more fundamental – basis for rejecting the argument according to which psychopaths do not grieve because they lack interpersonal empathy: we as individuals do not grieve the deaths of all others. Only the deaths of certain others prompt grief. We must therefore stand in some sort of meaningful relationship with them, a relationship the loss or transformation of which generates the sadness and sense of loss characteristic of grief. But this kind of relationship does not demand that we have affective empathy with the deceased or even affective empathy in general. Indeed, while grief is not a selfish response to the loss of others, it is nevertheless egocentric; we grieve because we have lost something (Cholbi, 2022). In cases where we love the deceased, we will in fact empathize with the deceased and so experience their loss as our loss too. What 'dictates the content of our grief experience are the particularities of the relationship in question', so that when we grieve those we loved,

difficult to account for, and as the case of infertile parents grieving children they could never conceive illustrates, grief can be justifiable even for the never existent.

part of loving another is that their fate or their well-being matters to us in a distinctive and disproportionate way. We revel in the happiness of those we love, as we despair in their sufferings. For loving them entails that what matters to them comes to matter to us. Thus, when we grieve in connection with loving relationships, a proportion of our grieving will be directed at what has happened to the other, such as what they may have gained or lost by dying, the quality of their dying process, *etc.* (Cholbi, 2021, pp. 239–40)

Psychopaths are not psychologically typical in that their reduced empathy makes it unlikely that they could grieve for losses suffered *by* the deceased. But this is consistent with their grieving for what they have suffered thanks to another's death. Hence, the psychopathic deficit in affective interpersonal empathy does not predict reduced susceptibility to grief. An inability to care about others and their fates need not impair the ability to be emotionally affected by events surrounding them, including their deaths. The following grief scenario is therefore not inconceivable despite psychopaths lacking interpersonal empathy:

S is a psychopathic individual: S can identify others' emotions, but does not feel distress in response to their distress, *etc.* S's mother, T, was an excellent caregiver to S. When T dies, S feels no anxiety, sadness, *etc.*, at how T died or how T's death might have been a misfortune to T (or to anyone else). All the same, S feels T's death as a loss to S inasmuch as T was a reliable provider of encouragement and support. S undergoes emotions characteristic of grief: sorrow, but also anger at the fact of T's death and worry about how to replace those goods T provided.

Again, S's grief may be atypical in that it will be entirely focused on S rather than T. In ordinary psychological subjects, the life of the deceased (including how they may have been harmed by death) often plays a prominent role in grief experience. Psychopathic subjects such as S, in contrast, could (despite their apparent deficits in interpersonal empathy) undergo grief that is purely egocentric and solipsistic.

4. Rethinking Empathy: Present Temporal Focus and Concern for Counterfactual Selves

Psychopaths' lack of interpersonal empathy therefore does not straightforwardly explain their diminished proclivity to grieve: that psychopaths lack such empathy does not entail, and indeed is compatible with, the essentially egocentric character of grief (that we grieve because we undergo the loss of meaningful relationships with others). An inability to relate to or care about the concerns of others need not stand in the way of experiencing others' deaths as losses to oneself.

However, another feature of the psychopathic mindset embodies a more fundamental lack of empathy, reconceptualized in broader terms than the interpersonal empathy we have been invoking to this point, that can help explain the diminished grief of psychopaths. Here again is the anonymous subject of 'My Life as a Psychopath':

Interviewer: How do you perceive it when you hear someone expressing their fear of mortality, or says they're afraid to die someday?

Subject: That always baffles me, because I can't comprehend why it matters. For me, life is very much in this immediate moment. This moment is all you have, and the fear of it going away is just nonsensical. This is a huge disconnect for me. People explain it in ways that they very much understand; they're afraid of

being forgotten. And none of those things are important to me, so it's sort of like saying that I'm afraid of not being the color blue. (Heaney, 2018)

It is tempting to read the subject's remarks as espousing a *carpe diem* mentality or a philosophical outlook espoused by Schopenhauer, among others: only the real should matter to us, but neither the past nor the future are real and so should not be objects of our prudential concern (Moran, 2022). But I would suggest that these remarks do not represent a philosophical stance but instead exemplify a psychopathic defect that has attracted little attention: the intense *present focus* of the psychopaths' temporal consciousness.

The psychopathic mind usually struggles to manage or sustain attention (Baskin-Sommers, Curtin, and Newman, 2011), with noticeable deficits in their ability to attend to context and to shift attention from one feature of a situation to another (Hiatt and Newman, 2006; Sadeh & Verona, 2008; Maibom, 2018, p. 67). These attentional deficits appear to take a specific form for psychopaths: they do not instinctually assign much significance to their pasts or their futures, rarely attending to events outside the specious present. Nor do they relate to their pasts or futures in evaluatively sophisticated ways. With respect to the past, difficulties with emotional memory are common in psychopaths. They struggle to recall emotions revealed in others' faces (Ragbeer and Burnette, 2013), and downplay the autobiographical significance of emotionally charged events from their past (Burrow *et al.*, 2014; Lanciano, Curci, & Basile, 2019). With respect to the future, despite the popular image of psychopaths as prudent, or even cunning geniuses (think Hannibal Lecter), psychopaths tend instead to be reckless, impulsive, and obsessive in their focus on very immediate goals or ends. They tend not to learn from past experience, and struggle with the conative aspects of prudence (for

example, delaying the gratification of lesser desires in order to satisfy greater long-term desires) (Kennett, 2002; Maibom, 2005; Maibom, 2018, p. 67). Unsurprisingly, psychopaths show little remorse or shame for the past actions (Hare, 2004). And while psychopaths feel fear, they are far less mindful of risk, suggesting both little concern for loss and poor anticipation of coming threats (Maibom, 2018). For psychopaths, the past and the present exist but hardly register in their deliberative consciousness. Neither the past nor the future are integrated meaningfully into the present, which dominates the psychopaths' attention (Maibom, 2018, p. 66).

Psychopaths are also generally deficient in their imaginative capacities, neither prone to make use of mental imagery nor skilful in doing so (Maxwell, Lynn & Lilienfeld, 2016). As Neil Levy notes, these imaginative deficiencies are accompanied by deficiencies with respect to *mental time travel*. A typical psychopath will have poor abilities 'to project oneself into the future or the past: to recall, in a distinctively first-person manner, past episodes and to simulate possible future scenarios in which one is personally engaged' (2013, p. 355). Their self-conception is thus 'stuck in the present'.

Taken together, these claims support the conclusion that psychopaths neither easily can, nor especially care to, transcend their present state of consciousness. (See Figure 1 for a summation of this claim and the evidence for it.) To whatever degree the past and future are cognitively accessible to them, the past and future are nevertheless of less practical concern to them. It is tempting to speculate about which of these is explanatorily basic: are psychopaths more indifferent to the past and future because they are cognitively inaccessible to them, or are the past and future cognitively inaccessible to

them because psychopaths are indifferent to them?² I make no pretence of answering that question,³ but I would conjecture that these are reinforcing tendencies. Lacking particular concern for their own pasts and futures, psychopaths are thereby less likely to develop their capacities to cognize the past and the future. But being deficient in their capacity to cognize the past and the future, psychopaths are thereby prevented from engagement with realities (or possibilities) that they might otherwise find reason to be concerned with.

The intense present focus of the psychopath's consciousness entails that they are unlikely to view past, present, and future as phases within a life they identify as their own. Their ends or concerns neither reach very far into the past nor very far into the future. As the subject of 'My Life as a Psychopath' puts it, 'this moment is all you have'.

I propose that we view the present focus of psychopathic awareness as an indicator of a wider inability to engage with counterfactual *selves*, where this encompasses both an inability to engage with other persons but also an inability to engage with past and future iterations of *themselves* (see Figure 2). Their own past and future selves are, like other persons, evaluatively remote from the present self of the psychopath. As such, the temporal remoteness of their past and present selves presents

² One reason to favour the latter is that deficits in cognitive access to the past and the future may not necessarily generate the inability to care about past and future selves that I have ascribed to psychopaths. Those with deficits in episodic memory, for example, seem able to relate morally to hypothetical scenarios despite lacking typical capacities for mental time travel. See Craver *et al.* (2016).

³ That autistics have difficulties with mental time travel complicates matters (Ye *et al.*, 2023). For they undergo grief and are at least interpersonally empathetic, while not struggling with cognitive empathy. This suggests that the mental time travel is less essential to interpersonal empathy, i.e., the ability to be concerned and motivated by the states of others, even if (as I shall argue) it is essential to the self-empathy that psychopaths lack and which accounts for their diminished or absent grief.

the same difficulties for psychopaths as other persons do; while these counterfactual selves can be recognized as such (recall that psychopaths have cognitive empathy with others⁴), they do not have the same role in the psychopaths' practical deliberation that they do for psychologically typical subjects. For psychopaths, the selves of others are of little moral concern, while their own temporally remote counterfactual selves are of little prudential concern.

As we saw earlier, psychopaths fall short on measures of interpersonal empathy. I propose that this deficit, along with their deficits in relating to their own past and present selves, are distinct manifestations of a more basic deficiency in what we may call *exogenous* empathy, the ability to relate evaluatively and emotionally to those selves besides one's present self. At least in the case of psychopaths, the explanation for their lack of interpersonal empathy is the same as the explanation of their lack of *intrapersonal* 'empathy', i.e., of concern for the past and future iterations of themselves, to wit, an exogenous empathy deficit.

We shall turn momentarily to the implications that psychopaths' lack of exogenous empathy has with respect to grief. But first, one might worry about attributing a lack of exogenous empathy to psychopaths on the grounds that it implies that they do not empathize with themselves, whereas, if anything, psychopaths appear to have an *abundance* of empathy for themselves. Their relentless pursuit of their ends, and their concomitant disregard of the ends of others, suggests undue self-regard rather than insufficient self-regard. These claims are correct, but compatible with individuals, psychopaths included, lacking in *self-empathy*. For empathizing with oneself is more

⁴ This same analysis predicts that those with interpersonal empathy but without cognitive empathy will undergo grief. This result is corroborated in studies of autistics (Warrier *et al.*, 2018).

than mere regard for one's interests in the moment. Just as empathizing with others requires us to strive toward recognition of their good on the whole, so too does empathizing with ourselves ask us to integrate the moments of our lives into some broader conception of our own good. The self-empathizer cares about themselves *qua* biographical person, a care rooted in but not reducible to what is good for themselves at a given point in time.⁵ The evident self-centredness of psychopaths is thus a centring of the *present* self, an attitude arguably at odds with empathy for themselves.

Caution is in order about extrapolating from these claims about psychopaths and their lack of exogenous empathy. A lack of exogenous empathy accounts both for psychopaths' lack of interpersonal empathy and for their intense prudential focus on the present. But I do not thereby claim that the interpersonal empathy and cross-temporal prudence march arm in arm. Egotists lack interpersonal empathy while possessing a very robust sense of themselves as subjects of prudence across time. A certain kind of self-abnegating utilitarian moral saint could well possess high levels of interpersonal empathy while being largely indifferent to their own well-being, whether at a moment or across their lifetimes. My claim is therefore that the lack of exogenous empathy is sufficient to explain these other two deficits, as the case of psychopaths illustrate. I do not thereby claim that the lack of exogenous empathy is necessary for these other two deficits, and so lacking interpersonal empathy or a cross-temporal prudential relationship to oneself may have other causes.

5. Revisiting Grief

⁵ For an intriguing exploration of self-empathy among military personnel struggling with moral injury due to combat, see Sherman (2014).

Equipped with the notion of exogenous empathy, we now return to psychopaths' diminished proclivity to grieve: can such 'grieflessness' be accounted for in terms of deficiencies in exogenous empathy?

Solomon (2004) argues that an inability or an unwillingness to grieve is likely to co-exist with an inability to experience or express gratitude. For grief and gratitude have a common origin, according to Solomon, in our vulnerability to, and interdependence on, other people. 'Grieflessness' is morally troubling because it amounts to a denial of how our lives and our values are intertwined with others. In the terms I outlined in section 2, not to grieve is seemingly to deny the role that others play in our practical identities, treating others as far more incidental to our values or commitments than they in fact are. Ingratitude is similarly morally troubling: to deny that others can benefit us in ways that justify gratitude is to deny how our lives and values are dependent on what others do. It is thus not surprising that psychopathy is among the 'Dark Triad' of traits the possessors of which do not experience or express gratitude at an ordinary level (Puthillam *et al.*, 2021).

Solomon is likely correct about grief and gratitude in psychologically typical cases: those who suppress or avoid grief and gratitude may well be seeking to deny their vulnerability to others.⁶ But psychopaths represent an extreme case in this regard. For their grieflessness and ingratitude do not seem voluntary, as if they *could* grieve or undergo gratitude but choose to avoid or suppress these. Rather, they seem incapable of these sentiments, a reflection of their Meursault-like disengagement from the human

⁶ Of course, on some conceptions of the virtuous life, vulnerability to others, and to all facts or circumstances external to one's own inner state, is what a virtuous person should *want* to avoid. This accounts for the hostility toward grief found in ancient philosophical schools, such as Stoicism, that understand virtue in terms of self-sufficiency (Cholbi, 2022, pp. 3–6).

social world. And Solomon nevertheless rightly captures an aspect of grief highlighted in section 2: many grief episodes include significant attention to the deceased and to their losses, especially when the deceased is a love object for the bereaved. Yet grief is fundamentally egocentric, rooted in the loss of an identity-constituting relationship with the deceased. Again, when the deceased is a loved one, that one cared for the deceased and so cares about their losses is essential to the relationship. But grief need not involve care for the deceased and so does not require the interpersonal empathy that psychopaths lack. Hence, their interpersonal empathy deficits do not explain their diminished or absent grief.

Solomon is thus correct that grief requires vulnerability to others, but (I suggest) he draws the circle of vulnerability too narrowly to account for psychopaths' lack of grief. What psychopathic individuals also lack, and which in turn explains their diminished or absent grief, are practical identities that extend across their past, present, and future selves, practical identities whose presence make it possible for the deaths of others to register as a loss to the temporally extended, biographical self.

The deaths of others cannot trigger ordinary grief in psychopaths because they lack practical identities in which others play a central role. But they also lack a rich concern for their own past and present selves. Their concerns are thus not vulnerable to the kinds of losses to self that trigger grief. Psychopaths' practical identities lack the self-other relations that might make it possible for them to grieve the losses that others suffer due to death. But their own lack of grief is due to their practical identities lacking the self-self relations – relations among past, present, and future selves – needed to undergo the egocentric losses that reside at grief's heart. The psychopathic fixation on the present renders their practical lives largely invulnerable to past events and irrelevant to future events. So just as their relationships with other people tend to be very short-lived (Weiss,

Lavner, & Miller, 2018), psychopaths' relationships with themselves are similarly short-lived, bounded by an awareness restricted to their specious present.

My claims should not be exaggerated: the psychopathic empathy deficit at issue is interpersonal rather than cognitive. They are aware that other individuals have a point of view distinct from their own but steeply discount, or even ignore, others' points of view in their own practical deliberation. Similarly, psychopaths are aware of past and future and aware that counterfactual selves, their own and others, exist in past and future. But these counterfactual selves are not well integrated into their attention, nor into their scheme of choosing and valuing. Psychopaths may well have practical identities in a minimal sense. They may well be able to articulate self-conceptions that serve as sources of justifications for what they do. But these self-conceptions are unlikely to resemble the elements of more psychologically typical persons' practical identities, unlikely to include 'roles and relationships, citizenships, memberships in ethnic or religious groups, causes, vocations, professions, and offices' (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 101). For such practical identities presuppose a cross-temporal evaluative perspective on oneself that psychopaths generally do not have. Having a personal relationship with another, being a citizen of a given community, belonging to a religious group, *etc.* get their point from values associated with ongoing projects or commitments pursued both with others and across time. But psychopaths' ends rarely take this form, and as a result, their practical identities neither incorporate others in anything more than an incidental way, nor do they involve ends whose value reaches backward to the remote past or forward to the remote future. The temporal narrowness of the ends psychopaths pursue explains why they rarely undergo morally significant emotions related to past or future events (shame, regret, fear, self-doubt, and the like).

The emotional volatility and shallowness exhibited by psychopaths reflects this transience of their practical identities. Cleckley (1988, p. 348) observed that his psychopathic patients were intensely emotional but without having the sorts of emotions reflective of a wider temporal consciousness:

Vexation, spite, quick and labile flashes of quasi-affection, peevish resentment, shallow moods of self-pity, puerile attitudes of vanity, and absurd and showy poses of indignation are all within his emotional scale and are freely sounded as the circumstances of life play upon him. But mature, wholehearted anger, true or consistent indignation, honest, solid grief, sustaining pride, deep joy, and genuine despair are reactions not likely to be found within this scale.

My explanation for psychopaths' diminished or absent grief – that they lack exogenous empathy – is consonant with Cleckley's observations. The psychopath's mercurial emotional responses reflect the narrow reach of their evaluative outlook, and in particular, its being tethered to the experienced present.⁷ Note that this absence of exogenous empathy does not preclude psychopaths undergoing powerful emotions in connection with events that set back their perceived interests. The death of someone who was strategically central to a psychopath's current goals could well generate frustration, resentment, *etc.* Meursault was clearly irritated by the conveniences arising from his mother's death, for instance. Psychopaths can thus engage emotionally with losses that hinder their current goals. But because such responses to 'loss' are not rooted in

⁷ Grief itself involves a 'dual process' of adjusting to loss (a temporally backward-looking enterprise) and reconstituting the self in light of that loss (a temporally forward-looking enterprise). See Stroebe and Schut (1999), Cholbi (2017), and Cholbi (2022).

concerns that project into the past or future, they are not the identity-based responses to loss characteristic of grief, any more than the day-to-day negative affect that psychologically typical individuals feel when everyday events impede the realisation of their ends.

6. Empathy, Grief, and Relationships

The example of Meursault might hint at a rival explanation for psychopaths' inability to grieve. Psychopaths simply do not form the kinds of valued relationships which, when disrupted by the other's death, are a cause for grief. Meursault's relationships with others are striking for being shallow and transient. This would seem to allow that he could grieve if he could form the requisite relationships. We therefore do not need to appeal to psychopaths' diminished empathy – including the modified conception of empathy I have advanced wherein psychopaths care little about counterfactual selves, their own or others – in order to explain why they do not grieve.

To answer this worry requires some measure of speculation, but it is plausible that psychopaths' lack of grief and their lack of rich personal relationships have a common cause in the deficits in exogenous empathy I have attributed to them. Certainly psychopaths struggle to form the kinds of relationships that provide the normative foundations for grief. I argued earlier that, given the egocentric character of grief, this is not easily explained by interpersonal empathy as it is ordinarily understood. We should instead view the psychopathic lack of interpersonal empathy as a reflection of a more fundamental lack of empathic engagement with counterfactual selves, including a lack of empathic engagement with their own temporally remote past or future selves. Ultimately, this lack of exogenous empathy is likely to play a role in accounting for both of these phenomena, i.e., psychopaths' difficulties in empathically engaging with counterfactual

selves is responsible both for their not forming grief-worthy relationships and for not grieving. A change in either of these would likely require the presence of exogenous empathy and would result in a change in the other. Were a psychopath able to form the identity-constituting relationships that form the backdrop of grief, they would also grieve, and *vice versa*. Such a transformation, I hypothesize, would amount to a transformation in the psychopathic identity wherein they come to have the sorts of practical identities that extend temporally across their biographies.

This hypothesis helps us to appreciate why psychopathy is an unfortunate condition to be in. Not only are psychopaths likely to have lives lacking in moral virtue, they are likely to be deeply isolated, not only from other persons but even from themselves. They are thus deprived of goods characteristic of human beings, who are equipped with senses of selves that persist metaphysically (and matter first-personally) through time.

Planning for the future involves imaginative projection; it requires that we understand the actions we undertake now as getting their point from a goal that may not be realized for weeks, months, or (often enough) years. This requires prospection. It also requires that we identify with our past stages and see them as engaged in a project which we share and continue. (Levy, 2013, p. 365)

Lacking such propensities, psychopaths are unlikely to pursue or realize achievements, to appreciate the subtle maturations possible in rich human relationships, to grasp why losing touch with our pasts can be painful, or to feel pained when their loved ones undergo dementia that inhibits their ability to recognize them. Worse still, psychopaths struggle to recognize such deprivations.

7. Conclusion

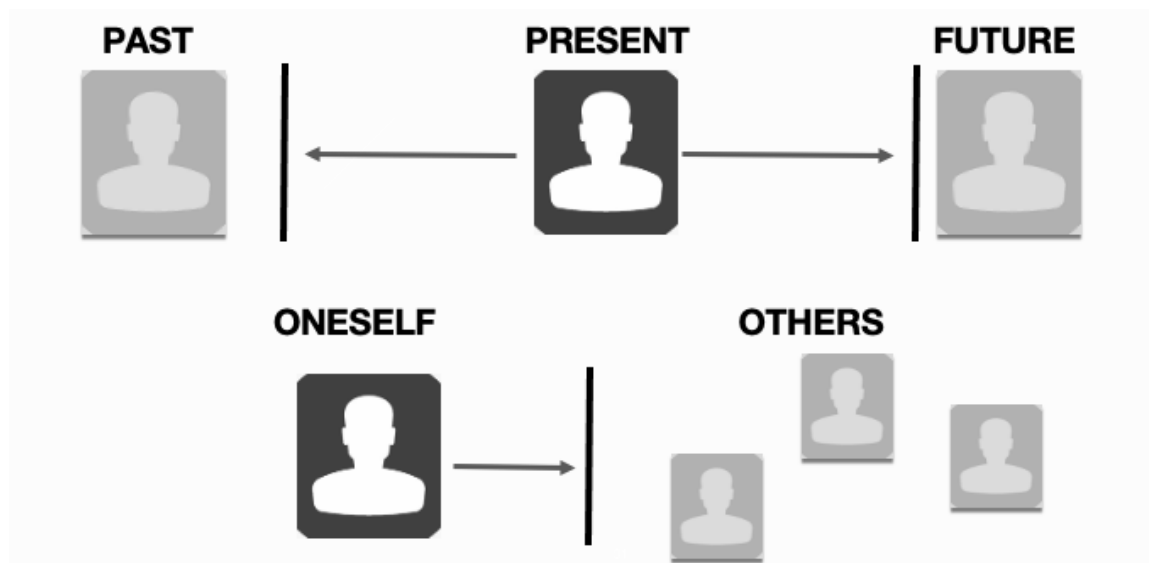
Others matter little to psychopaths, but this is not what is behind their lack of grief. Rather, psychopaths lack grief because they lack empathy, understood as an ability to relate to counterfactual selves, whether their own or others. Their past and future selves are too evaluatively remote for them to develop the cross-temporal, biographical practical identities that are threatened by others' deaths, and hence, lack the practical identities requisite for grief to respond to loss.

To some extent then, psychopathic grieflessness illustrates why they deserve (among other reactive attitudes) our pity: they are temporally imprisoned selves operating in a world of temporally extended persons and who, had certain contingencies played out differently, would have been temporally extended persons. Levy (2013, p. 365) hints that those with such temporally limited consciousness neither meet the criteria for (Lockean) personhood nor are able 'to grasp what it is to be a person, with plans and projects'. In this regard, psychopaths are not mere episodics, who recall the past and can anticipate the future but who do not identify strongly with their past and future selves (Strawson, 2018). Psychopaths cannot see themselves as one among many selves, their own non-present selves included, and as such, are synchronic but not diachronic persons, condemned to pursue only those human goods whose value is itself predominantly ephemeral.

FIGURE 1. The Present Temporal Focus of Psychopathic Awareness and Concern



FIGURE 2. Psychopaths' Indifference to Counterfactual Selves



References

- Arielle R. Baskin-Sommers, John J. Curtin, and Joseph P. Newman, 'Emotion-modulated Startle in Psychopathy: Clarifying Familiar Effects,' *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 122:2 (2013), 458–68.
- Ashley N. Burrow, Nicole Currence, Diana Lemus, Amber E. DeBono, Matthew T. Crawford, and W. Richard Walker, 'Psychopaths View Autobiographical Memories as Less Memorable, Important, and Emotional than Normal Individuals,' *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4:6 (2014), 1–9.
- David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).
- Michael Cholbi, "Grief's Rationality, Backward and Forward," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 94:2 (2017): 255–272.
- Michael Cholbi, "Grieving Our Way Back to Meaningfulness," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* (Meaning in Life and Knowledge of Death), 90 (2021): 235–251.
- Michael Cholbi, *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).
- Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So Called Psychopathic Personality*, 5th edition (William A. Dolan, 1988).
- Carl F. Craver, Nazim Keven, Donna Kwan, Jake Kurczek, Melissa C. Duff, and R. Shayna Rosenbaum 'Moral Judgment in Episodic Amnesia,' *Hippocampus*, 26:8 (2016), 975–979, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hipo.22593>.
- Jean Decety, Chenyi Chen, Carla Harenski, and Kent A. Kiehl, 'An fMRI Study of Affective Perspective Taking in Individuals with Psychopathy: Imagining Another in

Pain Does Not Evoke Empathy,' *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 7 (2013), 489.

Doi:10.3389/fnhum.2013.00489.

Gregor Domes, Pia Hollerbach, Knut Vohs, Andreas Mokros, and Elmar Habermayer, 'Emotional Empathy and Psychopathy in Offenders: An Experimental Study,' *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 27:1 (2013), 67–84.

Robert D. Hare, *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised* (Toronto: Mental Health Services, 2004).

Katie Heaney, 'My Life as a Psychopath,' *The Cut*, 10 Aug 2018 [available at:

<https://www.thecut.com/2018/08/my-life-as-a-psychopath.html>]

Kristina D. Hiatt and Joseph P. Newman, 'Understanding Psychopathy: The Cognitive Side,' in C. Patrick (ed.), *Handbook of Psychopathy* (New York: Guildford Press, 2006), 334–52.

Jeanette Kennett, 'Autism, Empathy, and Moral Agency,' *Philosophical Quarterly*, 52: 208 (2002), 340–357.

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Tiziana Lanciano, Antoinetta Curci, and Pierpaolo Basile, 'Do Psychopathic Traits Impair Autobiographical Memory for Emotional Life Experiences?,' *Memory*, 27:5 (2019), 660–672, DOI: 10.1080/09658211.2018.1551493

Neil Levy, 'Psychopaths and Blame: The Argument from Content,' *Philosophical Psychology*, 27:3 (2013), 351–367.

Heidi L. Maibom, 'Moral Unreason: The Case of Psychopathy,' *Mind and Language*, 20:2 (2005), 237–57.

Heidi L. Maibom, 'What Can Philosophers Learn from Psychopathy?,' *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, 14 (2018), 63–78.

Heidi L. Maibom, *Empathy* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020).

Reed Maxwell, Steven Jay Lynn, and Scott Lilienfeld, 'Failures to Imagine: Mental Imagery in Psychopathy and Emotional Regulation Difficulties,' *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 36:3 (2016), 270–300, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236616679963>.

Richard Moran, 'The Philosophical Retreat to the Here and Now: Notes on Living in Time,' *Philosophy*, 97:4 (2022), 413–433.

Arathy Puthillam, Sampada Karandikar, Hansika Kapoor, and Aneree Parekh, 'Gratitude Blindness: How Does the Dark Triad Experience Gratitude?,' *Personality and Individual Differences*, 168:1 (2021), Article 110309, DOI:10.1016/j.paid.2020.110309

Shayne N. Ragbeer and Mandi L. Burnette, 'Remember Me? Psychopathic Traits and Emotional Memory in an Undergraduate Sample,' *Personality and Individual Differences*, 54:3 (2013), 372–77.

Naomi Sadeh and Edelyn Verona, 'Psychopathic Personality Traits Associated with Abnormal Selective Attention and Impaired Cognitive Control,' *Neuropsychology* 22:5 (2008), 669–80, doi: 10.1037/a0012692.

Nancy Sherman, 'Recovering Lost Goodness: Shame, Guilt, and Self-empathy,' *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31:2 (2014), 217–235.

Robert Solomon, 'On Grief and Gratitude,' in *In Defense of Sentimentality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), doi: 10.1093/019514550X.001.0001.

Galen Strawson, *Things That Bother Me: Death, Freedom, the Self, Etc.* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2018).

Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, 'The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description,' *Death Studies*, 23:3 (1999), 197–224.

Varun Warriar, Roberto Toro, Bhisudev Chakrabarti, the iPSYCH-Broad autism group, Anders D. Børghlum, Jakob Grove, the 23andMe Research Team, David A. Hinds,

Thomas Bourgeron, and Simon Baron-Cohen, 'Genome-wide Analyses of Self-reported Empathy: Correlations with Autism, Schizophrenia, and Anorexia Nervosa.' *Translational Psychiatry*, 8, 35 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-017-0082-6>.

Brandon Weiss, Justin A. Lavner, and Joshua D. Miller, 'Self- and Partner-reported Psychopathic Traits' Relations with Couples' Communication, Marital Satisfaction Trajectories, and Divorce in a Longitudinal Sample,' *Personality Disorders*, 9:3 (2018), 239–249, doi: 10.1037/per0000233.

Jun-Yan Ye, Xiao-Jing Qin, Ji-Fang Cui, Qian Ren, Lu-Xia Jia, Ya Wang, Christos Pantelis, and Raymond C K Chan, 'A Meta-analysis of Mental Time Travel in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders,' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 53:4 (2023), 1509–1528, doi: 10.1007/s10803-021-05375-0.

MICHAEL CHOLBI is Professor and Personal Chair in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and founder of the International Association for the Philosophy of Death and Dying. Among his recent publications are *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2021), *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* (Princeton University Press, 2022), and "Grief as attention," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (2022).