

Running Head: AN ECONOMIC PROBLEM IN MOURNING

Freud's Case for an Economic Problem in Mourning

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Abstract

Freud's puzzling claim in his early writing that he could not account for the severity of the pain of mourning prompts a reflection on his subsequent response, which equated the pain with the breach in one's defenses occasioned by physical pain. Unremarked by Freud, the pain of (nonpathological) mourning and physical pain share striking features, in particular spontaneous remission and the setting aside of the ego, not readily found in other states. Decidedly absent from pathology in particular, these features may afford one definition of mental health, of which mourning, at least in its nonpathological prototype, is a realization.

Freud's Case for an Economic Problem in Mourning

The pain of mourning strikes the ordinary observer as so self-evident that one cannot easily comprehend Freud's claim in two celebrated essays that he could not explain the pain. In "On transience" (1916/1985) and "Mourning and melancholia" (1917/1984), he lamented that he could not account within his economic theory for the extraordinary pain the relinquishing of our love objects brings, even granting the understandable opposition of the ego to the relinquishment of those objects. He was not exhorting us to feel any differently. Rather, he could not align the degree of pain mourning produced with the most basic principles of his theory.

The economic point of view in Freud's theory considers psychological processes relative to their consumption and displacement of psychical energy. Freud found mourning puzzling from this point of view because he could not discern the source of the vast amount of energy the pain of mourning consumed.

Ten years later, in an appendix to *Inhibitions, symptoms, and anxiety* (1926/1989), Freud claimed to have found the missing explanation. When one mourns, as he had theorized earlier, reality-testing tells one the love object no

longer exists, and one must face the task of detaching one's libido from the object. The act of separation proves painful, he now added, because the object, still the recipient of a "high degree of cathexis" (p. 109), can no longer satisfy the cathexis, and the unsatisfied cathexis builds. The accumulation of unsatisfied cathexis produces the pain the mourner feels.

The onslaught of cathexis mimics the economic conditions produced by physical pain, according to the new account. In the experience of physical pain, a stimulus impinging from the inner or outer periphery of the body breaches the organism's protective devices and unleashes a flood of energy from which there is no escape. The individual cannot escape the onslaught because it is internal (Freud, 1920/1989).

With this elaboration of his theory, Freud was able to account for the tremendous energy consumed by mourning, in a system that has finite energy. The lost object arouses the cathexis it elicited formerly, only now the cathexis remains unsatisfied, consequently accrues, and thus produces extreme pain.

Insofar as Freud felt perplexed initially by a purely quantitative puzzle, he would seem to have addressed his concern with this addendum. His pairing of

mourning with the suffering of physical pain suggests further amplification of mourning that I shall pursue here.

Mourning and the pain from physical insult share two features, beside the energetic dynamic Freud described, that distinguish the conditions as varieties of painful experience.

First, the recovery from mourning and physical pain follows a different course from that followed by other forms of pain, even within the category of pain generated from within. As Freud noted, whereas one can flee from pain caused by an external stimulus, such as a hot stove, the escape from endogenously generated pain requires a more complicated solution. Some pain in this category can be relieved, in the long or short term, by action on the part of the afflicted person. For instance, although one cannot flee from the pain produced by an instinctual need, such as hunger, one may satisfy the need. One may satisfy the need by bringing about an alteration in the external world, for example by crying to obtain the provider of food or procuring the food oneself (Freud, 1915/1984). One cannot relieve the pain of either physical injury or mourning by any comparable intervention. The pain in these

cases dissipates only through healing, a gradual process one can influence only peripherally.

Second, both pain from physical injury and mourning draw sufferers' attention away from the ego. In the case of physical pain, one's attention is drawn to the site of the breach. In mourning, one becomes consumed by the object and its loss. In either case, one may become absorbed in one's pain or turn from the external world; neither disposition implies a preoccupation with self.

Either form of suffering may be hijacked by other processes.

Hypochondria may usurp normal pain mechanisms, for example, and melancholia converges with mourning in numerous important respects, as Freud (1917/1984, p. 252) noted.

These mixed cases lack the two features that distinguish nonpathological mourning and physical pain from other painful conditions: recovery through spontaneous healing and the setting aside of the self. Instances of pathology, they require intervention for recovery, and they emanate from a self absorbed in itself.

We may infer from this contrast that the experience of physical pain and mourning, and the recovery from them, signify (mental) health, through their distinguishing features of healing and lack of self-preoccupation. At the same time, both the endurance of them and recovery from them are passive processes. We do not feel our pain or disregard the self through any act of will. Thus we do not, in turning from self in these experiences, exhibit any particular virtuousness, as we might do when we intentionally set the self aside on other occasions, on behalf of someone else. Our passivity in both cases also distinguishes them from other forms of reality function in which we act deliberately to effect changes that will enable us to reach our goals.

Although he came to the conclusion by detecting an "economic" problem, Freud was right that (nonpathological) mourning holds a distinct place in our psychological life, shared by neither our pathological processes nor our day-to-day normal doings.

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Author Biography

A developmental psychologist by training, Susan Sugarman has published both in that area and on Freud and has taught courses on both at Princeton University. Author of *Freud on the Acropolis reflections on a paradoxical response to the real* (Basic, 1998), she recently contributed the entry on Freud to the second edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the social sciences*, published in 2008.