

Grief & Recognition: Isolationists and Explorationists

Introduction

Recognition theory states that the self is not a self without the help of others. Others affirm our identity by reacting positively to our traits. Iser writes, “Most theories of recognition assume that in order to develop a practical identity, persons fundamentally depend on the feedback of other subjects (and of society as a whole)”.¹ Recognition theory is often focused on the place of the family. However, much of the work ignores the importance of friendship in the development of the self. The self is largely formed during adolescence, when we spend a lot of time with peers of the same age, thereby creating the self together. This adolescent self is highly malleable from the influences of those around us; bad influences create a bad self and vice versa. The effect of others on us is not just a change in behavior but also a change in the self and in how we view other people. That effect makes recognition theory uniquely suited to investigate how we are affected by the loss of friends at this stage of our lives. Recognition theory’s emphasis on the interdependence of the self in its creation illuminates a new aspect of grief literature that isn’t highly explored. How is the changing of the self affected when those changing us die? I consider our self a mosaic of the people we love. We are constituted and created in concomitance with others and through others. What happens then, when during our formative years as we develop the self with others, we lose that reflective other? The person we had been forming our self with, through humor, stories, and experiences, passes away.

¹ Iser, Mattias, "Recognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>>.

In this paper, I argue that the loss of young peers through a tragic accident, who helped shape one's sense of self, disrupts our relationships with others and ourselves. This disruption diverges into what I term the isolationist and explorationist. One negatively impacts our relation to the self, and the other positively impacts our relation to the self and others; these reactions I describe overlap and coexist, but a person often subconsciously moves toward one path in the long-term reactions to grief, and the explorationist, I argue, leads to a greater flourishing of the self.

The Importance of Friends

While classical recognition theory claims that everyone has an impact on the self, the place of a friend is not as highly emphasized as perhaps it should be. Societal norms affect us greatly, who we become, what is normal, and the family impacts our love relations, but to truly understand how we are perceived, we require our friends. Crépel writes, "friends help each other in their inner conflict concerning the truth about themselves."² To truly become a complete self and understand who we are, it is required that we have friends to bounce our perspectives off. I didn't realize I was a relatively blunt individual who would tell people exactly what I think until a friend pointed it out to me, which, moving forward, has become an essential aspect of how I describe myself to others. Not only do our friends help identify who we are and our traits that we may not be as adept at viewing, but they also help us evolve. Crépel states, "My friend may not be as much an observer of myself who helps me to impose a positive image

² Crépel, Anne-Laure. "Friendship: Shaping Ourselves." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22, no. 2 (March 15, 2014): 184–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2014.896631>.

of myself to my consciousness as a companion with whom I shape my identity, both consciously and unconsciously.”³ Our continuous act of evolution of the self with our friends happens over time; we change and are morphed by them, and we do the same to them. This reciprocation of identity is extremely important to our changing of the self. What then occurs when that person we have morphed our selves with passes away? The change I will argue is immense and continues to affect us after their passing.

Why the reactions to death are so much more impactful than just the loss of a friend through a falling out or argument is because there is both an impossibility of reconciliation, and neither side wanted to drift apart in this scenario, one person passed randomly. Similarly, in cognitive theory, the inability to be recognized by a friend is impactful. Each individual recognizes us in a unique way, and those recognitions feel different for the person being recognized. To my mother, I will always be recognized as her child, to my brother, his brother, just as these are unique feelings of recognition so is being recognized by a friend. There are no forces pushing you toward one another, we are not blood related. That recognition of someone who chose to become close to you because they like the self you have become is soothing and euphoric to realize. No longer being recognized in one of those relationships takes something away from us that an argument or the severing of friendship could never do.

The Unique Mortality of a Friend

The mortality we experience from losing a young friend is unique from other experiences of death. One of the greatest effects of this is the loss of an assumption of

³ Crépel, Anne-Laure. “Friendship: Shaping Ourselves.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22, no. 2 (March 15, 2014): 184–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2014.896631>.

continued aging. As opposed to losing a grandparent or an older family member, the loss of a friend at a young age is unexpected and unknowable, outside of extreme cases like terminal diseases at a young age. Through this, we lose the belief that we will grow old with the people around us, that we can reminisce upon past times with the people we love. When a friend at a young age passes, your understanding of human existence is altered entirely. Because medical advances, have reduced the number of early childhood and infant deaths many people don't experience the loss of someone their age until adulthood. In many cases, people don't pass away randomly at young ages, except in the case of tragic accidents, which is what I'm largely analyzing. So when they do, our belief that we will grow old together, maintaining friendship or even loose acquaintanceship, is lost for everyone. The self is drastically altered as your perspective changes. The possibility of death becomes known intimately, and your ability to conceive these alternate realities grows. It becomes easy to imagine the death of others in everyday activities. Whether it's someone going for a drive or walking down an icy set of steps, each action taken by others that is even slightly dangerous opens up the possibility of death from your perspective. We come to terms with the reality that we are mortal beings, and our time together is short-lived.

The Passing – Isolationist and Explorationist

The passing of this person with whom we've shared so much of our creation often leads us down two subconscious paths, what I term the explorationist and isolationist. The explorationist realizes their loss and takes it as an opportunity to find new ways to form their selves with other people, new relationships with which they can continue this reciprocal exchange of identity. The explorationist expands their social circle, finds new love relations, and

engages with them deeply. The isolationist, on the other hand, forces themselves into seclusion subconsciously. They begin moving away from existing relationships and look inward instead of outward for love relations. Both the isolationist and the explorationist experience loss, mortality, reactions to death, changes in the self, in other relationships, and coping mechanisms differently.

Isolationist

The fault of the isolationist lies in this seclusion, because we are unable to reshape the self positively within the self. We cannot continue to shape our identity by ourselves because we are dependent on other relationships to change and affirm our identity. Thus, the isolationists' outside relationships become strained due to their seclusion. Fearing further grief, and further loss the isolationist refuses to engage in new relationships and new ways to find themselves in other people. What the isolationist fails to realize is that the death of a friend does not remove the friend's effect on the self. "It seems that in our day-to-day life, we often experience events with other people in mind: whether they have taught me practical or cultural knowledge, or whether they have influenced the way I perceive myself, there are numerous situations in which I think about them."⁴ Beyond the death of a friend, we are still able to find them within the self, within how we interact with others. Rather than take this living piece of a dead identity and share it with the world and others, the isolationist hides it within themselves. They fear that grief will make them unable to love, unable to expand their connective circle. Whiston, although not speaking about an isolationist directly, describes it perfectly; she writes,

⁴ Crépel, Anne-Laure. "Friendship: Shaping Ourselves." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22, no. 2 (March 15, 2014): 184–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2014.896631>.

“If grief is seen just as a feeling that can hinder our capacity for love, then, as Plato says, we need to free ourselves from it in our effort to pursue the desire for love – the desire for ‘the perpetual possession of the good.’”⁵ The effort to free oneself from grief comes at a cost, however. There is a move from friendship and kinship with those around the individual to isolation. Plato’s discussion of how we should react to grief, Whiston and I agree, is antithetical to genuine healing. She writes, “Nonetheless, turning away from grief and all its stages can have the consequences of squandering an opportunity for emotional or spiritual growth that takes us up the love ladder.”⁶ Whiston here is arguing for the explorationist path. Her description of someone losing the opportunity to experience growth is the exact fault of the isolationist.

In their paper, Johnsen and Tømmeraas reach similar conclusions about grieving friends. The profound impact on other relationships and the loss of the ability to connect with others. They write, “Several of the bereaved spoke about struggling with social relationships after the loss and not enjoying social situations like they used to. This caused some of the bereaved friends to withdraw from social life.”⁷ The case of retreating into oneself after death may be an attempt by the isolationist to cut off their interdependence and vulnerability with others. Recognition theory shows that we, as humans, must recognize how we are vulnerable to one another and interdependent with each other. Honneth writes “Because the normative self-

⁵ Whiston, Amna. “Love and Grief (Loving Better through Grief).” *Think* 22, no. 65 (2023): 53–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1477175623000234>.

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⁷ Johnsen, Iren, and Ane Martine Tømmeraas. “Attachment and Grief in Young Adults after the Loss of a Close Friend: A Qualitative Study.” *BMC Psychology* 10, no. 1 (January 15, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00717-8>.

image of each and every individual human being his or her 'me', as Mead put it is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being dependent on others carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse”⁸ Honneth emphasizes the danger to identity that being interdependent entails. The isolationist experiences this danger as the loss of others. They reject their interdependence because there is a fear of more death surrounding them. By rejecting it, the isolationist thus rejects our interdependence as a whole. Leading to an inability to be recognized by the other because they disavow interdependence with others, hoping to live solely to avoid the dangers of losing the other that had built up their self, i.e., the friend.

For the isolationist, the reaction to a realization of mortality is unique. Here, the isolationist realizes the mortality of those around them and is scared of experiencing that reality again. They seclude themselves in order not to lose more people and experience the death of others. The logic being that if they surrender themselves to isolation, then their relationships with others won't be as strong, and thus they won't be as impacted by the eventual death of another friend. As young people, we often feel invincible, like nothing can stop us. The effect this has on the psyche is an increase in dangerous activity, but once the realization of mortality happens, that effect is altered. The isolationist can sometimes retreat into the safety of seclusion. While most activities aren't extremely dangerous that people engage in aren't extremely dangerous the ability or desire to seclude oneself from anything

⁸ Honneth, Axel. *The struggle for recognition the moral grammar of social conflicts* Axel Honneth. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

dangerous can be potent. We begin to recognize ourselves as mortal, which is both necessary and partially harmful to the experience of life for the isolationist. Rather than doing as an explorationist might, which is still continuing to engage in life activities, the isolationist recognizes every activity in its potential to cause death. Even things such as driving may be seen as scary or unnecessary for the isolationist's continued existence. This can sometimes lead to a reclusion that is filled with even more dangerous method of numbing oneself. The move to alcoholism is extremely common in specifically young men after grief as outlined in Creighton's paper. She writes, "Many men spoke about their sense that they would be unable to cope with feelings of sadness and how they used alcohol as a means to dull the pain of their intense emotion."⁹ I myself can attest to this desire to move toward alcoholism. This is a key emotional difference between an explorationist and an isolationist. While it may seem that alcohol is dangerous so why would the isolationist move toward this. But young men often underplay alcohol's danger, the culture to drink as a young man can sometimes be suffocating and impossible to escape from. Also, drinking alone in a room is not as dangerous as going out and doing dangerous things with alcohol. For the isolationist, the numbing from drinking is also clearly more necessary than the desire to stray from danger. The isolationist begins to recognize alcohol as necessary for themselves to keep the pain at bay rather than confronting and understanding it.

⁹ Creighton, Genevieve, John Oliffe, Jennifer Matthews, and Elizabeth Saewyc. "Dulling the Edges': Young Men's Use of Alcohol to Deal With Grief Following the Death of a Male Friend." *Health Education & Behavior* 43, no. 1 (2016): 54–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48509578>.

The move toward becoming an isolationist is motivated by many factors, but one of the largest is that you don't have support in your grieving. The familial support behind you and the ways you are encouraged or discouraged to process your emotions. For myself, I was encouraged to talk about how I felt, share stories of those who knew my friend, cry, and go to the events honoring them rather than hide away in my own pain. The greatest solace for my grief was to sit around with six or so other close friends he knew and share stories, exchanging laughs and memories about our shared grief. These processes are vitally important and become essential for the healing of long-term grief. If someone hates discussing their loss, winces at the idea of thinking about a fond memory of them, then they may move toward becoming an isolationist. The pain through this effect becomes more entrenched, rather than the burden being lifted off the individual through sharing memories, the pain burrows deeper within ourselves.

Taken together, the isolationist response reveals a misunderstanding of what grief demands from us. The isolationist retreats into fears of further loss, in an attempt to protect the self, but instead it destroys the relational foundations that create the self. Recognition theory shows that identity is not something we can secure alone. It has to be sustained through engaging with others. The isolationist, however, refuses to engage through withdrawal, alcoholism, or avoidance of adventures; they deepen the wound that the isolationist wanted to escape. Rather than grappling with the profound loss of a friend and processing it with others, the isolationists attempt to engage only with themselves, which stops the process of healing and stops the possibility of connecting with others as a form of healing.

Explorationist

The explorationist, on the other hand, understands that, given the reality of mortality, it is imperative to use the limited time left to experience other people. For an explorationist to hide away from this reality is to do a disservice to the deceased. This disservice, which the isolationist may commit, is that we are obligated by the realization of death to embrace one another. The explorationists view this mortality as a call to action because, for them, every interaction could be the last one. The day-to-day effect of this is a positive change in disposition toward others. A disposition that results in greater understanding and care toward others' positions in life. Each moment becomes cherished when compared to the isolationist. Instead of fearing relationships for the possibility of loss, the explorationist embraces them, knowing that relationships can't last forever.

Whiston argues that we end up loving better through grief. Rather than trying to escape from grief, we must make a conscious effort to embrace it and love more deeply because of it. Whiston writes, "The second issue is perhaps not a worry at all: it is possible to be open to love through one's solitude, deepening one's sense of real connectedness to others, shared values, what Kant called the moral feeling, 'the love for human beings'"¹⁰ Here, our opinions slightly diverge. While she claims that one can be open to love in solitude, she simultaneously asserts that we can deepen our sense of connectedness to others. But within recognition theory, you cannot realize your position and inherent connection to others without connecting with others. If our self is constituted and created through others, how can we change the self in solitude? We can't because we require others to overcome this grief and love better through it. My

¹⁰ Whiston, Amna. "Love and Grief (Loving Better through Grief)." *Think* 22, no. 65 (2023): 53–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1477175623000234>.

conception of processing grief does seem to leave little room for nuance regarding the grief process. I would not like to assert that one should not spend any time in solitude and only be with other people. There are undoubtedly benefits from spending time alone and thinking about a past friend. The isolationist falters in spending too much time alone to the point that their processing becomes cyclical and not beneficial to the healing process. Similarly, the explorationist can have a pitfall of their own. Creighton's paper provides insight into how the explorationist can falter. She writes, "Adrian, a 31-year-old Anglo-Canadian, remembered losing his friend in a car accident when he was 23. He explained that his difficulties with alcohol started after the death of his friend, fueled by a ritual he referred to as "drink fests," wherein a group of friends drank, retelling stories about their friend and the meaning of his life. After a while, Adrian recalled, the gatherings became less frequent while his heavy drinking continued."¹¹ Adrian's experience is not uncommon. What begins as a way to honor the friend by enjoying the company of those who knew him best can sometimes become a habit you can't break. Adrian's alcoholism stems directly from his grief, and in an attempt to honor his friend as the explorationist should do, he fell prey to the primary pitfall, which is spending too much time in negative scenarios, attempting to honor or celebrate the friend with drugs and alcohol. I witnessed this firsthand, with my friend Alex, after the passing of our mutual friend. He began indulging in drugs alone, which eventually led to his own death in an overdose just a year later. Adrian's path was that of an explorationist; however, it led to poor outcomes because he didn't balance the solitude with exploration. Alex spent some time honoring our friend together, but

¹¹ Creighton, Genevieve, John Oliffe, Jennifer Matthews, and Elizabeth Saewyc. "Dulling the Edges': Young Men's Use of Alcohol to Deal With Grief Following the Death of a Male Friend." *Health Education & Behavior* 43, no. 1 (2016): 54–60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48509578>.

ultimately, his own isolationism may be partially to blame for his death. While both paths have their pitfalls, the explorationist offers more opportunities for growth and fewer for self-harm.

Objections

Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* offers an objection to the explorationist but his description ultimately fails to account for the interdependence of all humans, he writes "This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realise himself as truly human."¹² Sartre describes here how existentialism is a humanism. By looking inward to himself as the sole legislator and decider of everything for the man, Sartre concludes that this leads to aiming beyond oneself toward liberation for others. His argument may sound similar to the explorationist going beyond oneself to help the other. But it is actually quite the opposite. Sartre does not imply that the individual must rely or seek the help of others to decide upon these conclusions. Rather, in his view, man simply will come to the conclusion that we ought to liberate others because if we are free, there is a necessity to make others free. Explorationism, on the other hand, claims that the individual requires the other to fully heal past grief. While Sartre's discussion does not relate directly to grief processing, his implied disavowal of the necessity of the other is clear. The contrast to recognition theory is also clear, as Butler puts it quite succinctly, "Could it be that when I assume responsibility, what becomes clear is that who 'I' am is bound up with

¹² Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Philip Mairet. *Existentialism and humanism*. Toronto: CNIB, 2009.

others in necessary ways? Am I even thinkable without that world of others? In effect could it be that through the process of assuming responsibility the 'I' shows itself to be, at least partially, a 'we'?"¹³ Sartre's attempt to assume responsibility for others, in that he must free them as he is free, works to erase the very fact that to assume or acquire knowledge of the self, we require others. You cannot be just within yourself and decide on something, because to form that opinion, you need your friends, guardians, and institutions to influence you. Sartre is, in fact, describing the isolationist one who decides things for themselves and doesn't rely on the help of others for anything. The explorationist path exposes the weakness in this objection. Rather than denying individual responsibility, explorationism and recognition theory show how it is relational and interdependent, specifically for the process of grieving. Responsibility derives from the interaction with others. It does not spuriously appear from the self. The explorationist does not seclude into the self, but moves outward and hopes to connect with others instead of withdrawing into the self. In doing so, they remain faithful to the reality that grief reveals that the self is never merely an "I," but always already a "we."

Conclusion

In conclusion, I've attempted to show how the death of a close friend during adolescence leads to a disruption of the self. Not only the loss of a relationship, but a loss of a piece of the self. Since we are formed in concomitance with others, losing that other who helped form so much of the self has devastating impacts. Often forcing individuals down one of two paths, the isolationist and the explorationist. The isolationist attempts to protect the self

¹³ Butler, Judith. *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* S.I.: Verso Books, 2025.

through withdrawal are flawed, as recognition theory shows. Identity cannot be repaired or created in isolation. We require others, and by rejecting interdependence, the isolationist rejects the conditions necessary for healing. The explorationist response, though not without risk, relies on the help of others in the healing process. By continuing to engage with others after loss, the explorationist allows grief to transform their self and continue the healing process. Grief thus helps to reveal a truth about humans, the self is always a 'we' and never an 'I', even in the deepest pits of emotions.

Reflection Below

Grades listed at end of reasoing

1. For the weekly research assignments, I felt very good about almost all of them. Due to my schedule, I was able to put solid effort into each and every assignment. I think most of my work showed an understanding, an application, and I certainly gained expertise throughout the course on how recognition theory can be applied to my topic. I struggled slightly with application throughout the semester, but the feedback I was given made me reformulate my theory multiple times, which solidified the connection to recognition theory. I collaborated with Shane well for feedback and gave him what I thought was solid feedback. Shane and I are also friends outside of class, and we've discussed his and my papers multiple times after class or in my own apartment. I hopefully was able to respond to your critiques as well as those of my peers within the paper. I developed the research project myself thoroughly and was self-directed, and I would point to the zero late assignments as evidence for that. I also gave feedback on everyone's presentation, hoping to help them enhance their work. I also reflected on my ideas throughout the peer review and weekly assignment process, finding new holes in my work that you and Shane helped point out. I attempted to communicate the very complex ideas of grief processes using recognition theory, and hopefully did so during the presentation orally as well. I have been assessing and re-assessing my work all semester in hopes of making it better. Finally, all of my intellectual habits have been sharpened, opened through new understanding of recognition theory and the self, made humble through being wrong about arguments from Philosophers, I listened and was attentive in most classes, persevered through the large readings, and a schedule that had me going to four

classes in one day, and attempted to point and question when I believed things to be untrue. – **Grade: A**

2. Throughout the major research assignments, I tried to do my best on each one, and while I may have faltered slightly, I still think they were all good work. I once again believe I hit all content objectives with understanding theory, applying it to grief, and gaining expertise in the subject as I was able to describe and explain it to multiple people I discussed my paper with. I read many texts to gain the knowledge for the assignments and hopefully applied them correctly. I developed the research project and utilized my secondary sources pretty well, with most of my sources for my final paper being secondary. I was self-directed by getting them all in on time. However if I had taken more time for my first draft and not done it all the day before (largely in-part to the timing of other assignments in other courses) I would have produced a far-better, longer, and more well-thought out draft. These assignments certainly enhanced my critical and creative skills being both critical of myself and other philosophers as well as creative in the way I presented the argument. I engaged in philosophical dialogue with the philosophers used in my paper however, I do believe I could've utilized them more in a dialogical format. Sometimes, I just used a quote and did not engage with it as deeply as I could have. I took responsibility for my ideas by presenting them to the class and looking for the critiques possible specifically within the explorationist. I hopefully communicated these complex ideas well through the paper and in spoken word, but I'm sure there are areas that may be confusing to someone not familiar with recognition theory. I assessed my ideas throughout each assignment, but largely in the first draft,

because that was not the best draft I've produced, and I had to take lots of time to re-think, re-organize, and re-write many parts of it. Finally I definitely strengthened my intellectual habits lots of which was timing and spreading out of the work, which I did a lot better for the final draft. – **Grade A-**

3. The paper was a culmination of all the skills I learned throughout the course. Hopefully, I showed an ability to understand and apply the theories we've learned, as well as gained some level of expertise in the discipline. I read and interpreted many texts to finish this paper hopefully interpreting them correctly and using them to my advantage in the paper. This is the research project I developed and although worried I had bitten off more than I could chew I'm quite proud of what I came out with. I was self-directed in that, after the last draft, we had to finish this paper all on our own. I attempted to respond and include arguments from you, my peers, and myself within the paper. I enhanced many of my critical and creative skills by critiquing my past work and attempting to construct the argument creatively, and I think I did a good job. The dialogue with which I engaged, I think, I could have utilized and spoken to directly a bit more effectively in my paper. Some of my argumentation may have been addressed and described, and I tried to find some, but couldn't find much research specifically on what I was attempting to argue. I took responsibility for my ideas and despite your advice to keep some moral language in I decided to keep it in, because although it may feel insensitive, I do truly believe there is not necessarily a 'right' way to grieve but a more beneficial way. This paper is hopefully the culmination of the complex ideas I created and worked through mentally all clearly written down. For my habits I believe they all

were enhanced through the paper process. As with any large paper understanding and working through these ideas we have swimming in our heads is difficult and hopefully it went to paper successfully. For a final assessment of my paper, I'm very proud of what I produced and the work I put in, but I do think that with even more time, writing, and understanding of recognition theory, I could have produced a clearer and better-argued paper. However, I do still think this paper deserves a solid. **Grade: A-**