



Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2022, 176 p.

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Jonathan Lear is an American philosopher and psychoanalyst, works as the John U. Nef Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. His work, which focuses on Aristotle and Freud in particular, connects ancient philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and ethics. In *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, Lear examines mourning as an ethical and imaginative act central to human flourishing.

This book, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, presents a psychoanalytic account to understand what mourning stands for and what its relationship is with ethical life. Jonathan Lear aims to present mourning through an Aristotelian concept, “kalon”, and discusses mourning as a virtuous feeling. Lear also gives the idea of “end”. Here, this concept has a twofold meaning. First, the end is an ending; later, the end connotes a teleological view. Therefore, Jonathan Lear offers us an Aristotelian sense of mourning and ending. Besides, he argues end and mourning alongside concepts like “repetition”, “conserving”, “gratitude”, and “flourishing”.

The book starts with the chapter “We Will Not Be Missed!” Here, Lear begins with a reference to a university student’s statement at a conference about the end of the world case, such as climate change. This statement discusses that human beings will not be missed because they caused the suffering of Mother Earth, and

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when the Anthropocene becomes extinct, non-human animals will not miss us. This statement is a reflection that we will not be missed because we do not deserve to miss what we have done. Lear also takes this statement as an end of mourning. If we do not deserve to be missed, we do not deserve to be mourned. Thus, mourning is a feeling for people who deserve their good character. Here, Lear presents the concept of mourning related to the Aristotelian virtue ethics, especially his conception of “kalon”. In the next chapter, he assesses Freud’s essay “On Transience”. Freud argues that mourning is transient; there should be no repetition of grieving one’s loss. However, Lear criticises Freud for having no positive conception of repetition, and we should return to that feeling to hope to return to the good. Here, Lear connotes mourning with hope.

In the later chapters, Lear emphasises that we shall regard mourning as a virtuous attitude, we mourn for people who are good exemplars to us. With repetition, our imagination become active again, it restores our memory and this repetition brings a novelty to life, which is kalon. Furthermore, the sense of mourning presented as a form of flourishing and with this sense, Lear points out that mourning helps to conserve what is worth conserving. In later parts, Lear gives us implicitly mourning is amongst necessary elements of a solidarity for a nation and at the end he affirms the feeling of mourning that we should not seek to revolt against it because it is a justice towards the dead, the affirming of our loved ones. Last but not least, he attaches mourning with the feeling of gratitude.

Above, it is mentioned that Jonathan Lear offers us an Aristotelian account of mourning. In this regard, his main thesis is that mourning is a sense of human flourishing. So, if we argue that what is that human flourishing stands for, we should consider Aristotle’s virtue ethics. In the book’s title, Lear invites us to regard imagining mourning alongside ethical life; thus, his conception of mourning affirms human life. In the first chapter, he tells us that to be mourned, one needs to deserve it. This is a precondition of mourning. So, in the third chapter, while Lear is referring to his teacher, Mr. McMahon, he remembers his teacher since his noble action towards Lear. Because of Mr. McMahon’s noble action, he feels grateful to him for acting likewise in a noble way. This action makes Lear feel grateful for his teacher throughout his life, and once Mr. McMahon dies while Lear is mourning for him, this sense of gratitude restores his feelings and mourning, thus helping to flourish Lear’s life.

Now, we must understand how Lear believes that mourning helps flourish our lives. First, his approach is Aristotelian; he puts forward the concept of kalon, which means noble, fine, and beautiful. Lear states that kalon is an activity in which a generous person lives generously. As we know from Nicomachean Ethics, generosity

is not a sense of benefit in a utilitarian sense. It is a way of giving without expecting the benefit of that attitude. So, mourning is itself *kalon* that expresses our love of the dead. Lear emphasises feeling gratitude, which is a way of expressing a response to how our loved dead ones affect our lives.

Through mourning, we are “conserving” what is worth conserving for our loved dead ones. We conserve joyful and meaningful moments. It is itself *kalon* because mourning conserves fine and beautiful moments that are shared with the loved dead one. Though, it is connected with what Jonathan Lear calls “repetition”. In this sense, repetition criticises a Freudian sense of mourning. For Freud, repetition has a negative aura, a circle of hope and destruction, says Jonathan Lear. However, for Lear, repetition has a positive connotation, it helps us to imagine what is noble and fine. Within this repetition, we reanimate and return to moments of joy and meaning about our loved dead one. It is a way to restore our gratitude towards him. Therefore, Jonathan Lear understands mourning in a teleological way that it is a part of the good life, which helps us to affirm what is noble and fine. It can only be felt towards people who deserve it; we cannot mourn for bad people who have bad attitudes.

But even though I appreciate how Lear reflected mourning as a way to affirm life, this affirming life stands in two ways: first, affirming the life of the loved dead one. Later, it is a way to perform one’s life in a virtuous way. In other words, affirming life through mourning necessitates feeling gratitude for one person for what the one contributed to our life and acting just for his due. It also presents us with the Aristotelian account of justice, giving every man his due. However, I contend that Jonathan Lear’s book provides a consistent Aristotelian point of view about mourning and ethical life.

Nevertheless, the book does not provide a clear account of the political aspect of mourning. In the chapter “Good Mourning in Gettysburg and Hollywood”, Lear presents a perspective on the political aspect of mourning. He refers to Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address about the Battle of Gettysburg. Here, the author addresses that mourning can create a sense of gratitude towards our descendants, creating a sense of solidarity essential for nation-building.

I want to mention another ambiguity that I obtain in the book. Even though I appreciate the fact that Lear provides us with an account of mourning as an essential part of the ethical life, I contend that there is an ambiguity for me regarding how people handle the death of their loved ones, should it be accepting their death and affirming their loves abruptly? Can they act rationally when it comes to death, or are there any phases to reach that level of affirming one’s death? It is unclear to me

the issue that how people react and reflect on the loss of their loved ones. Can we at least not expect them to feel desperate in a moment? Maybe we can feel furious about how we lost our loved one, and it may be hard to affirm their lives with *kalon*. Thus, I argue that although Lear's mourning conception is useful to understand how it can be related to the Aristotelian virtue ethics, it is ambiguous about how people deal with mourning, whether they affirm the death of loved ones abruptly or whether mourning has any phases.

Last, I want to mention the issue of political mourning that I found unconvincing. The book starts with a reference to climate change, where a student says: "We will not be missed!" Here, a student reflects his frustration towards the Anthropocene and how the non-Anthropocene has exploited them. So, we know that with climate change, the Nature is dying. So, cannot we mourn for the Nature? Is the sense of mourning only attached to humans? Can we not feel gratitude towards Nature for what it contributed to us? So, let me argue grassroots movements. Climate change activists are showing an example of solidarity in preventing the exploitation of Nature. It is their reflection of love towards Nature, but I suggest we can reveal one lacking in Lear's account. People can feel gratitude towards Nature, the Nature that is dying; however, also, they can feel furious about how the Anthropocene did not give Nature its due, and they can feel that we have to restore this. Thus, even though I agree with Lear that mourning is a restoration of order, I argue that he has an insufficient account of how this mourning can be elevated within the political movements. Therefore, I contend that Jonathan Lear's account of mourning does not provide us with a sufficient account of the political mourning.

References

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