

# Sadness is not about Loss

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Received: 4 July 2024 / Accepted: 4 January 2025

*Abstract:* I argue that sadness is not about loss. I present two counterexamples to the Loss View: the view that if one is sad about something one takes it to be a loss. I suggest an alternative and defend it.

*Keywords:* sadness; loss; badness; emotion; formal object.

## §1 The Loss View

Philosophers of emotion have often claimed that sadness requires taking something to be a loss. For example:

Although different episodes of sadness may be related to particular objects as disparate as the disappearance of a loved one, failure at an exam, the melting of a glacier, and so on, the subject who feels sad nevertheless apprehends all these objects as losses. (Deonna and Teroni 2014, 17)


Let us call this view the Loss View:

**Loss View:** if one is sad about something, one takes it to be a loss.

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According to the Loss View, even if we can be sad about many different kinds of things, whenever we are sad about something, we take it to be a loss; on this view, all possible episodes of sadness require taking something to be a loss.<sup>1</sup> This view is common: it has been endorsed in (Lazarus 1991, 122), (Solomon 1993, 186), (Roberts 2003, 234), (Prinz 2004, 61), (Müller 2019, 37–38, 43–44) and (Deonna and Teroni 2022, 1–2).

I have brushed over the differences between the views of these philosophers, stating the Loss View using the verb ‘take’. One is committed to the Loss View if one endorses more specific views to the effect that, in order to be sad about something, it is necessary to perceive/judge/believe/imagine something to be a loss. Solomon, for instance, is committed to the Loss View because he writes: “My sadness, my sorrow, and my grief are judgments of various severity to the effect that I have suffered a loss” (Solomon 1993, 186).<sup>2</sup>

Before we move to the counterexamples, a word on ‘loss’. Defenders of the Loss View write as though all of their examples of things one could be sad about could be taken to be of a single kind of event (or relation) which can be designated with the word ‘loss’. Indeed, if they are to specify what all possible episodes of sadness have in common, it is *necessary* that all of their examples be of such a kind. But there may be no such kind. Does something happen when one ‘loses’ one’s mother which is of the same kind as what happens when one ‘loses’ one’s job? What about when one ‘loses’ hope or when one ‘loses’ a watch? I doubt whether there is a single kind of ‘loss’-event which all of these ‘losses’ belong to. Importantly, similar things can be said of ‘have’. Regardless of whether there is a single kind of ‘loss’-event, it is nevertheless true that whenever one takes a ‘loss’-event to have occurred one must think that there was something which then there wasn’t

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<sup>1</sup> The Loss View is entailed by the claim that loss is sadness’ ‘formal object’. See, e.g., (Teroni 2007, 408) and (Müller 2019, 37). On formal objects see (Kenny 2003, 132–135).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the differences between the Loss View theorists do not matter. If you believe there is no such genus as *taking* of which *perceiving*, *judging*, *imagining*, etc. are species, then imagine my counterexamples to be counterexamples to the more specific theses, which would, were there to be such a genus as *taking*, entail the Loss View.

or that something was had (in some sense of ‘have’) which then was no longer had.

I will speak as if there is a single kind of ‘loss’-event which all of the ‘losses’ the Loss View theorists speak about belong to. If there is no such kind, then I should be understood to be arguing for the strongest conclusion—namely, that in order to be sad about something, one needn’t take it to be a ‘loss’-event of any kind.

## §2 The Loss View is false

Here are two counterexamples to the Loss View:

*Counterexample 1.* Anne (of *Anne of Green Gables*) is sad about having red hair because she thinks it is ugly. Anne does not take her having red hair to be a loss.

*Counterexample 2.* Bob (of *A Christmas Carol*) is sad about being poor because he cannot afford treatment for his son Tim. Bob does not take his being poor to be a loss.

It is not even clear what it would be for Anne to take her having red hair to be a loss. Nor is it clear what it would be for Bob to take his being poor to be a loss.

Similar cases of sadness which do not seem to involve any thought of loss are cases of sadness on account of friendlessness, congenital illness, or involuntary childlessness. These are things people can be, and are, sad about without taking them to be losses.

In light of these counterexamples, one might think that this weaker alternative to the Loss View ought to be considered:

**Weak Loss View:** if one is sad about something, one takes something to be a loss.

But the Weak Loss View fares no better. In being sad, Anne doesn’t take herself to have had something which she no longer has nor does she take there to have been something which there now isn’t. Nonetheless she is sad. And Bob was always poor and always knew that he was poor.

*Objection.* These cases involve the subject thinking about some loss of opportunity, and therefore they are not counterexamples to the Weak Loss View. Anne is sad about her red hair because she thinks it comes with a loss of opportunity—in having red hair Anne takes herself to have lost the opportunity to be considered beautiful by her contemporaries. Bob takes himself to have lost the opportunity to pay for treatment.

*Reply.* It is doubtful whether the subjects of these cases take themselves to have lost opportunities: Anne always had red hair, so she wouldn't have taken herself to have ever had, or lost, the opportunities that having red hair precluded in Victorian Canada; Bob never had the money and knew it, so he would never have taken himself to have had, or lost, the opportunities that money would have afforded him.

*Objection.* But couldn't Anne think she has lost the 'genetic lottery'; and couldn't Bob think that he has lost some sort of lottery that determined his social position?

*Reply.* Regardless of whether either of these 'lottery' beliefs are true (I doubt it), we need not attribute them to Anne or Bob in order to make sense of their sadness. In order to be sad that she has red hair, Anne doesn't need to think that there was ever a chance of her not having red hair. Bob might think he was doomed to be poor and still be sad that he is.

What might be true is that the characters compare (what they take to be) a(n) (im)possibility and an actuality: their sadness might well be fuelled by counterfactual(/counterpossible) thinking/imagining. But the Weak Loss View cannot account for this: to take something to be a loss requires comparing two things one takes to be actualities—a before and an after.

There are also cases in which people are sad as a result of comparing (what they take to be) two actualities without them taking anything to be a loss: Anne might be sad about having red hair after comparing her hair with that of her friend Diana; Bob might be sad about being poor after comparing his situation with that of Scrooge. There are no 'losses' here. Nor need the characters think that there are.

### §3 Sadness and taking something to be bad

So what must one take something to be in order to be sad about it? What was said about comparisons at the end of the last section suggests an alternative to the (Weak) Loss View:

**Worse View:** if one is sad about something, one takes it to be worse than something else.

The *worseness* is *worseness for*; specifically worseness for something/someone one cares about (which may well be oneself). You are sad about your father being dead because your father's being dead is worse for you (and him?) than his being alive; Anne is sad about having red hair because she cares about how she looks and she takes having red hair to be worse for her looks than having black hair.

It is, I think, unnecessary to compare things in order to be sad. So I think the Worse View is false. However, it is true that if one makes a comparison one might end up taking something to be bad for something or someone one cares about; and in my view it is *this* which is crucial for sadness. What all cases of sadness have in common (including those I have considered here) is taking something to be bad. Hence the Bad View:

**Bad View:** if one is sad about something, one takes it to be bad.

The *badness* is *badness for*; specifically badness for something/someone one cares about. Anne is sad about having red hair because she takes it to be bad for her and her looks. Bob is sad about being poor because he takes it to be bad for Tim.<sup>3</sup>

I won't offer further reasons here for preferring the Bad View over the Worse View. But I will, in what follows, defend the Bad View from a

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<sup>3</sup> A different connection between sadness and badness is suggested by (Mulligan 2016). For me, when Sam says, truly, e.g. that he is sad that his father is dead: what Sam is sad about is that his father is dead; and what he takes his father's being dead to be is *bad*. Mulligan's discussion of happiness (*ibid.*, 138–139) suggests, rather: that what Sam would *really* be sad about is the badness of his father's being dead, a higher-level state of affairs; and what Sam would take that higher-level state of affairs to be is *unlucky*.

methodological objection in order to show that it is indeed a more promising alternative to the (Weak) Loss View.

*Objection.*<sup>4</sup> Even if the Bad View is correct, it does not shed light on the nature of sadness. In particular, it does not provide us with a suitable formal object for sadness. Badness cannot be the formal object of sadness, for if it were, the *individuation requirement* would be contravened:

*Individuation requirement:* each emotion type has its distinctive formal object (Teroni 2007, 399).

After all, when we are, e.g., afraid of something, don't we take it to be bad (for something/someone we care about)? Taking something to be bad is not exclusive to sadness, so badness cannot be sadness's formal object.

*Reply.* Objections have been raised against the individuation requirement (see Teroni 2007, 401–402). But even supposing that the individuation requirement is correct, that is no problem for the view that badness is sadness' formal object. Suppose badness *is* sadness' formal object and assume that one cannot take something to be a danger (to something/someone one cares about) without taking it to be bad (for something/someone one cares about), and hence that one cannot be afraid of something without taking it to be bad. This wouldn't entail a contravention of the individuation requirement, because it would not entail that sadness and fear have the same formal object. For formal objects (are supposed to) determine the correctness conditions of emotions (Teroni 2007, 399), and one could maintain that sadness' formal object is badness while fear's formal object is dangerousness on the grounds that the correctness conditions of fear are determined by dangerousness (as opposed to badness) and the correctness conditions of sadness are determined by badness.<sup>5</sup> Therefore one could uphold the individuation requirement, maintaining that

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<sup>4</sup> I thank Giovanna Colombetti for a comment which led me to develop this objection.

<sup>5</sup> I take sadness to be (primarily) about events and states of affairs; if an event or state of affairs is bad (for something/someone one cares about), sadness towards it is correct. If it is not bad for anything or anyone one cares about, sadness towards it is incorrect.

sadness and fear have different formal objects, even if both required one to take something to be bad.

This discussion focussed on fear, but so long as the correctness of the other negative emotions (anger, shame, jealousy, etc.) is not determined by mere badness, the same defence can be given *mutatis mutandis*. The individuation requirement would only be contravened if there were an emotion other than sadness which could claim badness as its formal object; but there is, I think, no such emotion.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Eileen John, Christoph Hoerl, Nathan William Davies, the participants of the 2023 Alpine Fellowship Symposium, and the participants of the 2023 Warwick-Geneva-Leipzig Interdepartmental Workshop for helpful discussions. I would also like to thank the Alpine Fellowship and the AHRC for financial support.

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