

## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1. For Whom We Grieve	21
CHAPTER 2. What to Expect When You're Grieving	38
CHAPTER 3. Finding Ourselves in Grief	65
CHAPTER 4. Making Good on the Pain	103
CHAPTER 5. Reason in the Midst of Grieving	123
CHAPTER 6. Our Duty to Grieve	149
CHAPTER 7. Madness and Medicine	166
CONCLUSION. Grief Most Human	186
<i>Notes</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	213

## INTRODUCTION

Grief tends to attract the attention of creative or inquisitive minds: The emotional turbulence caused by others' deaths is a central theme in one of the earliest known literary works, the 4,000-year-old Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Disputes about grief, burial rites, and social honor punctuate Homer's *Iliad*. Poems of grief or mourning, whether elegiac or defiant, are found in virtually all of the world's literary traditions. Many of Shakespeare's characters are emotionally vexed by grief. Indeed, cultural interest in grief appears to have accelerated in recent years, with grief a focus of innumerable personal memoirs, streaming television series, podcasts, graphic novels, and movies. For the technologically inclined, there are now several mobile phone apps to help users understand or manage their grief.

These facts speak to the powerful human interest in grief. But to judge by the number of philosophers who have investigated it, the subject is of little interest. Grief is a bit player in the history of philosophy, meriting only passing mentions in the works of eminent philosophers while receiving sustained attention from just a few.<sup>1</sup> And even among those philosophers for whom philosophy is a practical pursuit, a method by which to acquire the wisdom needed to live well, grief at the deaths of those who matter to us is rarely discussed, despite its being one of life's most pivotal and defining experiences.

For almost every subject, there's a "philosophy of" that subject. Philosophers have investigated the underpinnings of virtually every other academic discipline (philosophy of chemistry, economics, history, etc.), almost every profession (philosophy of medicine, education, business, etc.), many social developments (philosophy of artificial intelligence, space exploration, video games, etc.), and our major categories of social identity (race, gender, sexuality, etc.). Seen in this light, perhaps philosophers' neglect of grief is not a coincidence: Not every subject merits philosophical attention, and philosophers have not been all that interested in grief because grief is not all that philosophically interesting.

One of my goals in this book is to illustrate that this is false. Grief is in fact *extremely* interesting from a philosophical perspective. But if so, what accounts for philosophers' relative silence on the concept? Grief is an admittedly challenging topic to investigate in a sober, academic way. Emotionally complex and seemingly idiosyncratic, grief seems difficult to understand. Beyond that, in order to understand grief, we must confront some of the more unsettling realities of human life: that our emotions can sometimes prove difficult to comprehend or manage, that the people who matter to us are impermanent, and that because of this impermanence, our relationships with others are both sources of, and threats to, our sense of security, safety, and predictability. There is, then, much to be feared both in grief and in investigating grief.

But to my eye, philosophers have often brought certain intellectual assumptions to their investigation of grief, assumptions that have led them to have an at best ambivalent relationship to grief. Thanks to these assumptions, when philosophers have turned their eyes to grief, what they frequently see is embarrassing, even fearsome. For these philosophers, grief may be

inevitable, but it represents the human condition at its worst: turbulent, exposed, and pitiable.

Antipathy toward grief is a common theme among ancient Mediterranean philosophers. Greek and Roman philosophers were far more hostile toward grief than we moderns, tending to view grief as, at best, a state to be tolerated or minimized. For these philosophers, grieving others' deaths is an unruly condition, a sign that one had become overly dependent on others and lacked the rational self-control characteristic of virtuous individuals. According to the influential Roman physician Galen, grief arises from excessive or covetous desires for things or people. In his view, it's better to be rid of such desires than suffer the loss of mastery over one's emotions and comportment.<sup>2</sup> Grief, in this interpretation, is effeminate and pathetic.<sup>3</sup>

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates acknowledges that decent people will grieve their losses but insists that they should still find their grief shameful and try to moderate its public expression. He declares grief a "sickness" calling not for "lamentation" but for "medicine."<sup>4</sup> Socrates argues that aspiring political leaders should not be exposed to poetry depicting the "wailings and lamentations of men of repute." Any poetry with scenes of honorable men grieving should therefore be censored, with grief instead attributed only to women and "inferior men."<sup>5</sup> Later, in the moving death scene in *Phaedo*, Phaedo confesses that though he and Socrates' other friends had managed to control their grief up until Socrates raised the cup of hemlock to his lips, their emotions then boiled over. Tears and wailing ensued. "I wrapped my face in my cloak and wept for myself; for it was not for him that I wept, but for my own misfortune in being deprived of such a friend." Socrates rebukes them: "What conduct is this, you strange men! I sent the

women away chiefly for this very reason, that they might not behave in this absurd way.”<sup>6</sup>

As Scott LaBarge explains, authors in this tradition understood that grief is natural, but “tended to see their own grief, past or present, as evidence of a weakness that must be overcome or an error that must be corrected.”<sup>7</sup> The remarks of the Stoic philosopher Seneca are typical in this regard: “Let not the eyes be dry when we have lost a friend, nor let them gush. We may weep, but we must not wail.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet, lest one think that this antipathy to grief is unique to “Western” thought, we encounter a subtler expression of it in the writings of the Chinese Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi preached acceptance of all change, including death. In one well-known parable, the Master Hui arrives to comfort Zhuangzi upon the death of his wife. Hui unexpectedly finds Zhuangzi banging on a basin and singing rather than wailing or weeping:

Master Hui said: “You lived with her; she raised your children and grew old. Now that she is dead, it is enough that you do not weep for her; but banging on a drum and singing—is this not extreme?”

Master Zhuang said: “It is not so. When she first died, how indeed could I not have been melancholy? But I considered that in the beginning, she was without life; not only was she without life, but she was originally without form; not only was she without form, but she was originally without *qi*.<sup>9</sup> . . . the *qi* changed, and there was form; the form changed, and there was life; and now there is another change, and there is death. This is the same as the progression of the four seasons, spring, autumn, summer, winter. Moreover, she sleeps now, reclining, in a giant chamber; if I were to have

accompanied her, weeping and wailing, I would have considered myself ignorant of destiny. So I stopped.”<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, Zhaungzi’s parable does not echo the strident tone of Plato and other ancient Mediterranean philosophers. And at one level, Zhuangzi’s counsel is sensible: We should not forget that the deaths of those we love are as inevitable as the changing of the seasons. Yet he too sees grief as foolhardy, the result (he contends) of our forgetting our human “destiny.” And, like the Greeks and Romans, Zhuangzi invites the reader to try to *transcend* grief, in his case, by reminding ourselves that the lives and deaths of the loved ones for whom we grieve are but episodes within the larger cycle of nature. Zhuangzi’s parable does not *condemn* grief exactly. But it does consign grief to that set of emotions we undergo only because we are unduly fixated on the ephemeral and the mutable instead of on what is durable and unchanging. Like the Greeks and Romans, Zhuangzi understands grief as a consequence of ignorance. We grieve (or grieve to excess) because we have not fully taken to heart lessons about the larger world and our place in it. Grief thus reflects negatively on those who grieve, bringing to light their human shortcomings rather than expressing their best or truest natures.

Notice that these philosophers’ antipathy toward grief does not rest on any reluctance on their part to confront death. In fact, these traditions emphasize that philosophical wisdom is needed to ready us for *our own* deaths. Socrates went so far as to proclaim that philosophy just is preparation for death. Rather, what alarms these philosophers about grief is how it underscores human interdependence and our ensuing vulnerability to loss. And, while grief may shock us, this is not because, as Zhuangzi seems to allege, we are ignorant of human mortality.<sup>11</sup> We do not grieve because we are ignorant of human

mortality; we seem rather to grieve despite knowing that humans inevitably die.

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Grief, according to much of this philosophical tradition, is a source of shame. If so, then to linger over a phenomenon that reveals us in an unflattering light when we could instead try to figure out how to become the kinds of self-sufficient, invulnerable, and implacable individuals who neither can nor need to grieve does not make much sense. In this tradition, grief is a personal deficiency to be overcome instead of a philosophical problem whose depths should be plumbed.

Nowadays, philosophers do not seem to share the ancient conviction that grief is shameful. Nevertheless, a certain hesitancy about too openly acknowledging grief, or opening up grief to public philosophical scrutiny, is visible in a more recent episode in which a philosopher could *not* avoid grief.

In the summer of 1960, the British writer and theologian C. S. Lewis was sixty-one years old and at the peak of his professional and intellectual acclaim. Six years earlier, he had been appointed as the first holder of a newly established chair in medieval and renaissance literature at Cambridge University. His BBC radio broadcasts in the early 1940s, when London had been subject to repeated Nazi bombings, had been published as *Mere Christianity*. That work, along with essays such as *Miracles* and *The Problem of Pain* and the epistolary novel *The Screwtape Letters*, had made Lewis arguably the world's foremost spokesperson for Christianity. His works for children were also wildly popular; his seven-part series of novels, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, would eventually sell more than 100 million copies.

But professional acclaim would soon collide with private turmoil.

Four years earlier, Lewis had married the American poet Joy Davidman. His attraction had intellectual roots: Davidman had won multiple awards for her poetry and had authored a scholarly interpretation of the Ten Commandments for which Lewis had written the preface. But their love went beyond the cerebral. Lewis would write that Joy “was my daughter and my mother, my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign . . . my trusty comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow-soldier.” Only a few months into their marriage, Joy broke her leg, treatment for which revealed that she had developed cancer. The diagnosis seemed only to catalyze Lewis’s growing affection for her. The years from 1957, when Joy’s cancer went into remission, to 1959, when it returned, appear to be the most joyful in Lewis’s adult life. In April 1960, Joy and “Jack” (as Lewis was known to his familiars) took a holiday to Greece, fulfilling Joy’s lifelong wish to see the Aegean Sea.

And then, on July 13, Joy died.

Jack Lewis was not the sort of person to be unprepared for life’s challenges: Both of his parents had died of cancer, his mother when he was but nine years old. Jack moved from Ireland to England as a teenager, saw combat in World War I, lost and regained his Christian faith in early adulthood, and took in children evacuated from the London blitz.

But to judge from the journals he kept in the days following Joy’s death, Jack was caught hopelessly unprepared for his own grief.<sup>12</sup>

Jack was embarrassed by the tears and sorrow, but at least he had anticipated them. What he had not expected was how “grief felt so like fear.”<sup>13</sup> Nor had he expected his grief to include feelings of mild drunkenness (like being “concussed”), distraction

and boredom (“I find it hard to take in what anyone says. . . . It is so uninteresting”), or isolation and alienation (“There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me”). Nor had anyone warned him about how grief induces languor or “laziness.”

I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth?<sup>14</sup>

Grief had made Jack a stranger to himself. His own body was foreign to him, an “empty house” where he felt Joy’s absence most acutely.<sup>15</sup> A shared Christian faith had bound him to Joy, but it too did not seem up to the task of helping Jack find his way after her death. Instead, Joy’s absence sparked the only crisis of faith he had undergone since his conversion three decades earlier. “Meanwhile,” Jack asked, “where is God?”<sup>16</sup>

For devotees of Lewis’s work, the Jack Lewis of the early chapters of *A Grief Observed* likely comes as a surprise. They probably would not have predicted that Joy’s death would transform Lewis from an articulate public intellectual and Christian apologist to a frightened and bewildered man with wavering faith, a distracted mind, and a fractured sense of self. Readers may well have been taken aback by Lewis’s grief, struggling to reconcile it with his plea elsewhere to “submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body, in the end submit with every fiber of your being.”<sup>17</sup>

Lewis himself would die three years later. But in the interim, he considered whether to publish the journals cataloguing his own grief experience. For reasons that remain murky, he was reluctant for the journals to be associated with him. An apparent compromise was struck; the journals were published a year

later as *A Grief Observed*, but under the pseudonym N. W. Clerk, and with Joy referred to simply as “H.”

We cannot know for certain exactly what lies behind Lewis’s trepidation about publishing his grief journals. As a trained philosopher, Lewis was no doubt well versed in the philosophical tradition to which I earlier referred, a tradition in which grief is an embarrassment to be overcome. We can detect in *A Grief Observed*, and Lewis’s decision to publish it posthumously and pseudonymously, an inkling of such embarrassment. While he could not avoid grief in his private life, he managed to avoid it in his *public* life. For, while readers later learn of Jack’s grief, Lewis died having shielded it from public scrutiny. In this respect, Lewis’s life story embodies the tradition of philosophical antipathy toward grief: Whatever the private significance of grief, it is too shameful to be a subject of proper public philosophy.

But why should grief elicit shame? Is it possible to acknowledge that even though grief sometimes *causes* shame, such shame is improper, an echo of mistaken beliefs about what grief is and what it says about us?

By shrinking from grief as a subject of sustained inquiry, philosophers have not had to confront a potent counterexample to deeply held convictions about what is possible and desirable for us. Ironically then, these convictions have impeded full, non-dogmatic philosophical inquiry into grief. After all, grief only appears shameful and philosophically uninteresting *if* we accept the view that grief is bad and should be avoided. But should we accept these claims? Honest and sustained attention to grief itself may well cast these into doubt. In other words, get close enough to grief and not only will antipathy toward it dissolve but the worldview that marginalizes grief as a philosophical subject may waver as well. Ultimately, we avoid what we fear. Much of the philosophical tradition thus seems to fear grief for

what it might say about us human beings. Specifically, to investigate grief with the same probity and exactitude philosophers bring to other subjects may bring to light a possibility that many may fear—to wit, that our finitude, vulnerability, and interdependence neither can be nor should be fully overcome.

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I have not had a particularly difficult go of things grief-wise. With just more than half of my expected life in the books, I have had my share of grief, and have found it mildly distressing but far from tortuous. Certainly, Jack Lewis's grief at Joy's death was far more intense than anything I have undergone.

At its best, philosophy is courageous and practical. Its historical avoidance of grief is neither. To avoid grief for fear of entertaining uncomfortable questions about the human condition is not courageous. And neglecting one of the most distinctively human and life-defining events we face is not practical. One of philosophy's greatest uses is in helping us navigate life's more bewildering transitions: maturation, parenthood, romantic love, aging, death. In that light, our philosophical neglect of grief is faintly scandalous. We can certainly do better.

Yet the fact that philosophers have largely neglected grief does not show that there is much to be gained by investigating grief in a philosophical way. One might be skeptical that philosophy has any distinctive contribution to make to our knowledge of grief because other disciplines and practices have already shone the spotlight on it. Perhaps we need guidance about grief, but no *philosophical* guidance about grief.

I certainly do not think philosophy has a monopoly on understanding grief. But it does have a distinctive role to play that cannot be fulfilled by other disciplines or forms of expertise.

For instance, grief has been extensively studied by psychologists and psychiatrists. I will often reference their work in this book because the conclusions philosophers reach about some phenomenon should at least be compatible with the best evidence other disciplines provide about that same phenomenon. Philosophy need not compete with the answers provided by other disciplines. It can instead address questions that other disciplines are ill-equipped to answer. A philosophical understanding of grief should therefore accord with what psychologists, etc., have discovered about the grief experience. Still, there are two reasons psychology is not likely to offer compelling answers to certain questions we are likely to have about grief. First, psychology studies the workings of our minds—what is “in our heads.” I will have a lot to say in this book about the psychology of grief, but focusing on grief as a purely mental phenomenon overlooks the non-mental facts involved in grief. As we shall see, grief occurs because of our ties to other people as well as our ties to our own past and future selves. Grief is thus about *how our minds relate to the wider world*, a consideration that purely psychological approaches to grief may shortchange. Second, psychology aims to be a descriptive discipline, discovering the laws that govern our thoughts and experiences. But many of our questions about grief are not descriptive in nature. They are instead ethical questions about why we should care about grief, whether we should be glad (rather than resentful) that we grieve, or whether grief is morally obligatory. Such questions are philosophical in nature.

Similarly, health care providers are often the first resource we turn to in order to address life challenges, and we might therefore hope to answer these questions about grief by turning to mental health professionals. Recent decades have witnessed an explosive growth in the grief counseling industry. It is certainly

not the purpose of this book to disparage grief counseling. No doubt many bereaved persons benefit from it. But the “therapeutic” challenges grief raises for us do not seem necessarily medical in nature.<sup>18</sup> I will offer explicit arguments against viewing grief as a medical problem later (in chapter 7). But for now, suffice to say that some of the challenges grief presents are “problems in living,” problems arising not because our lives have gone wrong somehow but because human life has certain predicaments baked into it. And philosophy is often where we turn for help with those predicaments.

Literature and the arts also can no doubt be instructive with regard to grief.<sup>19</sup> This book contains many references to grief memoirs and other literary works that illustrate claims about grief that we also have nonliterary reasons to accept. Yet no single artistic work can fully illuminate grief’s nuances. For one, such works nearly always focus on a single grief episode. We can learn a great deal about grief when such episodes are representative of grief experience in general, but if they are atypical, they are as likely to mislead as to inform. Also keep in mind that literature and the arts thrive on drama and are thus likely to overrepresent the most intense or emotionally high-pitched grief episodes at the expense of representations of ordinary, more “healthy” grief episodes.<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for instance, vividly exemplifies how grief can simultaneously feel inescapable and enigmatic. But (fortunately) only a fraction of bereaved people ultimately contemplate suicide (as *Hamlet* seems to), and only a smaller fraction of the bereaved are thereby led to violence.

The Internet blogosphere is also saturated with advice on how to deal with grief. But much of it suffers from the same defect as artistic depictions of grief, drawing solely upon the blogger’s experience while neglecting the voluminous scientific

research on the subject. In other cases, Internet resources largely add to the haze that surrounds grief by devolving to a tired therapeutic language of “closure,” “healing,” and “journeys,” which lacks philosophical mettle.

More generally, grief is a serious matter that deserves to be taken seriously, but we are only rarely invited to *understand* grief. And as I will elaborate later in chapter 3, in addition to involving painful emotions, grief is also made more difficult by the fact that it is often a bewildering experience. We often seem not to grasp what happens to us when we grieve. When successful, philosophy provides us just such an understanding.

In fact, that understanding requires a philosophical *theory* of grief. If that word “theory” sends shivers down your spine, be assured that I don’t have in mind anything weighty. If we are to understand grief, we need to understand its various facets, considering both what various grief experiences have in common as well as how they differ. A good theory unifies what we know about some domain, so that we see how these different parcels of knowledge interrelate. And in the case of grief, we have many philosophical insights but not, to my mind, a well-developed theory. My hope is that the theory outlined in this book enables us to see grief clearly, both in its parts and as a whole.

Still, you might doubt that a philosophical theory of grief can do much to alleviate the *emotional* tumult of grief. Admittedly, a rich philosophical understanding of grief may lessen the confusion that can surround it. But that understanding is helpless in the face of the agony of grief. Above all else, we seek comfort when thinking about grief, and philosophy is unlikely to comfort us.

To be clear, even the best philosophical theory of grief almost certainly cannot solve every challenge grief presents to us. But we should not underestimate how important understanding

grief is to the task of negotiating its emotional shoals. We are better knowing the truth about grief than finding comfort in half-truths and platitudes. Ultimately, each of us wants to live in light of the truth, however jarring the truth might be. The greatest and most lasting comfort is found in the truth. Lewis himself put it well:

[C]omfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, everyone stands to benefit from this book insofar as they can benefit from a more robust philosophical understanding of one of life’s “big emotions.”

That said, some will benefit more than others. In particular, this book is not principally aimed at those *in the midst of* grief. The emotional throes of grief may make it difficult to think about grief with the degree of detachment philosophy often requires. Moreover, as we shall learn in chapter 2, grief typically makes great demands on our attention, to the degree that it can compromise our ability to concentrate and to retain working memories.<sup>22</sup> I have sought to make my theory as accessible as possible to those with little philosophical background. Still, philosophy is a demanding enterprise and, as such, those in the midst of the cognitive fog of grief may struggle to engage fully with our philosophical inquiry.

However, this inquiry is likely to be more beneficial to those for whom grief has waned. The experience of grief teaches us about grief, but some questions can linger. More fundamentally, I would like to show those who have grieved exactly why

it can be a benefit—why, in the end, our propensity for grief should be welcomed rather than regretted.

I also intend this inquiry to benefit us prospectively, in *advance of* grief. As I have indicated, this book is not meant to be therapeutic in the usual way. But one way philosophy can be therapeutic is by readying us for what is to come. In particular, I hope that this inquiry can dispel the fear that I suspect grief often evokes. Earlier I criticized the philosophical tradition for being afraid of what grief might say about us. That fear may be ill-founded, but that does not mean there is nothing to be feared in grief. Grief can result from events (the deaths of those close to you) that we have reason to fear, as well as being harrowing in its own right. In particular, grief can induce in us a frightening sense of helplessness, of being tossed about in an emotional seastorm. But the likelihood of grief in our lifetimes is high, and if we shrink from trying to understand grief because we are afraid to look it square in the eye, we bar ourselves from the one path to addressing this fear. Fear of uncertainty and of the unknown are arguably among our greatest fears, after all. I doubt I can make the case that you should look forward to grief, exactly. All the same, knowing grief as well as we can in advance of grieving can diminish our fear of an event that we will not, in all likelihood, be able to avoid.

This book thus fits into a tradition that sees one of philosophy's key tasks as that of *consolation*, of helping us navigate our expectations for our lives, particularly by enabling us to understand ourselves and our circumstances. The grief we undergo in response to the deaths of those who matter to us represents a circumstance that is difficult to avoid and yet poses a challenge to what we expect, or hope for, from the world. Addressing these challenges, I will try to illustrate in this book, is best

done through a richer understanding of their nature and of ourselves.

My hope is that this book will *not* be the last word from philosophers on grief. Every philosopher of course wants to be right. But influencing philosophical discourse is no less valuable. The centrality of grief to the human experience makes it ripe for philosophical investigation, so the paucity of philosophical attention it has received is lamentable. Perhaps the account of grief and its importance expounded here, even if mistaken, will persuade philosophers that the subject deserves better.



Before our inquiry begins, let me provide a chapter-by-chapter preview of what is to come. For those who are eager to jump right in, feel free to move ahead.

The deaths of others elicit a range of responses from us. Anyone with a semblance of moral sensitivity is at least mildly dismayed upon learning of the deaths of others. However, only *some* of our responses to others count as grief responses. Chapter 1 takes up the question of how grief is differentiated from other responses to the deaths of others by addressing the *scope* of grief: For which individuals do we grieve? What must be true of another person, or of our relationship to her, such that her death is a loss that elicits grief? In this chapter, I argue that we grieve for those in whom we have invested our *practical identities*, that is, we grieve those who come to play crucial roles in our aspirations and commitments—indeed, in how we understand ourselves and in what we find valuable or worthwhile in our lives. This claim helps explain grief such as Jack Lewis’s—the grief we feel at the deaths of close loved ones or family

members—but also grief prompted by the deaths of those with whom we lack that same intimacy or familiarity, such as artists, politicians, or other public figures.

To know who we grieve for is still not to say what grief is. Chapter 2 develops a philosophical account of grief's nature. Specifically, I argue first that grief, unlike emotions such as fear and anger, is a series of affective states rather than a single such state. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross popularized this notion with her well-known “five stage” model, wherein grief progresses through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Subsequent research has found that Kübler-Ross's model is correct at a broad level but often gets the details of grief wrong: Grief typically includes multiple distinct emotions, but many of us do not undergo these five emotional stages, do not undergo them in this order (unsurprisingly, acceptance usually comes first), or undergo other emotions besides these five (guilt, fear, confusion, etc.). Second, I argue that grief should be thought of as a kind of emotionally driven *attention*. Grief responds to the deaths of others, not by immediately disclosing their importance but by motivating us to take notice of their deaths and interrogate how those deaths matter to us. Finally, although grieving is not a process we can dictate, it is nevertheless an *activity* that responds to our choices and actions and that has a discernible aim. These three features of grief qua emotion (that it is a process, a kind of attention, and an activity) as well as the conclusions regarding the scope of grief defended in chapter 1, suggest that grief's object—what grief is ultimately *about*—is the bereaved individual's relationship with the deceased, a relationship that invariably has been transformed by the latter's death.

Our exploration then turns to several foundational ethical questions concerning grief. Chapters 3 and 4 address what I

believe to be the principal ethical quandary caused by grief: Grief is by its nature painful or distressing, but also seems capable of contributing to our overall well-being. Many individuals are even drawn to the painful aspects of bereavement, in fact. This tension is the *paradox of grief*. Chapter 3 proposes that, because grief involves sustained and diverse emotional attention to an integral relationship whose terms must change due to the death of one of its participants, grief is uniquely situated to afford us self-knowledge, and in particular, knowledge of the values, emotional dispositions, and concerns that make up what I call our practical identities. The deaths of those to whom we are attached trigger, to a greater or lesser degree, a “crisis” in our relationship to them, which in turn generates a crisis in our own identity. It does this by highlighting that our values, commitments, and concerns are not simply “givens” that can be taken for granted but are dependent on relationships with other mortal beings. When they die, our relationships with them can—indeed *must*—change. The challenge of figuring out how those relationships shall change is the central puzzle grief provides. We solve this challenge when our grieving results in valuable self-knowledge.

This argument establishes how grief can be good for us despite its being painful or distressing. However, this argument does not fully explain why individuals often *seek out* opportunities to undergo painful grief experiences. Chapter 4 argues that while such experiences are genuinely painful, such experiences can be desirable as indispensable components of a larger valuable activity (in the way that, say, pain experienced in the course of strenuous exercise can be desirable insofar as it is inherent to an activity that is valuable overall).

A second foundational ethical question about grief is whether it is rational. Chapter 5 argues against two views that

deny the possibility of rational grief. The first posits that grief is *arational*, not subject to rational appraisal at all. The second posits that grief is *necessarily irrational*. I propose that grief is *contingently rational*. The rationality of grief is primarily retrospective, to be judged based on how well a grief episode and the emotions that embody it reflect the significance of the relationship the bereaved had with the deceased. A rational grief episode, on my view, is both qualitatively and quantitatively appropriate to that loss. In other words, *our grieving is rational when we feel the right emotions in the right degree in light of the loss of the relationship with the deceased that we have suffered*. The chapter concludes by arguing that although grief can be (and often is) rational in this respect, grieving individuals are nevertheless prone to irrationality when they are asked to make decisions regarding the dead or dying person for whom they grieve.

Chapter 6 considers whether, as the late Robert Solomon proposed, there is a duty to grieve. Those who do not grieve, or grieve without apparently sufficient depth or intensity, are open to apparent moral blame. I argue that such a duty is misunderstood if classified either as a duty owed to those who grieve the same deaths as we do or as a duty owed to the deceased. Neither of these duties reflect the essentially egocentric nature of grief defended in chapters 1 and 2. Instead, the best candidate for a duty to grieve is that it is self-regarding, i.e., a duty to oneself. Echoing the conclusions of chapter 3, the duty to grieve rests on a duty to pursue substantial self-knowledge—knowledge of one’s own values, dispositions, for example—so as to render rational the pursuit of one’s conception of the good. The duty to grieve thus belongs to the duties stemming from a moral requirement to respect and perfect ourselves as rational agents.

Chapter 7 addresses grief in the context of mental health and the treatment thereof. As noted earlier, ancient philosophers

worried that grief portended a loss of reason or self-control. Such worries fit into a long-standing cultural pattern depicting grief as a species of madness. Questions about grief and mental disorder came into public view about a decade ago when a committee developing a new version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* suggested changing the status of grief, jettisoning the claim that grief (despite having much in common with recognized mental disorders such as depression) is a “normal” response to loss and proposing the introduction of a new “complicated grief disorder.” Denunciations of these moves to “medicalize” grief were swift. This chapter argues that while mental health treatment is sometimes appropriate in the course of grief, grief’s medicalization should be resisted. While grief often resembles mental disorders in diminishing our sense of well-being and hampering our ability to function day-to-day, it nearly always represents a healthy response to others’ death—a sign of good underlying mental health rather than a pathology. A grieving person can of course be ill and therefore an appropriate subject of medical attention. But even when illness has grief as its source, the individual is almost never *sick with grief*. Normalizing the medical treatment of grief would do more harm than good.

## INDEX

- absence of grief, 18, 22, 66–68, 125–28, 176, 202n25. *See also* quasi-grief
- activity, grief as, 17, 44–47, 72–76.  
*See also* dialectical activity
- afterlife, 61–63, 131
- Albom, Mitch, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, 180
- alcoholism, 178–79
- alienation. *See* disorientation
- American Psychiatric Association, 169
- amputation, experience of another's death likened to, 33, 55, 83–84
- animals, 186, 211n1
- anticipatory grief, 140–43, 194
- arationality of grief, 19, 124–28
- Aristotle, 104
- attachment, 27–28, 128, 140–44
- attention: cognitive deficits resulting from altered, 172–73; defined, 48–49; degradation of, 7–8, 14; grief as specific form of, 17, 48–49, 85–86; on one's relationship with the deceased, 81, 93–94, 128; rationality of grief and, 135–36; self-knowledge arising from, 85–86. *See also* disorientation
- Attig, Thomas, 203n39
- Augustine, Saint, 110–12, 120
- avoidant attachment style, 128
- bewilderment, as feature of grief, 13, 73–79, 84, 110. *See also* disorientation
- blogs, 12–13
- Bowie, David, 25
- Bowlby, John, 41
- Brady, Michael, 48, 106–7
- brain, 173
- Brewer, Talbot, 116
- Burton, Richard, 191
- Callard, Agnes, 116
- Camus, Albert, *The Stranger*, 66–68, 102, 149, 174, 179
- Cassam, Quassim, 84
- Castro, Fidel, 26
- chatbots, 90
- Chung, Julianne, 188–89, 195
- closure, 13, 102
- cognitive deficits, resulting from grief, 124, 172–73
- coming to terms with death, 79, 102
- complicated grief disorder, 20, 169, 184
- consolation, as task of philosophy, 15, 187
- counseling. *See* mental health and therapy
- creativity, 188–89. *See also* improvisation
- Cruzan, Nancy, 51

- Davidman, Joy, 7–8, 65, 74, 76, 83–84, 88, 96, 105, 111–12, 129, 131, 174
- death: dying vs., 200n16; funeral and disposition following, 144–47; inevitability of, 4–6, 10, 186; irreversibility of, 191; metaphysical beliefs about, 61–63, 131. *See also* dying
- the deceased: duties to, 153–54; and end-of-life choices, 139–44; funeral and disposition of, 144–47; irreplaceability of, 191–92; loss of well-being of, as object of grief, 50–52, 61. *See also* relationship with the deceased
- denial of death, 77–78, 135
- depression, grief likened to, 20, 168–69, 171
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, 20, 169, 175, 177, 183, 211n22
- dialectical activity, 116–17
- Didion, Joan, 33, 74, 77, 111, 120, 168; *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 33, 74, 180
- disorientation, as feature of grief, 32–33, 55, 80–81, 84. *See also* attention; bewilderment
- disposition of corpses, 144–47
- dopamine, 173
- DSM. *See* *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders*
- dual process model of grief, 79, 81
- duty to grieve, 19, 149–65; the deceased as object of, 153–54; duties to self and, 157–65; moral ground of, 150, 155–59; and moral object of grief, 150, 155–57; other people as object of, 151–52; self-knowledge as goal of, 150, 155–59
- dying: the deceased's experience of, 200n16; end-of-life choices and, 139–44
- egocentric nature of grief: attachment to another linked to, 27, 53, 92–93; duty to grieve linked to, 19, 152; occurrence and degree of grief dependent on, 22–23, 29–30, 32–33, 92–93; and paradox of grief, 70; practical identity investment linked to, 32–33; self-knowledge linked to, 91–94
- emotions: grief's manifestation of, 39–43, 63–64; involved in the relationship with the deceased, 59–60, 74; management of, 44; passive character of, 43–44; philosophy as aid in dealing with, 13–14; rationality of grief and, 88–90; reflexive, 92; theoretical accounts of, 199n1; variety of, in grief, 39–43, 74, 85, 98
- Epic of Gilgamesh*, 1
- estrangement. *See* disorientation
- ethics: and the absence of grief, 18, 22; associated with grief, 11, 17–19; and the benefits resulting from grief, 18; and the duty to grieve, 19, 149–65; and the rationality of grief, 18–19, 123–48
- fear: of grief, 9–10, 15; grief compared to, 38, 40, 48–50, 73, 75, 133; philosophy as means of addressing, 15; rationality of, 133; resulting from loss, 192–94
- formal object of grief, 50–61, 73–74
- Foucault, Michel, 184
- freedom, 188
- Freud, Sigmund, 94
- Fuchs, Thomas, 203n32
- funerals, 144–47
- Furtak, Rick Anthony, 78

- Galen, 3
- gender, and grief, 168. *See also* women
- genre, of grief narratives, 180–81
- Godard, Jean-Luc, 187
- grief: absence of, 18, 22, 66–68, 125–28, 176, 202n25; as an activity, 17, 44–47, 72–76; adequation/proportionality of, 108, 132–38, 149; anticipatory, 140–43, 194–95; as attention, 17, 48–49, 81, 85–86, 93–94; bewilderment as feature of, 13, 73–79, 84, 110; complexity of, 135; conclusion of, 95; defined, 21; degrees of, 31–32, 106, 108–9; difficulties in understanding, 2; disorientation as feature of, 32–33, 55, 80–81, 84; duration of, 95–96, 98, 106, 169; emotional and mental responses to, 7–8; functioning during, 175–77; healthy, 94–95, 174–75; helplessness as feature of, 15, 130, 132; as a literary genre, 180–81; mourning vs., 21–22, 152–54; nature of, 17, 38–64; negative effects of, 65, 68–69, 71; object of, 17, 49–63, 150–57, 205n62; pathological, 75, 171–72, 174, 181–82; people who elicit one's, 16–17, 21–37; on a philosophical approach to, 1–16; preparation for, 15, 194–96; as a process, 17, 39–43, 135–38; purpose of, 73–76, 83, 85–86, 89–91, 115; quasi-, 117–18, 127–28; recovery from, 95–98, 180; sadness as feature of, 39, 41–42, 44, 48, 96–98; scope of, 16–17, 25, 33–37; stress of, 18, 32, 68, 103, 124, 142, 173, 190; as supposed deficiency of human thought and character, 3–6, 9, 112, 168; trauma likened to, 189–94; unexpectedness/unpredictability of, 7–8, 74–75, 195; universal, 198; value and benefits of, 14–15, 18, 65–71, 73, 83–95, 101, 114–22, 170–71, 176–77, 187–88
- guilt, 137, 145–47
- Gustafson, Donald, 129–32, 147
- Hacking, Ian, 177–79, 181
- Harbin, Ami, 80
- hatred, grief in spite of, 26–27, 35–36
- health. *See* medicine and medicalization; mental health and therapy
- helplessness, as feature of grief, 15, 130, 132
- Higgins, Kathleen, 82
- Homer, *Iliad*, 1
- human condition: death as essential feature of, 4–6, 10, 186; grief as means of understanding, 2–3, 5–6, 9–10, 186–87, 193
- Hume, David, 104–5
- identity. *See* practical identity investment
- imagination, 89–90
- imperfect duties, 156, 165
- improvisation, 45–46, 75, 188, 195
- intellectualization of grief, 88–91
- interdependence, 5, 10, 202n23
- Internet: chatbots available on, 90; grief for public figures known through, 24–25; grief-related resources on, 13
- intimacy, 23–26
- Jamison, Kay Redfield, 174
- John Paul II, Pope, 62
- Jollimore, Troy, 69, 109
- joy, rationality of, 134
- Kagan, Shelly, 109
- Kant, Immanuel, 157–59
- Kennedy, John F., 24, 26
- Klein, Colin, 105–6
- Kleinman, Arthur, 170–71

- Korsgaard, Christine, 30–31, 87
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, 17, 41, 66, 78, 135, 179
- LaBarge, Scott, 4
- Lewis, C. S. “Jack,” 6–9, 14, 16, 33, 57, 65, 67–69, 74–76, 83–84, 87–88, 96–97, 105, 110–12, 120, 124, 129, 131, 174;  
*A Grief Observed*, 7–9, 67, 96–97
- limbic system, 173
- Lincoln, Abraham, 34–35
- literature: case studies in, 66–68, 77, 124–26; grief as subject of, 12, 180
- looping effects, of medicalization of experience, 178–83
- loss: irreversible and irreplaceable, 191–92; of one’s relationship with the deceased, 55–64, 191–92; of one’s sense of self, after another’s death, 32–33, 79–86; of one’s well-being, after another’s death, 52–54, 61; suffered by the deceased, 50–52, 61
- love: knowledge in relation to, 76–77, 79, 100–101; not necessary for grief, 26–27
- Mad Men* (television show), 118
- madness, grief as, 20, 124, 166–71, 174.  
*See also* mental health and therapy
- Manchester by the Sea* (film), 180
- Mandela, Nelson, 25
- masochism, 104–6
- material object of grief, 49–50, 73
- meaninglessness, as response to another’s death, 7–8, 32
- medicine and medicalization: and end-of-life choices, 139–44; grief as subject of, 12, 20, 169–85; as inadequate framework for understanding grief, 170–71, 176–79, 181–83, 211n22
- memory, 93–94
- mental health and therapy, 166–85; and the framing of grief, 170–71, 176–79, 181–84; functioning during grief, 175–77; grief as healthy, 172–75; grief as madness, 20, 124, 166–71, 174; grief as pathological, 181–82; grief as subject of, 11–12, 19–20; pathological grief, 75, 171–72, 174. *See also* rationality of grief
- Mitford, Jessica, 145
- Moller, Dan, 96–99, 205n62
- moods, 40–41
- Moore, G. E., 114
- morality. *See* duty to grieve; ethics
- mourning, 21–22, 44, 150, 152–54
- narrative, 43, 81–82, 118, 180–81
- Nussbaum, Martha, 52, 76–77, 85, 101
- objects of grief: formal, 50–61, 73–74; material, 49–50, 73
- Olberding, Amy, 209n2
- pain associated with grief, 18, 103–22; as acceptable cost, 107–9; attraction to, 18, 110–18; context of, 119–20; intrinsic nature of, 113–14, 120; pleasure in relation to, 104–6; proportionality of, 108; rationality of grief and, 111–21; self-knowledge as outcome of, 113–18; suffering in relation to, 106–7; value and benefits of, 114–22. *See also* suffering
- paradox of grief, 18, 69–71, 73, 102–5, 107, 109, 121–22, 177. *See also* grief: value and benefits of; pain associated with grief
- Parkes, Colin, 80–81
- philosophy: antipathy toward grief in, 3–6, 9–10; benefits and uses of, 10–16;

- grief as subject of, 1–6, 9–10, 13–16, 189–96; other approaches to grief compared to that of, 11–13; reluctance to examine grief in, 2–3, 9–10
- Plato: *Phaedo*, 3–4; *Republic*, 3
- practical identity investment: crises of, 82–86; as crucial source of grief, 30–37, 76; defined, 30–31; degrees of, 31–32; duty to grieve and, 158–59; in public figures, 34–35; in relationship with the deceased, 30–37, 55–58, 62, 76–82; self-knowledge of, 18, 82–94, 182–84; temporalities of, 76–82; values, commitments, and concerns underlying, 18, 30–31, 195; various manifestations of, 31; vulnerability of, 193–94
- Preston-Roedder, Erica and Ryan, 96, 97
- proportionality of grief, 108, 132–38, 149
- Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 77, 85
- psychology, grief as subject of study for, 11
- public figures, grief in response to deaths of, 17, 24–25, 34–35
- purpose of grief, 73–76, 83, 85, 89–91, 115–16
- quasi-grief, 117–18, 127–28. *See also* absence of grief
- Ratcliffe, Matthew, 89, 203n32, 204n45
- rationality of grief, 123–48; adequacy to relationship with the deceased as criterion of, 125, 127–28, 132–38; as arational, 19, 124–28; and bewilderment at another's death, 77–78; characteristics of, 19; compared to rationality of other emotions, 133–34; as contingently rational, 19, 125, 139; deliberation not necessary for, 116–17; duty to grieve compared to, 165; end-of-life choices and, 139–44; episodes manifesting, 135–38; funeral and disposition choices and, 144–47; inquiry into, 124; and over-intellectualization of grief, 88–91; as irrational, 19, 124–25, 129–32; necessity of, 187, 206n1; and the pain of grief, 111–21; and the role of emotions, 88–90. *See also* cognitive deficits; irrationality of grief; mental health and therapy; truth, in relation to grief
- Rawls, John, 160
- recovery from grief, 95–98, 180
- regret, 95–98, 164
- relationship with the deceased: attachment as feature of, 27–28, 128, 140–44; complexity of, 59–60; crises of, 18, 57–58, 79–80, 82–86, 143; emotions associated with, 59–60, 74; end-of-life choices and, 139–44; failure to grieve as instructive about, 202n25; formation of healthy, 94–95; funeral and disposition choices and, 144–47; intimacy as feature of, 23–26; loss of, as object of grief, 17, 22, 55–64, 205n62; love as feature of, 26–27, 76–77, 79; practical identity investment in, 30–37, 55–58, 62, 76–82; quasi-grief lacking in attention to, 117, 127–28; rationality of grief evaluated by, 125, 127–28, 132–38; resilience and recovery relating to, 95–98; temporalities of, 76–82; transformation–after death–of, 55–61, 79–80, 94–97, 187–88; understanding of, resulting from grief, 18, 77–79

- remarriage, 191–92  
resilience, 96–98  
Rilke, Rainer Maria, v  
role models, 31, 35
- sadness, as feature of grief, 39, 44, 48, 96–98  
Schut, Henk, 79, 81  
scripts, for grief, 181  
the self: accountability to, 163–64; diminished well-being of, as cause of grief, 52–54, 61; duties to, 157–65; dynamic vs. static conceptions of, 86–88; effects of medical classification on, 177–80; as essential focus of grief, 19, 22–23, 27, 29–30, 32–33, 53, 70, 91–94, 152; loss of, through death of another, 32–33, 79–86; love of, 100–101, 158–59; medicalization as inadequate framework for understanding, 170–71, 176–79, 181–84, 211n22; as object of duty to grieve, 155–57; relationship of, with the deceased, 17, 18; value and benefits of grief for, 14–15, 18, 65–71, 73, 83–95, 101, 114–22, 170–71, 176–77, 187–88  
self-knowledge: duty to grieve based on, 19; duty to pursue, 150, 155–59, 162–63; objections to claims regarding grief’s purpose, 86–94; of one’s practical identity, 82–94; pain of grief as investment in, 113–18; resulting from grief, 18, 77–79, 82–95, 98, 102, 115, 122, 176–77, 195–96; self-love and, 100–101, 158–59; unconscious/non-deliberative pursuit of, 88–91, 116–18, 156–57; value and benefits of, 99–101  
self-love, 100–101, 158–59  
self-respect, 160–61  
Seneca, 4, 54, 55, 191  
serotonin, 173  
Shakespeare, William, 1; *Hamlet*, 12, 124–26, 179  
shame: associated with absence of grief, 150, 164; associated with grief, 3, 6, 9  
Smuts, Aaron, 96, 97  
Socrates, 3–5  
Solomon, Robert, 19, 85, 149–51, 164, 202n23  
stages of grief (Kübler-Ross model), 17, 41–42, 78, 135, 179–80  
stress, of grief, 18, 32, 68, 103, 142, 173, 190  
Stroebe, Margaret, 79, 81  
substituted medical judgment, 141–43, 145  
suffering, in grief: allowance of, 69; desire to avoid, 65, 68, 103–4; pain in relation to, 106–7; pathological, 75. *See also* pain associated with grief  
suicide, 12, 174, 205n64  
surrogates, for end-of-life decision making, 140–44  
survivor’s guilt, 137  
Szasz, Thomas, 184
- Taylor, Elizabeth, 191  
Tekin, Serife, 183, 211n22  
temporality of grief: backward-looking dimension, 76–79; duration of grief, 95–96, 98, 106, 169; forward-looking dimension, 79–82; rationality of grief and, 132–38  
theory of grief, benefits and uses of, 13  
Tolstoy, Leo, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 118  
trauma, grief likened to other forms of, 190–94  
truth, in relation to grief, 14, 88

- Up* (film), 180
- vulnerability, revealed by grief, 5, 10, 77, 193–94, 202n23
- Walter, Tony, 95
- well-being: of the deceased as object of grief, 50–52; grief’s contribution to one’s, 18, 70–71; medicalized view of, 176; of one’s self as object of grief, 29–30, 52–54; post-grief return to, 96, 181
- Wilde, Caleb, 145–46
- Wilkinson, Stephen, 126–28, 147, 168–69
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 39–42
- women, associated with grief as weakness or madness, 3, 168, 209n2
- Zhuangzi, 4–5