

**Grief: a philosophical guide.**

M. CHOLBI, 2022

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Is it good to grieve? Do we have a duty to mourn? Should we respond to the intense pain of loss with medicine or with therapy? In his fascinating, insightful and accessible book *"Grief: A philosophical guide"*, Michael Cholbi sheds important light on the nature and normativity of grieving.

Cholbi's book is motivated by several observations. First, grief is near-ubiquitous; almost all of us have experienced, or will experience the distressing loss of people close to us. Second, grief has potentially paradoxical features: it is a potent source of suffering, and yet many intuitively feel that it is valuable and that the absence of grief would not be a boon. Third, grief has hitherto been relatively neglected by philosophers. Some, like Socrates, have seen grief as a weakness or as a malady. Others have suspected that grief is irrational or arational –not admitting of any useful philosophical analysis. Still others, perhaps, have felt that grief is philosophically uninteresting – a subject for psychologists or self-help manuals, but not fit for conceptual analysis. Cholbi rejects all three of these claims, and sets out in his book to systematically explore why, how and whether we should grieve.

For whom do we grieve? Cholbi starts by aiming to identify what it is that gives rise to grief.

(He usefully distinguishes early on between 'mourning': the external manifestations and

social rituals that accompany death, and 'grief': the internal psychological reaction to that loss). He considers candidate explanations - love, intimacy, and attachment – and suggests that they explain some of the paradigm cases, but not the more atypical cases (for example grief for a public figure, or grief for an estranged or disliked family member). Cholbi's answer is that what unifies grief is the death of someone in whom we have invested part of our practical identity. That is the reason that their death generates a potent personal sense of emptiness.

Next, Cholbi develops an account of the nature of grief. It is not, he contends, a mood or a sensation. Following Wittgenstein, he suggests that it is a sustained, recurring pattern of mental states, a process (though not in the linear and caricatured sense implied by stages of grieving models). It involves a range of emotions, but it is also something active rather than simply experienced. It is a form of 'emotionally catalysed attention' (p. 48), capable of generating learning and self-knowledge, and focused on the transformation of a relationship that was important for the bereaved. This leads to the central claim of his book: Cholbi understands grief as serving a particular function. The distinctive value that it offers is in leading to greater understanding of ourselves and in helping us to reforge our practical identity in the wake of loss. 'Grief shakes us in part because we tend to build our practical identities around the existence of other people...but then forget that fact. Grief brings the vulnerability, and ultimate contingency, of our practical identities into stark relief' (77) What Cholbi refers to as the 'forward-looking' dimension of grief is the attempt, often inchoate, to revise our sense of self, incorporating a new relationship with the now-deceased loved one.

This teleological understanding of grief provides Cholbi with a way of responding to the painful and apparently paradoxical nature of grief. Other philosophers have noted that grief potentially provides a powerful counter-example to purely hedonistic accounts of wellbeing. For example, Troy Jollimore has described it as a quintessential form of “meaningful suffering”, suggesting that some forms of suffering can be a source of (or at least an indicator of) value rather than disvalue (Southern Journal of Philosophy 2004). Another common way of understanding grief is as a necessary side effect of attachment to others. The British psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes memorably described grief as “the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment”. Cholbi’s view in part lines up with these. He sees the pain of grief as being instrumentally valuable in human flourishing. Our lives would be poorer if we chose to protect ourselves from grief by failing to form attachments with others. But he also draws on a Kantian-inspired duty of self-knowledge. This gives rise to Cholbi’s perhaps most provocative suggestion – that we have a moral duty (to ourselves) to grieve when someone close to us dies.

One interesting challenge for Cholbi’s account arises towards the end of the book. He claims that human grief is distinctive because of our tendency to form attachments with others, or self-consciousness, and understanding of our own mortality. Yet, as he acknowledges, there is considerable evidence that non-human animals such as orca, chimpanzees, elephants or dogs grieve. Such animals display a repertoire of behaviours and emotions in response to the death of a family member or mate that clearly overlaps with that of humans. But such evidence might be a problem for the teleological account unless it expands to include different (non-cognitive) forms of self-knowledge.

A second challenge is posed by the phenomenon of resilience in response to grief. Cholbi discusses in detail the example of the main character of Albert Camus' *L'Étranger*. At the start of Camus' novel, Meursault has just learned of the death of his mother and is strikingly, disquietingly unmoved. Cholbi claims that we would not be better off if we were, like Meursault, so immune to grief. However, the alienated and aloof Meursault may not be a good example. Two decades ago, a fascinating study from Columbia prospectively identified and interviewed a group of 200 newly widowed individuals (Bonanno, *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2002). More than 40% of the group showed patterns of resilience – relatively attenuated or short-lasting distress. What is more, the study found no evidence that these individuals were emotionally distant, nor that their marriages were more superficial or lower in quality. What did characterise these individuals (compared with those who had chronic grief) is that prior to the death they were less dependent on their spouse; they were also more likely to have world views accepting of death. This sort of evidence seems to run counter to Cholbi's idea that the pain of grief is necessary and valuable. When we consider real examples of people who manifest relative resilience in the face of grief, it seems less plausible that those who fail to grieve deeply are missing something – either in the quality of their relationships, or in their self-knowledge. Indeed, their resilience seems like something that we have reason to emulate.

Cholbi does not expect all readers to necessarily share his conclusions. But this well-written, engaging and thought-provoking book is a brilliant example of applied philosophy. It is relevant to important debates within medicine (for example, recent controversy about definitions of a prolonged grief disorder). It will be interesting and helpful for clinicians

caring for those who are bereaved, for philosophers of emotions, and of course, for all of us who, sooner or later, have to navigate the long, dark, and winding valley of loss.

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