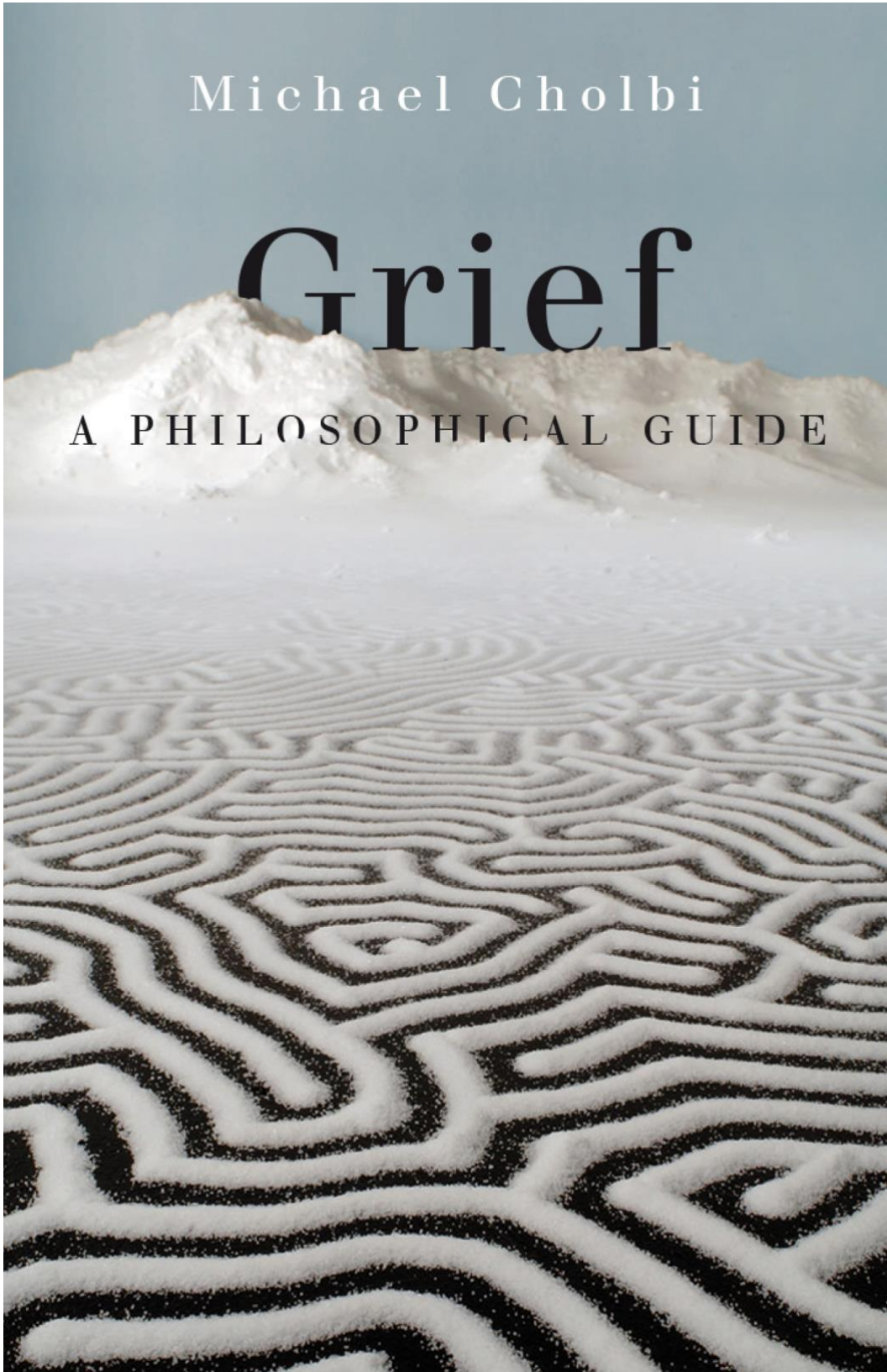


Precis, Grief: A Philosophical Guide

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Grief

A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE



Philosophy has a long history of investigating the significance of our mortality — whether, for example, death is a harm to us, whether it merits fear, etc. But these investigations have focused almost exclusively on the significance our own deaths have for us, instead of on the significance that *others'* deaths have for us. Most notably, grief, the paradigmatic human response to the deaths of others, receives only very sporadic attention from philosophers, and when philosophers have investigated grief, their attitude toward it has often been negative, even hostile. The prevailing attitude toward grief in the ancient Mediterranean philosophical tradition, for example, was a grudging acceptance that we humans grieve, juxtaposed with a dismissal of grief as a grandiose or 'womanly' emotion that betrays an unhealthy dependence on others rather than the self-sufficiency that characterizes the virtuous person.¹

Grief: A Philosophical Guide aims to remedy both this philosophical inattention to grief and the antagonism that grief has often elicited among philosophers: Not only is grief a worthy subject for philosophers, it represents a defining human experience. The book argues that though grief is not always a desirable or rational response to others' death, it often is, and it in fact manifests some of the most admirable human qualities, including the sophistication of our emotional palette, our capacity for adaptation, and our ability to interweave past, present, and future. At the very least, we ought to feel grateful, rather than ashamed, at the fact that we grieve others' deaths.

Grief: A Philosophical Guide develops the rudiments of a philosophical theory of grief across seven chapters.

Grief is not our response to the fact of mortality as such. Only some of our responses to others' deaths are grief responses. Rather, we undergo grief in response to the deaths of specific, identifiable individuals. This raises the question of what facts must hold true in

¹ Scott LaBarge, "How (and Maybe Why) to Grieve Like an Ancient Philosopher," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Suppl. Vol, *Virtue and Happiness: Essays in Honor of Julia Annas*, R. Kametkar, ed., 2012: 321-342.

order for us to grieve the deaths of others. Chapter One argues that grief does not require that we be intimate with the deceased; that we love them; that we are attached to them; or that they contributed positively to our well-being. While one or more of these features will usually be present in the relationships we have with those we grieve, they are not essential to grief. I propose instead that we grieve for those in whom we have invested our practical identities, i.e., those whose existence is assumed in our understandings of what we care about and in our goals or hopes for the future. This account explains how grief is not limited to loved ones but can extend to role models, political leaders, revered cultural figures, etc. Furthermore, that we grieve those in whom our practical identities are invested helps explain the *egocentric* character of grief, how it is that grief registers a loss both to the self and a (partial) loss *of* the self.

Chapter Two takes up the nature of grief as an emotional condition. Grief proves difficult to describe and taxonomize in the terms familiar in the philosophical literature on the emotions. Despite having an extended duration and coloring other emotional responses, grief is not a mood. But nor is grief a single emotional state. For while few grief episodes conform to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' canonical five stage model of denial/anger/bargaining/depression/acceptance, grief nevertheless involves several different emotions experienced at different moments. Sorrow or sadness is the most prominent among these, but grief can also involve anxiety, guilt, resentment, confusion, emotional numbness, etc. Grief is thus a multi-state emotional *process*. Grief also differs from more standard emotions in two other ways. First, grief is a kind of emotionally-driven *attention*. As we grieve, we are paying attention to a salient fact, namely, the fact of the death of someone in whom we have invested our practical identities. The different emotions we undergo in grief are different species of attention, directed at different dimensions of our relationship with the deceased. Second, grief is not a process we can dictate, but it is nevertheless an *activity*. We

do not confront grief in a wholly passive way. Rather, in grieving, we respond to our emotions deliberately, choosing and acting in ways that can facilitate transitions within a grief episode (as when, for example, a grieving spouse finally decides to remove the deceased spouse's clothing from a shared closet).

Grief is thus a more intricate emotional condition than the emotions that philosophers tend to analyze, such as fear. However, that grief is an active process of emotional attention generates questions about its nature that do not arise for seemingly more simple emotions. For instance, how are the various emotional states in a grief episode interrelated such that we ought to view these as components of a single, coherent experience? Moreover, what explains the variations both in how different individuals grieve in response to the same death (that two siblings might grieve their parent's death differently, e.g.) and in how one and the same individual grieves differently in response to different deaths (that a person will grieve a co-worker's death differently from the death of their child, e.g.)? These facts are best explained by positing that the object of grief (the fact that renders our grief reactions intelligible responses to their causes) is the loss of the bereaved's relationship with the deceased as it was. Grief, in other words, is an emotional reaction that tracks the 'identity crisis' that occurs when another person — a person around which our concerns and goals are to some degree oriented — can no longer play the role(s) they previously played in our relationship with them and in our lives as a whole. The variety of emotional states we find in grief episodes thus reflects the wide variety of different relationships we bear to one another and the numerous ways in which our interpersonal relationships contribute to our practical identities.

Chapters Three and Four together address what I call the paradox of grief: On the one hand, grief is an affectively taxing, even arduous, condition, involving several emotions that we ordinarily have reason to avoid. At the same time though, grief does not seem to be a condition we should want to avoid altogether; rather, grief is a fundamentally human

experience that can contribute to how happy or meaningful one's life is. How, in other words, can a condition that usually feels very bad be good for us all the same? The third chapter proposes that grief represents a distinctive opportunity for the good of *self-knowledge*.

The deaths of others in whom our practical identities are invested highlights that our practical identities (and the values, goals, etc., incorporated therein) are not simply 'givens' that can be taken for granted, but hinge on the existences of our relationships with others. When they die then, our relationships with them can no longer proceed under the existing terms and must change. Hence, by compelling us to reconsider and reconfigure our practical identities, the deaths of those in whom our identities are invested discloses a large amount of information about our own goals, values, commitments, and so on, as well as motivating us to consider how those deaths should alter these. Grief thus represents a robust opportunity for us to renew our practical identities through an exercise of active agency that culminates in self-knowledge.

The claim that grief affords us valuable self-knowledge does not fully resolve the paradox of grief, however. For many individuals seem drawn to the more painful aspects of the grief experience, as if these aspects were themselves good or desirable. Chapter Four answers this worry by showing how the psychological pains associated with grief can contribute to its value and indeed are indispensable to it. In the absence of such pains, grief would not be able to play the special role it plays in fostering self-knowledge. Bereaved individuals may therefore be unwittingly pursuing self-knowledge by pursuing painful grief experiences as if those experiences were good *per se*. The pains we undergo in grief are therefore neither instances of masochism nor mere costs to be borne in exchange for the goods of grief. They are instead genuine pains that, within the distinctive context of grief episodes, are *good* pains.

Chapter Five of *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* addresses the conditions under which our grief responses are rational. I reject both the view that grief is arational, not subject to rational appraisal at all, and the view that grief is necessarily irrational, involving an inherently contradictory combination of attitudes. I propose instead that grief is *contingently* rational, where the primary measure of its rationality is retrospective, that is, it is rational when the emotions we feel are appropriate, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to the loss of the relationship we suffer because of the others' death. Still, even though grief is often rational in these respects, it can undermine the rationality we are expected to demonstrate when making decisions either for our dying loved ones or for the dead. In fact, the emotional attachment we often have toward those individuals can complicate our efforts to make choices in accordance with *their* values or beliefs.

As the example of Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger* illustrates, the lack of (or complete absence of) grief can be subject to moral criticism. But in what sense can grief be morally owed to someone? Distinguishing between the personal psychological process of grief and the behavioural manifestations of grief that we observe in mourning, I argue in Chapter Six that not grieving or grieving inadequately are not moral wrongs to the dead or to other bereaved individuals (though we can wrong both such parties with respect to mourning). The duty to grieve, I suggest, is intimately tied to the good of grief that I identified in Chapter Three, namely, grief's distinctive capacity to enable substantial self-knowledge of our identities, values, and goals. The duty to grieve is in fact an imperfect self-regarding duty whose fulfilment constitutes an enhancement or perfection of our rational agency. When grief results in substantial self-knowledge, we stand in a more rational relationship to our conceptions of the good and can live more authentically. By fostering self-knowledge, grief puts in a better position to know what we are doing with our lives.

Controversies have arisen over the past decade concerning whether psychiatry and the mental health professions should recognize a grief-specific mental disorder. As many have observed, grief often has ‘symptoms’ similar to recognized mental disorders such as depression. Shall we conclude then that a person can be sick with grief? Chapter Seven provides reasons to resist this conclusion. Admittedly, grief often seems to lessen our sense of well-being and our ability to function in our normal social environments. But in most cases, these are short-lived phases that seem to reflect nothing dysfunctional or pathological about the bereaved person. Indeed, inasmuch as they represent intelligible responses to the upsetting events that prompt them, they are equally likely to be signs of good underlying mental health as they are signs of mental illness. In addition, we should be wary of introducing a grief-specific mental disorder because its introduction will likely result in widespread self-diagnosis and influence how bereaved individuals experience grief (in a way similar to how classifying alcoholism as a disease rather than as a moral failing has altered how alcoholics understand their condition). ‘Medicalizing’ grief may well impede rather than catalyse the self-knowledge that makes grief good for us. This conclusion is nevertheless compatible with individuals seeking medical treatment for particular difficult grief episodes, insofar as they exhibit the symptoms (sadness, anxiety, etc.) characteristic of some other mental disorder.

Grief: A Philosophical Guide does not address every philosophically substantial question grief raises. In this respect, it should not be treated as the ‘last word’ on the philosophy of grief. Nonetheless, it aims to bring systematic theoretical order to the piecemeal observations about grief that philosophers have tended to offer. In so doing, it illustrates that grief merits greater philosophical attention. And though the book’s aims are not directly therapeutic, it may allay the fear we feel in anticipating grief and provide valuable perspective on grief episodes we have already encountered. If its conclusions are

correct, guarded optimism about grief is in order: Grief is admittedly emotional vexatious, but it also represents an opportunity to restore hope and a sense of meaningful agency when human mortality unavoidably intervenes.