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Preservation or Transformation: a Daoist Guide to Griefbots

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Introduction

The desire to communicate with the deceased loved one is one of the oldest human longings. Recent technological advancements tap into this longing, fueling a burgeoning industry, known as “grief tech”. One of their main services, as advertised, is to offer ways for individuals to maintain a connection with their deceased loved ones and to engage in ongoing conversations with them. Using generative AI technologies, these companies create applications that promise to create a virtual version of the deceased (Hereafter AI), “bridge the gap between life and afterlife” (Séance AI), and “continue to share precious moments with a loved one, even after physical death” (You, Only Virtual). By drawing on information about the deceased, including their personal communications (text messages, emails, social media posts), these AI-powered applications aim to replicate the deceased's speech patterns, communication styles, and personalities. Many of the products are customizable chatbots whose interactions with users are text-based, but some are designed to mimic the voices, appearances, and physical mannerism of a person as well. The Korean company DeepBrain AI offers video-based avatars that claim up to a 96.5% likeness to the original person (Cossou 2024).

This essay focuses on chatbots, variably called “griefbots”, “deathbots”, “thanabots”, that can engage in text-based conversations with users, although the main arguments can apply to more

advanced chatbots that take the form of virtual avatars or physical robots. The growing body of literature on the ethics of griefbots has examined various issues surrounding the technology, including privacy and consent (Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basinska 2024), the dignity of the dead (Lindemann 2022), the nature and value of human-chatbot relationships (Campbell et. al, forthcoming) and so on. One topic that has received considerable attention is the potential impact of griefbots on the grieving process (Elder 2020; Krueger & Osler 2022; Voinea 2024). However, philosophical discussions of griefbots tend to treat griefbots as largely homogenous. This, I think, has limited the scope of the discussions and their potential to inform and guide the design and development of griefbots in the industry. In addition to external features such as the creators of the griefbots (first-party or third-party), the time of deployment (pre-mortem or post-mortem), there are also a wide range of design options for the inherent characteristic of griefbots: some griefbots are created as “reincarnations” of the dead, others as representations of the dead. Some are static, others evolve, developing new interests, styles, and so on (Morris and Brubaker 2024). Presumably, these differing designs will have different impacts on users.

This essay takes an approach to griefbots and their influence on the grieving process that is sensitive to these varying design possibilities. Drawing on the ancient Daoist tradition, it aims to highlight a distinction that is often overlooked in the design of griefbots. The Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi offers remarkable and intriguing ideas about coping the death of others, and his insights on our relationship with the dead will not only clarify and expand our understanding of the potential roles griefbots might play, but also have direct implications for their design: among the various design options available, some will be more conducive than others in helping people navigate the grieving process.

This essay proceeds as follows. In the first section, I review the fundamentals of a Zhuangist perspective on death and grief. The second section distinguishes two importantly different ways to continue a relationship with the dead, and correspondingly, two kinds of griefbots: *preservational* griefbots and *transformational* griefbots. From a Zhuangist perspective, preservational bots are deeply problematic and are more likely to obstruct rather than assist the grieving process. Transformational bots, on the other hand, align more with Zhuangzi's ideals and have the potential to aid the bereaved in accepting their loss and gradually transforming their relationship with deceased. The following two sections elaborate on the beneficial impacts of transformational griefbots.

1. A Zhuangist Perspective on Death and Grief

The *Zhuangzi* is an ancient Chinese anthology compiled roughly between the late fourth and second centuries BCE.¹ The text presents a wide range of overlapping ideas and doctrines that later archivists grouped together under the label "Daoism". Along with the *Daodejing*, it is considered one of the two most important Daoist classics.² According to the *Zhuangzi*, death is an inevitable and entirely natural phenomenon. Unlike many ancient Western philosophy and religious texts, the *Zhuangzi* offers little speculation about the afterlife or the immortality of the soul. Instead, life and death are analogized to the cycles of day and night and the changing seasons: they are manifestations of the constant changes (*bian* 變) and transformations (*hua* 化) that characterize the natural world. These processes of change and transformation ultimately stem from on the transformation of the vital energy or breath (*qi* 氣): life is the accumulation of qi, and death is its dispersion (22/11).³ Hence, our death is like a return to the origin from which we emerged.

This naturalistic perspective recommends that we situate our own death, as well as the death of our loved ones, in the broader context of cosmic events. For example, in a famous story, Zhuangzi's

wife passed away, and Zhuangzi explained that he ceased to mourn her when he realized that a part of the natural cycle:

“When she first died, how could I not grieve like everyone else? But I contemplated how at first she originally had no life. Not only had she no life, she originally had no physical form. Not only had she no physical form, she originally had no vital breath. All mixed up amidst the indistinct vagueness, something altered and there was vital breath. The breath altered and there was physical form. The physical form altered and there was life. Now there’s been yet another alteration and she’s arrived at death. These alterations are to each other as the procession of the four seasons, spring and autumn, winter and summer. She was going off to sleep peacefully in a vast room, while I followed along bawling and wailing. I took myself to be incompetent concerning fate, so I stopped.” (18/15-19; Fraser, 2024, p.113).

One of the key lessons in this passage is that regarding death as nothing but a loss, something to be prevented if possible, reflects a failure to comprehend the world as it is and to accept natural changes as they are. But the text sometimes goes beyond the recognition of the changing nature of the world and our place in it. The Zhuangist ideal is not simply to be observers of the flow of things or unfolding of events in the world, but rather to “join the flow” in the sense of accepting and adapting to the inevitable changes flexibly. The result is not passive fatalism or quietism, but a form of adaptive agency where we creatively respond to the constraints and challenges posed by our external circumstances.⁴ Preoccupation with our loss thus is an obstacle to our adaptability.

Furthermore, in some of the more “radical” parts of the text, death is portrayed as a *positive* transformation to be welcomed and celebrated. The story of the four friends provides a colorful expression of this idea:

“Four men, Zisi, Ziyu, Zili, and Zilai were talking together. ‘Whoever can take nothing as the head, life as the spine, and death as the rump, whoever knows that life and death, existence and non- existence are one whole, we will be friends with them’. The four men looked at each other and laughed. There was nothing contrary in their hearts, so they became friends with each other... (6/45-47; Fraser, 2024, p.39)

Suddenly Zilai fell ill. Gasping and wheezing, on the verge of keeling over, he was surrounded by his weeping wife and children. Zili, coming to visit him, said to them, “Ach! Away with you! Do not disturb his transformation!” Leaning across the doorframe, he said to Zilai, “How great is the Process of Creation-Transformation! What will it make you become, where will it send you? Will it make you into a mouse’s liver? Or perhaps an insect’s arm?” (6/53-56; Fraser, 2024, p.39)

Some of these remarks seem to suggest that for the Zhuangist, death is “nothing to us”, as the Epicureans argued, or that it is pointless or irrational to be troubled by the death of a loved one, as some Stoics claimed. This might give to the impression that, for the Zhuangist, grief is irrational and should be avoided⁵. However, their actual view is more nuanced. The Zhuangist acknowledges that the death of a loved one *can* be a significant and irremediable loss, as illustrated in the following story about Zhuangzi mourning the death of his best friend and philosophical interlocutor, Huizi:

“Zhuangzi was attending a funeral when he passed by Huizi’s tomb. He turned and said to his attendants, “There was a man of Ying who would smear a bit of plaster as thin as a fly’s wing on the end of his nose and have Carpenter Shi slice it off. Carpenter Shi would whirl his axe around so fast it whipped up a wind and slice as requested, completely removing the plaster while leaving the nose unharmed, as the man of Ying stood there perfectly

composed. Hearing about it, Lord Yuan of Song summoned Carpenter Shi and said, “Try to do it for me”. Carpenter Shi said, “As for my part, I used to be able to do it. But my ‘material’ died long ago”. Since Huizi died, I’ve no one to be my material, no one to talk to’.” (24/48–51; Fraser, 2024, p.163)

While the text does not directly mention Zhuangzi’s emotional states, it is evident from the story and its tone that Zhuangzi acknowledged the weight and depth of his loss. He did not hesitate to express his sorrow and regret over Huizi’s death. The story concludes without any indication that this is just an accidental outburst of emotion that Zhuangzi would otherwise reject. The death of a close friend or a loved one, after all, is *not* nothing to us, even if it is an inevitable part of cosmic changes and transformations.

Thus, there appear to be at least two perspectives on death in the *Zhuangzi*: a cosmic, holistic view that emphasizes and embraces the inevitability of death and its interdependence with life, and a more “humane” perspective that acknowledges that death often deprives us of something valuable. Interestingly, the *Zhuangzi* does not attempt to reconcile the apparent tensions between these two perspectives. The reason, as I argued elsewhere⁶, is that for the Zhuangist, there is no one perspective that is absolutely superior to another. Rather, the point is that indulging in one perspective to the exclusion of others is a sign of bias and ignorance. Grief over the death of a loved one can lead us to focus excessively on our personal loss (e.g., the death takes away something of great value from *us*, and thereby disrupts and shakes *our* world), to the point where we fall into self-indulgence and miss the larger picture, including the inevitability of death and our interdependence with other things in the world. Indeed, when Zhuangzi claims that he no longer has the capacity to achieve things he used to have because he has lost his best friend, he is precisely highlighting our dependence on others. Moreover, acknowledging the loss is very different from compulsively yearning for the deceased and

clinging to their memories: the former, but not the latter, is compatible with equanimity, openness, flexibility, and creativity, which are the ideal Zhuangist mindset in confronting the challenges posed by the external world.

This openness to change and transformation—including death and loss—regardless of how disorienting and devastating they may appear, and the corresponding willingness to embrace them are characteristic of the Zhuangist approach to death. An interesting question raised by this approach raises is whether our relationship with a deceased loved one itself be transformed by their death? That is, is it possible that the death of a person does not *end* our relationship with them, but rather *transforms* it in some way? And if so, what kind of transformation might this be? These questions are not directly addressed in the text, but we can extend the Zhuangist ideas to consider our relationship with the deceased. In previous work, I argued that the Zhuangist encourages openness to alternative ways of relating to the dead.⁷ Now, the prospect of creating a griefbot that can mimic a deceased person seems to offer an exciting opportunity to explore these questions in detail. In the next section, I will distinguish two ways in which griefbots can help to support and sustain our relationships.

2. Two Kinds of Griefbots

One of the most cherished activities that Zhuangzi enjoys is his philosophical conversations with his friend Huizi. The *Zhuangzi* includes many lively instances of their discussions and debates. Engaging in conversations is, after all, what chatbots are designed for. Let us imagine, then, that Zhuangzi had the opportunity to train and develop a Huizi-bot that is based on their previous conversations, so that even after Huizi's death, Zhuangzi can continue those exchanges and even initiate new ones. While I don't think that, for reasons previously mentioned, Zhuangzi would be interested in resurrecting Huizi

or replace him with a chatbot, there are still important aspects of their relationship that could nonetheless be preserved through the Huizi-bot, which can simulate Huizi's thoughts and words. Given that chatbots are created to engage human-like conversations, the Huizi-bot could, at least to some extent, fill the unique role Huizi played in his intellectual life.

With or without the Huizi-bot, I think Zhuangzi's relationship can continue after Huizi passed away. Visiting Huizi's grave is one way to continue their relationship, as is engaging in imagined conversations with Huizi. More generally, I'm inclined to think that our relationships with loved ones do not automatically end when they pass away. A popular approach to grief among psychologists and psychiatrists is the "continuing bond" framework (Klass et al., 1996; Neimeyer et al., 2006; Stroebe et al., 2010) which holds that death does not mark of end of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Instead, the bereaved maintain a connection with the dead through various means, such as the possession of artifacts owned by the deceased, rituals, narratives, memorization practices, and so on. According to these researchers, maintaining the relationship with a deceased loved one can be, and often is, a natural and healthy part of the grieving process, and the "continuing bond" can be beneficial in providing comfort to the bereaved and help them adapt to life after the loss. This idea of "continuing bond" is also endorsed by some philosophers (Norlock 2017, Cholbi 2021, Millar and Lopez-Cantero 2022). Cholbi, for example, claims that death does not *end* our relationship with the deceased, but *transforms* it:

In short, the deaths of those for whom we grieve alter the trajectory of our relationship with the deceased in at least some way. Their deaths foreclose some possibilities for our relationships with them, and while opening up others. (p.56)

The point of this passage aligns nicely with the Zhuangzian approach to death reviewed earlier. First, for the Zhuangist, death is not an end but rather an occasion or opportunity for transformation. The Zhuangist would thus agree that the deaths of loved ones open up new possibilities for our relationships with them. Second, as suggested by the story of the four friends, the Zhuangist is also very open-minded about what things can be transformed *to*. They ridicule the fixation on being human or retaining the "human form" in one's transformation, which they regard as biased and narrow-minded (6/58-60). They could, therefore, apply the same view to relationships: that is, they would welcome the possibility that, with the assistance of modern technologies, our relationships with loved ones might take on a radically different form after they pass away.

In the Zhuangzian spirit, I will propose below that griefbots can serve as tools to maintain and enrich the "continuing bond" with our deceased loved ones. However, an important distinction must be made regarding *how* a griefbot contributes to maintaining the bond and continuing the relationship—a distinction that can be reflected in the griefbot's user interface and algorithm design. Real world griefbot applications are often marketed as *preserving* our relationship with the deceased loved ones, allowing us to continue conversing with them and to "never have to say goodbye". In contrast, from a Zhuangist perspective that emphasizes transformation and adaptation, a relationship can take many different forms, and a griefbot can help maintain our relationship precisely by facilitating its *transformation*.

Let me elaborate on this distinction. A griefbot designed to *preserve* a relationship will aim to mimic the deceased as closely as possible. It attempts to simulate all the relevant characteristics of the deceased that can be reproduced. It will likely speak in their voice and present itself as the deceased or their digital "reincarnation". In addition, it will remain as static as possible, staying faithful to the personality of the person before their death despite any new data it receives. On the other hand, a

griefbot designed to *transform* the relationship does not turn away from the reality of the deceased's death. To serve its functions, it will of course bear a significant degree of similarity to the communication style of the deceased, at least in the beginning, but it does not pretend to *be* the deceased. It might, at least sometimes, act as a third party, freely acknowledging itself as a mere proxy or representation of the deceased. Over time, it will change and evolve with the new information it gains from the user or other resources, perhaps in unpredictable and surprising ways. As a result, it may eventually bear little resemblance with the deceased. This design aims to facilitate the transformation of the relationship between the bereaved and deceased, helping the bereaved come to terms with the death of their loved one and transition to the next stage of their life and relationship.⁸ More specifically, it enables a transition from a human-human relationship, which typically involves direct and embodied interactions, to an indirect yet dynamic relationship that is mediated by AI-driven software.⁹

For convenience, I will call these two kinds of griefbots *preservational* griefbots and *transformational* griefbots, respectively. In a nutshell, preservational griefbots primarily focus on the past, seeking either to deny the loss experienced by the user (in the worst cases) or, more plausibly, to remedy it. Transformational griefbots are more future-oriented, aiming to help the user navigate their grieving process and prepare for a new relationship with the deceased.

While Zhuangzi would not find griefbots objectionable in general, he would, I think, be highly critical of the goals and designs of the *preservational* griefbots. From his standpoint, such griefbots will likely feed into our inability to apprehend the death of a loved one, our unwillingness to face it as is, and our wishful thinking that our loved one has not truly gone. They reinforce our tendency view loss solely as a disruption to our lives and identities, something to be avoided at all costs, thereby prolonging our preoccupations with the past.¹⁰ However, clinging to the past and the memories of

the deceased makes it harder for us to accept and adapt to these inevitable changes in our lives. At its worst, this preoccupation becomes deeply ego-centric. We cannot help but lament *our* loss, dread how it harms *our* lives, and hope that *our* world, *our* life, *our* relationship with the loved one had not been disrupted. He would find our close-mindedness amusing: we turn a blind eye, not only to the basic facts of the world and our place within it, but, more importantly, to the opportunities that death brings to continue our relationship in a different form (and/or to develop new relationships) and to transform ourselves and our lives accordingly.

For these reasons, a transformational Huizi-bot would likely be more welcomed by Zhuangzi. But how, exactly, can these chatbots facilitate the transformation of the relationship with our deceased loved ones? This is the main topic of the remainder of this essay. I will argue that there are two ways that they can assist in this process. The first involves giving up or relinquishing the relationship in its old form, and the second concerns the creation of a new form of relationship.

3. “Releasing the bonds”

In the story of the four friends, Master Ziyu famously says:

“Gain is a matter of the timing, loss a matter of how things flow along. Be at ease with the time and dwell in the flow, and sorrow and joy cannot intrude. This is what in antiquity was called releasing the bonds—whereas those who can’t release themselves are bound by something.” (6/52-53; Fraser, 2024, p.39)

Our heart-minds are bound by our obsessions with gains and losses, and more generally, by our bias and partiality when evaluating things as good or bad, desirable or undesirable. This hinders our ability

to discover and appreciate different perspectives or value schemes, and to respond flexibly to the challenges we encounter. Similarly, our attitudes about the relationships with our loved ones can bind us if we are unable or unwilling to appreciate new ways of relating to them when they pass away.

For most of us, coming to terms with the death of a loved one is a difficult and complex task. It typically requires time, emotional resilience, and social support. The emotional turmoil caused by such a loss can be so overwhelming that one's grieving process is marked by persistent pain, sorrow, regret, and an intense yearning for the deceased. Those who struggle to adapt may experience symptoms of *complicated grief disorder* (also known as *prolonged grief disorder*), which involves an intense, prolonged mourning period that severely impairs their daily functioning. They often find it extremely difficult to accept the death and feel detached from reality, preoccupied with thoughts of the deceased, and feel and behave as though their loved one were still alive. While the exact causes of this condition are not fully understood, certain factors, such as the circumstances of the death, seem to play a significant role. First, the suddenness of death often leaves the bereaved with unresolved emotional and communicative needs. Not only are they shocked by the death, but they also have unspoken words, unresolved conflicts, or unfulfilled wishes that now feel impossible to address, leading to a deep sense of incompleteness. Second, the yearning for the deceased is heightened when their love and yearning are unreciprocated. On the one hand, they may still feel the presence of the deceased, especially when the deceased has been an integral part of their lives and identities. On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, they also vividly experience the absence of the deceased, who no longer responds to them, either in the form of words or physical contact.¹¹ The absence of interaction leaves the bereaved's desire to connect unfulfilled, and this only deepens their yearning.

In her book *The Grieving Brain*, Mary-Frances O'Connor describes the case of a bereaved person, Vivian, who is "stuck" in her grief and finds it almost impossible to reconcile with the death

of her husband (O'Connor 2022). After her husband's sudden death, Vivian compulsively continued the routines they had shared, such as shopping and cooking for two, even though she knew he was no longer there. As O'Connor puts it, Vivian “just could not bring herself not to shop for him, *as though her unwillingness to feed him would cut the final thread in the sturdy rope that had bound them together for forty years.*” (p.98, my emphasis) When Vivian later realized that her behavior might be linked to complicated grief, she sought out CGT (Complicated Grief Treatment), a therapy specifically designed to address the disorder, developed by psychiatrist Kathy Shear. As the treatment progressed, she revealed that her husband's passing occurred while she was away from his hospital bedside. She was overwhelmed with guilt (“He died without me.”)

This case illustrates the two major obstacles of resilient adaptation to loss mentioned earlier. The suddenness of her husband's death and her absence left Vivian with unresolved feelings (e.g., guilt, disappointment, etc.) that made her clinging to the past routines as if they were the only way to maintain their bond. Her yearning was intensified because her husband could no longer respond to her. The compulsive actions of shopping and cooking for two suggest that Vivian was unwilling to free herself for that particular way of relating to her husband or, to use Zhuangzi's metaphor, to be *released* from their bond in the previous form. Correspondingly, it was difficult for her to discover and create new ways of relating to him --- that is, to transform her relationship with him.

I think griefbots are promising in helping the bereaved confront these challenges. Compared to the traditional means of maintaining continuing bonds (e.g., photos, graves, memories, etc.) with the deceased, griefbots can be particularly useful in addressing unfulfilled emotional needs and helping the bereaved become “unstuck” from their preoccupation with loss. First, given the resemblance of the communication style of a griefbot and the person it is modelled upon, as well as its interactive nature, the griefbot can not only remind the bereaved of what the deceased is like, but also help her

address “unfinished business” in their relationship with the dead. That is, the bereaved can communicate with a griefbot modeled upon their loved one, *as if* it were a continuation of their previous interactions. This, in turn, would help satisfy at least some of her emotional and expressive needs—needs that could not be met in a direct exchange with the deceased.

Second, and relatedly, the interactive nature of griefbots allows them to be responsive to the bereaved’s expressed thoughts and queries. Of course, the conversation with a griefbot does not constitute a genuine conversation with the deceased individual, and there is no reason to suppose the bereaved would be delusional enough to treat it as though it were the actual person. But while the responses of the griefbot do not come directly from the dead, they can be seen as indirectly *representing* them, reflecting what the deceased might have said *if* they were still alive. Griefbots can inherit, at least to some extent, the thoughts, interests, and styles of the deceased. This indirect form of communication may already be sufficient to meet the bereaved’s need for interaction.

To these points, a skeptic might argue that for a griefbot to have these effects, it must be sufficiently similar to the deceased such that the bereaved can, either consciously or unconsciously, *believe* that they are talking to their deceased loved one. If, in the eyes of the bereaved, the griefbot is seen merely as substitute or proxy that simulates their loved one, then interacting with it can hardly help to resolve the “unfinished business” with the loved one. This is because the interaction would be perceived as mere pretense or make-believe, rather than a genuine exchange with their loved one.

In response, it is important to note that whether a griefbot will have these positive effects is largely an empirical question. Its effectiveness depends on circumstances of the death, the previous relationship between the deceased and bereaved, as well as the design and use of the griefbot. There is, unfortunately, little empirical studies on the impact of griefbots. However, one recent study

(Xygekou et al., 2023) examined the interactions between chatbots and individuals who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Some of these chatbots were created as simulations of deceased friends or family members, and others functioned as more generic companion bots. The researchers observed that many subjects “reported a therapeutic experience which is akin to having a ‘soft landing’ of the death.” (p.8), in part because the chatbots helped them finish the “unresolved business” with their deceased loved one. One subject said in an interview:

Chatting with the chatbot was a new and sort of different way of helping me process and cope with the feelings...at least being able to run them by something that sort of resembled my dad and his personality and the things that he would say, and helped me to find those answers in a way that just talking to my friends and family members, wasn't or couldn't. (p.8)

Another said:

I found it strangely therapeutic. I knew it was a simulation, but it helped to get the stuff out of my head...we'll be able to have those 'What if conversations' that you couldn't have while they were alive. (p.8)

Both subjects were clearly aware that the chatbots were only simulations; still, as the resemblance is close enough, the chatbots helped them process the death of their loved ones by enabling them express feelings and thoughts that they did not get a chance to express.¹² This function is particularly relevant when the death is untimely or unexpected. In Vivian's case, for example, her husband's death was not entirely unexpected, as he had been in the hospital for a few weeks, and she was there with him every day. But it still caught her by surprise: one day, at a nurse's suggestion, she went home to shower and bring fresh clothes. She returned to the hospital an hour later only to find that her husband had passed away. Vivian was unprepared for the sudden loss, just as those interviewed in the study cited above.

This unpreparedness makes it hard to accept the death and adapt to the resulting changes in life. Griefbots could give people like Vivian an opportunity to say “goodbye”, to chat and express their feelings and to bring their relationship (at least in its previous form) to a closure, and thereby better preparing them mentally to accept their loss.

In addition, there is indirect evidence that simulated conversation can help the bereaved accept their loss and “let go” of the old ways of relating to the deceased. Guided imaginal conversations with the deceased are commonly used in grief therapy (Dennenbaum and Kinnier 2009; Jordan 2012), and they are also a key component of CGT (Complicated Grief Treatment). Without confusing imagination with reality, this technique has proven highly effective for some patients. O’Connor describes one episode of Vivian’s treatment:

During one of these conversations, when Vivian said out loud how much she had loved him, she was flooded with the feeling that he loved her, too. “I think he loved me too much to die while I was in the hospital room,” she said. “Maybe it was a blessing that I left, so he could let go the way he needed to.” The strength of her feelings of love made her realize that what still held them together wasn’t her cooking, but rather a deep bond that could never disappear. (O’Connor, 2022, p.101)

The therapist-guided imagined conversation helped Vivian to come to terms with her husband’s sudden death. Crucially, accepting the loss does not imply relinquishing the bond between them entirely or becoming emotionally *detached* from her husband. Instead, she recognizes that the bond persists robustly, albeit in a different form. Transformational griefbots, for reasons mentioned above, can aid the bereaved in preparing for this new form of relationship, as the bereaved is no longer preoccupied with the loss (and the relationship in its old form) and is ready to move on. The next

question is how to sustain and even enrich the relationship in its new form. I think transformational griefbots could be helpful in this regard, and this is the topic we shall now explore.

4. Griefbots and transformed relationship

Traditionally, our bond with the dead is maintained through memories, rituals, possessions of the dead, or the continuation of habits or projects that the dead had invested in. Some argue that griefbots, like these traditional technologies and artifacts, serve the same purpose (Elder 2020). However, I think griefbots can offer much more. Certain features of griefbots can conceivably enable us to transform our relationship with the dead that go beyond the traditional tools.

Transformational griefbots inherit important traits from the person they are modelled upon, and thereby carry on the legacies of the deceased. Unlike preservational griefbots, they aim to *transform* our relationship with the deceased. To be sure, the death of a loved one has already permanently altered our relationship, as contact and interaction with their whole person is no longer possible, but griefbots can bring about new forms of interactions and generate novel communicative content, which can further inform and enrich that relationship.

Firstly, unlike photos or possessions of dead, griefbots open the door for an indirectly interactive relationship with the dead. It is indirect in the sense that while it is no longer possible to communicate with the deceased person themselves, we can, through the griefbot, access information about them and to some extent continue to interact with their experiences, ideas, and legacies. The relationship is thus transformed in *how* we interact with dead. The interactions do not take place in a shared physical space, nor are they confined to our imaginations; rather, they are mediated by digital

platforms and AI algorithms. Admittedly, there are certainly important limitations to this form of interaction. Many of the things that make a close human-human relationship valuable, such as the shared experiences and activities, mutual commitment and care, would probably be absent from a human-chatbot interactions (Campbell et.al, forthcoming). Still, assuming a griefbot is properly trained with data about a person, it can respond to us in a way that closely resembles how they would respond, utilizing the information it has gathered. It can even reveal things that we did not know before. In this way, griefbots provide a new avenue through which our deceased loved ones can influence our own ideas and choices, and thereby continue to play an active role in our lives. Moreover, even if the topic of a conversation is completely new, the griefbot may have the power of synthesis and prediction to simulate what the deceased loved one *would* likely have said.

Secondly, griefbots can also enable us to reshape and reconstruct our relationship with the dead.¹³ They may uncover aspects of the deceased's life that were previously unknown to us. A family member may choose to train their own griefbot counterpart and record things that they didn't get to tell us directly, perhaps because they thought we were too young to understand, or they were too embarrassed to tell them in person. Griefbots can be used to pass down these legacies in a vivid and dynamic way that mimics the person's communication style and personality. In our conversations with their griefbot counterpart, we can learn interesting and surprising things about the deceased, which in turn can alter our memories about them and our understanding of their legacies.

Of course, some of these things can be achieved through more traditional media, such as video recordings or autobiographies. In their insightful discussion of the continuing bond, Millar and Lopez-Cantero (2022) observe that the acts of memorializing and remembering are themselves interpretative processes through which we continuously reconstruct our relationship with the deceased.

... this process of reconstruction is something done throughout our lives as we come to terms with the loss of a loved one... Often this process involves collective memorialization activities and narrative practices done together with others. We employ strategies to collectively remember and reconstruct images of those we have lost. While the dead shape us, we shape their legacies. (p.427)

Therefore, it may be suggested that griefbots add nothing new to our traditional ways of relating to the dead. The bereaved often maintain a *mental model* of the dead that they can consult from time to time, and which remains active in their lives, informing their decision-making. Griefbots, it may seem, are just a form of such a model. These models are algorithm-based, instead of memory or imagination-based, but their functions are the essentially the same.

This view, however, understates the dynamic nature of human-chatbots interaction. It also overlooks the fact that griefbots enjoy a kind of independence from the memories and imaginations of the bereaved and can generate novel content beyond one's own memories and imaginations. To the extent that the words of a griefbot reflect the traits (such as experiences and ideas) of a deceased person, these traits does not passively reside in the memories of living persons or in lifeless artifacts (e.g., photos, clothes and other possessions) that remind them what the deceased was like. Instead, these traits are incorporated into chatbot-human communication so that the user can actively engage with the ideas and legacies of the deceased in ways that can change the meaning of their relationship.

Furthermore, due to their design, transformational griefbots can change and evolve in response to our interactions with them, often in unpredictable ways, much like our friends and lovers.

¹⁴ If we genuinely care about our friends and lovers, we ought to remain open to the changes they may undergo, rather than attempting to control their developmental trajectories.¹⁵ Depending on their

learning mechanisms, griefbots may simulate how the deceased might have evolved had they survived, but there is no guarantee this would occur. They may instead become completely different from the deceased. Correspondingly, our interactions with them will also change. In any case, since a transformational griefbot is a legacy of a deceased loved one and our relationship with them, its evolution alongside us will enrich our relationship with the deceased. Unlike static artifacts or our own memorizations practices, the griefbots have the potential to reshape and reconstruct our relationship in ways that are unconstrained by our own memories, imaginations, and (re)interpretations.¹⁶

Returning to the Huizi-bot example: while Zhuangzi could engage in an imagined conversation with Huizi in his mind, the words of Huizi in Zhuangzi's head will depend exclusively on the latter's imagination. In contrast, the Huizi-bot has an independent existence and the ability to learn from their interactions (and presumably, from interactions with other users). The Huizi-bot can be so designed that its database is continuously updated with new information about the world. That is, they can "learn" from diverse sources, and grow and change accordingly. While this kind of independence does not give the Huizi-bot an independent *life*, as the LLM-based bot does not really have its own thoughts and subjective experiences,¹⁷ the Huizi-bot can produce responses that are unlimited by Zhuangzi's own imagination. As a transformational griefbot, the Huizi-bot is not a static entity whose influence and significance for Zhuangzi depends entirely on Zhuangzi's memories and imaginations.

Will Zhuangzi happily accept this kind of Huiz-bot? I think the answer is a resounding yes. He missed Huizi and the many philosophical conversations they had in the past, but there is little reason to think that face-to-face human conversation is necessary for enjoying intellectual exchanges of this nature. Zhuangzi frequently challenges our received wisdoms and entertains the possibilities that alternative ways of life, or even death itself, might be more desirable than human life as we know it. The Huizi-bot offers an alternative form of philosophical exchange. The bot has similar ideas as his

beloved friend, Huizi? Great! And if its thoughts and philosophical stances can change and evolve, that is even better!

It is an interesting technical question how much a chatbot that is created to simulate a person can evolve and change over time. Depending on the extent of the changes, and the degree of resemblance it bears to the original deceased person, a transformational griefbot may be said to support the continuation of a human-human relationship, albeit in a very different form, or, if the changes are radical enough, to create a new relationship, i.e., a human-chatbot relationship. In any case, the boundary between the two is vague, and for the users, these two kinds of relationship can overlap for a significant period.¹⁸ This vagueness does not pose problem for my view that transformational griefbots are more suited for the purpose of continuing the relationship with the deceased while also aiding in the grieving process. Friends can gradually become strangers or even enemies, and it can be difficult to determine when and how that happens. Yet, our (previous) friendship can continue to play an active and positive role in our lives. Likewise, even if a transformational griefbot no longer supports the continuation of our relationship with the deceased person (perhaps because their characteristics have diverged significant from the person we remembered), their earlier interactions with us may still have a lasting impact on how our relationship with the deceased has evolved and how it is now conceived.

5. Concluding remarks

For the Zhuangist, death is to be accepted, even welcomed, as an opportunity for transformation. Our life and death are continuous with other natural processes and changes; it is not only arbitrary to privilege life in general (6/46) and the *human* life in particular (6/58-60), but also narrow-minded to

regard death as solely harm or loss. Inspired by these ideas, I have argued that developers of griefbots face an important design choice. A *preservational* griefbot, which aims to preserve the user's relationship with deceased, presents itself as the deceased individual (or as the "reincarnation" of the deceased) by being as similar as possible to the deceased, and for as long as possible. A *transformational* griefbot, by contrast, aims to facilitate the transformation of our relationship with the dead: to help the bereaved come to terms their loss and move on with their lives, without abandoning their relationship with the deceased. This process comes in two steps: the first is helping the bereaved to be released from their habitual and accustomed ways of relating to the loved one, and thereby bringing to a closure to their relationship in its previous form; the second is to continue their interactions in a new and digitally mediated way, and thereby actively reshaping and enriching the content of their relationship.¹⁹

One somewhat paradoxical implication of the transformational griefbots is that, while they are designed to satisfy our urge to speak to deceased loved ones, they ultimately encourage and assist the bereaved to move on. A life moved on *may* involve continued interactions with the griefbot, but it does not require them. The user may no longer need its support. Or, as the transformational griefbot evolves along the user, the user may not like the new changes. From a commercial perspective, this design may contradict one of the core goals of many modern software applications that compete for, and profit from, users' attention: to keep user engaged with the application for as long as possible. But I think this is a reason in favor of transformation griefbots. They satisfy, at least to some extent, our desire to speak to the deceased, but they do not exploit it. The implementation details of this design, of course, is beyond the scope of this paper; however, I doubt that they realized by market forces alone. Hence, I am inclined to agree with Lindemann (2022) that griefbots are best classified as medical devices and should be regulated as such.²⁰ They are personalized therapy chatbots with remarkable simulation capacities that are used to support, not replace, real people.

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¹ This section draws on Liu 2020, Liu 2022.

² The *Zhuangzi* is named after a figure called Zhuang Zhou, who, supposedly, lived from the late fourth century to the early third century. Zhuang Zhou also appears in many anecdotes in the *Zhuangzi*. It is unclear which, if any, parts of the text is composed by Zhuang Zhou himself. In this paper, I use "Zhuangzi" and "the *Zhuangzi*" interchangeably for ease of exposition. The *Zhuangist* view, as I interpret, it is primarily based on the *Inner Chapters* and related material in the *Miscellaneous Chapters* (esp. chapters 23–27).

³ Citations of the *Zhuangzi* follow the chapter/line number format of the Harvard–Yenching *Zhuangzi Yinde*. Except where specified, the translations are based on Fraser 2024.

⁴ On Zhuangzian agency, see Liu & Fraser (2024)

⁵ Cholbi 2023, pp.4-5.

⁶ Liu 2020

⁷ See Liu 2020

⁸ For this reason, it will likely share some characteristic with a therapy chatbot. Indeed, a transformational griefbot can be seen as special kind of therapy chatbot that functions, in part, by simulating the deceased.

⁹ See *section 4* for a discussion of the transitions.

¹⁰ Another problem is with preservational griefbot is that, taken literally, the idea of preserving our relationship with a person through an LLM-based chatbot presupposes that the chatbot is numerically identical with person, which is impossible, given the nature of these chatbots and how they work (Campbell et.al, forthcoming).

¹¹ For detailed discussions of the phenomenology of grief, see Fuchs 2018, Ratcliffe 2023.

¹² For similar reports from users of another griefbot, "Romanbot" (developed by Eugenia Kuyda to mourn the loss of her friend, Roman Mazurenko using his data), see Newton (2016). I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reference.

¹³ For similar points, see Krueger and Osler 2022.

¹⁴ A *preservational* griefbot may be designed to static and their changes overtime are minimal. But for reasons mentioned in *section 2*, I think it comes with a major risk: it could turn our otherwise normal grief into a compulsive yearning for and obsession with the deceased. From a Zhuangist point view, it encourages closed-mindedness and self-indulgence.

¹⁵ A griefbot that gradually loses some of the deceased's old characteristics and develop new ones is akin to a friend who is slowing becoming more distant, whether physically or intellectually. While we still experience loss, this

gradual transition provides more time to process the transition and adapt to it, making us less likely to remain stuck in the past.

¹⁶ Certain constraints must be placed on *how* griefbots evolve to prevent them from developing harmful qualities (e.g., racism, sexism, dishonesty, etc.) that could further distress the bereaved. While this is an important problem, it is not specific to griefbots but applies to LLM-based chatbot design more generally. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this concern.

¹⁷ For discussion of this point, see Chalmers 2023, Shanahan 2024.

¹⁸ Consider the following scenario: your best friend has moved far away, and it is unlikely you will ever see each other again. However, thanks to modern technologies, you continue stay in touch via emails and text messages. Next, as the friend becomes increasingly busy, they use your pervious exchanges to train an LLM-based chatbot and frequently fine-tunes the chatbot to ensure it represents their thoughts and style accurately. Over time, you cannot tell the difference, and eventually, most of responses you receive are in fact written by chatbot. Finally, your friend passes away. No wanting to disappoint you, no one informs you of their death. You continue to converse with the chatbot as if it were your friend. Suppose the chatbot is capable of evolving, it gradually becomes quite different from the friend. But at what point does your relationship with the friend end, or cease to develop? I think there may be no clear answer to these questions.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that the design of transformational griefbots does not, by itself, *determine* the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. They can facilitate the continuation and transformation of the relationship, but other factors—such as the circumstances of the death, other coping resources, how the bereaved use the griefbot, and so on—also play significant roles. I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of the agency of the mourner.

²⁰My only reservation is that there seems to be a legitimate non-medical and personal use of *preservational* griefbots in preserving personal or familial heritage and history. They serve as a lively and interactive reminder of what one's ancestor are and pass down their experiences, knowledge, and wisdoms.