

# **Falsely, Sanely, Shallowly:**

## **Reflections on the Special Character of Grief**

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**ABSTRACT:** Our reluctance to demystify grief is a sign of the distinctive obligation and discomfort that people feel towards those who have died. These feelings, however, are instructive about the nature of grief. As a vehicle of a living person's relation to the dead, grief is mysterious—and we are rightly reluctant to take that mystery away. But grief is not to be avoided by philosophy on that account. I defend a less Romantic view of grief, in which a grieving person's experience of "normal" grief: 1) is felt to require an *objectively recognized* loss; 2) is felt to be *dedicated to that lost object*; 3) seems to most people to be something that she *ought to feel*; and 4) probably *ought not to be medicalized*, nor consequently medicated. This view of grief affords an understanding and appreciation of this rather special and important emotion without reducing its mystery

### **1. INTRODUCTION: THE RELUCTANCE TO DEMYSTIFY GRIEF**

Nina, the main character of Anthony Minghella's very entertaining and thought-provoking film, *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, grieves for such a long time and to such an incapacitating extent for her dead boyfriend, Jamie, that his ghost returns to her.<sup>1</sup> He brings with him a number of his ghost-friends—gregarious, imposing house guests who send Nina on errands, watch videos day and night on her television, move her furniture, and intrude upon her and Jamie's privacy. In his newly-acquired heavenly understanding, the movie implies, Jamie's ghost intends to help push Nina out of her grief and back into the swing of life, into the arms of a new beau. Unsurprisingly, his plan works. Nina, on her own, turns Jamie and her other house guests out and chooses life without ghosts. Dead boyfriend and living girlfriend say goodbye to one another by sharing some of their happy memories and reciting a French poem.

*Truly, Madly, Deeply* is thoroughly Romantic in its sensibilities, a study of the effects of a peculiarly Romantic love that outlives both its objects and those who love them. In this, what I am calling 'Romantic' attitude, we idealize the

inwardness of emotion. In it, an individual's feelings, however fleeting, are taken to wield authority over the individual and her community. French poetry aside, *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is Romantic in its implication that the feelings of a particular human individual—in this case, Nina's love-turned-grief—have a supernatural power and importance. The movie plays both sides of the fence regarding the value of grief, arguing on the one hand that Nina's grief is so powerful and grand that it enables her to communicate with the dead, and on the other that even the dead want her to stop grieving and get on with her life. This ambivalence is associated with the Romantic idealization of emotion and is common in modern understandings of grief. It is brought into sharp relief by the unwillingness of the DSM4 (the American Psychiatric Association's most current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) to categorize 'normal grief' as a psychiatric disorder, despite its meeting—according to Steven Wilkinson—all the criteria for one.<sup>2</sup> Our Romantic idealization of grief is also suggested by the relative dearth of philosophical analysis devoted to it. As Donald Gustafson notes, "traditional and recent philosophical writing about the emotions contains almost nothing about the emotion of grief. This could hardly be a mere oversight."<sup>3</sup>

In light of philosophy's traditional obsession with death and the afterlife, it is indeed surprising how little attention has been paid to grief and mourning. A *Philosopher's Index* search produces under fifty hits for each term, and this is counting both book reviews and articles where the terms are used metaphorically (as in the pervasive "grief" of postmodernism).<sup>4</sup> Anthropology is rife with discussions of funerary rituals, and there is more to be found on the subject of grief in psychology and religious studies than in philosophy—although James Averill has stated that even in psychology, "there has been a tendency to ignore grief in comparison with other emotions."<sup>5</sup> When they are considered in philosophy, however, grief and mourning are usually treated as mere examples in the general study of the emotions, or indirect routes to a discussion of the anticipation of one's own death. Obviously, the analysis of any emotion runs the risk of reifying it, and risk-aversion in this regard could keep philosophers mute about any emotion, but this is particularly so in the case of grief.

We tend to think of grief as an *especially* personal experience, a psychological state whose depth we ought not to plumb, because it is somehow larger, more beautiful, more "true" than either the person who feels it or the one who studies it. This is precisely because it is so easy to consider the grieving subject—unlike the subject in love or the subject enraged—without taking seriously the thing for which she grieves. The object of grief being out of the picture, theorists tend to bracket it off from their study of the griever. This imaginative distance from the object of grief paves the way both for the overly-clinical attitude towards grief which advocates "recovery," and for the overly-mystical attitude towards it which suggests that the dead hover beneficently over us. There's something rather evasive about this philosophical treatment of grief, but this evasion is itself informative: It demonstrates a flat unwillingness to put ourselves above grief by medicalizing or analyzing it, even as we are drawn to do so. The idealization, evasion, and ambivalence associated with grief indicate its distinctiveness from other emotions and mental states. What gives grief this unusual character?

I think this reluctance to demystify grief even on the rare occasions we study it is a sign of the distinctive obligation and discomfort that people feel towards those who have died, an obligation and discomfort which constrain even philosophers who theorize about the emotions. This constraint, however, is itself instructive about the nature of grief. I will argue that grief is a peculiarly obligatory emotion on account of its concrete relation, in the thoughts of the grieving subject, to real individuals who have passed away. As a vehicle of a living person's relation to the dead, grief is actually mysterious—hence our reluctance to take that mystery away. But grief is not to be avoided by philosophy on that account. I will defend a less Romantic, more outwardly-oriented view of grief, one that is sane and, to the Romantic's lights, false and shallow. I will argue that a grieving person's experience of "normal" grief: 1) is felt to require an objectively recognized loss; 2) is felt to be *dedicated to that lost object*; 3) seems to most people to be something that she *ought to feel*; and 4) *probably ought not to be medicalized*, nor consequently medicated.<sup>6</sup> This view of grief affords us an understanding and appreciation of this rather special and important emotion without devaluing it or reducing its mystery.

## 2. THE APPARENT OBJECTIVITY AND DEDICATION OF GRIEF

When grief is considered at all in philosophy, it is usually analyzed in terms of the grieving subject's inward feelings, consistent with the Romantic treatment I described above. Maybe this is to be expected in a post-Cartesian age. Even Plato, however, who normally evaluates emotions by reference to their objects (as for instance in Diotima's "ladder of loves" speech in the *Symposium*), focuses on the griever's feelings when he argues against immoderate grief in the *Republic*.<sup>7</sup> Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illyich* and Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*, to which several of the few contemporary philosophical treatments of grief refer, both consider the point of view of the dying subject. So, far from actually exemplifying the experience of grief in its ordinary sense, these works lead the discussion back to the more traditional existentialist issue of the anticipation of one's own death.<sup>8</sup> Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," which is taken as a starting point in several analyses, is a psychological study of the experience of sadness in the face of loss, or in other words, of the subject's inward feelings.<sup>9</sup> In other words, where it is genuinely considered at all, as opposed to being conflated into consideration of one's own being-towards-death, one person's grief over the loss of another has tended to be treated like other emotions: As a subjective mental state which, while it may be occasioned, even defined, by external events or by the subject's beliefs about them, is analyzable without reference to the external events or the justifiability of the subject's beliefs.<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, most of the few authors who write about grief define it as a reaction to "real or perceived" loss [emphasis mine].<sup>11</sup>

I believe that analyses of grief in these purely subjective terms miss the mark. For one thing, a grieving person recognizes her relation to the object she has lost as being more important than her relation to the objects of her other emotions. In a sense, a person who is grieving recognizes her grief as being not just *about* or of

the object she has lost, but *for* the lost object: She experiences her grief as dedicatory, as an offering. We say, "I love *x*," "I am angry at *x*," "I hate *x*," "I envy *x*," etc., but we say "I grieve *for y*," "I am grieving *over y*." These expressions demonstrate two distinctive qualities of grief. 1) Grief seems to the grieving subject to be somehow more externally based than her other emotions: I experience grief, *not* just as *in me*, as *something I feel*, but as *something I am going through*, as *something I am doing*.<sup>12</sup> In other words, grief is felt to require an *apparently objective loss*. 2) Grief is dedicatory; one experiences grief, *not* just as being *occasioned by* a loss, but as being *in honor of the thing lost*. In other words, grief is felt to be *dedicated to the lost object*. Although most or all emotions may be intentional or object-related, then, grief is intentional in a somewhat different way.<sup>13</sup>

It may be important to make clear before going further that despite my claim that a griever feels related to the external world in a particularly strong way, I adhere to the usual distinction between grief and mourning. Grief is a mental state or process, a set of emotions or feelings. Mourning is the external expression of grief, or even more specifically, a ritualized or publicly recognized expression of grief.<sup>14</sup> The dedicatory, obligatory quality of grief and the distinctive relation to the external world into which it puts the person who is grieving may indeed motivate mourning. I would argue, as well, that a person feels obliged to mourn when someone close to her has died. To pursue the relation and distinction between grief and mourning further is the business of another essay. For present purposes it is enough to say that while grief and mourning are distinct, they share the apparent objectivity, dedication, and obligation that I argue here obtain in grief.

### 1) "Normal" Grief Seems to the Grieving Subject to Require an Apparently Objective Loss

Here, I step away from many theorists of grief by limiting my discussion to those mental states which occur in reaction to an "apparently objective," irreversible, concrete, and unique loss. By this I mean a reaction to the death or destruction of a particular concrete thing which the grieving person takes others besides herself to recognize both as having existed and as having died or been destroyed, not just as having been separated from the person who is grieving for it. I will call this, "apparent objectivity," meaning that the loss must *seem* to be objectively the case to the person grieving over it as well as to others in her community, in order for the person's emotion to be rightly called, 'grief' as I will use the term.

Similarly, the loss must be apparently objectively irreversible, concrete, and unique. A change of circumstances of a beloved object, even what is expected to be a permanent separation from it, may be cause for great sadness or distress, but not for grief, as I use the term. Someone who has gone through a divorce, or broken up with her boyfriend, or been disillusioned about democratic ideals, or moved away from her parents, or even lost her fortune, will not experience the obligatory, dedicatory, qualities that I believe obtain in grief. In cases such as these, the loss is simply not apparently objectively irrecoverable. This is reflected in the fact that friends and family members of the subject often characterize a *very* great distress in these cases—a level of distress that approaches that of grief—as

histrionic, self-indulgent, or mentally unhealthy, and tell her things like, "this is not a matter of life and death."

It may make sense to say that one feels real grief over the devastation of a great building by war, or the destruction of one's house in a natural disaster. These things, though inanimate, are unique and apparently objective, and certainly may be someone's particular concrete beloveds. In particular instances, then, we might want to characterize these losses as grievous: a house that has been in one's family for generations, a place whose special character will not be found elsewhere. As a general rule, however, I am reluctant to call the sadness one might feel in the face of these sorts of losses, 'grief.' For one thing, we would not necessarily be surprised or disappointed if a citizen of the city where the bombed building stood, or a former inhabitant of the destroyed house, was not deeply saddened over the loss. Indeed, we might well praise the person for keeping a stiff upper lip or for eschewing her attachment to an inanimate object. We would usually be surprised or disappointed, however, if our friend did not grieve over the death of her mother. These other misfortunes likely bear some relation to grief, then, but I believe them to be by and large distinct from the reaction to the apparently objectively irreversible, concrete, unique loss that is my focus here.<sup>15</sup>

Donald Gustafson gets at this quality of relation to the external world efficiently when he distinguishes grief from sorrow solely by their "conative differences." Grief, Gustafson argues, involves a counter-belief desire that the lost object not be lost, while sorrow involves only wishing, which need not be belief-contrary, because one can wish for anything.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Alice, grieving for her father, will seriously desire that her father not have died, and so will be in turmoil because her desire cannot be satisfied. Her friend, Zachary, who is sorry about the loss, on the other hand, will merely wish for Alice's sake that Alice's father were still alive. Zachary's sorrow does not put him in turmoil, because his wish is not frustrated by being impossible to satisfy. In a related vein, Gustafson argues, "if a person expresses or seems to manifest grief . . . but there is no appropriate belief, thought, or judgment that the agent could avow . . . as to who is lost or dead, then it will not be plausible that the agent's emotion, if there genuinely is one, is grief."<sup>17</sup>

With this last claim, Gustafson draws out an Aristotelianism that is incumbent on a proper understanding of grief. The loss for which one grieves is objective in the same sense that the Aristotelian notion of happiness is said to be an objective state, as opposed to the fleeting subjective experience that we call 'happiness' today. Aristotle asks:

Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we . . . see the end? Even if we are to lay down this doctrine, is it also the case that a man is happy when he is dead? Or is this not quite absurd. . . . But if we do not call the dead man happy, . . . this also affords matter for discussion; for both good and evil are thought to exist for a dead man, as much as for one who is alive but not aware of them; e.g., honours and dishonours and the good and bad fortunes of children and in general of descendants. And this also presents a problem; for though a man has lived happily up to his old age and has had a death worthy of his life, many reverses may befall his descendants. . . . It would be odd, then, if the dead man were to share in these changes and become at one time happy, at another wretched; while it would

also be odd if the fortunes of the descendants did not for some time have some effect on the happiness of their ancestors.<sup>18</sup>

In this passage Aristotle himself recognizes the apparent absurdity that strikes the modern reader: We think of happiness as a subjective feeling on the part of the happy person, and think it odd to attribute it to a person whom, we suspect, can no longer feel. But Aristotle also cites an absurdity that is less readily noticed by modern readers: We think of happiness as a kind of observable condition in life, and think it odd to attribute it to a person who is suffering a series of serious troubles in her life, even if she doesn't know about them. Despite the more subjective, inward characterization of emotions typical of modernity, I think we still do recognize this latter kind of absurdity. We might feel sorry, for instance, for a child whose trust fund has decreased because of bad investments by the trustee, even if the child is too young to know or care. And this sort of thing is particularly the case with grief: It is common to feel sorry, for instance, for someone whose potential heirs have a long and ugly squabble over the inheritance, whether this infighting occurs before or after she dies. On this basis alone, we may take Aristotle to be claiming that the dead are apparently objectively recognized as such, and that the deceased's relationship to the living carries on after her death.

From his ruminations about the happiness of those who have died Aristotle further infers that happiness is an objective, stable, achievement, that "happiness [is] . . . something permanent and by no means easily changed, while a single man may suffer many turns of fortune's wheel" (1100b1-5). A person's happiness, as Aristotle understands it, is affected but not dictated by the fleeting good and bad, lucky and unlucky, pleasant and painful, events that fill her life. This implies, however, that the person's life itself, to which we attribute happiness and unhappiness, is the kind of thing about which we can make not only objective judgments, but permanent, stable ones. The person's life is, in this Aristotelian sense, a singular entity, objectively, or at least intersubjectively, recognized and assessed by others, even when the others outlive her. Thus on the Aristotelian model, the loss of a life which occasions grief is apparently objective, both from the point of view of the griever and from the point of view of those in her community, and these two points of view are interdependent. If a person in grief avows a reasonable belief that the object of her grief has died, but her friends and family members deny it, it becomes questionable whether the sorrow or turmoil she is experiencing is really grief.

Obviously, one's subjective assessments of one's life and emotions are important to understanding them, even with regard to grief. In the case of grief, however, the more Aristotelian, apparently objective assessment of the life of the deceased becomes salient for the grieving person. In grief, one feels oneself to be grieving for the loss of the whole life of the lost person, not, for instance, for some misfortune that befell the deceased when she was fifteen, nor for the current absence of a pleasant dinner one had with her the previous year. The apparent objectivity, irreversibility, concreteness, and uniqueness that I have claimed must obtain for the lost object of grief, therefore, interdepend with the characterization and evaluation of the deceased's life as a whole. The whole of her life is larger, in

this sense, than the sum of its parts, the fleeting moments that filled it. Indeed, in a sense her life extends beyond the confines of her body and her time on earth, into the lives of her descendants, her loved ones, and those upon whom her life had an effect.

It is on account of the apparent objectivity of grief, on account of the griever's refocus on the whole life of the deceased, that grieving tends to be a time for reflection. While commentators often note that grief is associated with social withdrawal or depression, they rarely discuss its reflective tone.<sup>19</sup> But people in grief regularly experience a very reflective time, investing their time in thought about the deceased, about the meaning of life and death, about the passage of time, etc. This reflection is linked to the social withdrawal characteristic of grief. In grief, one feels as if one is separated from the ordinary daily life of the social world, somehow on a different plane. The socially distant, withdrawn attitude of grief is precisely the griever's step back from her own fleeting, subjective experiences of her interactions with others to a reflective distance from which she considers her own and others' lives as objectively whole entities.

One might object at this point that it is common for a person in grief to regret an unpleasant last interaction with the person who has died, or to be pleased that the deceased did not suffer very much in her last days, and that this is evidence that one is grieving over these fleeting moments. Examples like these, however, far from providing evidence of the subjectivity of grief, demonstrate very strongly its apparent objectivity. For when one regrets, say, an argument one had with the deceased in her last days, one is implying that this unpleasantness should not interfere with the "proper" memory of her,<sup>20</sup> which should be, for instance, of the lifelong friend with whom arguments like this one had been forgiven and forgotten many times over. Similarly, when one is pleased that the deceased did not suffer much at the last, one implies that her suffering would have interfered with the overall happiness that one wants to attribute to her life. It is for reasons like these that we claim that we should not speak ill of the dead: When someone has died, our judgments of her take on a permanence and a wholesale value that they lacked during the person's life, and we are reluctant to disfavor a whole life, objectively.

The apparent objectivity of the loss that one grieves over is consistent with James Averill's argument that grief is biologically efficient for species that live in organized societies.<sup>21</sup> Averill claims that grief:

[Is] often antithetical to the establishment of new relations, and hence the alleviation of the stress [that is incumbent upon it]. . . . [Therefore] grief is fundamentally a biological phenomenon whose significance goes well beyond the well-being of the single individual. . . . The biological function of grief is related to the maintenance of long-term social bonds where such are needed for the survival of the species.<sup>22</sup>

According to Averill, the extreme unpleasantness of grief motivates individuals to maintain community bonds in species where those bonds are important to survival. Grief, then, is an individualized sign of a social loss, and so requires the apparent objectivity of the loss. Without this quality, Averill implies, grief would defy scientific understanding. In the terms I have been developing here,

we might say that if we ignore the apparent objectivity of grief, if we think of it only in terms of the grieving person's individual and subjective feeling of sadness, we essentially refuse to study grief, as a distinct emotion, at all. Considering only its subjective qualities, we might well identify grief with the pang of unrequited love or postmodern angst, as some recent authors have done.<sup>23</sup>

In a Romantic portrait such as *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, the protagonist's feeling of grief (or later, her overcoming of grief) is painted larger than either the protagonist or her loss, extending across the boundary of life and death itself. In the portrait I am painting here, by contrast, a life is bigger than the sum of its parts, extending across and unifying, reflecting upon and affecting, the fleeting subjective feelings of the one who lives it, and perhaps of many others as well. Hence, in the end, the otherwise Romantic *It's a Wonderful Life* provides a cinematic depiction more proper to grief. In his suicidal despair over having lost the bank deposit for his business, George Bailey, the protagonist, is able to contact the angels with his prayers. In the end, however, George learns that suicide is not the answer, essentially because of the grief it would cause to his family and community. George learns that his despair is a fleeting thing, far outweighed in importance by his life as a whole, and the community of which he is an integral part.<sup>24</sup> Grief, distinctively among the emotions, brings to the foreground our sense that a life is an apparently objective entity which is lived with others, apparently objectively. Understood this way, the fleeting experiences that fill a life—even the grief one feels for a beloved who has died—are always *less than* the life they fill.

## 2) "Normal" Grief Seems to the Grieving Subject to Be Dedicated to the Lost Object

The dedicatory quality of grief's relation to the dead is reflected in some of the things we commonly say about the deceased, such as "she would have wanted it this way," "let's win this game for her," "she's turning over in her grave about this," etc. Obviously, these sorts of phrases idealize grief and its objects, and indeed, I think it is largely the dedicatory aspect of grief that makes grief particularly easy to romanticize. When someone we love has died, we desire to *do honor to*, to *show appreciation for*, that life as a whole, differently from and more importantly than the honors or rewards she may have received for particular accomplishments during her life (and for the reasons I have given in (1): In grief, one thinks of the deceased as having lived a life *larger* than those accomplishments). This is why we often actually do dedicate works or achievements to the deceased or in her memory. We name stadiums and schools after great coaches or statesmen, we dedicate episodes of T.V. shows to producers or actors who have died, we dedicate books, etc. Similarly, we try to satisfy wishes or desires of the deceased, in her honor, that we did not satisfy while she was alive. We break addictions of ours that saddened her, for instance; we give to a charity she espoused, we finish a project she started, etc. Although outward acts like these are properly part of mourning and not of grief, they are nonetheless motivated by grief and grief shares with them their dedicatory quality.

In grief, of course, it is the grief itself which is dedicated to the deceased. In grief, one feels oneself to be doing honor to or satisfying the wishes of the deceased through the grieving itself. This may seem contrary to reason, and to many people's sense that the dead are unable to appreciate our grief. But that it may seem irrational or futile to offer up our grief to the deceased does not affect the fact that we feel we are doing so. How can we explain the dedication or offering of an *emotional state* to someone who has died? This is most easy to understand on the model of satisfying the deceased's wishes.

Most everyone has had the experience of imagining how her loved ones will react to the news of her death, or of imagining or planning her own funeral. This sort of thing typically occurs when one is feeling angry or unappreciated or otherwise despairing, and it often has the effect of lifting one's spirits or bringing one out of one's self-indulgent sorrow. A woman might imagine her children weeping over her death, for example, in a daydream, after they have berated her for the cruel strictness of her household rules. By doing so, she feels avenged, she reassures herself that she is loved, she reminds herself that her and her children's relationship extends beyond this incident. This can be, as Hegel implied, a crucial part of ethical consciousness: "Justice . . . is . . . the simple spirit of the individual who has suffered wrong [The Furies]." <sup>25</sup> On the Hegelian model, a person in grief feels that, through the grief, some justice will be done the deceased for unkindnesses or wrongs the deceased suffered during her life, some assurance will be given her that she is loved, some acknowledgment will be made to her that her relationship to the griever extended beyond either of their fleeting feelings. The person in grief offers her grief up to the deceased in that spirit.

Hegel is instructive about the mechanics of this experience and its rational motivation. For Hegel, ethical life—i.e., consciousness of the interests of others—begins with the institution of the family. As a member of a family, an individual *naturally* considers herself related to a community larger than herself, and to a future after her own death. When an individual forges this consciousness of others through *deliberate* acts, according to Hegel, she participates in a nation rather than a family. It is simply implied in one's recognition of one's membership in a family, however, that one is part of something larger than oneself.<sup>26</sup> According to Hegel, a family member's natural consciousness, e.g., of being related to her parents and siblings, is part and parcel of her natural consciousness of a community that will continue after her death, e.g., in her or her siblings' children and grandchildren. In this sense, Hegel incorporates the apparent objectivity of the experience of grief into ethical consciousness. But Hegel's notion adds to this apparent objectivity a dedicatory aspect, a sense of doing honor to the other members of one's family.

The Family keeps away from the dead the dishonoring of him by unconscious appetites and abstract entities, and puts its own action in their place, and weds the blood-relation to the bosom of the earth, to the elemental imperishable individuality. The Family thereby makes him a member of a community which prevails over and holds under control the forces of particular material elements and the lower forms of life which sought to unloose themselves against him and destroy him.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, for Hegel, family members are naturally inclined to preserve the honor of their relatives who have died, to preserve the memory of the dead as conscious, living individuals, instead of let them return to dust, entirely forgotten. Of course, in practice, what this means is that family members feel a duty to honor their dead (or not-yet-living) relatives by taking responsibility for burial, sharing memories of them, willing them an inheritance, etc. These practices express dedications we make to the dead or to our descendants. Beyond—or before—these practices, however, family members “assert a living consciousness” of the deceased over and against the material forces that assert their control over her body, in grief. Thereby, they dignify the deceased even in death, even if burial or inheritance is impossible. Thus grief, on the Hegelian model, is precisely the natural inclination to honor the deceased, and is offered up to the deceased to preserve her consciousness. And since grief is a consciousness of the deceased, it succeeds in this preservation; hence platitudes such as that the deceased “isn’t really gone as long as we remember her.” According to Hegel, the natural consciousness of the family is subsumed into the nation, and other further developments of ethical consciousness. Thus, while grief is, according to Hegel, most typical of family members, its character will be preserved in the grief felt by friends, and in things like public memorials.

Based on his claim that grief’s desire is belief-contrary, Gustafson argues on the contrary that grief’s desire cannot motivate action, such as dedication or mourning, regarding its object. Therefore, Gustafson further argues, grief cannot be relieved by the action it motivates, as are other emotions: “Flight [e.g.] relieves fear, action quells anger, hate is alleviated by action, and so on.”<sup>28</sup> As evidence against Gustafson and in favor of my claim that grief motivates its own dedication to the deceased, consider another action in which a belief-contrary desire is expressed: Daydreaming. Suppose one rehearses a retort to an insult to which one failed to respond adequately when it was lodged. Even as one prepares one’s speech, one believes that the insult can no longer be avenged, that one has missed one’s chance. In other words, although the emotion here is anger and not grief, the anger is contingently (and this contingency protects the distinction between anger and grief on this point) associated with a belief-contrary desire. Yet the rehearsal does indeed relieve the anger caused by the insult. In a similar way, grief motivates dedications that we make to the deceased, in mourning and in the grief itself. And where grief does not evolve into depression or some other neurotic permutation, its dedication to the lost object does ease the grieving person’s pain eventually. The grieving person, in a sense, “gives away” her grief by offering it up to the deceased.

Of course, it is “too late” to satisfy the desires of the deceased in the same way the desires of the living become satisfied. But dedication brings about its own sort of satisfaction, even when the dedication is made to someone who is still alive. When one dedicates one’s new book to one’s spouse, one believes or hopes that one’s spouse will appreciate it, one imagines her face when she sees the lovely gesture printed on the page. Of course, one’s spouse need not have had any *actual wish* that is satisfied by the dedication. Indeed, the wish that is satisfied by the dedication of grief, like the wish that is satisfied by the dedication

of the book, is *what we imagine is everyone’s secret wish—that people know that she is loved and appreciated as a whole*. Because a person in grief believes the deceased’s life to have taken on a new importance, a new largeness, in death, the person believes that it is newly important to dedicate something to the deceased, to acknowledge and address what the griever takes to have been her—and maybe everyone’s—secret wish, that there be an acknowledgment of the priceless value of the whole of her life.

### 3. GRIEF AND OBLIGATION

In his extremely persuasive and provocative, “Is ‘Normal Grief’ a Mental Disorder?” Stephen Wilkinson argues against the DSM4 that “normal” grief is indeed a mental disorder, meaning that it is a state of unhealth or impairment.<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson claims that one might take his thesis either straightforwardly, or “alternatively,” as “attacking ‘orthodox’ definitions of mental health.”<sup>30</sup> I read Wilkinson’s thesis in this alternate way: Although I believe his arguments are by and large convincing, I do not believe that ‘normal grief’ is a mental disorder. My concern here, however, is not with how we understand mental health and illness, but with *why we make an exception of grief* from the category of mental disorder even when, as I will grant to Wilkinson, it meets the criteria for one. I suspect that we tend to avoid calling ‘normal grief’ a disorder because of its *obligatory* aspect. In other words, I think that people feel that the dead are owed the unhappiness of the living over their loss, and that that is why we are reluctant to think of grief as a disorder.

Wilkinson argues convincingly against what he takes to be the best and most typical reasons for believing that grief is not a disorder: That grief is normal, that it can be healthy or beneficial, that not grieving can be harmful, that grief is rational, that grief ought not to be medicalized or treated, and that grief has a “real world” cause. Even if we grant their truth in all cases (as Wilkinson and I are both inclined to do) Wilkinson claims that these traits do not distinguish grief from many other disorders whose unhealth we are not squeamish to pronounce. For instance, Wilkinson’s response to what we may take to be the strongest objection to his thesis—namely that grief is a beneficial response to loss—is that there are many disorders which have beneficial effects. “[If] a young boy has mumps, . . . for instance, . . . we should regard him as having a disorder, even if it is in his interests to have this disease now in order to prevent him from having it as an adult (when it could cause sterility).”<sup>31</sup>

If grief meets the criteria for a disorder, then, what makes us reluctant to call it one? Wilkinson does not address this question directly, but the most telling of his arguments in this regard is his response to the “medicalization” objection. “The first [version of the ‘medicalization’ objection] says that we ought not to classify grief as a disorder, because to do so would have bad consequences.”<sup>32</sup> Quoting Kopelman, Wilkinson fills out the objection thusly: “If [grief] is an illness or a disease, . . . arguably we should . . . marginalize the requests of grieving people. . . . The view that normal grief is a disease predisposes physicians, nurses and others to view [the griever’s] choice as impaired by his disease of grief.”<sup>33</sup> In his response, Wilkinson simply deflates the normative challenge:



I do not wish to deny that classifying grief as a disorder might have these bad effects. What is questionable, though, is whether this sort of moral consideration is relevant to the issue of whether or not it is a disorder. It could only be relevant if some principle like the following were true:

P. For any type of condition X, X is a disorder only if classifying it as a disorder has no significantly harmful effects.

But (P) is false. [emphasis mine]<sup>34</sup>

Wilkinson's response to the medicalization objection only succeeds if we believe his claim that "(P) is false." But we could formulate the crucial statement more normatively, as follows: "For any type of condition X, X should be classified as a disorder only if doing so has no significantly harmful effects." Put in these terms—i.e., in terms of the justifiability of the DSM4 authors' choice—Wilkinson's response to the medicalization objection is seriously undermined, even if his general thesis remains in tact. This is not inconsistent with the terms of Wilkinson's own thesis: "If my arguments are successful, those who propose definitions of mental disorder like that contained in the DSM4 are faced with a difficult choice."<sup>35</sup> In other words, I grant Wilkinson his "alternate" thesis that because grief meets the criteria for a mental disorder we should rethink our theories of mental illness. But I interpret the unwillingness of the DSM4 authors to categorize grief as a disorder as the result of the obligation we feel to grief uniquely among candidates for treatment. I take the reluctance to medicalize grief as a straightforward expression of respect for those experiencing 'normal' grief, for their requests and choices, along the lines of Kopelman's suggestion. However similar grief may be to other disorders, and however flawed our 'orthodox' definitions of mental illness, we resist "marginaliz[ing] the requests of grieving people . . . [or] view[ing] the griever[s] choice as impaired by his disease of grief," not because our general standards are flawed, but because of the respect we tend to have for grief.

To investigate the nature of this respect, I turn to Plato. It may be noteworthy that Plato regularly supports claims by reference to their normative or educational value, as I have suggested Wilkinson's "medicalization" objectors do. In the *Meno*, for instance, Socrates thusly supports his theory that learning is recollection from a previous life: "I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe [it]" (86b–c). It is not irrelevant that the claims that Plato supports in this way are usually claims about the condition of the soul after death. Plato criticizes the same tendency I have been—the tendency to avoid consideration of the dead on account of our uncertainty about them. He effects this criticism by arguing that it is good for us to believe certain things about death. Socrates argues that citizens will become cowardly, e.g., if Hades is depicted as unremittingly frightening: "can someone be unafraid of death, preferring it to defeat in battle or slavery, if he believes Hades is full of terrors?" (*Republic* 386b).

Other Platonic arguments about the censorship of depictions of grief are linked to the depictions of the fearworthiness of death itself: "[A] decent man doesn't think that death is a terrible thing for someone decent to suffer—even for someone who

happens to be his friend. . . . 'we'd be right, then, to delete [from the poets] the lamentations of famous men, leaving them to women (and not even to good women, either) and to cowardly men, so that those we say we are training to guard our city will disdain to act like that" (387d–388a). Socrates claims that young people influenced by such stories will "feel neither shame nor restraint but groan and lament at even insignificant misfortunes" (388 d–e). The implication is that the griever's vision of the afterlife affects her evaluation of the loss she has suffered. Grief, then, on the Platonic view as on the Aristotelian, indicates an assessment of the happiness of the whole life of the deceased, an objective assessment that takes into account both the events that occurred during her life and relevant events that occur after her death. For Plato, however, the relevant events after death occur in the afterlife rather than, as for Aristotle, in the earthly lives of the deceased's descendants.

While, according to Plato, it is good and respectable to believe in the afterlife, and while grief, according to Plato, implies such a belief, grief itself, on the face of it, does not seem to be respectable to Plato, because it rests upon a false or vicious concept of the afterlife. Although Plato obviously favors at most a rather limited grief, however, he nonetheless supports my claim that we feel ourselves to have certain obligations to the dead, obligations that should be met through grief. "[A] decent man," states Socrates in Book X, "will . . . bear [the loss of his son or other prized possession] more easily than other sorts of people. . . . But," he asks, "Will he not grieve at all, or, if that's impossible, will he somehow be measured in his response to pain?" Glaucon answers that "the latter is closer to the truth," and Socrates does not dispute it (603e). Taken together, the Platonic passages on grief imply that if we did not grieve at all, we would not be human—we would not manifest either the emotional or the rational capacity of our human condition. While immoderate grief is overly emotional and demonstrates a need for dialectical therapy, it is simply not available to us not to grieve at all. Moderate grief, then, implies that the griever believes in the afterlife and in the value of the lost object, and these are beliefs that, according to Plato, are virtuous to hold.

For guidance in making the distinction between obligatory and immoderate grief, it will be helpful to add Freud to Plato. In his famous "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud argues that grief and melancholia (or depression) are similar enough for the comparison to be enlightening about depression, and that "[the] exciting cause [loss of a beloved person or thing] proves to be the same in both."<sup>36</sup> The distinguishing feature of melancholia, according to Freud, is the "extraordinary fall in his self-esteem," which the melancholic, but not the person in grief, experiences.<sup>37</sup> "In grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself."<sup>38</sup> The "delusional [self]-belittling" of the melancholic, Freud claimed, should be understood as the melancholic's transmutation of reproaches she has against the lost object.<sup>39</sup> In other words, according to Freud, the depression that people sometimes feel instead of grief at the irrecoverable loss of something to which they are attached is attributable to the obligatory nature of grief: They feel that they ought to grieve, or in Freud's terms, "ought to have loved" the lost object. Finding themselves unable to meet that obligation as fully as they feel they should, they depressively reproach themselves.

Freud attributes to the melancholic something quite similar to Plato's "immoderate" grief. The melancholic, though full of (delusional) self-reproach, is self-indulgent and lacking in shame, taking offense easily, and going on and on in her lament, taking up a great deal of other people's time.<sup>40</sup> Freud attributes these characteristics of melancholia to the patient's ambivalent feelings about the lost object and, relatedly, to her narcissism. Taking the analysis out of the Freudian vernacular, we are left with someone who is immoderate in her lamentation and self-involved, someone who is melodramatic and drawing attention to herself (perhaps properly attention due the lost object), someone who is ambivalent in her feelings, both about her loss and about her grief. Put this way, melancholia is precisely that emotional state which, although it shares many of grief's affective qualities, meets none of the criteria I have argued inhere distinctively in grief. As self-absorbed, melancholia is concerned with the inward feelings of the melancholic and relatively oblivious to any sense of objective occurrence of loss. As melodramatic and attention-getting, melancholia inhibits any sense of dedication to something outside the subject herself. And as lacking in shame, melancholia shares with Plato's characterization of immoderate grief a kind of viciousness, an ignorance of obligation to others, including the dead.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: GRIEF AND MEDICALIZATION

In *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, Nina's grief is figured as, identified with, her love. There, grief is depicted as simply the development of love under particular circumstances—after one's beloved has died. Indeed, the arc of the movie perfectly compliments that of the traditional Romantic comedy: Girl loses boy, girl gets boy, girl loses boy again. The film's portrayal of grief, like the many Romanticized portrayals of love that it parallels, is immensely satisfying, and as such, instructive about our desires. It comforts us about death and loss, and I grant that we need such comfort. Still, we should beware of the seductions of this sort of conception of grief. By extolling the power of the living individual's inward feelings, the "true, mad, deep" sort of grief, like the passages of Homer that Socrates suggests deleting, encourages an immoderation that is self-absorbed and self-indulgent, and so—if my arguments have been correct—not rightly called 'grief' at all, but 'depression,' or 'melancholia.'

For the clinician, the friend, and the family member, the distinction between 'normal' grief and a clinical depression following the death of a loved one is certainly difficult to draw. If my argument here is correct, however, we should expect "melancholia" to masquerade as 'normal' grief, expect it to display the superficial aspects of grief without actually meeting the criteria I have set out. Thus, in non-grieving depression, or "immoderate grief" we should expect to see an apparently objective loss occur before the onset of the depression, a loss to which we might normally attribute grief. Similarly, we should expect the grieving person to express a desire to honor the deceased and to dedicate her grief to the person she has lost. We should also find ourselves respecting the grief and the person who feels it, since we should expect for the grief to feel obligatory. Thus, ultimately, the distinction between "normal" grief and clinical depression or

"melancholia" comes down to a normative decision on the part of the community to which the grieving person belongs: *We* make the difference between "normal" and "immoderate" grief. This judgment is a responsibility that, if my argument is correct, we should not shy away from if we are to do justice to the obligatory, dedicatory qualities of "normal" grief *and* to ease the suffering of those who are clinically depressed.

In particular, then, "immoderate" grief, or melancholia, will make itself known to observers by the grieving person's romanticization of her own grief—while her feelings may start out looking like grief, the dedication of the grief to the deceased by the grieving subject *will not ease her suffering. She will not be willing to give it away.* Thus, what appeared to be—or maybe at one time was—the dedicatory and obligatory nature of her feelings will begin to seem to those who know her to become a little self-serving. She will start to seem as though she loves the grief, values the grief, more than its object and more than herself. Rather than putting her grief to work in the service of sharing the common secret wish of humanity for recognition and remembrance of each life, she will begin to appear to be using her grief to achieve that secret wish for herself. Her grief, unshakable by dedication to the lost beloved, will start to get in other people's way. Rather than taking the reflective distance on life that I have argued is typical of "normal" grief, the griever will show off her grief in increasingly obtrusive ways. Excusing her dysfunctionality by reference to her grief, she will become unable to meet, or even catch up with, her responsibilities to the family, the social set, or the community which made sense of her grief at first. When the grief itself, *rather than the loss*, becomes "the problem," it is time for the clinician to step in.

Uncomfortably, the clinician, the family member, or the friend is as likely as the melancholic subject to have to decide when her grief has become immoderate. This again speaks to the communal, apparently objective, nature of "normal" grief. Because, apparently to the grieving subject, "normal" grief must be recognized as such by those with whom she shares the knowledge of her loss, so in immoderate grief does she depend upon us to recognize that her feelings have gotten out of hand. If we turn our backs to our responsibility to recognize depression for what is instead of humoring the subject in her belief that she is grieving normally, we not only let down our suffering friend, family member, or patient—we also let down the deceased, to whom, I have argued, proper recognition is owed. Thus, we let ourselves and the whole community down as well, becoming enrapt by the living melancholic subject instead of recognizing and sympathizing with the wish we all share for love and recognition.

Thus, the fact that we feel obliged to grieve need not require us to avoid medicalizing or treating apparent cases of grief. We are well capable of overruling this obligation, when we judge someone's feelings to be immoderate and dysfunctional, with a higher obligation to ease suffering, and this may be the rationale of doctors who, say, prescribe sedatives for those in grief. Similarly, we are obliged to develop our talents, but where an athlete wants to medicalize this obligation and take steroids, we tend to overrule her in favor of a higher obligation to ideals of fairness or sportsmanship. If, however, as I have argued, we feel: 1) That our loss, like our grief, is objective, and we feel: 2) That our



grief is dedicated to the deceased, and if we feel: 3) Obligated to grieve and if, as I have also claimed, we feel these things in part because we feel ourselves to share with the deceased (indeed, with everybody) a secret wish that our life as a whole be appreciated after we die, then it makes sense that we would *want* to suffer the pain of grief. In 1917, Freud claimed "it never occurs to us to regard [grief] as a morbid condition and hand the mourner over to medical treatment."<sup>41</sup> Even today, however, when increasingly many kinds of pain and suffering are deemed intolerable, and when grief is often medicalized and treated, we continue to dispute about it. Out of appreciation for the dedicatory and obligatory qualities of grief, we *want* a world in which grief is valued: This desire competes strongly with the desire to ease suffering, and distinguishing the grief we want from the depression we ought to treat is, in our post-Romantic era, an unavoidable burden.

My argument, then, hardly secures the case against medicalizing or treating grief. There are certainly those whose grief is immoderate beyond their own conscious control, and who require medical intervention just to make it through the long days of their sorrow. Because the decision to intervene cannot be made in the abstract, clinical interpretations of 'normal' grief, and the tendency to treat it, must remain available. But barring the judgment that a particular person's grief has become undesirable, it is clear from everything I have argued about grief that we should be very reluctant to medicalize or medically suppress or mask it. The desire to ease the suffering of "normal" grief, like Jamie's desire to orchestrate Nina's return to life and love in Minghella's lovely film, is a Romantic idealization, both of the power of the grieving subject's emotions and of our own power over them. It is, ultimately, an idealization of the love that mortal creatures feel for one another, as if that love—whether it be the love that the grieving subject felt for the deceased or the love that doctors feel for their suffering patients—possesses the immortal power or infallibility we lack.

## Endnotes

1. *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, Dir. by Anthony Minghella, starring Juliet Stevenson and Alan Rickman, (Samuel Goldwyn Co./Winston/ BBC/Lionheart (Robert Cooper), 1990).
2. Steven Wilkinson, "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2000): 289–30.
3. Donald Gustafson, "Grief," *Nous* 23 (1989): 457–79; 457.
4. See, e.g., Harvey Hix, "Postmodern Grief," *Philosophy and Literature* 17 (1993): 47–64.
5. James Averill, "Grief: Its Nature and Significance," *Psychological Bulletin* 70 (1968): 721–48; 740.
6. See Wilkinson, "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?" for a discussion of "normal" grief. I will touch on this only somewhat tangentially, but I do want to mark off a moderate, dedicatory grief as normal, as opposed to the rampant or debilitating or long-lasting anxiety or depression that may sometimes attend upon grief, making it "abnormal."
7. Plato, *Symposium* 201d–203b; 210a–212; *Republic* 386a–388d. All Plato references are taken from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). Since for Plato, material objects only exist through participation in the forms, it is unclear what

the difference would be between grieving for the loss of a material object and grieving for the loss of an ideal object, or between these and grieving for the loss of one's idea of a material object, for him; still it is noteworthy that Plato does not indicate with regard to grief, as he does with love, that some objects are more worthy of it than others.

8. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin Books, 1960); Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Pubs., 1969).

9. See, e.g., Joseph Bottom, "The Logic of Decay," *Philosophy and Literature* 18 (1994): 91–104; 92, 97; Harvey Hix, "Postmodern Grief," *Philosophy and Literature* 17 (1993): 47–64; Amy Olberding, "Mourning, Memory, and Identity: A Comparative Study of the Constitution of the Self in Grief," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (1997): 29–44; 32.

10. See, e.g., John Archer, *The Nature of Grief*, (London: Routledge, 1999); Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," (1917), trans. Joan Riviere, reprinted in *Freud: General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963); 164–79; Averill, "Grief: Its Nature and Significance"; Wilkinson, "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?" Gustafson, "Grief," is a noteworthy exception on this point.

11. See Averill "Grief: Its Nature and Significance," 724; Gustafson, "Grief," 458; Wilkinson, "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?" 290; Freud, in "Mourning and Melancholia," defines grief as a reaction either to the loss of an important person or thing, or to the loss of "some abstraction which has taken the place of one," (164), which is essentially the same as Archer's definition (*The Nature of Grief*, (1)). Many authors rely, as well, on Bowlby's separation anxiety studies, i.e., they take grief to be a reaction to loss, even where the loss may not be recognized as irreversible.

12. This more externally-connected quality of grief may account for grief's well-recognized relation to anxiety and depression (e.g., Freud's comparison of grief to "melancholia," Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*; see also Averill, "Grief: Its Nature and Significance"; Wilkinson "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?"; Olberding, "Mourning, Memory, and Identity: A Comparative Study of the Constitution of the Self in Grief," etc.). We tend to experience anxiety and depression, like grief, as things we are going through (as opposed to, or in addition to things we feel), and they certainly share with grief its sorrow, fear, and pain. But anxiety and depression, I would claim, do not have the dedicatory or obligatory aspects of grief, and so are quite distinguishable from it.

13. See Gustafson, "Grief," 460, for a helpful discussion of grief's intentionality.

14. Although I think it is important to make what might be called the "internal-external" distinction here between grieving and mourning, it is not necessary for my purposes that I be picky about whether grief is an emotion, a condition, a mental process, etc. The various authors with whom I will be in conversation in this paper have varying views on the matter—some stated explicitly, some taken as assumptions—and I will be conversing with them all on equal terms. In general, I am inclined to think of grief as an emotional state, and will refer to it as that, as an emotion, and as a state, interchangeably, whenever I am not in specific conversation with an author referring to it differently.

15. Averill demonstrates that there is considerable cultural relativity in both mourning rituals and notions of the proper causes for grief. Perhaps indeed, the grief-appropriateness of losing a fortune or a house should be left an open question, to be determined by different societies in their own ways. Still, I would maintain that wherever a particular society designates a particular loss as warranting grief, they will designate it also as apparently objective, irreversible, concrete, and unique. None of Averill's examples challenge this. See James Averill, "Grief: Its Nature and Significance," 724–5.

16. Gustafson, "Grief," 467–8.

17. *Ibid.*, 464.

18. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: Random House, 1941), 927–1112; 946–7 (1100a10–30).

19. Of the articles I have cited, only Bottom, "The Logic of Decay," touches on the reflection associated with grief.

20. Nor indeed, with her proper memory of oneself during her last hours. While I have set aside metaphysical discussions of the afterlife, and so will not discuss here whether the deceased actually has memories of her life, I do believe that one's regret of unpleasant last interactions with someone who has died indicates that the person in grief thinks of her own life, that we tend to think of even the lives of the living, as being apparently objective in the sense I have used it. Certainly this is what Aristotle thought.

21. Averill, "Grief: Its Nature and Significance," 721.

22. *Ibid.*, 744.

23. Hix, "Postmodern Grief"; Archer, *The Nature of Grief*. This is not to say that comparisons of these other emotions to grief, or metaphorical representations of these other emotions as grief, might not be very fruitful in many different contexts. I am only claiming here that such comparisons or representations are not the same as philosophical attempts to understand grief.

24. *It's A Wonderful Life*, Dir. by Frank Capra, Starring James Stewart and Donna Reed (RKO/Liberty Films, 1946).

25. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 277.

26. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*; 268–9.

27. *Ibid.*, 270–1.

28. Gustafson, "Grief," 468–9.

29. *Ibid.*, 289.

30. *Ibid.*, 291.

31. *Ibid.*, 293.

32. *Ibid.*, 298.

33. *Ibid.*, 298.

34. *Ibid.*, 298.

35. *Ibid.*, 290.

36. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 164.

37. *Ibid.*, 165.

38. *Ibid.*, 167.

39. *Ibid.*, 169.

40. *Ibid.*, 168–70.

41. *Ibid.*, 165.

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