

***Grief: A Philosophical Guide.* By MICHAEL CHOLBI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. vii + 212. Price £20.00)**

Despite being one of life's most disruptive, painful, and puzzling experiences, grief has been rather neglected within philosophical scholarship until recently. Michael Cholbi helps to plug this gap with this clearly written guide, which addresses many of the most important philosophical questions surrounding grief. Due to its approachable style, the book will be of interest to the general reader as well as those engaged in related philosophical enquiries. It presents a distinctive account of grief as a process of emotionally-driven attention directed at one's lost or changed relationship with the deceased, and through which one can acquire significant self-knowledge. The first four chapters are devoted to setting up this account and looking at the value of grief, while the final three turn to further questions regarding grief's normative status. This review will briefly outline each chapter's contribution before providing some more critical discussion of the role given to self-knowledge in Cholbi's account.

Chapter 1 considers the scope of grief by examining *who* we grieve. Cholbi convincingly argues that we grieve those in whom we invest our 'practical identities'—the set of commitments, concerns and values that guide our choices and actions. Grief does not require intimacy, love, attachment, or that the deceased contributed to one's wellbeing, despite such traits often featuring in our relationships with those we grieve. Chapter 2 looks more closely at the kind of experience that grief is and its intentional object. It is widely accepted that grief is not a single emotion, but rather some kind of temporally-extended *process* involving wide-ranging emotional and cognitive ingredients. This chapter sets out Cholbi's novel account of the nature of this process, taking it to be best characterised as one of emotionally driven *attention*, directed at the relationship one had with the deceased. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on grief's value, discussing an apparent tension between grief being painful but also seemingly having something to recommend it, such that it should not be avoided altogether.

Cholbi argues that it is grief's capacity to generate self-knowledge, through attending to different aspects of one's prior and current relationship with the deceased, that imparts it with this value.

The final three chapters discuss grief's normativity, in terms of rational, moral, and medical norms, respectively. Chapter 5 responds to accounts that take grief to be intrinsically irrational or arational. Cholbi argues instead that grief can be rational, but that this rationality is *retrospective* in that it is reflective of grief's quantitative and qualitative appropriateness to the lost or transformed relationship at which it is directed. Chapter 6 argues that we have a *duty* to grieve those in whom we invest our practical identities and that, perhaps surprisingly, this duty is directed at ourselves rather than at the deceased or other living people. This self-regarding duty is said to stem from a broader duty to pursue self-knowledge. Finally, Chapter 7 argues that although grief meets certain criteria for mental disorders, it ought not to be medicalised. Doing so may erode grief's potential to contribute to a meaningful life. A notable virtue of these chapters is their careful attention to the practical implications of philosophical theses. For instance, Chapter 5 offers some intriguing discussion of how different strands of rationality can conflict with one another and the ethical implications this may have for end-of-life care and post-death decisions.

Grief: A Philosophical Guide is highly successful in exposing largely overlooked normative and theoretical issues surrounding grief and situating them within extant philosophical discussions. Furthermore, the account it develops of grief as a process of attention directed at the relationship with the deceased is novel and, in many ways, plausible. Where the book is not always wholly convincing is in certain details of this account, however. In particular, much is made of the role of self-knowledge, which is held to confer significant value and to be grief's 'purpose'—that which makes an activity successful when achieved. While grief can certainly have a revelatory quality, generally, as Cholbi acknowledges, people do not consciously pursue self-knowledge in their grief; it is rather something attained unwittingly. This lack of awareness feels hard to square with the normative and ethical claims made with respect to grief's purpose. Cholbi proposes that grief is successful to the

extent that self-knowledge is accrued and, additionally, that we have a duty to grieve in virtue of a broader duty to pursue self-knowledge. Firstly, some will object to the idea that someone has somehow failed to grieve successfully if, irrespective of how well they have otherwise navigated their loss, they do not emerge having attained a new understanding of themselves. Secondly, the proposed duty to grieve not only has a moral basis that can be opaque to the griever, but the griever may not even recognise grief as an opportunity for self-knowledge. Thus, both the nature of the duty and the means of fulfilling the duty seem often to be unknown to the griever, which remains a puzzling feature of this account.

Another potential concern about the alleged role of self-knowledge—particularly with regards the proposal that it is ‘the good in grief’—is that it is perhaps more optimistic than is warranted. It is not clear that self-knowledge acquisition would allow one to ‘emerge from grief with a rejuvenated practical identity and a more stable sense of self’ (p. 85), as is suggested. Much of the self-knowledge acquired in grief is a product of one’s prior identity being shattered and the bereaved being forced to reconstruct who they are. Put in these terms, it is questionable that this should result in a more stable sense of self as compared to who one was prior to the loss. On the contrary, this profound disruption seems rather likely to result in *less* stable practical identity; key elements of one’s prior self might be impossible to rebuild or replace. Of course, Cholbi’s point may be that *given that* you have suffered an identity-shattering loss, it is better to grieve than to not grieve. This, however, would appear to involve an assumption that grief, on the one hand, and understanding that you have lost someone central to your identity, on the other, can be disentangled to the extent that grief could in principle be avoided. Plausibly, however, grief is partly a process of comprehending and recognising loss, and if this is so, where one does come to recognise the loss of someone in whom their identity was invested, this would already necessitate grief.

Despite these more critical comments, *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* does an excellent job of illuminating how one’s practical identity can involve others, and how this identity must be

reconfigured following a bereavement. As the book outlines, grief reflects the relationships we share with others, and amid its throes, we find ourselves attending to—and rebuilding—our identities and relationships. To the extent that grief goes hand-in-hand with the kinds of identity-constituting relationships that Cholbi highlights, this already sheds important light on why we should not wish for a life without grief, for such a life would be one lacking meaningful relationships at its core.

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