

# Grief's Rationality, Backward and Forward<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL CHOLBI

*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona*

Grief is our emotional response to the deaths of intimates, and so like many other emotional conditions, it can be appraised in terms of its rationality. A philosophical account of grief's rationality should satisfy a *contingency constraint*, wherein grief is neither intrinsically rational nor intrinsically irrational. Here I provide an account of grief and its rationality that satisfies this constraint, while also being faithful to the phenomenology of grief experience. I begin by arguing against the best known account of grief's rationality, Gustafson's *strategic* or forward-looking account, according to which the practical rationality of grief depends on the internal coherence of the component attitudes that explain the behaviors caused by grief, and more exactly, on how these attitudes enable the individual to realize states of affairs that she desires. While I do not deny that episodes of grief can be appraised in terms of their strategic rationality, I deny that strategic rationality is the essential or fundamental basis on which grief's rationality should be appraised. In contrast, the heart of grief's rationality is backward-looking. That is, what primarily makes an episode of grief rational *qua* grief is the fittingness of the attitudes individuals take toward the experience of a lost relationship, attitudes which in turn generate the desires and behaviors that constitute bereavement. Grief thus derives its essential rationality from the objects it responds to, not from the attitudes causally downstream from that response, and is necessarily irrational when the behaviors that constitute an individual's grieving are inappropriate to the object of that grief. So while the strategic rationality of an episode of grief contributes to whether it is on the whole rational, no episode of grief can be rational unless the actions that constitute grieving accurately gauge the change in a person's normative situation wrought by the loss of her relationship with the deceased.

Grief at the death of loved ones is one of the few genuine universals of the human condition. For although bereavement practices are culturally variable and specific,<sup>2</sup> grief itself appears to be nearly ubiquitous among human individuals who suffer the death of (or similar separation from) a loved one. Yet by itself, this ubiquity tells us little about grief's place in our ethical life. After all, there are likely to be other ubiquitous human responses—rage, jealousy, etc.—that are neither obviously desirable nor obviously

---

<sup>1</sup> Audience members at the 2013 Three Rivers Philosophy Conference at the University of South Carolina, particularly Konstantin Pollok, Andrea Staiti, Jeremy Rosenbaum Simon, Susan Mills, Steve Luper, and Stephen Campbell, provided valuable feedback on this article, as did David Adams, Brian Domino, Megs Gendreau, Katie Stockdale, and Monique Wonderly.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Levy, "Emotion, knowing, and culture," in R.A. Shweder and R.A. Levine (eds.), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 214–237; Maurice Eisenbruch, "Cross-cultural aspects of bereavement: A conceptual framework for comparative analysis," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 8, 3 (1984): 283–309; D.P. Irish, K.F. Lundquist, and V.J. Nelson (eds.), *Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in Universality* (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1993); and Paul C. Rosenblatt, "A social constructivist perspective on cultural differences in grief," in M.S. Stroebe, R.O. Hansson, W. Stroebe, and H. Schut (eds.), *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), pp. 285–300.

rational, responses that, if it were possible, we might choose to expunge from our collective psychological repertoire.

Such does not appear to be true of grief. For despite grief's being painful, some measure of grief is taken as a mark of good mental health. (Until recently, the American Psychiatric Association, in its diagnostic manual of mental disorders, had specifically mentioned grief as a paradigm instance of a condition which, although it may satisfy the definitional components of a mental disorder, should not be classified as a disorder because it is the "expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event."<sup>3</sup>) Furthermore, as a number of philosophers writing on grief have emphasized, our capacity to grieve is intimately related to our well-being. The inability to grieve adequately either reveals or creates an impediment to our flourishing as human beings, and more specifically, to our capacity to properly value our relationships with others.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, the relationship between rationality and well-being is complex: It is at least possible that an attitude or reaction can be rational while making our lives worse, and conversely, that an attitude or reaction can make our lives better despite being irrational. Yet the consensus, both philosophical and lay, that grief is a healthy response to loss suggests that any philosophical account of grief's rationality should be rejected if it makes grief out to be inherently irrational.<sup>5</sup> For while it is likely that particular instances of grief are irrational, it would be surprising indeed if grief as such is generically irrational. Conversely, however, grief is likely to resemble other human attitudes, such as belief, that are at least sometimes irrational. Grief's rationality is a contingent feature of grief. Thus, any account of the nature of grief that implies either that it is intrinsically rational or intrinsically irrational ought to be rejected. Let us call this the *contingency constraint*.

Here I aim to provide an account of grief and its rationality that satisfies this constraint, while also being faithful to the phenomenology of grief experience. I begin by arguing against the best known account of grief's rationality. According to this *strategic* or forward-looking account, the practical rationality of grief depends on the internal coherence of the component attitudes that explain the behaviors caused by grief, and more exactly, on how these attitudes enable the individual to realize states of affairs that she desires. On this view, grief is rational when the attitudes it generates enable a grieving individual to satisfy her desires by acting so as to achieve the states of affairs that are the objects of those desires. Grief is irrational, on this view, just in case it generates conflicts among the grieving individual's attitudes.

While I do not deny that episodes of grief can be appraised in terms of their strategic rationality, I deny that strategic rationality is the essential or fundamental basis on which

---

<sup>3</sup> American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Washington, D.C., 1994), p. xxi.

<sup>4</sup> Loretta Kopelman, "Normal grief: Good or bad? Health or disease?," Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology 1, 4 (1995): 209–240; Martha Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 66–77, 140–141; Robert C. Roberts, Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 236; Robert Solomon, "On grief and gratitude," in In Defense of Sentimentality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 77–79; Talbot Brewer, The Retrieval of Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 147; and Carolyn Price, "The rationality of grief," Inquiry 53, 1 (2010): 20.

<sup>5</sup> For the moment, I assume that grief is rationally appraisable. In section 5, I consider one prominent argument for the claim that grief is a non-rational condition.

grief's rationality should be appraised. In contrast, the heart of grief's rationality is backward-looking. That is, what primarily makes an episode of grief rational *qua* grief is the fittingness of the attitudes individuals take toward the experience of a lost relationship, attitudes which in turn generate the desires and behaviors that constitute bereavement. Grief thus derives its essential rationality from the objects it responds to, not from the attitudes causally downstream from that response, and is necessarily irrational when the behaviors that constitute an individual's grieving are inappropriate to the object of that grief. So while the strategic rationality of an episode of grief contributes to whether it is on the whole rational, no episode of grief can be rational unless the actions that constitute grieving accurately gauge the change in a person's normative situation wrought by the loss of her relationship with the deceased.

My discussion proceeds as follows: After first clarifying grief's object, that is, what grief is grief *about*, I then offer arguments in section 2 against the best known version of the strategic account, offered by Donald Gustafson.<sup>6</sup> Section 3 provides a general diagnosis of why Gustafson's account flounders, a diagnosis that generalizes to any version of the strategic account. Crucially, I do not deny that grief has such strategic dimensions or that its rationality can be appraised in strategic terms. I instead deny that there is any particular desire that (a) grief subserves in grieving individuals and (b) explains how grief is contingently strategically rational, i.e., a desire which, given the bereaved's beliefs, can be, but is not necessarily, satisfied. Strategic accounts of grief's rationality thus fail because they are phenomenologically inaccurate to the phenomena of grief; because whether grief is rational turns out (on these accounts) to be a necessary rather than contingent fact about grief and thus violates my contingency constraint; or both.

Section 4 outlines my positive account of grief's rationality. I compare grief to its positive correlate, joy, and argue that just as joy's rationality is most plausibly captured in terms of its fittingness to its objects, grief's rationality is most plausibly captured in terms of its fittingness to its objects. This fittingness has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

Even with these arguments, proponents of the strategic account may nevertheless declare our disagreement a draw. Grief's rationality is two-dimensional; it may be appraised either in strategic or backward-looking terms, they may argue. Section 5 responds to this objection, noting that while grief's rationality can be appraised strategically, grief's rationality is *fundamentally* backward-looking because the behaviors that constitute bereavement are the causal products of desires which in turn rest on one's attitudes toward the lost relationship, the very attitudes that are appraised as fitting or unfitting according to my backward-looking account. Backward-looking rationality therefore has explanatory priority over strategic rationality in the rational appraisal of grief.

Two notes on terminology: I here take the death of a loved one to represent our paradigm grief experience. 'Grief' is sometimes used more loosely to refer to the experience of any significant loss, such as divorce, job loss, a loved one's physical or mental degeneration, or a child's maturation. In general, the analysis I provide here of how grief at the death of a loved one is rational is applicable to these other phenomena. Whether these deserve to be counted as 'grief' is a verbal dispute with which I see little philosophical point in engaging. Second, some of the grief literature contrasts grief with mourning, understanding the former as a mental state and the latter as the behaviors caused by, or

---

<sup>6</sup> "Grief," *Noûs* 23, 4 (1989): 457–479.

expressing, that state. In contrast, I will use ‘grief’ to refer to the state and phrases such as ‘bereavement’ and ‘grieving behaviors’ to refer to the latter.

### 1. Grief’s Object

Philosophers commonly treat grief as, or as constituted by, a kind of emotion. Emotions are intentional states because they have objects outside ourselves. We are not simply angry or afraid. We are angry *that* someone has wronged us or afraid *that* we have embarrassed ourselves publicly. Emotions are thus ‘about’ or are directed at states of affairs. This is especially clear in the case of grief: While “I am in grief” or “I’m grieving” are proper locutions, they are incomplete. When we grieve, we grieve something specific or identifiable. We grieve *for* something or *over* something, and we miss crucial features of grief if we focus exclusively on its internal, felt quality and neglect the external objects that prompt grief.<sup>7</sup>

So what is grief’s *object*? When we grieve, we grieve a loss. But what sort of loss? Tempting though it is say to that grief’s object is the deceased person, this cannot be exactly correct. For while it is possible to feel sadness at any person’s death, grieving their death requires that the deceased stand in a minimally intimate relationship of some kind with those who grieve them. We characteristically grieve the deaths of spouses, siblings, parents, close relations, and friends. Conversely, claims to grief weaken as the intimacy of the relationship with the deceased weaken. Such intimacy reaches its outer limit in grief in the sadness that many people evidently feel when a revered celebrity dies. The death of pop singer Michael Jackson sparked innumerable tributes and memorials, and no doubt many of the participants in these rituals would have described their experiences and feelings as ‘grief.’ However, most of these participants had no relationship to the human agent Michael Jackson as such. They ‘knew’ him through his celebrity persona and his music, and so it may well be the death of this persona that they grieve. I offer no point of demarcation to indicate the level of intimacy necessary for one person to grieve the death of another. I mean only to underscore that what transforms ordinary sadness about the loss of life into grief is its personal dimension—that one person can genuinely grieve for another only when they stand in some intimate relationship.<sup>8</sup>

In a more axiological vernacular, the grieving have undergone a loss of value, and more specifically, the loss of an *agent-relative* value.<sup>9</sup> To grieve a loss is not simply to suppose that the world now contains less that is valuable than it did before. Of course, grief does not preclude feeling that the deceased was agent-neutrally valuable. One can grieve the loss of S whilst also acknowledging that the world has lost an excellent doctor, a generous benefactor, a kind parent, a jovial golf partner, or a devastating wit. Nor does the agent-relative dimension of grief preclude sadness or regret on behalf of the deceased. One can grieve the loss of S while regretting that S never got to run a marathon, learn Italian, or witness the marriages of her children. But one’s grief is not empathy for the deceased either. For grief is felt as a loss specifically to oneself, a loss indexed to the relationship that death has transformed. In addition, the loss registered in grief is quite

---

<sup>7</sup> Janet McCracken, “Falsely, sanely, shallowly: Reflections on the special character of grief,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19, 1 (2005): 141–142.

<sup>8</sup> Solomon, “On grief and gratitude,” p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> This is suggested by Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions, p. 41, and Brewer, The Retrieval of Ethics, pp. 174–175, though neither use this axiological vocabulary.

different from losing a treasured keepsake or piece of property. To lose a treasured keepsake is to lose the goods it provided or represented—and nothing more. Such a loss may prompt or resuscitate past grief (or may generate “anticipatory” grief).<sup>10</sup> But it cannot itself be an object of grief. Martha Nussbaum is no doubt correct in claiming that we grieve those whom we comprehend as making a contribution to our flourishing as human beings.<sup>11</sup> Yet grief’s object is not simply the loss of the various such contributions the deceased made to our flourishing. Yes, our feelings of grief swell when we remember the party she threw on our anniversary, her knowing smile, or how skillfully she built a campfire. But the bereaved do not see the deceased as losses for which compensation is suitable, or even possible. And so we distort or fail to engage fully with our own grief if we too eagerly seek to replace these goods provided by the deceased. *She* is irreplaceable, even if the goods she provided us are not.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, grief need not be predicated on the loss of such goods at all. While grief sometimes involves warm remembrance or commemoration dedicated to the deceased, some grief episodes lack this sunny or honorific quality.<sup>13</sup> Those undergoing ambivalent or conflicted grief, for example, are often grieving the loss of an individual who they expected would provide them with certain goods but did not. We can thus grieve those who contributed little to our flourishing. We can even grieve those to whom we are hostile because they made our lives worse.

What then are we left with as the possible object of grief? Given that grief is self-concerning and agent-relative but not directed at the goods that the deceased person provided us or the larger world, we are left with but one possibility: We grieve for the *relationship* we lose with the deceased person. That is, grief’s object—what sustains a bereaved person’s attention throughout an episode of grief—is how her relationship is necessarily transformed by the other’s death. We will have occasion to clarify this claim as we proceed, but note that this claim does not entail that death necessarily *terminates* the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased. A bereaved person may continue to relate to the deceased, but of course the deceased cannot relate back (or at least cannot relate back in the same way). Within an intimate relationship, the network of habits, hopes, expectations, and shared understandings that constitute the relationship cannot continue uninterrupted or unchanged when one of its participants dies. So though death is the causal trigger of grief, the surviving participant’s loss of the relationship as it was, and its possible transformation by the other participant’s death, provides grief its object.

## 2. Gustafson’s Strategic Account

If grief’s object is the loss of the relationship with the deceased, then grief is rational to the extent that it rationally responds to this loss. Given the ubiquity and apparent

---

<sup>10</sup> Solomon, “On grief and gratitude,” p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> *Upheavals of Thought*, pp. 81–82.

<sup>12</sup> Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, pp. 174–176. As McCracken, “Falsely, sanely, shallowly,” p. 144, points out, we seem to grieve not the goods of a person’s life taken singly, but the loss of their life in its entirety.

<sup>13</sup> McCracken, “Falsely, sanely, shallowly,” p. 147, claims that grief has this dedicatory aspect, that (for example) we seek to satisfy the wishes of the deceased so as to honor them. I disagree with this, but in fairness, McCracken aims only to analyze normal or healthy grief in these terms.

healthiness of grief, an account of grief's rationality should explain what makes grief typically and paradigmatically, even if not necessarily, rational.<sup>14</sup>

Yet arguably the most influential analytical account of grief, that offered by Donald Gustafson, consigns grief to the scrapheap of irrationality. Gustafson proposes that grief is a complex state of belief and desire, and while its component belief or desire states can themselves be rational or irrational, he focuses primarily on what he calls the "strategic" rationality embedded in grief. Grief, like all emotions, provides "motive force" to action. An action can thus be appropriate or inappropriate "to the desires or ends partly constitutive of the emotion."<sup>15</sup> On Gustafson's picture, grief is 'strategically' or practically rational just to the extent that it enables a grieving individual to grieve in ways that satisfy her desires in light of what she believes about the world.

But Gustafson argues that the complex of beliefs and desires that constitute grief is by nature irrational because it provides motive force for an agent to act in ways that are incompatible with her beliefs. For grief involves both the belief that the individual grieved is deceased and the desire that the same individual not be deceased:

S grieves N's death. S knows and believes that N is dead. S has feelings of loss, pain, anger, and the like, at the loss of N. And importantly, S desires that it not be the case that N is dead. . . . Note that S's belief and S's desire are incompatible. That is, a belief and a desire, had by an agent at a given time, are incompatible in this way in case the desire is unsatisfiable on the truth of the belief, or the satisfaction of the desire requires the falsity of the belief.<sup>16</sup>

Grief thus turns out to be essentially irrational, according to Gustafson. For if grief necessarily involves a belief contrary to one's desire, then there are no actions whose performance will satisfy the agent's desired end, that the deceased individual still live. Grief's painfulness is therefore due to the volitional paralysis this belief-desire pair brings about. "One grieves," Gustafson concludes, "just in that there is nothing which can be done!"<sup>17</sup> Grief thus differs from many other emotional states in that it cannot be relieved or dissipated by acting on it. The only cure, on Gustafson's view, is to align one's beliefs and desires so that the conflict at the heart of grief is resolved.

Gustafson offers far too many specific arguments for me to engage here. He does not shy away from acknowledging that his account of grief violates my contingency constraint, readily admitting that that on his account, "grief appears to leave no room for justification, given its cause and genesis."<sup>18</sup> But aside from the worry that Gustafson has

---

<sup>14</sup> As recent scientific literature on grief has emphasized, despite the fascination with pathological or 'complicated' grief found in the self-help literature and in Anglo-American culture more generally, most bereaved persons exhibit resilience and recover from even profound losses relatively quickly with little or no clinical assistance. See George Bonnano, The Other Side of Sadness (New York: Basic Books, 2009), especially pp. 45–66.

<sup>15</sup> "Grief," p. 462.

<sup>16</sup> "Grief," p. 466.

<sup>17</sup> "Grief," p. 469.

<sup>18</sup> "Grief," p. 469.

condemned grief to an inherently irrational state, many details of his defense of this account of grief can be questioned.

For one, we need not posit that grief is irrational in order to differentiate it from sorrow, as Gustafson contends. Gustafson argues that sorrow at a person's death is distinct from grief at that same person's death in that the sorrowful *wish*, rather than desire, that the deceased still be alive. For S to desire that P is to have a world-to-mind pro-attitude that motivates S to act so that P is the case. For S to wish that P is to have a world-to-mind pro-attitude that does *not* motivate S to act so that P is the case. Hence, we can rationally wish for the impossible, despite not being able to rationally desire (what we believe to be) the impossible. Gustafson thinks that sorrow at a person's death thus does not invite the charge of irrationality in the way that grief does, for wishing that P and believing that not-P are not incompatible, whereas desiring that P and believing that not-P are.

Gustafson thus concludes that sorrow and grief have the same object but different constituent conative elements. However, we noted earlier that grief is not a response simply to loss. It is a response to a lost relationship. Sorrow, I propose, has a loss, but not the agent-relative loss of a relationship, as its object. I may be sorrowful at your loss, but I grieve at mine. This is a difference in the objects of these states, not in the nature of the attitudes taken toward those objects, as Gustafson proposes.

More generally, while it cannot be denied that grief involves the belief that a loved one has died, it is far from clear that it includes the specific conative state of desiring that Gustafson proposes. Surely a person can grieve the lost relationship with a deceased loved one without desiring (or wishing) that the person still be alive. A sincere Christian can grieve the loss of his relationship with a deceased loved one while believing that the loved one is now exulting in the glory of God, in which case he cannot plausibly be said to desire that the loved one be alive instead of enjoying eternal bliss. Similarly, a couple in which one partner is terminally ill may, after discussion, decide that the terminally ill partner is better off dead, and as such, the couple may opt to forego further medical treatments and interventions and allow death to arrive. The healthy partner does not desire that the ill partner be alive. Gustafson's account thus implies that when the ill partner dies, the surviving partner's response cannot be classified as grief, since he did not, and presumably does not, desire or even wish that the deceased partner be alive. He believes she is dead, and may have various other desires pertaining to her. But it stretches credulity to think that his anguished reaction, tinged as it may be with a sense of relief, is not grief.<sup>19</sup> As a response to loss, grief stands independent of the desire that the deceased still live. Nor is grief incompatible with relief at the death of another.

Finally, Gustafson sees grief's painfulness as a kind of helplessness: One cannot bring about a state of affairs one desires to bring about, resulting in anguish. This anguish co-occurs with a sense of there being no rationally appropriate response to grief. Grief is thus anomalous among the emotions in that it can motivate only irrational actions.

---

<sup>19</sup> A further limitation of Gustafson's account of the desire that the deceased be alive is that we do not generically desire that a person be alive. Rather, we desire that a person be alive under some specified conditions. Hence, Gustafson might suggest the surviving partner does desire that the deceased be alive under specified conditions (that she be alive and healthy, etc.). But even if true, this would not show that the desire that the deceased be alive is an essential element of grief. It would, at most, show that we can grieve other 'losses' besides the deaths of our loved ones, for example, declines in their health and capacities.

Admittedly, grief sometimes develops in the form Gustafson identifies, so that the grieving individual ends up pining for the deceased and vainly acts in the hope of bringing them back.<sup>20</sup> It follows necessarily from Gustafson's account that all grief behaviors are explicable in terms of the belief-desire complex that constitutes grief, and more specifically, by the desire that the deceased individual still be alive. But it seems premature to conclude that all actions (or behaviors, if one prefers) motivated by grief can be explained by this belief-desire complex. The bereaved sort through their loved one's belongings, tell stories about the deceased, ensure the disposition of the deceased's will and wishes, visit tombs and gravesites, and document their emotions. Again, perhaps some of these behaviors flow from desiring that the deceased not have died. Yet Gustafson's account has no way of explaining these grief responses except as irrational pinings, futile efforts to resurrect the dead by those who know, however implicitly, that they cannot be resurrected. Understanding grief's rationality strategically, as Gustafson does, thus makes it impossible to identify many very ordinary grieving behaviors *as* grieving behaviors, much the less to classify them as rational or irrational grief responses.

Gustafson's strategic approach to grief's rationality is elegant and understandably influential.<sup>21</sup> And admittedly, some bereaved individuals do experience the sort of yearning for the lost loved one Gustafson makes central to the experience of grief. Nevertheless, I contend that it is mistaken in conflating a species of irrational grief, namely, strategically irrational grief, with grief itself.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Diagnosing the Failures of the Strategic Account

Still, those attracted to the Humean psychology underlying Gustafson's strategic account may propose that even if Gustafson got the details wrong, another strategic account may well be able to evade my criticisms of Gustafson's account. More specifically, given that my criticisms of Gustafson's position largely focused on the implausibility of thinking that the desire that the deceased for which one grieves be alive is inherent to grief, perhaps the strategic view of grief's rationality would fare better if some other desire were definitive of grief.

Here the challenge for defenders of the strategic account is to identify a belief-desire complex that

---

<sup>20</sup> Some philosophers make the still stranger claims that grief does not generate particular forms of action at all (Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*, p. 63) or that grief's most salient manifestation is a form of volitional paralysis or catatonia (William Lyons, *Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 42–43).

<sup>21</sup> While few commentators wholeheartedly endorse Gustafson's conclusions, many endorse them in part or concur with his premises. For example, Nussbaum agrees that grief is predicated on the desire for the return of a loved one; Solomon, "On grief and gratitude," pp. 79, 85, maintains that grief involves the impossible-to-satisfy desire that the beloved survive combined with the inability to accept their loss; Price, "The rationality of grief," claims that grief involves two forms of sadness, one of which (anguish) involves irrational conflicts between belief and desire; Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*, p. 236, claims that grief is a kind of paralyzing wish for the loved one's return.

<sup>22</sup> To Gustafson's credit, he does seem to have anticipated a primary feature of complicated or prolonged grief, namely, that those with the strongest "continuing bonds" with the deceased are more likely to suffer complicated or prolonged grief. See George A. Bonnano, Eval Gal-Oz, and Nigel P. Field, "Continuing bonds and adjustment at 5 years after the death of a spouse," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 71, 7 (2003): 110–117.



[a] all grieving individuals actually have;

[b] honors my contingency constraint, i.e., that does not result in grief's rationality being an analytic or conceptual truth about this belief-desire complex; and

[c] the possession of which makes it possible to evaluate the rationality of an episode of grief in strategic terms, that is, in terms of whether the complex is internally coherent in such a way that the desire can be satisfied on the condition that the belief is true.

While I cannot state definitively that no such belief-desire complex exists, no candidate for this complex appears forthcoming.

For instance, suppose grief combined the belief that the grieved individual is dead with the desire for the elusive psychological condition known as 'closure'. No doubt a lack of closure, that is, a lack of emotional resolution or equilibrium, characterizes many instances of grief, and given grief's painfulness, it would be unsurprising if the bereaved did not desire closure. Still, it is not clear that this complex is present in all episodes of grief. For it does not seem impossible to be undergoing grief having already achieved closure. Imagine an example of a 'good death': The dying individual has ample time to ready others, her loved ones have ample time to ready themselves, any lingering relationship issues are resolved, thorough and explicit instructions are provided concerning the disposition of the body and the deceased's financial affairs, death occurs relatively comfortably, etc. Under such optimal conditions, survivors are likely to believe the individual has died, to have already achieved closure (making the desire for closure otiose), and yet still undergo a measure of grief. Hence, it seems perfectly coherent for grief to occur without a desire for closure when closure has already been achieved.

However, suppose we grant in the name of philosophical charity that this complex satisfies [a] above. Does this belief-desire complex honor [b] though? On its face, it would seem to, for the belief that a person is dead is not inherently incompatible with desiring to be emotionally at peace with their death. Consider the following set of conditions:

S is in grief due to T's death only if

- (1) S believes that T is dead, and
- (2) S desires closure with respect to T

Here (unlike as in Gustafson's original analysis) the satisfaction of the desire incorporated in (1) does not require the falsity of the belief stated in (2). So understood, grief is not necessarily irrational then. This conclusion is too hasty though. For whereas Gustafson's version of the strategic account made it impossible for grief to be rational, this version of the strategic irrational makes it impossible for grief to be irrational, at least in strategic terms. This emerges most clearly when we consider the nature of the desire expressed in (2). Closure is the resolution of an emotionally distressing state. So to desire closure with respect to one's grieving for T's death is thus to desire that one no longer grieve T's death:

S is in grief due to T's death only if

(1) S believes that T is dead, and

(2') S desires not to grieve with respect to T

Grief would be strategically irrational on this version if the satisfiability of the desire expressed in (2') depended on the falsity of the belief expressed in (1). But not only is that not the case, the satisfiability of the desire expressed in (2') *presupposes* the truth of the belief expressed in (1).<sup>23</sup> S's desire not to grieve with respect to T is intelligible only given S's belief in T's death. Grief thus turns out to be intrinsically rational. And while my own contingency constraint requires that any account of grief's rationality show that it is at least sometimes rational, for grief to be intrinsically rational would be to err by inoculating grief from rational criticism altogether.

But even supposing there were some way to locate logical space between (1) and (2') so as to make it at least possible for (2') to go unsatisfied, it is also not apparent that this belief-desire complex satisfies [c]. It is possible to ask whether (2') is itself rational, whether S ought to desire not to grieve with respect to T. But whether S ought to have such a desire has no bearing on whether she can satisfy that desire given her other beliefs and attitudes. That desire sets the trajectory of her practical deliberations and so by itself is neither *strategically* rational or irrational. Likewise, to the extent there is the prospect of conflict amongst a grieving person's attitudes at all, the conflict in question is not of the sort required by the strategic account, namely, a conflict of belief and desire. Rather, the conflict is one in which desire conflicts with fact: S both grieves T's death and desires not to grieve T's death. But there is no potential conflict among S's attitudes such that S's attitudes, operating in concert, can prove strategically rational or not. Hence, representing grief in terms of a desire for closure does not generate a version of the strategic account of grief's rationality.

Of course, proponents of the strategic account are free to offer additional candidates for a belief-desire complex on which grief and its rationality might rest. It would be impossible to rebut these candidates one by one. But the example of a desire for closure indicates why these candidates are unlikely to succeed. First, grieving no doubt involves conative states such as desires, but there does not seem to be any particular desire that the bereaved share. Describe this desire too finely, and the strategic account will (as Gustafson's did) fail to classify a wide range of grieving behaviors as such. Describe this desire too broadly, and the strategic account will likely end up invoking a desire so general as to make grief's rationality a necessary, rather than a contingent, fact about grief. Second, whether a given belief-desire complex is satisfiable in the way outlined by the strategic account, i.e., whether the desire is satisfiable on the assumption of the belief's truth, will not vary across different instances of that complex. Hence, if a defender of the strategic account proposes that grief is defined by some belief-desire complex, then either all episodes of grief involve satisfiable belief-desire complexes or none do. Either way, grief's rationality turns out to be intrinsic, in violation of my contingency constraint.

Prospects thus seem dim for a strategic account that is accurate to the phenomenology of grief as well as avoiding the twin pitfalls of making grief out to be either intrinsically

---

<sup>23</sup> At least in cases where grief is not genuinely psychotic or delusional.

rational or intrinsically irrational—a fact about the nature of grief rather than about certain configurations of grief. More generally, strategic accounts of grief’s rationality exemplify a common contemporary picture of human rationality that Talbot Brewer has recently characterized as a “world-making” conception of human rationality. On this conception, actions are intelligible to the extent that they realize the states of affairs they aim to realize. As a species of “production,” action is “at heart a technique for remaking the world so that it answers to the agent’s intentions or desires.”<sup>24</sup> I have not denied that some instances of grief are strategically irrational in one or more of the ways discussed here. However, the failures of particular versions of the strategic account imply that the shortcomings of the strategic account reside precisely in applying this world-making conception of rationality to the phenomenon of grief. Views like the strategic account, as Brewer vividly puts it, threaten “to take what we know in the moment of loss as a yawning abyss of absence and shrink it to the unimposing dimensions of a technical anomaly in decision theory.”<sup>25</sup> The core of grief’s rationality must lie elsewhere.

#### 4. Grief’s Rationality, Looking Backward

If grief’s rationality is not fundamentally strategic, what is the alternative? We can make headway on an alternative if we compare grief to a similar state with an opposing normative valence: joy.

Joy is in many respects the positive correlate of grief. We experience joy in response to events or situations that non-trivially augment our well-being. Of course, the analogy with grief may be inexact. The kinds of events that augment our well-being and trigger joy appear to be greater in number than the losses that trigger grief. Yet this may reflect the fact that our conceptual repertoire for positive emotions is smaller than that for negative emotions. Paul Ekman, the foremost defender of universal ‘basic’ emotions, identifies four negative emotions (anger, disgust, fear, and sadness), one neutral (surprise), and one positive (happiness).<sup>26</sup> It is certainly possible to imagine individuating joy (or happiness) more finely to reflect the wide array of experiences that prompt joy-like reactions. But the important point for our purposes is that among these experiences are the establishment or deepening of personal relationships. New parents and those embarking on new romantic relationships experience joy, as do those who reconcile after long periods of estrangement.

Suppose we attempt to conceptualize joy’s rationality strategically, in terms of the coherence of the attitudes it generates and the actions motivated by those attitudes. Joy is nonsensical without the belief that an event or situation has augmented our well-being. And no doubt joy causes a wide array of subsequent desires and attitudes: desires to celebrate, commemorate, congratulate, and so on. And as Gustafson argued with respect to grief, these desires may or may not cohere with our beliefs, and when they do not, our attitudes and actions exhibit strategic irrationality.

Yet this sort of irrationality seems peripheral to the question of the rationality of joy. For all that is necessary for joy as such to be rational is for it to be a fitting response to what prompts it. Joy can be rational or irrational along both its cognitive and conative

---

<sup>24</sup> The Retrieval of Ethics, p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> The Retrieval of Ethics, p. 174.

<sup>26</sup> “Basic emotions,” in T. Dalgleish and M.J. Power (eds.), Handbook of Cognition and Emotion (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 1999), pp. 45–61.

dimensions. An episode of joy may be based on a false belief, for example. And as Aristotle pointed out about pleasure, joy can be quantitatively appropriate or not. A person can feel too little joy in that the event or situation that prompts joy may be more *joyful* than the joyful individual's response suggest, i.e., it may make a greater contribution to the individual's well-being than is suggested by her comparatively joyless response. Conversely, a person feels too much joy when the event or situation that prompts her does not make as great a contribution to her well-being as her joyful response implies. Joy is thus rational when it is proportionally directed at properly joy-worthy objects.

The fittingness of joy also has a qualitative dimension. Our joyful responses are nuanced, and not every joyful response is qualitatively appropriate to the joyful event that prompts it. It would be odd for, say, players on a winning soccer club to celebrate by smoking cigars on the pitch, whereas cigars are not at all out of place when partners close a lucrative business deal. The joy Christians feel on Easter clearly calls for different joyful responses than the joy we feel when we witness our friends' weddings. These differences in joyful responses are not simply cultural inflections. They instead reflect subtle differences in the significance of joyful events or objects. The implicit message of one joyful response differs greatly from another. The exuberant screaming of fans expressing joy when their favorite pop star appears onstage are not conveying the same message as new parents expressing joy through crying, hugging, and the like. And these differences are not entirely quantitative differences, as if joyful experiences differ solely in how joyful they are. The exuberant pop fans are not more joyful than the new parents, even if the former's joy appears more exuberant than the latter. For the pop fans, the joy catalyzed by proximity to a venerated figure, by the frenzied, near-erotic bass thump, by the kaleidoscopic visual displays, merits their screaming. For the new parents, the joy catalyzed by finally seeing their progeny's face, by the awareness of nature repeating itself, by the relief that arrives after labor's oscillations, merit their crying. A pity that our eudaimonic vocabulary lacks the resources to capture these qualitative differences.

Joy's rationality is thus primarily a matter of its rationality *qua* attitudinal response to the events or situations that cause it. Its rationality is not primarily strategic, grounded in what it prompts us to do, but backward-looking, grounded in how we respond to its causes.

The rationality of grief, I believe, is best understood along similar lines. To claim that grief is rational full stop is to say that it is rational, both theoretically and practically. Like joy, grief can have irrational belief components (we may prematurely believe that a living person has died). And as with joy, grief can be experienced insufficiently or too greatly. There is not, of course, a quantum of grief that is appropriate to all grief episodes. How much grief one ought to feel depends on how much of value is lost when the grieved individual dies. Because grief's object is not the death of the person *per se* but the loss of the relationship with that person, the nature or intensity of the relationship in turn determines the nature and intensity of the grief appropriate to that relationship's transformation.<sup>27</sup>

Like joy, the fittingness of grief also has a qualitative face. As with joy, the specific instantiations of grief vary with respect to their objects—more specifically, with the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved—and facts about the parties involved.

---

<sup>27</sup> Solomon, "On grief and gratitude," p. 86 proposes that both insufficient and excessive grief stem from narcissism. His thought appears to be that insufficient grief is an indication of an unwillingness to acknowledge love or dependence, whereas excessive grief is an indication of an inability to conceptualize the deceased loved one otherwise than in terms of their significance for oneself or one's well-being.

Widows and widowers do not grieve as siblings do. Divorced partners do not grieve as married partners do. Facts such as the cause of death shape the fittingness of grief reactions, for example. Those who die in mass shootings are grieved differently from those who die of heart failure. Soldiers killed in combat are grieved differently from anti-war activists who die of cancer. Again, the diversity of grief is not simply a cultural byproduct. The cross-country funeral train of Abraham Lincoln was a fitting response to America's loss. But so too was the funeral of Hollywood funnyman Milton Berle, effectively a celebrity roast where fellow comedians ridiculed the cheap yarmulkes distributed to Jewish mourners. As a response to the agent-relative loss of an intimate relationship, grief is thus exquisitely sensitive to facts about what (or whom) is lost, who suffers the loss, and the totality of facts about the histories and personalities of both.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not claiming that grief's rationality is reducible to its psychological manifestations. Rather, it is about how fittingly or appropriately we are affected by the losses that prompt grief. Thus, grief is not simply a causally governed disposition or sentiment, on my account. Our proclivity to feel grief is not entirely analogous to our proclivity to cringe when tasting something foul. For grief can be fitting or unfitting to the objects that cause it. Grief's epistemology is therefore objectivist: An instance of grieving (or features of an instance of grieving) can be justified and unjustified. However, this objectivity concerning judgments of grief's justifiability does not bring in tow a robustly realist ontology of grief. There are not, on my view, objects with properties that render them intrinsically grieveworthy. For as noted above, grief registers an agent-relative loss, and to that extent, grief is constituted by relations between the bereaved and the objects of their grief. We ought to grieve, insofar as grief is a fitting response to the agent-relative losses that cause to grieve, but grief cannot be explicated without reference to the human vulnerability to such losses that make grief possible.

Grief might seem to be 'merely' a behavior, rather than an intentional action. But the notions that an action is intentional only to the extent that it seeks to realize a state of affairs or that an action's rationality can only derive from its aptness in realizing a state of affairs are prejudices that have kept philosophers from appreciating the essentially backward-looking nature of grief's rationality. The bereaved person who sorts through the belongings of a deceased loved one may of course have a state of affairs she is pursuing, for example, preparing the loved one's estate for appraisal. Yet she is also acting: grieving deliberately. To insist that she acts rationally only insofar as there is some state of affairs grieving 'aims at' is to cabin grief into a philosophical theory of action unsuited to it.

In a similar vein, it may be objected that my backward-looking account of grief's rationality elides the distinction between action motivated by an attitude and the expression of that attitude. Doubtless, many of the events prompted by grief—crying, quivering, and the like—are better described as expressions of grief instead of actions motivated by grief. But much of what we do in the process of grieving is deliberate action we undertake because we suffer the loss of a valued relationship. What I deny is that the rationality of such deliberate acts of grief can be captured entirely in terms of how such acts enable grieving agents to realize desired states of affairs.

## 5. Explanatory Priority

Still, advocates of the strategic account may propose a draw. In other words, they may rest content claiming that while I have identified a second dimension to grief's

rationality, I have not given sufficient reason to claim that grief's rationality is *not* strategic. And indeed, I have not suggested that we cannot ask whether grief is rational in the way that the strategic account suggests. There may well be instances of grief that are strategically rational but irrational in my backward-looking sense, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, I claim that grief's rationality is *fundamentally* backward-looking but only derivatively or non-specifically strategic. To see why, we must clarify the place of fitting attitudes in the explanatory economy of grief, especially given that I invoke fittingness to explain rationality, whereas it is typically invoked to explain value.

In the case of grief, fittingness is a relation between a bereaved individual's beliefs regarding the object of her grief, i.e., the agent-relative loss she suffers as a result of a loved one's death, and the desires that generate the particular behaviors that constitute her grieving. The beliefs in question will be both normative and non-normative. The latter will include (presumably) the belief that the loved one is dead, along with various other beliefs concerning that loved one, the bereaved, facts about the deceased's death, and facts about the larger world. The former will include beliefs about the character and values of the deceased, the norms and expectations thought to govern the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, and the ethical significance of events within their relationship, as well as more general ethical commitments and principles. The relevant beliefs, then, are all those beliefs, normative and non-normative, that constitute the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved, as well as all beliefs germane to the bereaved's appraisal of the significance, history, and health of that relationship.<sup>28</sup> As noted above, like any beliefs, the beliefs from which the fitting attitudes that comprise grief flow can themselves be evidentially irrational or ill-formed, in which case an episode of grief will be irrational just in that it rests on false beliefs about the relationship lost via the death of the loved one.

Attitudes that are fitting or unfitting serve to mediate between these beliefs—let us call them the bereaved's *object-related beliefs*—and the desires that generate, and so serve to explain, particular grieving behaviors. These attitudes set grief's agenda, but desires propel its implementation. Hence, the desires that serve to explain why individuals grieve as they do inherit their rationality from the attitudes they serve to implement. And while these desires and the grieving behaviors they generate can be irrational if they collide with a bereaved individual's beliefs in the ways the strategic account supposes, it is the fittingness of the attitudes that generate these desires that is fundamental to the rational appraisal of grief.

Let us see how this plays out with a hypothetical example:

In her first clinical consultation following the loss of her husband nine months ago, Mary describes John's death as "the gut-ripper of her life". Although John had been troubled by vague and misdiagnosed symptoms for a few months, the actual diagnosis of metastatic bone cancer preceded his death by a mere three weeks. As a consequence, she felt "totally unprepared" for the loss of "the man who had been everything to her—her best friend, her lover, her helpmate, her north, her south, her east, and her west." Most of all, Mary felt that with John's death she had lost her "anchor" in the world, and perhaps significantly in view of the cause of his death, describes her ongoing grief as "bone-shattering." She

---

<sup>28</sup> Philosophers have said relatively little about how to define or characterize a relationship. Here I draw on the notion of a relationship I take to be implicit in chapter 4 of Thomas M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Meaning, Permissibility, and Blame* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008).

literally counts the days since his death, and has never missed a single day of visitation to his graveside in a cemetery over an hour from her home, even in forbidding winter weather that made the drive a life-threatening proposition. The special intimacy that Mary and John shared through 15 years of marriage contrasted sharply with the “miserable” first marriages each had endured previously. She describes John as a perfect partner—devoted, good-humored, an excellent provider, and her “buffer” from a harsh world. Now, she feels a keen sense of abandonment by the man who promised he would “always be there” at a time of need. As a consequence she feels vulnerable and alone.

Now, Mary only experiences any respite from her grief when she feels John’s “presence.” Her desperate yearning for contact with him was reflected in her hysterical attempt to climb into John’s open casket at the funeral, and her still frequent calls to his answering machine “just to hear his voice.” Sometimes this wished-for contact comes in dreams, as she responds to the sound of his voice saying, “Honey, come snuggle up to me,” or at night when she clearly feels his hand in hers, or patting her side. The most sustained sense of contact came during one of her daily visits to his grave, when she felt surrounded by signs of his heavenly existence in the sunset, a flock of birds, and the whispering of his voice in the wind. Mary confesses that such moments accentuate the loss when she “awakens” to the reality of his death, and that she feels that she will never see him again.

Mary goes on to say that she feels “so encased in grief that she doesn’t even know who she is anymore.” She sees no vestiges of the outgoing person she used to be, and feels enraged that “God would leave her here without any purpose for being left behind.” Nothing about her present life makes sense to her—as she sums it up, “the quality of my life is gone, and nothing is left but garbage.” In her own words, she “can’t accept that John is gone,” and is left “in shock after losing the foundation he provided.” In many ways she feels much like she did nine days after his death, rather than how she had hoped to feel a full nine months later. She did show a spark of pride, however, in producing a handsome laminated memorial card for John that she designed, which she spoke hopefully of using as the starting point for a book about him and about their relationship. As she noted in closing, she didn’t want the memory of John to be “erased,” and she somehow hoped that such a project would help her “get back some of the person she used to be.”<sup>29</sup>

Let us analyze the rationality of this episode of grief from its bookends, so to speak. Mary has a wide variety of object-related beliefs, normative and non-normative, concerning John and their relationship: that John protected her from the larger world, promised never to abandon her, died suddenly, etc. Some of these beliefs may be false, even delusional (e.g., that he was the perfect husband). Her grief manifests itself in behaviors explicable in terms of specific desires. Her visits to his gravesite betoken a desire to maintain their relationship, her counting the days since his death a desire to measure the distance between them, and so on. That her grief appears to be resolving is indicated by a shift in her desires toward commemorating John.

Mary’s grief exemplifies strategic irrationality. Indeed, she sometimes exhibits precisely the belief-desire conflict Gustafson identifies. She knows that John is dead, but has difficulty accepting this, and her desire that he not be dead causes her anguish and leads her to behave

---

<sup>29</sup> This example is adapted from Robert A. Neimayer, “Complicated grief and the quest for meaning,” *OMEGA* 52, 1 (2005): 37–39.

neurotically. Mary's grief is not wholly rational, then. But nor is her grief wholly irrational. Given the depth, intensity, and significance of her relationship to John, there is something fitting or apt about the contours of Mary's grief despite its being strategically irrational in its particulars. Even if the complex of beliefs and desires that emerge in the course of her grieving are irrational, her grief nevertheless seems on the right track. How so?

In a concrete sense, to grieve is to evaluatively engage with the loss of an intimate relationship. Yet in a more symbolic or affective sense, relationships survive the deaths of one of their members just in that the surviving members are compelled to attend to the relationship at a crucial juncture in its history. When a loved one dies, we naturally attend to the relationship that the death in question has transformed. In Mary's case, her attention to her relationship to John is a kind of standing disposition that mediates between her object-related beliefs and her more specific desires and grieving behaviors. The specific forms Mary's attention takes—marking the days since his death, etc.—depends on the beliefs she has about her relationship with John. However, her attention to the lost relationship is desire-like in that further desires and behaviors germinate from it. But it differs from her more specific desires in not aiming at some specific state of affairs in its own right. There is not some state of affairs P that Mary's attending to her lost relationship seeks to satisfy, some state which, if it occurred, would by itself amount to making it the case that Mary's grieving was successful. Its role is instead to provide the agenda for the more specific desires and behaviors that constitute her grieving. Unsurprisingly, grief resembles love with respect to its psychological and rational economy. To love another is not to seek to act with the aim of bringing about some state of affairs. It is instead a commitment to attend to the other, from which many other more specific desires, directed at various states of affairs, grows.

Hence, despite being strategically irrational, Mary's grief is not quantitatively disproportionate to the immense loss she has suffered. While she hoped to grieve less, her quantum of grief is not unfitting to her loss. Likewise, her grief does not appear qualitatively unfitting either. For example, her marking the days since John's death likely reflects the abruptness of his death and the short period of time she had to prepare for it. Measuring this time is a method by which Mary bids John the full farewell that was denied her when he died.

Ideally, Mary may come to reconcile her beliefs and desires so as to make her bereavement both fitting and strategically rational, and hence, rational *tout court*. Following the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross<sup>30</sup> and John Bowlby,<sup>31</sup> much of the therapeutic literature emphasizes that grief is a process or narrative delineated into discrete stages. While I reject the conventional 'stage view' of grief because it is both descriptively suspect and unduly rigid in its prescriptions,<sup>32</sup> my account of grief's rationality agrees with this view in understanding grief as the unfolding of an engagement with a relationship that has been lost or transformed, where the pattern of such unfolding serves to explain how grief manifests itself at a given time with particular desires and behaviors.<sup>33</sup> On my account, the pattern reflects the attitudes, whether fitting or unfitting, that stand between

---

<sup>30</sup> On Death and Dying (New York: Scribner, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Loss: Sadness and Depression (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Davis Konigsberg, The Truth about Grief: The Myth of Its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Peter Goldie, "Grief: A narrative account," *Ratio* 24, 2 (2011): 119–137, provides a philosophical defense of such a view.



the bereaved's beliefs about the relationship lost or transformed by death and the desires that explain particular acts of grieving. The diversity of such patterns in turn reflects the diversity of human relationships and the diverse ways in which we react, fittingly or not, to the loss or transformation of those relationships. And the diversity of these patterns accounts for why strategic accounts have difficulty identifying a plausible candidate for a belief-desire complex definitive of grief. There is no universal desire shared by the grieving simply because there is neither a universal object of grief nor a universal grief response. We can of course surmise a great deal about the fittingness of an individual's attitude toward such a loss by making inferences from her particular grief behaviors and the desires that underlie these behaviors. However, this epistemic fact should not obscure the explanatory fact that the relationship between the attitudes in question (and the pattern they establish) and particular grieving behaviors is explanatorily asymmetric: Mary desires to visit John's gravesite because of her fitting attitudes toward her loss. She does not have the underlying attitudes toward her loss because of her desire to visit the gravesite.

Given the role of such attitudes in establishing these grief patterns, no episode of grief can be rational *tout court* if these attitudes are not fitting, even if an episode of grief is perfectly rational from a strategic point of view. Suppose Mary has the same body of object-related beliefs as before, but her grieving behaviors are very different: She does not attend John's funeral, rarely thinks of him, and assures her counselor that all is well. It could be correctly surmised that Mary's attitude toward her loss does not accord with its true significance for her. Mary's bereavement behaviors reflect her desires, but they do not reflect the desires she would have if her grief rested on a fitting attitude toward her loss. She ought to desire to grieve differently, both in amount and in kind, than she in fact grieves. She ought to desire to commemorate John, to document their lives together, and so on. Yet the fact that she does not desire these outcomes is entirely compatible with her grieving behaviors being strategically rational. For her desires do not require the falsity of her beliefs in order to be satisfied.

A fully rational episode of grief must therefore rest on true object-related beliefs, properly fitting attitudes toward the lost relationship, and internal coherence among a person's beliefs and the particular desires and behaviors that constitute their grieving. Nevertheless, as I have argued, the fittingness of these attitudes has the leading role in determining whether an episode of grief is rational *qua* grief. Note that my backward-looking account does not ascribe either intrinsic rationality or intrinsic irrationality to grief, as strategic accounts seemingly must. Agents with normal cognitive and emotional repertoires and minimally decent arcs of moral development will likely satisfy these conditions. At the same time though, it does not make rationality a property of grief as such. Grief, on this view, is contingently rational.

Grief is not a reactive attitude in Strawson's sense.<sup>34</sup> But like resentment and the other reactive attitudes, grief's rationale is inextricably linked to our human commitment to ordinary interpersonal relationships. For mortal beings like ourselves, the value provided by such relationships is inherently fragile, and so we cannot imagine such relationships absent grief at their destruction. And while grief might, like resentment, generate attitudes or practices of bereavement open to rational justification, it is justification enough that grief responds appropriately to the fact of loss, just as it is justification enough of

---

<sup>34</sup> Peter F. Strawson, "Freedom and resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25.

resentment that it responds appropriately to perceived injustice.<sup>35</sup> This is what Stephen Wilkinson, in attempting to show that grief *as such* is a mental disorder, does not appreciate about grief's rationality.<sup>36</sup> Wilkinson accepts the principle that if grief is "an intrinsically rational state," then it is not a disorder. But, Wilkinson argues, while there are grounds for worry that the individual who fails to grieve has an undesirable character trait or lacks good mental health, our concern is not that she is insufficiently rational. Wilkinson thus concludes that grief is intrinsically *non*-rational, that aside from the rationality of the beliefs or other states that compose it, it is not rationally assessable at all. But Wilkinson overlooks the possibility of explaining grief's rationality in the backward-looking terms I propose. For he supposes that only beliefs or desires oriented toward the realization of specifiable states of affairs are subject to rational appraisal and thereby leaves no rational space for grief to occupy. Grief's rationality, like joy's, is measured primarily in terms of the aptness of the attitudes that prompt it, not primarily in terms of the internal coherence of the attitudes it causes.

## 6. Conclusion

My backward-looking account of grief is an attractive account of grief and its rationality: Grief's object is not the death or loss of the deceased, but the termination of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Understanding grief's rationality entirely in strategic terms is phenomenologically inaccurate; fails to classify some obvious examples of grieving behaviors as such; and wrongly assumes that grief's painfulness is desiderative in origin. We ought instead see grief's rationality (or at least, the core respect in which grief's rationality should be appraised) as akin to joy's, grounded primarily in the fittingness of the reactions that constitute it rather than in the strategic rationality of the attitudes it causes. My backward-looking account of what is fundamental to grief's rationality is phenomenologically plausible and accounts for the paradigmatic rationality of grief while satisfying my contingency constraint, according to which the rationality of grief is a contingent fact.

The past several decades have witnessed an increasing 'medicalization' of grief. Grief itself is now routinely 'treated' with a regimen of counseling that conceptualizes grief as a series of 'tasks' central to personal growth.<sup>37</sup> The American Psychiatric Association recently contemplated classifying grief episodes that extends beyond two months as clinical maladies, only to retreat in the face of criticism.<sup>38</sup> My arguments suggest that lying behind the medicalization of grief is a crude picture of how grief functions in our rational economy. For if my account of grief's rationality is correct, grief is much more than a state of distress normatively isolated from our human concerns. Without grief, we would be unable to engage with, and remain in normative contact with, those we care for.

---

<sup>35</sup> This makes Solomon's hypothesis that grief and gratitude are co-occurring states, i.e., that those unable to grieve adequately are likely to be unable to express gratitude, plausible. See "On grief and gratitude," pp. 102–105.

<sup>36</sup> "Is 'normal grief' a mental disorder?," *Philosophical Quarterly* 50, 200 (2000): 296–297.

<sup>37</sup> See Arthur Kleinman, "Culture, bereavement, and psychiatry," *The Lancet* 379, 9816 (18 February 2012): 608–609. The journal *Death Studies* published an issue (32, 1, 2008) devoted to the question of whether the results of grief should be understood in terms of 'recovery.'

<sup>38</sup> Richard A. Friedman, "Grief, depression, and the DSM-5," *New England Journal of Medicine* 366, 20 (2012): 1655–1857.