

Two problems of fitting grief

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a surge in philosophical work on the fittingness – that is, a specific kind of rationality – of backward-looking negative emotions such as grief, anger (see e.g. [Callard 2017](#) and [Shoemaker 2018](#)) and resentment.¹ A significant subset of this literature has focused on the fittingness of grief quite specifically (e.g. [Moller 2007](#), [Cholbi 2017](#), [2019](#), [Maruić 2018](#), [Na'aman forthcoming](#)). The fittingness of grief is also the focus of the present paper.

Although purported philosophical insights gleaned from examining the rationality of grief vary starkly between philosophers, these insights, viewed from an aerial perspective, all depend on a perceived discrepancy between (1) the low levels of grief that people tend to experience after losing a loved one and (2) much higher levels of grief that are rationally called for given the magnitude of the loss. One attractive way to understand this discrepancy between actual and rational grief is in terms of *fittingness*:² people tend to grieve less than would be fitting given the magnitude of their loss. My objective in this paper is to articulate two never properly distinguished, and indeed sometimes conflated, arguments in favour of the purported discrepancy between actual and fitting grief: a metaphysical argument and a psychological argument. For now, let me briefly outline these arguments.

Whether grief is fitting depends (in part) on a person's relation to the deceased; the *mere* death of a person does not provide a fitting reason to grieve. This relation to the deceased is paradigmatically cast as a love relation quite specifically. The exact focus on *love* should, however, be viewed as a convenient paradigm, not as a hard requirement (see [Cholbi 2017: 257](#) for the same point). In this paper, I will stick to this paradigm. Grief fits the loss of a loved one.³

- 1 Resentment has most recently been discussed in tandem with the nature of forgiveness; see e.g. [Hieronymi \(2001: 24\)](#), [Fricker \(2018: 24\)](#), [Milam \(2019\)](#), [Pettigrove \(2012: 24\)](#) and [Schönherr \(2019: 24\)](#).
- 2 While it has recently become popular to cast this discrepancy explicitly in terms of fittingness (e.g. [Cholbi 2017](#), [Maruić 2018: 8](#), [Na'aman forthcoming](#)), Moller's earlier paper ([2007: 311](#)) casts it in terms of 'appropriate' emotional responses. [Cholbi \(2017: 255\)](#) uses both pieces of terminology – fittingness and appropriateness – to describe the intended phenomena.
- 3 The death of a person has been analysed as the 'reason' ([Helm 2010](#), [Na'aman forthcoming](#)) for grief, and the element of love has been called its 'background condition' ([Na'aman forthcoming](#)) or its 'focus' ([Helm 2010](#)).

Now, this formulation – ‘the loss of a loved one’ – is ambiguous between two readings. We could mean that grief fits loss only if we lost a person whom we *used to* love (prior to their death), or we could mean that grief fits loss only if we *still* love this person (after their death, as it were).⁴ Assuming the former, we can formulate what I call the ‘metaphysical argument’: grief is fitting entirely in virtue of facts about the past (i.e. a person’s death and one’s past love for her). These facts remain forever unchanging, which renders grief forever fitting. The attenuation of grief is, thus, always unfitting.

On the second of the above readings we cannot formulate the metaphysical argument, because grief is rationalized in part by facts about the present, that is, our continued love for the deceased. We can, however, formulate the psychological argument: grief commonly diminishes faster than love, which is why most people grieve less than would be fitting.

My first goal in this paper is to pinpoint a discrepancy in the literature. Authors such as Moller (2007) and Maruić (2018) *draw a conclusion* that we can only hope to support relying on the metaphysical argument – namely that grief is forever fitting – but they *argue* largely along the lines of the psychological argument. My second goal is to highlight that both arguments deserve philosophical attention.

In the next section, I will lay out the distinction between fittingness and all-things-considered rationality. In §3, I will detail, assess and situate the two above-mentioned arguments.

2. Fittingness and all-things-considered rationality

Grief is a fitting response to the loss of a loved one. It is, to be precise, the fact that a loved one was lost that provides the fitting reason for grief. This is a quite specific reason. In contrast, the total set of reasons rationalizing an emotion far outstrips this narrow class of fitting reasons. Thus, an attitude is rational *all things considered*, if and only if it is reasonable given the entirety of reasons of which fitting reasons are but a subset. An example might help. If an evil dictator promises not to torture me if I admire her, I surely have conclusive reason to admire her. Admiration, however, is not a fitting response to the dictator (see Howard 2018: 3).⁵ Such dictators are despicable, not admirable. Reasons that rationalize an attitude, without being fitting reasons,

4 In real life, both senses often occur side by side. We often continue to love a person whom we loved when they were still alive. Nevertheless, the question of what exactly constitutes fitting grief remains.

5 Crisp (2000: 459), Parfit (2001: App. A) and Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004: 392) state variants of this example.

are known as the *wrong kind of reasons* (see [Gertken and Kiesewetter 2017](#) for a summary).⁶

Strikingly, people who experience negative emotions (e.g. anger, resentment or grief) almost always have available so-called ‘wrong reasons’ not to experience them. After all, negative emotions are not fun to have, which provides the bearers of these emotions with hedonic (i.e. self-interested) reasons against having them. These hedonic considerations, however, do not usually present fitting considerations against experiencing them. After becoming the victim of a severe offence, health-related considerations might render it all-things-considered rational for a person to tame her anger. Anger may nevertheless be a fitting response to the offence (see [Milam 2019](#)).

These insights can be applied to grief. A mother who recently lost her husband and who has to attend to the needs of her kids might have strong moral, and strategic, reasons not to let grief overwhelm her ([Cholbi 2017](#): 257). If these considerations are strong enough, then she has all-things-considered reason to grieve less, although grief remains fitting. As it turns out, the most pervasive driver behind the attenuation of grief – psychological resilience (see below) – is best understood as implementing such a ‘wrong reason’ by serving the grieving person’s forward-looking self-interest. We will come back to this in the next section.

3. *Two problems of fitting grief*

In the introduction, I gave a quick overview of the two arguments concerning fitting grief. Let us now look at both arguments in more detail, starting with the metaphysical argument.

In two recent papers, Dan [Moller \(2007\)](#) and Berislav [Maruić \(2018\)](#) have embraced the striking conclusion that grief remains *forever* fitting. Towards the end of his paper ‘Love and death’ (2007), Moller has us imagine, somewhat dramatically, a species of

super-resilient [aliens]. When their spouses drop dead in front of them, they shrug their shoulders and check what is on television. They remarry as soon as they are able to find another mate, often within weeks. (2007: 313)

And although these aliens ‘show tremendous concern’ ([Moller 2007](#): 314) for their spouses while they are alive, these feelings, we are told, are immediately extinguished after their spouse’s death. Moller furthermore reminds us that actual people’s feelings are often akin to the feelings of such alien creatures:

Wives and husbands remarry, often at depressingly brief intervals . . . we retain photographs and other trinkets of remembrance, but all of the

6 For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that emotions are susceptible to the wrong kind of reasons, recognizing that reservations can be found in the literature (for a review see [Gertken and Kiesewetter 2017](#)).

emotions that were once insurmountable barriers to similar relationships with others are irrecoverably lost. (2007: 301)

In these cases, Moller alleges, grief remains appropriate despite the loss of emotions of attachment. Such responses are simply ‘incommensurate [with the] value [of our loved ones]’ (Moller 2007: 310). Note that, for Moller, this incommensurability is *strongest* in cases in which a bereaved spouse’s love vanishes after their partner’s death, which makes it likewise clear that Moller does not conceive of fitting grief to be dependent on the continuation of love. In line with this assessment, Moller remarks that

[e]ven if it turned out that we undergo intense distress for a few years rather than a few months, the question of whether we have reason to regret the attitudes toward a lost spouse that resilience instills would remain. . . . And, as I have argued, there are such reasons, though these reasons may be outweighed by other considerations. (2007: 315)

Maruić reaches a similar conclusion:

over time, as we grieve, it becomes not wrong to grieve less. However, I also think that there is no good way to understand this. When we try to understand it, all we find are reasons of the wrong kind. (2018: 16)

Of course, if grief remains forever fitting, it *must*, if attenuated at all, be attenuated for the wrong reasons. Such strong conclusions can only be justified by the idea that fitting grief is *essentially* backward-looking, rationalized only by maximally persistent facts about the past.

Alternatively we may hold that grief fits the loss of a person whom one *still* loves. According to this line of argument, the metaphysical problem set out above disappears, of course. After all, on this view, not all constituents of fitting grief are facts about the past, which is why our justification for this strong metaphysical claim falls flat. Grief may become less fitting over time; whether it does simply depends on the (dis)continuation of love. But even if we assess the fittingness of grief based on a person’s remaining love for the deceased, we can recognize the possibility that grief often diminishes faster than love. Above I called this ‘the psychological argument’.

This line of argument is most prevalent in Maruić’s argumentation. In a central passage, he states that

my love [for my deceased mother] did not disappear as quickly and as thoroughly as my grief. My grief started diminishing very shortly after her death and its diminution was rapid and complete. Yet I love her more and longer than is reflected in my grief. (Maruić 2018: 5)

Maruić’s self-report is empirically validated by a long and persuasive line of research in psychology about emotional resilience. This line of empirical research, conducted over roughly the past 20 years, provides powerful evidence

supporting the idea that a significant proportion of the population exhibits a staggering degree of emotional adaptability. In response to an ‘emotionally disruptive event such as the death of a close relation [resilient individuals] maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions’ (Bonanno 2004: 20).

Further research on resilience indicates that around half of the population is resilient, and resilient individuals return to a baseline welfare level often after only four months of being bereaved without signs of depression or post-traumatic stress (e.g. Zisook et al. 1997, Litz et al. 2002, Jordan and Neimeyer 2003, Bonanno et al. 2005). Given this research, we can be reasonably confident that resilience is real and widespread, although not ubiquitous. When a person’s grief is attenuated by natural resilience it diminishes for the wrong reason, while the bereaved person’s love for the deceased continues; at least, this is a reasonable suspicion to have.

Both Maruić and Moller heavily rely on findings from psychological resilience research in arguing their case. It is worth noting that, in the context of the metaphysical argument, psychological resilience simply makes no difference whatsoever. After all, according to this argument, the attenuation of grief is *always* unfitting. Resilience is important only in the context of the psychological argument, because it provides powerful evidence that grief commonly attenuates faster than love. In the context of the psychological argument, however, we cannot embrace the conclusion that grief *must* be attenuated for the wrong reasons. Pointing to this tension in the literature, between resilience-based arguments and conclusions about grief’s unceasing fittingness, is the first goal of this paper.

Before continuing, I must insert a note on the scope of both arguments. In the preceding discussion, I limited my analysis to the role that two elements – love and death – have in assessing the fittingness of grief. I do not, however, wish to insist that these are the *only* relevant elements. For instance, in an insightful recent article, Oded Na’aman defends the idea that grief is one of many ‘rationally self-consuming [attitudes], the longer they endure the less rational they become’ (2019: 3). One of Na’aman’s guiding claims is that grief can become less fitting *because we have already experienced some*, thereby introducing a further element that bears on the fittingness of grief. Here is of course not the place to evaluate this novel proposal. For now, I simply wish to note that there is room to supplement the reasons under discussion with *further reasons* that may also bear on the fittingness of grief.⁷

7 Another example of such a further specification can be found in Moller 2017: in this handbook entry, he briefly considers (§ 4) the possibility of a ‘new self condition’, according to which grief may become less fitting as we ‘become sufficiently different people’ and the loss ceases to be *my* loss.

I will use the rest of this paper to assess both arguments for their plausibility. My goal is of course not to settle the debate. Rather, my aim is simply to point out that both arguments work with a distinct but *prima facie* plausible characterization of the kind of losses that render grief appropriate. Naturally the ensuing discussion will start with and focus on the metaphysical argument, as it strikes many as less intuitive.

First, a word of caution. Intuition is often a reliable guide in assessing whether an emotion is all-things-considered rational. For instance, any theory advocating that it is all-things-considered rational to grieve forever contradicts our pretheoretical commitments and should presumably be rejected. We should, however, be somewhat cautious when likewise probing our intuitions for judgements about fittingness. For instance, the pretheoretical judgement that, at some point after losing a loved one, one ‘no longer grieve[s] – and this is somehow all right’ (Maruić 2018: 17) arguably operates on the level of all-things-considered rationality. It is *all-things-considered* ‘all right’ to stop grieving after some time. Whether there are interesting desiderata grounded in intuition beyond these all-things-considered judgements remains controversial. All possibilities seem to be live options: that grief remains forever fitting, that grief’s fittingness attenuates with one’s waning love, or that grief may eventually cease to be fitting ‘alongside the continuation of love’.⁸

Second, throughout this paper I have emphasized that grief is forever fitting only if we keep the focus on one’s past love for the deceased. The reverse is not true, however. While grief’s focus on one’s past love is necessary for the statement of the metaphysical argument, it may not be sufficient. Let me explain. Just above, I briefly referenced Na’aman’s thesis that grief is ‘rationally self-consuming’, illustrating the possibility that *further reasons* might impact how we think of the fitting trajectory of grief. At least on the face of it, both could be true: grief, when fitting, may respond to a griever’s past love for the deceased, *and* grief is rationally self-consuming. And if this turns out to be true, then grief may fittingly attenuate while still focusing on the bereaved person’s past love. Thus, again, the focus on one’s past love is necessary, not sufficient, for the metaphysical argument.

Third, and most importantly, one of Moller’s key claims in ‘Love and death’ is that grief emotionally registers certain losses (see e.g. 2007: 310). If I lose my spouse and a week later I lose my love for them, it would still be true of me that I have lost something that was of utmost value to my life. Grief, on this picture, is a fitting response in so far as its presence would emotionally register my loss. The fact that I have lost something important, and the concomitant fact that it would be appropriate to emotionally register this loss, both remain true notwithstanding my instant emotional adjustment.

Alternatively, in line with the psychological argument, one may hold that the death of a loved one is a loss only if it continues to be *experienced as a loss*.

8 This formulation was suggested by a reviewer.

If I stop caring, it might be true that I lost something precious, but it does not present itself as a loss *to me*. The idea that a lack of care can render an emotion unfitting is familiar from emotions such as fear. My fear that you will knock over my vase ceases to be fitting when I stop caring about the vase altogether (see e.g. Helm 2010: 58). Similarly we might hope to maintain that grief is a fitting response to the death of a loved one only if we continue to care about this person, that is, only if our love continues. One interesting consequence of this view – suggested by an anonymous reviewer – is that grief is thereby rendered fitting not just because it responds to a loss that lies in the past, but because of the ‘ongoing ramifications of the past’, that is, the continued emotional involvement that makes grief a fitting response to the death of a loved one.

The bottom line is that both ways of conceptualizing the losses seem to have traction. However, the dramatic conclusion that grief remains forever fitting is not simply an extension of the psychological argument; it is a conclusion provided by a different argument. There are at least two distinct philosophical problems of fitting grief and both need to be addressed in their own right. But this will have to wait for some other time.⁹

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