

Michael Cholbi. *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton, NJ:
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Michael Cholbi opens *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* with an evocative epigraph, a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke's 1923 letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy that reads:

The great secret of death, and perhaps its deepest connection with us, is this: that, in taking from us a being we have loved and venerated, death does not wound us without, at the same time, lifting us toward a more perfect understanding of this being and of ourselves. (Cholbi, 2021, epigraph)

The quote carries significance beyond its literary power. It compresses Cholbi's central claim that grief wounds but in its wounding, it deepens our understanding and self-knowledge. This is further emphasized in the dedication to his father, "who taught [him] about grief without ever saying its name" (Cholbi, 2021, acknowledgement). Together, the epigraph and the dedication frame the work as both philosophically and personally grounded. Grief has, by Cholbi's own analysis, been shamefully neglected. The Western philosophical tradition, from the Greeks and Romans through Zhuangzi in the Chinese tradition, has tended to view grief as a "consequence of ignorance" (Cholbi, 2021, p. 5), a personal weakness to be overcome rather than a serious philosophical subject worth investigating. Although modern philosophers do not share the old view that grief is shameful, there remains a certain reluctance to acknowledge grief openly. Cholbi seeks to overturn this neglect by offering an optimistic philosophical account of grief: what it is, who we grieve for, whether it is good for us, whether it is rational, whether we are obligated to undergo it, and whether it is a form of illness. Across seven chapters, Cholbi defends what he calls "qualified optimism" (p. 123) about grief. His aim, he writes, is to "show those who have grieved exactly why it can be a benefit—why, in the end, our propensity for grief should be welcomed rather than regretted" (pp. 14–15).

The introduction lays out the book's central argument: the avoidance of grief has been a mistake both intellectually and ethically. By refusing to examine grief genuinely, philosophers have protected themselves from uncomfortable truths about

the human condition—"a possibility that many may fear—to wit, that our finitude, vulnerability, and interdependence neither can be nor should be fully overcome" (p. 10). What philosophy has feared is also what Cholbi believes grief uniquely reveals and what makes it ethically valuable to investigate. Philosophy at its best is characterized by courageous and practical management, and grief as one of the most distinctively human, life-defining experiences deserves the same genuine attention philosophers give to love, ageing and death.

Chapter 1 examines the question of for whom we grieve. Cholbi, early in this chapter, differentiates between mourning and grieving, considering the latter to be a more specific and personal reaction to death, whereas the former is "more public and often ritualistic" (pp. 21–22), and further he presents three natural accounts of relationship that would make our grief intelligible: intimacy, love and attachment. While each explains many ordinary cases, none captures the full range of relationships in which grief is intelligible. For example, we grieve public figures we never knew, biological parents we never met, even people we hated. Then he proposes that we grieve those in whom we have invested our "practical identities," a term coined by Christine Korsgaard for the set of commitments, values and concerns that give shape and direction to our lives (p. 30). Only this account, he argues, can capture the full range of relationships that ground grief (pp. 23–37).

In Chapter 2, Cholbi turns to the nature of grief itself. He argues that grief is neither a single emotion nor a mood but an emotional process. He concludes that grief is "an active process of emotional attention, incorporating both feeling and choice, causally instigated by the death of someone in whom the bereaved has invested her identity" (p. 55). Cholbi further argues that the object of grief is neither the loss of well-being to the deceased nor to the bereaved, but the transformed relationship between them (p. 58). The argument is strengthened by examining a phenomenon directly relevant to the philosophy of religion: those who believe in an afterlife genuinely grieve, even though they hold that the deceased continues to exist and indeed flourishes. Their grief, Cholbi argues, is intelligible only on the view that what they grieve is "the loss of their relationship with the deceased as it was" (p. 63). Religious believers maintain "continuing bonds" (p. 63) with the dead on transformed terms. This is a key point of contact with the philosophy of religion. Cholbi treats belief in an afterlife not as a mistaken view to be rejected, but as a philosophical phenomenon that helps clarify the object of grief.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore what Cholbi calls the paradox of grief: grief feels bad and should be avoided, yet grief is valuable enough that we should not avoid it altogether (p. 69). Chapter 3 presents Cholbi's central claim that grief's distinctive good is the self-knowledge that it brings about, revealing our values, concerns and practical identities (p. 83). Chapter 4 then addresses why bereaved people seem drawn to grief's pain rather than avoiding it, citing Augustine, C. S. Lewis, and Didion (pp. 110–111). Grief's pains, Cholbi claims, are not mere costs but investments. They constitute an "organic unity" in G.E. Moore's sense: "a valuable state of affairs in which the value of the whole

is not a function of the sum of the value of its components considered separately" (pp. 114–115). The pains thus become good within the activity of grieving rather than being subtracted from its goods. Chapter 5 addresses the rationality of grief, rejecting both Stephen Wilkinson's view that grief is *arational*, what Cholbi describes as "a state or condition not open to rational assessment," (p. 124) and Donald Gustafson's claim that it is *necessarily irrational*, namely, "that every grief episode falls short of rationality" (p. 125). Instead, Cholbi argues that grief is contingently rational: a grief episode is rational when its component emotions track the relationship transformed by the death, qualitatively, in which emotions occur, and quantitatively, in their intensity and duration (p. 139).

Chapter 6 defends Robert Solomon's claim that there is a moral duty to grieve, while redirecting the object of that duty. According to Cholbi, the duty is owed neither to the deceased nor to fellow grievers, but to ourselves. He argues that "[t]he duty to grieve is a duty to pursue knowledge of our practical identities and their component elements (our values, preferences, core convictions, emotional dispositions)" (p. 155), since it is grounded in a Kantian obligation of self-knowledge. He further argues that those who shame individuals for not grieving engage in a form of "moral interloping": wrongly treating a self-regarding matter as though it were owed to third parties who have no claim on it (p. 164). He closes Chapter 6 by restating the book's central aim: that we have a duty "to grieve [...] to pursue self-knowledge. In grieving, we show both love and respect for ourselves" (p. 165). It is worth noting that Chapter 6 is one of the book's most provocative chapters, and one in which religious tradition might productively trouble Cholbi's distinction between grief and mourning. Cholbi explains that "[w]e may owe others a duty to mourn but this neither is, nor implies, a duty to grieve" (p. 153). The duty to grieve, he argues, is owed only to ourselves; duties owed to the deceased belong to mourning, which can be "faked" (p. 153). Yet many religious traditions place real moral duties on the bereaved toward the deceased themselves, such as ensuring their spiritual well-being or peaceful transition, helping the deceased in the afterlife through prayers, offerings and rituals. Such practices, from a religious perspective, are not external performances that the bereaved could fulfil while remaining inwardly indifferent; they are continuous, relational engagements that carry exactly the feature Cholbi attributes to grief—emotional attention, ongoing care for the relationship and the renegotiation of identity in light of the loss.

Chapter 7 argues against medicalizing grief, drawing on Ian Hacking's notion of "looping effects" to argue that classifying grief as a disorder would alter how grievers understand themselves in ways largely detrimental to grief's potential for delivering self-knowledge (pp. 178–181). Cholbi proposes that grief remain a "V-code," an important clinical consideration that may impact diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment even though it is not a disorder per se (p. 184). As Cholbi puts it, a grieving person "may be ill, and their illness inextricable from their grieving, but they are almost never sick with grief" (p. 171).

The conclusion draws the discussion together and makes two final observations. First, Cholbi admits that his framework probably extends to many non-death traumas such as divorce, illness, job changes, but maintains that death-related grief is distinctive both in degree – due to its irreversibility and irreplaceability – and in kind: “because we grieve those in whom our identities are invested, their deaths are simulacra of our own and so serve to underscore the vulnerability of our practical identities to death itself” (pp. 189–193). Second, he denies that philosophical understanding can make grief unnecessary. Cholbi claims that the self-knowledge grief delivers is the kind of knowledge that requires grief to acquire, and this is why philosophical knowledge about grief cannot replace grieving itself (pp. 195–196). Cholbi captures all of this in the book’s final sentence: “Grief, I have emphasized, cannot be avoided. We can grieve smarter, but ultimately, we cannot outsmart grief. Nor should we wish to” (p. 196).

Overall, the book’s arguments are carefully presented, and the practical identity investment framework does genuine work throughout. Cholbi defends his thesis that grief should be welcomed, not regretted, against a tradition that has marginalized its subject, and he does this with intellectual seriousness, drawing on examples from literature, psychology and philosophy. The book is recommended to anyone interested in knowing the philosophical side of grief. Readers approaching the book from the philosophy of religion may find Cholbi’s engagement with religious belief to be incomplete. He uses afterlife belief as an example case to challenge competing theories of grief, and his account of “continuing bonds” with the dead aligns with practices found in Abrahamic, Hindu and Buddhist traditions, yet he does not fully explore these theological perspectives. *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* is an engaging book that courageously and concretely illuminates the topic of grief; moreover, it opens conversations that the philosophy of religion is particularly well placed to take further.

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