The Duration of Grief

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Over the last few decades, moral philosophy has broadened its scope. Moral philosophers today aim to explain not only morally right and wrong actions and choices, but a wide range of attitudes, including a large variety of emotions. A parallel shift has taken place in the accepted notion of practical rationality. During most of the 20th century, practical rationality was understood as pertaining strictly to instrumental reasoning, the maximization of value, or the satisfaction of preferences and desires. Today, practical rationality is often understood more widely, as concerned with attitudes and emotions that admit of justification. The rationality or normativity of attitudes is often described in terms of the fittingness of an attitude to its object or the right kind of reasons for the attitude.

With this broadening of scope, new challenges have emerged. If various attitudes and emotions can be rational in the sense that they can fail or succeed to be fitting to their objects, then changes in emotions must also, in principle, be vulnerable to rational scrutiny. There must be instances in which our regret, anger, amusement, and admiration—to name but a few examples—fittingly subside or persist, as well as cases where a change or continuance of an emotion is rationally criticizable. But how are we to understand the rationality of emotional change and persistence?

In what follows, I consider this question by examining current debates in empirical psychology and moral philosophy about the duration of grief. Recent empirical research of bereavement and grief suggests that most people are significantly more resilient to loss than it had previously been thought. While the psychologists who argue for this claim take it to be decisively encouraging, some philosophers have reacted to the news with regret, arguing that resilience to loss constitutes a rational failure. The different reactions, I argue, reveal different presuppositions about the rationality of emotions in general and of grief in particular. While most psychologists and some philosophers assume that grief can be warranted only insofar and as long as it is instrumentally valuable, some philosophers hold that grief is rational when fitting to its object and that fitting grief should not diminish unless there is a relevant change in its object. On the first view, rational diminution in grief is determined by the realization of grief’s end, understood,
roughly, as a return to one’s functional and emotional baseline; on the second view, rational diminution in grief is precluded by the irreversibility of the loss and the persistence of one’s love.

I agree with the first view that grief may rationally diminish and with the second view that grief is non-instrumentally rational. These seemingly conflicting claims are compatible, I argue, because fitting grief is properly understood as part of a non-instrumental process that is itself fitting in response to loss. The view I propose becomes available once we reject the commonly held but rarely articulated assumption that the rationality of an attitude at a given time is determined independently of the agent’s prior and subsequent attitudes. The general lesson is that the rationality of emotional change sometimes depends on the rational or fitting process in which an emotion is embedded. Thus, the duration of grief as part of a fitting ongoing response to the death of a loved one is an ethical issue: it can be fully settled neither by empirical discoveries nor by philosophical analyses of rationality, but requires substantive ethical reflection.

1. Grief Work vs. Resilience

Traditional bereavement theory is widely endorsed by theorists and mental health professionals in the industrialized West (Bonanno 2009). The theory construes grief as a kind of progressive work that takes time to complete. The metaphor of grief as work can be traced back to “Mourning and Melancholia,” where Freud argues that the bereaved individual needs to review “each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido . . . to the non-existent object” and “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 1917/1957, 154). The traditional approach also maintains that bereaved individuals who do not exhibit grief and do not attempt to work through the pain of loss are denying its importance and likely to suffer delayed grief reactions (Bonanno and Field 2001, 798-799). John Bowlby, a prominent bereavement theorist, describes the “prolonged absence of conscience grieving” as a type of disordered mourning and views the experience or expression of positive emotions during the early stages of bereavement as a form of defensive denial (Bowlby 1980, 138). Furthermore, according to surveys conducted among self-identified bereavement experts, the majority of experts endorse the claim that absent grief exists and that it generally results in delayed grief reactions.

But according to George Bonanno, one of the leading figures among the new researchers of bereavement, “recent studies that have directly examined the legitimacy of the grief work approach have not only failed to support this approach but actually suggest that it may be harmful for many bereaved individuals to engage in such practices” (Bonanno 2004, 21). In fact, Bonanno
suggests, grief work may be relevant only to the minority of people who suffer from severe grief reactions (ibid). Most people are not so drastically inhibited by loss: “Resilience to the unsettling effects of interpersonal loss is not rare but relatively common, does not appear to indicate pathology but rather healthy adjustment, and does not lead to delayed grief reactions” (Bonanno 2004, 23). In a study that considered subjects’ functioning before and after bereavement, Bonanno and his associates found strong evidence that many bereaved individuals exhibit little or no grief and that these individuals are not cold and unfeeling or lacking in attachment but, rather, are capable of genuine resilience in the face of loss (Bonanno, et al., 2002).

Bonanno summarizes their findings:

Almost half of the participants in this study (46% of the sample) had low levels of depression, both prior to the loss and through 18 months of bereavement, and had relatively few grief symptoms (e.g., intense yearning for the spouse) during bereavement. An examination of the prebereavement functioning of this group revealed no signs of maladjustment; these participants were not rated as emotionally cold or distant by the interviewers, did not report difficulties in their marriages, and did not show dismissive attachment. They did, however, have relatively high scores on several prebereavement measures suggestive of the ability to adapt well to loss (e.g., acceptance of death, belief in a just world, instrumental support). (Bonanno 2004, 23)

To be sure, even the resilient individuals reported experiencing some yearning, emotional pangs, intrusive cognition, and ruminations, but unlike those who suffer from severe bereavement, among the resilient these experiences were transient and did not interfere with their functioning in other areas of life or with their capacity for positive affect (23-24). The most decisive and striking finding is that people typically recover from grief within two to three months (Bonanno 2005; Futterman, Peterson, and Gilewski 1991). Bereavement, says Bonanno, “is something we are wired for, and it is certainly not meant to overwhelm us. Rather, our reactions to grief, seem designed to help us accept and accommodate losses relatively quickly so that we can continue to live productive lives” (Bonanno 2009, 7-8).

2. The Normative Consensus

The empirical disagreement between traditional bereavement theory and the so-called new science of bereavement betrays an underlying normative consensus. Both sides of the divide seem to agree that the pain and anguish of bereavement can be healthy or warranted if and when it enables the bereaved individual to return to normal functioning. At times, the desired functional baseline seems to be associated with an idea of productivity: healthy grief is our way back to leading a productive life. Thus, there is agreement about the goal of grief. The disagreement, at
least as Bonanno explains it, is about how severe, disruptive, and prolonged must grief be in order to accomplish its goal. The traditional approach holds that in grief we must gradually work towards our goal, while the new approach maintains that most of us have efficient response mechanisms that do the work for us, so to speak. I will later suggest that this way of portraying the disagreement is misleading, and that the empirical controversy might hide an ethical disagreement about the appropriate or fitting response to loss. But it seems that both camps take themselves to be making strictly empirical claims and sharing a background normative picture. It is this normative picture that explains why Bonanno considers himself and his colleagues to be the bearers of good news: if the desired result of grief requires less suffering and disruption than we tend to think, then we should be relieved and encouraged.

Indeed, it may seem obvious that we should want to reduce the anguish of grief. Stephen Wilkinson goes even further. He argues that because grief involves suffering and incapacity, it is always a disorder, at least as the term is defined by the DSM (*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*.) To fend off the suggestion that grief is rationally defensible, Wilkinson claims that grief is neither rational nor irrational, but non-rational: it is “not assessable in terms of rationality” (Wilkinson 2000, 297). It would seem odd, says Wilkinson, to call a person who fails to grieve irrational only because she does not experience mental anguish. Donald Gustafson, on the other hand, argues that grief is necessarily irrational because it involves a desire that is unsatisfiable by the agent’s own light, namely, a desire that a person not be dead coupled with a belief that the person is dead (Gustafson 1989).

Against these views, Michael Cholbi (2017) and Dan Moller (2017) argue that the rationality of grief should not be assessed in terms of reason to relieve one’s suffering or to satisfy one’s desires, but in terms of the fittingness of grief to its object. Cholbi makes the point forcefully:

> The heart of grief’s rationality is backward looking ... 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.... Grief thus derives its essential rationality from the objects it responds to, not from the attitudes causally downstream. (Cholbi 2017, 257)

Once we broaden our notion of rationality beyond the satisfaction of desires or the maximization of pleasure over pain, and include in it the fittingness of various attitudes and emotions to their objects, it no longer seems odd, as Wilkinson claims, to say that a person who fails to grieve the loss of a loved one is rationally criticizable. Emotions are often thought of as evaluative presentation their objects (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000) — fear of the fearsome,
admiration of the admirable, regret of the regrettable, etc. — and an emotion is said to be fitting when it presents its object correctly.

Thus, emotional anguish can be fitting or unfitting on certain occasions just as emotional pleasure can be fitting or unfitting. In response to one’s past wrong, guilt and the suffering it involves may be fitting; the absence of guilt unfitting. In response to a joke that is not funny, amusement and the delight it involves may be unfitting; the absence of amusement fitting. Bonanno and his colleagues seem to assume that the minimization of suffering is always warranted, but if grief is a fitting response to the loss of a loved one — i.e., if it is a correct emotional presentation of the loss — we might have reason to resist its diminution as well as reason to bemoan our resilience in the face of loss.

3. The Objection to Resilience

One reason to be troubled by resilience is that a quick recovery from grief might seem to exhibit a deficiency in the relationship with the person who died. For example, Dan Moller considers the argument that resilience to loss shows that the deceased was relatively unimportant to us: we do not need the deceased to go about our lives and we easily find a replacement (2007). Another argument is that quick recovery constitutes a form of desertion, a failure of solidarity with the deceased (E. & R. Preston-Roedder 2017). Yet another line of argument, offered by Aaron Smuts, maintains that what is most troubling about resilience is the thought that we will cease to care about an individual we currently care about very much (Smuts 2015).

Erica and Ryan Preston-Roedder address these worries persuasively, though here I only have space to briefly recount their claims. They argue that a quick recovery from grief is compatible with two crucial ways in which the deceased was and is important to us. First, even if we can function without our loved one, our loved one might have had a crucial impact on the kind of person we are. Second, we may view our loved one as irreplaceable in his or her particularity even if his or her contributions to our general well-being can be achieved in other ways, or with other people. Resilience is therefore compatible with the importance we attribute to the deceased. They also argue that when someone returns to her functional baseline shortly after her beloved’s death, she need not desert her loved one or cease to care. Rather, she may adopt some of her beloved’s projects, continue to pursue projects she and her beloved once pursued together, and take up projects that serve to commemorate her beloved (E. & R. Preston-Roedder 2017, 109). These ways of remaining devoted to the deceased also show, contra Smuts, that a diminution in
grief does not imply that one cares less about the deceased. Although the short duration of grief might reveal various flaws in the relationship, it does not entail such flaws and it is compatible with having had a fully committed loving relationship.

One might worry that if the above arguments in defense of resilience are successful, then they are too successful. They do not only remove our reason to persist in grief, they remove our reason to grieve at all. Given that, as Erica and Ryan Preston-Roedder argue, we can love the deceased without grieving, what reason do we have to insist on the fittingness of grief within the first two to three months after bereavement? Thus, the arguments in defense of resilience seem to support a more radical conclusion: the normative rejection of grief no matter its duration. If a normative defense of resilience is to leave room for a normative defense of grief, it must explain not only why recovery from grief might be fitting, but why recovery from fitting grief might be fitting. How is it that our love for the deceased seems to call for temporary grief?

The question is thrown into sharp relief in Dan Moller’s recent paper on love and the rationality of grief (2017). Moller argues that the drastic and rapid change in our response to the death of those we love cannot be fitting.

What we have lost remains roughly the same, even as the intensity of our response begins its meteoric dive toward the baseline where it no longer seems to reflect the horror of what has happened. To put it another way, the fittingness approach to assessing the emotions suggests that within a reasonable range there is a right degree of response, and since we display two different response-levels, they cannot both be right. (Moller 2017, 8)

Since the initial horror strikes Moller as fitting to the gravity of the loss, and since the object to which the horror is a response remains the same (and so does the love that is the backdrop of this horror,) Moller concludes that a diminution in grief cannot be fitting. This claim is compatible, Moller notes, with having various instrumental reasons to endorse the diminution of grief. Nevertheless, “the meteoric dive toward the baseline” constitutes a failure to appreciate the loss. “It is unclear,” says Moller, “why the fact that ten years now interpose between my mother’s death and the present should make it more fitting for me to feel very little in relation to what remains the loss of someone who meant (and means) as much to me as anything in my life” (13).

On Moller’s view, the fact that most of us are resilient to loss implies that we fail to appreciate the significance of the losses that are most important to us. As long as we continue to love the deceased, the death remains significant to us and therefore our initial response—debilitating grief—remains as fitting as it ever was. The reason to bemoan resilience thus turns into a reason to bemoan any recovery from grief. We seem to waver between opposite views—either we should
never grieve or we should never cease to grieve—unable to find a principled defense of temporary grief.

4. The State View of Fittingness

Berislav Marušić argues that the puzzle about the duration of grief eludes a solution (Marušić 2018). Although Marušić is sympathetic to Moller’s argument that recovery from grief is not fitting as long as we continue to love the deceased, he claims that Moller’s decisive conclusion offers an “unrealistic moral psychology” (20). Nevertheless, Marušić insists that we cannot properly explain why our reasons for grief expire. The mere passing of time does not seem to provide the right reason, he argues, nor does the view of grief as a healing process or a kind of work, which seems to assign grief the wrong object: one’s own future well-being rather than one’s past loss. Marušić concludes that although reasons for grief expire, when we try to understand why “all we find are reasons of the wrong kind” (35).

I agree that Moller’s conclusion is objectionably unrealistic, but unlike Marušić I believe the fact the conclusion is unrealistic is indicative of a flaw in the reasoning that leads to it. More specifically, I believe there is no principled reason to deny the fitting diminution of grief. I will now argue that Moller’s and Marušić’s resistance to fitting emotional change stems from an assumption about fittingness that, once brought to light, seems dubious.

Consider Moller’s claim, cited above, that since we display two different levels of response to the same loss, one of the two must be incorrect or unfitting. Moller assumes that there can be only one right response-level. What is the basis of this assumption? If a certain response-level is understood as accurately presenting the loss, then a different level of response to the same loss might seem to present a different, incorrect presentation of the loss. On this picture of fittingness, since the loss remains unchanged, debilitating grief remains fitting as well. This view rests on the more general assumption, which I will call the stability of fitting reasons (SFR, for short), according to which if the facts that constitute fitting reason for an emotion persist, then the emotion remains fitting. In other words, Moller assumes that not only the loss remains unchanged but that its accurate emotional presentation remains unchanged. It follows that if debilitating grief is fitting in response to loss, then given the irreversibility of the loss, a response different from debilitating grief cannot be fitting.

Before evaluating this view in detail, it is worth noting that the issue has been discussed with regard to other emotions. Philosophers have struggled to explain the rational diminution of
backward-looking emotions such as regret, anger, and resentment. Jeff McMahan (2005), Liz Harman (2009), Jay Wallace (2013), and Kieran Setiya (2014) have all discussed cases in which there seems to be a rational lack of regret about decisions the agents themselves judge unjustified, bad, or wrong. One of the most discussed cases in this context is Derek Parfit’s case of the young girl’s child (Parfit 1984). A 14-year-old girl decides to have a child though she has decisive moral and prudential reason not to. And yet many think that her subsequent lack of regret is warranted. Given that the young girl’s regret would be initially fitting, what might rationally justify the girl’s eventual affirmation of her choice to have a child when she did?

Harman and Wallace argue that a shift in the young girl’s attachments—specifically, her love for, or relationship with the child—gives her reason not to regret her unjustified decision; Setiya claims, more radically, that we have reason to prefer the existence of anyone who co-exists with us, whether or not we have a special relationship with the person; and McMahan argues that, in non-moral cases, a change in attitude can be justified by a change in the agent’s personal values and commitments. It is not always clear with regard to each of these accounts whether the explanation is meant to establish that the lack of regret is fitting or merely that there are strong reasons not to regret despite the fact that regret remains fitting (I will return to this point shortly.) However, on either interpretation, these theories seem to imply that in the normal cases of regret, where attachments and personal values do not change and no person comes into existence, rational regret persists.

Anger and resentment have also attracted philosophical attention. Pamela Hieronymi (2001) articulates a challenge for accounts of forgiveness. Forgiveness is generally understood as the rational (if non-voluntary) forgoing of warranted resentment. Hieronymi asks: Given that resentment is warranted by a past wrong, as well as by the moral accountability of the wrongdoer and moral standing of the victim, and given that these facts do not change, how can the diminution of warranted resentment be rational? Hieronymi’s solution shifts the object of resentment from the past wrong itself to the threat that emerges from it. Resentment, according to Hieronymi, is a protest against a present threat created by a past wrong. Genuine forgiveness is warranted when the threat is removed—through apology, for instance—and there is nothing more to protest. Agnes Callard, by contrast, maintains that when one suffers a wrong one has “reason to be angry forever,” but may rationally cease to care about the wrong done to one once it is acknowledge as such by the wrongdoer and the moral relationship is restored (Callard 2017).
The aforementioned accounts share with Moller’s and Marušić’s accounts of grief the assumption that any explanation of rational diminution in a backward-looking emotion inevitably takes one of two strategies. Either it describes a change in the facts that originally constituted the fitting reason for the emotion or it concedes that the emotion remains fitting and appeals to moral, pragmatic, or other so-called ‘wrong kind of reasons’ against it. The removal of the threat that is the reason for resentment renders regret no longer fitting, whereas the young girl’s relationship with her child arguably gives her strong reason not to regret her choice even though regret remains fitting. The former strategy explains why the emotion is no longer fitting; the latter strategy explains why, though the emotion remains fitting, there is other reason that changes the overall rational status of the emotion.

Contrary to the widespread assumption that these two strategies are exhaustive, there is, in fact, a third possible strategy for explaining the rational diminution of backward-looking emotions. The third strategy attempts to explain a change in the emotion’s fittingness without appealing to any change in the facts that constitute the initial reason for the emotion. This strategy is made possible once we reject SFR, and maintain instead that even if the facts that constitute reason for an emotion remain unchanged, the emotion can cease to be fitting. In other words, from the fact that grief is about irreversible loss, it does not follow that grief is indefinitely fitting.

To argue for this third strategy, I need to argue that SFR is false. How, in principle, can the fittingness of an emotion change without a change in the facts that give reason for it? It has been argued that the status of a fact as a reason normally depends on other facts that enable the reason or function as background conditions for it (see Dancy 2004, 39-40; Schreoder 2007, 27; Scanlon 2014, 48). The fact that I love Helen does not itself give me a reason to grieve for her, but it is a background condition that explains why her death gives me a (fitting) reason to grieve for her. Similarly, the fact that you and I stand in a moral relationship does not give you a reason to resent me, but it is arguably a background condition that explains why the fact that I harm you without justification gives you a reason to resent me. Thus, various facts can be part of the rational explanation of the reason to φ without being the reason, or part of the reason to φ.

In the case of grief, it is plausible that the fact that a person’s death constitutes a reason for grief depends on the relationship one had with the deceased. Even a view that maintains that every death gives every person some reason for grief (independently of any special relationship) would

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1 An argument for this analysis of the different accounts of backward-looking emotions can be found in <redacted>.
surely allow that we have exceptional reason to grieve the deaths of our loved ones (and that fitting grief for our loved ones is exceptional in both quality and intensity.) So the relationship with the deceased is a background condition for our reason for grief. The irreversible occurrence in the past constitutes a fitting reason for the emotion in virtue of facts that function as background conditions, and it is possible for these background conditions to change with time. Thus, the wrong that gave you reason for resentment might no longer give you such reason once a genuine apology is offered, though it will forever be true that you were wronged and that this wrong was the object of your resentment. Similarly, we might seek to explain the rational diminution of grief as a change in the fittingness of grief but not as a change in the fact that constituted the initial reason for grief. Rather, we can try to explain the change in grief’s fittingness by appealing to a relevant change in background conditions.

Admittedly, it is plausible that some measure of grief normally and fittingly persists long past the first few months following the loss. What concerns us is the diminution of debilitating grief, which strikes us as a fitting first-response to a terrible loss. In fact, the puzzle we wish to resolve can be generated by the fairly weak claim that there is some fitting change to a fitting emotion without a corresponding change to the fact or set of facts that the emotion is about. In the case of the psychological findings discussed in section 1, the change we seek to justify is the return of the bereaved to his or her emotional and functional baseline. Such alleviation in grief is compatible with the continuation of grief at a more tolerable level.

Now that we established the possibility of the third strategy for explaining grief’s diminution, we can pursue it. How, then, can it be that, at first, debilitating grief is a fitting response to loss and, as such, an accurate presentation of it, but within two to three months a different kind of grief, compatible with a return to one’s emotional and functional baseline, becomes a fitting response to the very same loss? The answer lies, I believe, in what kind of response a ‘fitting response’ is. If fitting responses are primarily distinctive emotional states, then incompatible emotional states entertained by the same agent could not both be fitting in the same respect with regard to the same object. But what if the fitting response to loss is an emotional process? Indeed, a fitting response might involve various emotions, moods, thoughts, and actions that unfold in a certain way, according to a certain pattern, over time. Some details of such a process view of grief will be spelled out in the next section, but we can already see that if the fitting response to loss is primarily a process, then two incompatible emotional states entertained by the same agent can both
be fitting to the same object in the same respect because both might be part of the same fitting process and therefore part of a single fitting response to loss.

Let us therefore distinguish between the state view of fittingness and the process view of fittingness. The state view holds that the fittingness of an emotional process over time is (always) determined by the fittingness of each emotional state at each moment in time. The process view holds that the fittingness of each emotional state at each moment in time is (sometimes) determined by the fittingness of the emotional process of which it is a part. To illustrate, on a state view of fittingness, if amusement is a fitting response to a funny joke at a given moment in time, then as long as the joke remains funny amusement remains fitting. The fact that amusement normally fades while the joke remains funny would be seen as a failure of fittingness. The state view similarly implies that when the feeling of admiration is fitting, it remains fitting as long as its object remains admirable, and the same applies of course to the backward-looking emotions we have considered: regret, anger, and resentment.

Once the state view of fittingness is brought to light, it does not seem very plausible. The view prescribes fitting emotional state independently of the agent’s attitudes at other times, but the fittingness of an emotion at a time normally seems to depend on its trajectory over time. The fact that I’ve regretted a silly mistake for a whole day seems to undermine the fittingness of my regret; the fact that I’ve been delighted by a compliment for a whole week seems to undermine the fittingness of my delight; and the fact that I’ve resented a slight for a whole year seems to undermine the fittingness of my resentment. Contrary to the state view, we normally assess fittingness at a time in light of a conception of the fitting evolution of an emotion over time. Indeed, the fittingness of an emotion’s duration is often proportional to its object just like the fittingness of an emotion’s intensity.

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2 Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson subscribe to this view and therefore argue that due to “the instability of affect,” our affective responses often fail to be fitting even by our own lights (2009).

3 D’Arms and Jacobson claim that considerations of fittingness can be divided into considerations of shape and considerations of size (2000, 73-75). An emotional episode is unfitting in shape when it presents its object as having certain evaluative features the object in fact lacks; it is unfitting in size when it is disproportional to the evaluative features of its object. Regret, for instance, is unfitting in shape if its object is not regrettable (no reason to cry over spilt milk if the milk is still safely in the bottle,) and it is unfitting in size if it disproportional to the significance of its object (the milk is spilt, and that is regrettable, but there is no reason to cry because it is only milk.) But there is a third kind of considerations of fittingness that goes unmentioned by D’Arms and Jacobson, namely, considerations of length. What is the duration of a fitting emotion? Perhaps regretting the spilt milk is fitting for a moment, but surely it is not fitting to regret it all day long.
In light of these observations, it seems that whether an emotion fittingly persists may depend on the fitting evolution of the emotion over time and the process of which it is a part. Thus, the fact that an emotion has persisted for some time might itself render its continuation unfitting apart from any change to its object is that its reason. This means that the evaluative presentation of the object might shift with the duration of the emotion. Therefore, to know whether my amusement at this moment is fitting you need to know whether its object is funny but also whether I have just encountered it, whether I have encountered it many times before, and how long I’ve been amused. Different answers to these questions would reflect differently on the content of my amusement and the evaluative presentation of its object.

Similarly, we cannot determine whether affective attitudes such as despair, relief, boredom, and surprise are fitting without reference to the agent’s prior mental states. Roughly put, fitting hope is the predecessor of fitting despair; fitting frustration or anguish are predecessors of fitting relief; and fitting desire is the predecessor of fitting satisfaction. Being bored by something is fitting only given a history of futile engagement with it and surprise is fitting only given prior fitting expectations. These claims are far from precise, but the relevant point is that substantive accounts of the fittingness of such affective attitudes must resort to the agent’s past attitudes.

Thus, the fittingness of an emotion at a given moment in time may partly depend on its relation to the agent’s attitudes and emotions at other times. It is therefore a mistake to assume, as the state view of fittingness does, that fittingness is determined in isolation from the evolution of the agent’s mind over time. Rather, at least in some cases, to understand whether an emotion accurately presents its object at a time, we must consider it in its diachronic context. A fitting response to the object is primarily a response that unfolds over time. If the fitting response to loss is a process, then this process is the background condition of the reason for debilitating grief and the progression of the process can explain the fitting diminution of grief.

In this section I argued for a novel strategy for explaining the rational diminution of grief, I argued against a state view of fittingness, and I described the structure of a process view of fittingness. Contrary to Moller’s claim, two different response-levels to loss can both be correct, or fitting, if they are both part of a single evolving response to loss that is itself fitting. What explains the change in fittingness need not be a change in the object of grief, but a change in the relation between grief and the agent’s emotions and attitudes at other times.
A process view can also explain why the observations made by Erica and Ryan Preston-Roedder in defense of resilience are compatible with the fittingness of grief. It is plausible that the different ways in which we might remain in solidarity with the deceased presuppose a period of fitting grief. It would not be fitting to respond to the death of our loved ones with immediate acceptance and willingness to take up projects that commemorate the loved one’s existence. Rather, it is more plausible that such responses are later stages in a fitting process that begins with grief. The process view can incorporate incompatible attitudes and emotions as part of a single, fitting, diachronic response to loss. To pursue the third strategy for explaining the rational diminution of grief — i.e., to explain why grief fittingly diminishes while the loss remains — we must resort to a process view of fittingness and, specifically, a process view of the fittingness of grief. I turn to this task in the next section.

5. Grief as a Stage in a Fitting Process

We seek a process view of the fittingness of grief that has the resources to justify resilience. To this end, consider again the two opposing normative views of resilience, the one seemingly presupposed by empirical researchers and the other put forward by Moller and Marušić. On the first view, grief is instrumentally valuable to one’s return to normal functioning and its diminution is made appropriate by the accomplishment of its goal. On the second view, grief is non-instrumentally valuable as a fitting response to the loss of a loved one, and as long as the conditions that made grief fitting remain unchanged its diminution is unfitting. A major objection to the first view is that it assigns grief the wrong object: in grief we are not concerned with our future well-being, but with the significance of the past loss. A major objection to the second view is that it unrealistically saddles us with indefinite grief. We seek a view according to which grief is non-instrumentally valuable and focused on the past loss, as in the second view, but it may fittingly diminish, as in the first. The desired view would thereby avoid both objections.

Before moving forward, a clarificatory remark is due. I have been speaking of grief as a distinctive emotional state and of its fittingness in terms of its place in a process that includes other emotions and attitudes. However, according to a common view of grief, grief is itself a process. The famous ‘five stage’ theory of grief, due primarily to the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, has been largely rejected, but the view that grief is a process still has many proponents. Among

4 See Kubler-Ross 1982 and 1997. For empirical arguments against the five-stages theory, see Maciejewski et al. 2007 and Konigsberg 2011.
philosophers writing on grief, Peter Goldie (2012) has argued that grief is a process best understood as a narrative while Michael Cholbi, whose view we will return to shortly, has also argued that grief is a process composed of various emotional states (2018). However, what I wish to explain here is how a change in the initial response to loss — which I have called debilitating grief — might be fitting. I wish to remain neutral on the question of whether the process in which debilitating grief is embedded is itself an episode of grief or merely includes an episode of grief among its stages. The answer is not crucial to my argument. However, to fix terms, I will continue to speak of grief (or debilitating grief) as a stage in a broader process. except where noted otherwise.

Now, there have been serious attempts to articulate an account of grief that meets our desiderata. For example, Martha Nussbaum offers an account of grief that also purports to defend rational (and fitting) change in non-instrumental grief. According to Nussbaum, the object of grief is the loss of the contribution the deceased made to one’s flourishing. She writes that her own grief for her mother was “identical to a judgment with something like the following form: ‘my mother, an enormously valuable person and an important part of my life, is dead’” (2001, 76). She then considers the diminution of her grief:

I will still accept many of the same judgments—including judgments about my mother’s death, about her worth and importance, about the badness of what happened to her. But propositions having to do with the central role of my mother in my own conception of flourishing will shift into the past tense. By now, in August 2000, it is no longer as true of me as it was in 1992, that “my mother is an important element in my flourishing”; I am now more inclined to accept the proposition, “The person who died was a central part of my life,” and this judgmental change itself is a large part of what constitutes the diminution of grief. (Nussbaum 2001, 82)

Nussbaum explains the fitting diminution of grief by a change in what she takes to be the object of grief, namely, the present contribution of her mother to her flourishing. In the eight years since her mother’s passing, Nussbaum’s flourishing has become less dependent on her mother and therefore grief in response to the event of her mother’s death has ceased to be fitting.

Moller objects that Nussbaum is “obtaining a changing object of grief at the expense of a realistic characterization of what we mourn for” (Moller 2017, 10). The object of grief, claims Moller, is the person, who remains dead, not the various roles the person played in our lives. And Marušić doubles down on this point:

[It remains puzzling to me why Nussbaum’s … point—that her mother plays a less central role in her flourishing—would not constitute a reason for an intensification, rather than the diminution, of grief. After all, isn’t it a further loss—in addition to her mother’s being dead—that her mother no
longer plays this central role? — For what it’s worth, I have been struck by the thought that it should be distressing that my mother is no longer a central part of my life—for instance, when she missed the birth of her grandchildren. (Marušić 2018, 11)

Indeed, the reluctance to let go of grief and the sense that the dissipation of grief will amount to a further loss, are themselves characteristic of fitting grief if not essential to it. Even if the diminishing role of the deceased in our lives explains the diminution in grief, it does not seem to justify it.

For these reasons, it might seem that a non-instrumental view of grief that properly locates its object in the past is committed to the persistence of grief. To be sure, both Moller and Marušić acknowledge that love is a crucial condition for the fittingness of grief, and with the waning of our love for the deceased grief might fittingly diminish. But their point is that grief normally diminishes while our love remains strong. Even in Nussbaum’s example, her love for her mother does not diminish, only her mother’s contribution to her flourishing does. The diminution of grief seems criticizable, even if psychologically inevitable, because our love persists.5

Michael Cholbi’s view of grief claims to account for its diminution as well as its non-instrumental nature while insisting on the continuation of the relationship with the deceased (2018). Cholbi argues that grief is a purposeful activity that includes various emotions, and that its aim is the transformation of one’s relationship with the beloved given the fact of the beloved’s death (2018, 21). Contrary to Freud’s view that the goal of grief is detachment from the deceased, and contrary to Nussbaum’s view that grief diminishes with the diminishing centrality of the deceased in one’s life, Cholbi argues that “bereavement should be guided by the goal of establishing a new, more stable trajectory for one’s relationship with the deceased, incorporating the relationship’s history prior to death” (Cholbi 2018, 18). The diminution of grief need not indicate the diminishing significance of the deceased in one’s life, “on the contrary,” writes Cholbi, “grief seems healthiest when the bereaved is able to continue her attachment to the deceased under the new terms necessitated by death,” and he emphasizes that “this does not entail the cessation of the bereaved’s relationship with the deceased” (Cholbi 2018, 18).

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5 Though here one can rehearse the point Marušić makes in the block quote: the future diminution of our love for the deceased might be seen as a further reason for grief. Is it not deeply disturbing to think that the very same person whose death we grieve so deeply today will no longer be loved by us in the future? The person in grief might plausibly see herself as committed to the continuance of love and therefore committed to grieve forever. The view we seek would allow for the commitment to continue to love but (like E. & R. Preston-Roedder) deny that indefinite grief is the only fitting way in which love may persist in the absence of the beloved.
According to Cholbi’s view, what explains the fitting diminishment of grief’s suffering as well as the fitting termination of the whole process of grief is the accomplishment of grief’s goal, namely, the revision of the terms of the relationship with the deceased. And yet Cholbi insists that the object of grief is the disruption to the relationship caused by the death of the beloved, not the goal of revising the relationship (12). In the course of emotionally attending to the deceased and to the forced transition in our relationship with her, we gradually become active and adopt a purpose—namely, “to identify how, if at all, our relationship with the deceased will continue in light of the radical change in background realities that their death has wrought” (13).

Bracketing Moller’s worry that the relationship with the deceased is not the proper object of grief, Cholbi’s view might seem capable of explaining both the fitting diminution of grief and its non-instrumental nature. The view maintains that grief is a process that at first looks backward non-instrumentally and gradually turns its gaze forward, toward its goal. But if grief is made fitting by the goal of revising the relationship in accordance with the death of the beloved, then even the seemingly non-instrumental stages of grief are in fact instrumentally justified. Alternatively, if those initial stages of grief, when one’s gaze is turned decisively backward, are in fact non-instrumentally warranted by the disruption of the relationship, then grief is not an entirely purposeful activity. As a result, it is not clear what accounts for the normative unity of the process Cholbi describes as grief, and, furthermore, it is not clear what makes the initial non-instrumental stages of grief fittingly diminish to make way to the forward-looking stages.

The difficulty can be brought out by considering a case that separates the instrumental from the non-instrumental in Cholbi’s account. Suppose a person skips the first, backward-looking stages of debilitating grief and immediately begins revising the relationship, adapting it to the new albeit permanent absence of one’s beloved while experiencing little to no anguish. If, as Cholbi claims, grief is a purposeful activity that aims at finding new terms on which to continue the relationship, then there should be no objection to skipping those first, difficult stages. Indeed, accomplishing the goal without the typical anguish of grief would seem like a welcome improvement. But if we insist that those first stages are essential to a fitting process of grief then the process is not made fitting by its goal. Therefore, more needs to be said to explain how the instrumental and non-instrumental aspects of the process Cholbi describes fit together. This is what the process view of fittingness allows us to do.
The fitting process of which debilitating grief is a stage is not an instrumental process that aims toward an independently defined end. Whether the process of grief ends with a return to one’s emotional and functional baseline or with the revision of the relationship with the deceased, the process would not be fitting—it would not correctly present the loss—without the initial stages of debilitating grief.

On this non-instrumental process view, the desired end-state is historically defined — i.e., it is defined by the way it is brought about. To be the winner of a game of basketball, to obtain a PhD, or to have a friend, is to have gone through processes of certain kinds. Of course, there are various ways to get a trophy, possess a diploma, or have a drink with Charlie, but for these things to count as winning the game, having a PhD, or having a friend, they must have the relevant history. That is to say: they must have been brought about in a certain way. While the desired end-state of an instrumental process is defined independently of the process and determines its stages, the desired end-state of a non-instrumental process is defined by the appropriate completion of the process. Thus, to determine the fitting duration of debilitating grief, we must determine the fitting process in which debilitating grief is embedded, its different stages, and the way in which the different stages relate to each other so as to form a coherent whole.

While I cannot argue here for a full substantive account, the idea of a non-instrumental process allows us to revise an account such as Cholbi’s to address the concerns voiced by Moller and Marušić. Cholbi can now argue that the process of revising one’s relationship with the deceased essentially includes grief’s suffering among its stages, such that a failure to be pained by loss is a failure to fittingly revise one’s relationship with the deceased. In this sense, grief is non-instrumental. Nevertheless, the fitting occurrence, duration, and diminution of grief’s suffering is determined by a broader process that leads to the revision of one’s relationship with the deceased.

6 Although some processes are more clearly defined than others, such as getting a PhD in comparison to forging a friendship. For the view that friendship entails a relationship with a certain kind of history, see Kolodny 2003.

7 We find a useful analogy to the distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental processes in John Rawls’ distinction between, on the one hand, perfect and imperfect procedural justice and, on the other hand, pure procedural justice. The required outcome of perfect and imperfect procedural justice can be specified independently of the procedure that brings it about. Perfect procedures are guaranteed to bring about the required outcome while imperfect procedures are only likely to bring about the required outcome. For example, a procedure of criminal justice, which aims to convict the guilty and only the guilty, cannot guarantee success but might be sufficiently reliable and therefore count as a procedure of imperfect procedural justice. However, pure procedural justice obtains when there is no criterion for the right outcome other than the execution of a correct or fair procedure (Rawls 1971, 86). For example, when applied fairly, a gambling procedure renders its consequences legitimate, whatever they are.
To be sure, in order to be guided by the relevant process, the person in grief must, at least occasionally, take up a forward-looking point of view. Moller and Marušić might therefore worry that, like Nussbaum’s account, my proposal mischaracterizes the object of grief. But a grieving agent can be occasionally attentive to the process that grief is part of, while being on the whole intensely focused on the past loss. The agent’s attentiveness to the process is even compatible with the idea that in the depth of grief the agent fittingly revolts against grief’s future diminution. These synchronically conflicting stances are reconciled by a diachronic view that treats them as consecutive rather than simultaneous states. There is no one single point of view that the agent should adopt throughout the process; rather, there are various points of view, each fittingly adopted at a different stage or moment in the process. At times, a wholly backward-looking perspective is fitting, while at other times, the agent may fittingly reflect on the process as a whole.

The tension between the diachronic perspective and the synchronic one is not a flaw of the view I am proposing, but a feature that captures an important aspect of the phenomenology of grief. As Peter Goldie argued (2012), grief is replete with irony. For one, we remember the past from the present perspective, which was not available to us then, when our loved one was still alive. But we are also sensitive to the shortcomings of our future perspective as well as to those of our present one. Even if grief will not dissipate completely in the future, we will most likely lose touch with the initial shock and horror we fittingly experienced upon first encounter with our loved one’s death. In the present, this same horror consumes us so as to make the continuation of life seem contemptible and wrong. Neither perspective is the right one; they are each incomplete and yet fitting at different stages.

Consider Nussbaum’s report about her own grief: eight years after her mother’s death, Nussbaum’s mother no longer plays a central role in her life and her grief has diminished. This may seem fitting. But it is crucial to the plausibility of this example that Nussbaum’s diminution in grief did not occur immediately following the news of her mother’s death. Suppose Nussbaum adapted to her mother’s absence very quickly, and within weeks her mother ceased to play a central role in her life. I do not think the corresponding absence of grief would strike us as fitting in such a scenario, where grief fails to run its (fitting) course. As this example illustrates, our understanding of grief, our own grief and others’, is informed by our understanding of the unfolding process of which grief is part. To grieve well, as it were, is to move fittingly between conflicting perspectives, at once truthful and partial.
6. A Lesson: An Ethical Dispute in Empirical Disguise

The forgoing discussion yields an important lesson about our understanding of healthy grief. Consider again the empirical debate between traditional bereavement theory, which construes grief as a work that takes a long time to complete, and the new science of bereavement, which holds that most people are resilient to loss and do not need to grieve for very long at all. I have been attributing a common normative view to these empirical accounts, according to which grief is part of an instrumental process that, when successful, leads the bereaved individual back to normal functioning. But I now want to suggest that, while the disagreement is in large part empirical, it might also be ethical.

Ethical convictions and intuitions often inform medical opinion. For example, the most recent edition of the DSM, the DSM-5, issued by the American Psychiatric Association, allows clinicians to diagnose Major Depressive Disorder in individuals within the first few months after bereavement. However, the DSM-5 also cautions that “…periods of sadness are inherent aspects of the human experience” and “should not be diagnosed as a major depressive episode unless criteria are met for severity …duration …and clinically significant distress or impairment” (APA 2013, 168, my italics). But what is the normative force of the claim that sadness should not be diagnosed as a disorder because it is inherent to the human experience? There are many inherent aspects of the human experience that we seem to have good reason to minimize, if not extinguish. Indeed, disease itself seems to be inherent to the human experience. Perhaps the DSM’s claim about grief relies on the intuition that, unlike Major Depressive Disorder, “normal grief” is a fitting response to the human condition and therefore should not be diagnosed and treated. Even if medication could efficiently bring us back to our functional baseline, it might still be unjustified and even wrong to preempt a person’s fitting reaction to the loss of a loved one.

Once we notice that on many occasions a departure from functional and emotional baseline strikes us as non-instrumentally justified because it is a fitting response to events in a person’s life, important ethical questions arise. In fact, the disagreement between traditional bereavement theory and the new science of bereavement can be recast as involving two distinct issues. The first is empirical: how do most people in fact return to their baseline functioning following a loss? The second is ethical: what is a fitting, or healthy, process by which a person can return to baseline functioning following a loss? In their determinations about what is healthy and unhealthy, psychologists and psychiatrists are not only informed by empirical data, but by ethical views that
influence their interpretation of the data. Once these views are brought to the fore and distinguished from empirical claims, it becomes clear that we cannot simply accept them on the authority of experts. Upon reflection it might turn out, for instance, that though traditional bereavement theory is empirically flawed in various ways, it gives a better analysis of the significance of loss in a person’s life than the view put forward by the new scientists of bereavement and therefore constitutes a more compelling ethical view of the processes of repair in the aftermath of loss. Alternatively, if we reject the ethical proclamations of the traditional approach we should reject them as such. Empirical findings and philosophical analyses of rationality cannot determine the appropriate duration of grief; we must reflect on the ethical questions surrounding the process of grief as we reflect on other substantive ethical or bio-ethical questions, such as abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, etc.

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8 Janet McCracken makes a similar point about the ethical issues involved in the medicalization of grief: “Out of appreciation for the dedicatory and obligatory qualities of grief, we want a world in which grief is valued: This desire competes strongly with the desire to ease suffering, and distinguishing the grief we want from the depression we ought to treat is … an unavoidable burden” (McCracken 2005, 154).
References

American Psychiatric Association. 2013. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.)


