



## Grief as a Duty of Practical Fidelity

Michael Cholbi, Philosophy, University of Edinburgh

Jordan MacKenzie, Corcoran Department of Philosophy, UVA,  
[dfs8zy@virginia.edu](mailto:dfs8zy@virginia.edu)

---

We often feel duty-bound to grieve our loved ones after their deaths. But how can we owe grief (or anything) to those who are no longer alive? We propose that the duty to grieve the deceased is part of a wider duty found in mutually loving relationships, which we call the duty of practical fidelity. The duty of practical fidelity commands us to “factor” our loved ones into our practical identities, while encouraging them to do the same. Fulfillment of the duty requires that we attend to radical changes in their identities—and few changes are more radical than death. We grieve in order to adapt our practical identities to the death of a loved one. Failure to do so wrongs the deceased.

---



ARTICLE

## GRIEF AS A DUTY OF PRACTICAL FIDELITY

Michael Cholbi\*  
Jordan MacKenzie†

We often feel duty-bound to grieve our loved ones after their deaths. But how can we owe grief (or anything) to those who are no longer alive? We propose that the duty to grieve the deceased is part of a wider duty found in mutually loving relationships, which we call the duty of practical fidelity. The duty of practical fidelity commands us to “factor” our loved ones into our practical identities, while encouraging them to do the same. Fulfillment of the duty requires that we attend to radical changes in their identities—and few changes are more radical than death. We grieve in order to adapt our practical identities to the death of a loved one. Failure to do so wrongs the deceased.

### I. Introduction

We hate to remind you, but you’re going to die someday. But don’t worry—you’re in good company. We’re going to die someday too.

When we think about our deaths, we can’t help but contemplate the reactions of the people we will leave behind. While we hope that they will come to lead happy lives without us, we also hope that they won’t neglect the fact that we are now gone. We want our deaths to matter to our loved ones because *we* want to matter to our loved ones. The prospect of not being grieved in death—to have our loved ones not emotionally engage with our deaths, or to simply “move on”—is unsettling because it would suggest that we don’t matter to them in the way we thought we did.<sup>1</sup>

\* Professor and Personal Chair in Philosophy, University of Edinburgh.

† Assistant Professor of Philosophy, University of Virginia.

1. For philosophical discussions of whether this “resilience” in the face of grief is rational or desirable, see Dan Moller, “Love and Death,” *Journal of Philosophy* 104, no. 6 (2007): 301–316, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil2007104621>; Michael Cholbi, “Regret, Resilience, and the Nature of Grief,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16, no. 4: 486–508, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-20180015>; Berislav Marušić, “Do Reasons Expire? An Essay on Grief,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 18, no. 25: 1–21; and Oded Na’Aman, “The Fitting Resolution of Anger,” *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 8: 2417–2430, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-019-01317-w>.

To take this thought one step further, we might even think that grief is something that the loved ones who survive our deaths owe to us—that there exists a moral *duty* to grieve when someone close to us dies. One bit of evidence for this emerges when we turn the tables and imagine how we would appraise ourselves if, contrary to our own expectations, we failed to grieve our deceased loved ones. Not grieving them would cast us in a morally unflattering light. What sort of daughter, son, friend, or partner would we be if we could go about our day without feeling grief at their demise? After all, indifference to their deaths looks perilously close to indifference to them. A negative moral self-appraisal such as guilt and shame would thus seem to be in order.

Hence, a failure to grieve seems like a moral failure. Of course, it doesn't follow that we should grieve as much as possible. Too little grief seems morally off-putting, but too much seems morally tragic. Sure, we wouldn't want our loved ones to move on from us while we're still warm in our graves. Yet we also hope they wouldn't try to "press pause" on their lives out of a misguided sense of devotion to us.

Our aim in this paper is to vindicate the thought that we have a moral duty to grieve those with whom we share reciprocal loving relationships. We'll do this by deriving a duty to grieve from a broader duty associated with such relationships, a duty we call *the duty of practical fidelity*. Roughly, the duty of practical fidelity is a duty to shape our own practical identities—that is, the descriptions under which we value ourselves, find our lives worth living, and locate the source of many of our practical reasons—by the practical identities of those with whom we stand in reciprocal loving relationships. That the duty to grieve rests on the duty of practical fidelity illuminates how we can owe grief to our deceased loved ones, while also providing a story about the content and limits of that duty.

Our inquiry thus has both a narrow and a broad goal. Narrowly, it aims to capture what we owe to our loved ones in terms of grief and why. In so doing, we thereby offer what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic philosophical account of an other-regarding duty to grieve. More broadly, our discussion aims to articulate both the substance and content of a general moral duty that is unique to reciprocal, intimate relationships.

Our paper proceeds as follows. In Section II, we explain what we understand a duty to grieve to involve and defend the claim that it is best construed as an other-regarding duty to the deceased. This sets us up for Section III, in which we argue that the duty to grieve is derivative of a broader duty of practical fidelity that we owe to people with whom we share loving relationships.

The duty of practical fidelity is a duty to “factor” our loved ones into our practical identities, while simultaneously encouraging and helping them to do the same, even as our respective practical identities change over the course of our relationship. So construed, the duty of practical fidelity simultaneously commands us to stay rooted to and grow alongside our loved ones. It is this duality that we find once again in grief, and it helps to explain why both an absence and overabundance of grief is morally off-putting. Grieve too little, and the worry arises that we have failed to be responsive to a fact about our loved ones (i.e. that they are now dead) that demands a revision to our own practical identities. Grieve too much, and we risk having responded to that fact while still failing to appropriately adapt our practical identities to it.

We conclude in Section IV by considering how best to understand how it is that we can owe a duty of grief to the dead. Here, we take on the classic challenge of making sense of duties to the dead, especially in light of Epicurean claims to the effect that the dead can be neither harmed nor wronged because they are not experiential subjects. While we do not refute such claims, we nevertheless show that our argument for the existence of a duty to grieve underscores the moral costs of endorsing them. Specifically, we argue that the Epicurean argument against duties to the dead *also* applies to many of our duties to the living, including the duty of practical fidelity. And so, if we want to deny the existence of duties to the dead on Epicurean grounds, we must also render incoherent much of what we seem plausibly to owe our living loved ones.

Before moving on, we want to offer three quick clarifications about our project. First, in this paper, we’re interested in grief directed at the loss of persons (often designated “bereavement”). We recognize, of course, that people can feel grief in other sorts of cases as well: we can, for instance, grieve the loss of a job or relationship.<sup>2</sup> While we think that grief can be fitting in these cases, we don’t think that it can be something that is *owed* to its subject. And so, these sorts of non-person-directed grief cases won’t be captured by our analysis.

Second, we have used the term “duty to grieve” throughout this paper in a way that aligns with current philosophical discussions of the topic.<sup>3</sup> But

2. Matthew Ratcliffe and Louise Richardson, “Grief over Non-Death Losses: A Phenomenological Perspective,” *Passion: Journal of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotion* 23, no.1 (2023): 50–67, doi:10.59123/passion.viii.12287.

3. See e.g. Cholbi, “Regret, Resilience, and the Nature of Grief,” and Michael Cholbi, *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 149ff, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691211213>; Kristján Kristjánsson. “Grief: An Aristotelian Justification of an Emotional Virtue,” *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 4 (2015): 805–828, <https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2015.92.4.1>; and David Wasserman and S. Matthew Liao, “Issues in the Pharmacological

some readers might worry that such talk reflects a trend within moral philosophy of unduly overpopulating the realm of duties. In response, we aim to show that there are potent other-regarding moral reasons to grieve such that in failing to act upon these reasons, their loved ones have moral standing to object (or would have such standing, if they were alive). To our eyes, this suffices for these reasons to ground a genuine duty.

Third, while we will have more to say about our *conception* of grief in Section II, we need to forestall possible misunderstandings about the duty at issue. At a conceptual level, grief is a person's individualized response, typically infused with intense emotion, to the death of another. Hence, the duty to grieve will minimally amount to a duty to enable such a response (by not avoiding or suppressing grief), and all the more, to grieve in specific ways. The duty to grieve should thus be distinguished from other duties related to the dead with which it could be confused. The duty to grieve is not the same as a duty to *mourn*, where mourning involves the participation in practices or rituals through which others' deaths are acknowledged. Nor is the duty to grieve a duty to *commemorate* the dead. We shall have little to say about these other putative duties, though we happily recognize that grieving, mourning, commemorating, etc. can overlap as a matter of fact (many of those who are mourning are also grieving, for instance). Hence, if there are such duties, their fulfillment may coincide with the fulfillment of the duty to grieve.

## II. What is Grief, and to Whom Might it be Owed?

Before we figure out why we may owe others our grief, we need to say something about what grief is, and to whom it may cogently be directed.

### II.A WHAT IS GRIEF?

As a first pass, one might think that grief is a certain emotion: that particular feeling of forlorn hopelessness that accompanies significant loss. But anyone who has gone through the process of grieving understands the limits of this depiction. Grief incorporates a number of almost contradictory emotional states, including but not limited to anger, guilt, resignation, and even joy.<sup>4</sup>

Induction of Emotions," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2008): 178–192, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2008.00414.x>.

4. Cholbi, *Grief*, 40.

Further, grief is not *simply* a passive emotional experience. Rather, in grieving, we actively reckon with our feelings, asking what exactly they mean, and why we're experiencing them. At times, we may be spurred into action by our grief. In the throes of grief, we may get radical haircuts, quit our jobs, throw out our possessions, or take up new hobbies.

What unites the various facets of grief into a single process? The common thread linking together grief's constitutive components is that they are anchored in the *attention* the bereaved person pays to the fact of the other person's death.<sup>5</sup> That grief involves a wide range of paradigmatic feelings, for instance, speaks to the complexity of our loss. That grief often forces us to undergo a process of reckoning further attests to this complexity: we aren't *told* what a loved one's loss means to us but instead must figure it out for ourselves. The (often regrettable) life choices that we make in the midst of grief, meanwhile, speak to the magnitude of our loss: we aren't the same person after losing a loved one, and so our lives can't possibly remain the same.

Just as grief is paradigmatically associated with certain emotions and activities, so too do we associate it with a particular object: even though we can grieve all sorts of losses, we paradigmatically grieve people. And not just any people. As one of us (Cholbi) has proposed, we grieve the demise of those people in whom our *practical identities* are invested.<sup>6</sup>

Here's what we mean by this. We are not simply disembodied instances of pure reason; rather, we're embodied social agents who structure our lives around particular commitments and ends. These commitments and ends, in turn, constitute our practical identities. As Christine Korsgaard describes the concept, a practical identity is a "description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking."<sup>7</sup>

Practical identities are historically rooted; we come to have the practical identities we in fact have because of our individual experiences and biographies. Crucially though, they are far more than a descriptive accounting of what matters to us. What renders a practical identity *practical* is that it functions to give direction and purpose to our lives, shaping deliberation and choice by reference to concerns and commitments with which we identify. That you are a Mormon gives you reason not to drink coffee; that you are

5. Michael Cholbi, "Grief as Attention," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 29, nos. 9–10 (2022): 63–83, <https://doi.org/10.53765/20512201.29.9.063>.

6. Cholbi, *Grief*, 30–33.

7. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511554476>.

a doctor gives you reason to abide by the Hippocratic oath; that you collect antique perfume bottles gives you reason to peruse the aisles of that secondhand store. Practical identities, while rooted in our pasts, thus project us prudentially into our futures.

In addition to being forward-looking, our practical identities are also other-regarding. This is unsurprising: the commitments that we structure our lives around are, by and large, commitments *to* other people. To be a student is to have a teacher, to be a grandparent is to have a grandchild. Many of these people, in turn, become integral to our sense of who we are. Their desires, wellbeing, and commitments become sources of practical reasons for us, just as our own desires, wellbeing, and commitments are sources of practical reasons for us.

Who we are, then, is at least partially a function of whom we love and what relationships we stand in. This means that when our loved ones change, we also change. Our spouse retiring is not just a change that *they* undergo, but also a change that *we* undergo; we are now the spouse of a retiree. When our children leave the nest, they are not simply “transformed” into young adults. Their leaving also transforms us into “empty nesters”. These are not mere “Cambridge property” changes: our loved ones’ transformations can strike us at the core of who we are and can radically change what practical reasons are available to us.

When our loved ones die, their deaths inevitably reshape the relationships that we share with them, thus upending our practical identities.<sup>8</sup> We may still be our father’s child once he has passed away, but our relationship with him (and our sense of ourselves as his child) will be transformed by his death. Death thus confronts us with a practical question: who are we now that they’re gone?<sup>9</sup>

Grief is the process through which we struggle to answer that question. In grieving, we reconstruct our practical identities to accommodate the myriad ways in which they’ve been altered by our loved one’s passing.<sup>10</sup> In this re-

8. For a philosophical argument in favor of the position that grief involves reckoning with the transformation of a relationship, see Becky Millar and Pilar Lopez-Cantero, “Grief, Continuing Bonds, and Unreciprocated Love,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 3 (2022): 413–436, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12462>. For empirical support of this claim, see Dennis Klass, “Solace and Immortality: Bereaved Parents’ Continuing Bond with their Children,” *Death Studies* 17, no. 4 (1993): 343–368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481189308252630>.

9. In describing the dead as “gone,” we need not assume that there is no afterlife. Indeed, it is a strength of the practical identity account of grief that it allows for grief among those who believe in the afterlife, for they too will have their relationships with their loved ones, and thus their practical identities, altered by death (Cholbi, *Grief*, 61–63).

10. Cholbi, *Grief*, 56ff.; Jelena Markovic, “Transformative Grief,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2024): 246–259, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12875>. Note that when this process goes awry, such as in cases of complicated grief, we may be left feeling confused about who we are

gard, it makes sense that grief would be *active*, rather than *passive*: we can't passively rebuild ourselves, after all. And so too does this account deliver us a story about grief's cessation: our grief stops when we've finished integrating the loss of our loved one into our practical identity.

We can see such a process in action by considering how people often conceptualize grief as involving a simultaneous loss of other and loss of self. And so John Bayley, novelist and widower of Iris Murdoch, writes:

I could not escape back into my old self, because my old self no longer existed. In widowhood you lose not only your loved one but much of yourself. And there was no new one to take its place.<sup>11</sup>

And so too does the philosopher Augustine, reflecting on the death of a close friend, write:

My eyes sought him everywhere, but they did not see him; and I hated all places because he was not in them, because they could not say to me, "Look, he is coming," as they did when he was alive and absent. I became a hard riddle to myself, and I asked my soul why she was so downcast and why this disquieted me so sorely. But she did not know how to answer me.<sup>12</sup>

Lest this conceptualization of grief as a loss of self seem to be the sole purview of novelists and philosophers, consider how participants from a study on grief described their experiences:

Before I lost my spouse, I knew who I was because I was [name of wife]'s husband and [name of son's] dad... That's kind of how I saw my role and that's what was important to me. That was the job I wanted, and now I have no idea who I am, and that's a big part of my struggles right now is [sic] trying to figure out what I am without my wife.

...

There's definitely an identity crisis. Before, I was Michael and [wife's name]. Now I'm just Michael.

...

as persons (Benjamin W. Bellet et al., "Identity Confusion in Complicated Grief: A Closer Look," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 129, no. 4 (2020): 397–407, <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000520>).

11. John Bayley, *Widower's House: A Study in Bereavement, or How Margot and Mella Forced Me to Flee My Home* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 3–4.

12. *Augustine: Confessions*, A.C. Outler, ed. and trans. (1955), book IV, ch. 4, ¶9. E-text at: <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/conf.pdf>.

I see myself as half a person, half of a couple... I'm not complete... I don't see myself as a whole person.<sup>13</sup>

The grieving process, in turn, is regularly construed as a process of identity reconstitution. Psychologist Marilyn McCabe describes grief as involving a recognition “both that the lost other is an ongoing part of our existence, and that the *processes* of relationship continue to be reintegrated, transferred, rejuvenated, and transformed.” It is through this reckoning, she contends, that we are able to “reconstruct our selves and our lives in the experience of profound loss.”<sup>14</sup> This often involves reckoning with the way in which our relationship has changed, and with how we in turn have changed.<sup>15</sup>

That the grieving process involves reckoning with the question of who we are now that our loved one is gone is reflected in many of our experiences of grief. Still, one might worry that associating grief with practical identity transformation might run the risk of making grief into an unduly narcissistic enterprise—as though the primary aim of going through such a process is to figure oneself out, rather than to mourn the loss of the deceased. Surely, if grief has an object, it ought to be the person who has been lost, and not the person who has done the losing.

That, at very least, is what Marušić has argued.<sup>16</sup> Such a view, which locates the object of grief in the deceased and the losses they suffer due to death, evades any worries about grief being narcissistic. But this view has untoward implications. For one, grief seems justifiable even when death is harmless or even beneficial to the deceased, as is arguably true in many cases of voluntary euthanasia or if (as many believe) their dead loved ones enjoy an eternal and blissful afterlife. In addition, that we grieve for the harms suffered by the deceased is difficult to square with the phenomenology of grief. If grief's object is the losses that the deceased has suffered due to death, then this view needs a special account of why emotions that are clearly self-concerning—such as resentment, anxiety, or disorientation—are so common in grief. These features of grief are, in contrast, easy to account for on a prac-

13. Erin C. Wehrman, “‘I Don't Even Know Who I Am': Identity Reconstruction After the Loss of a Spouse,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 40, no. 4 (2022): 1250–1276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075221127399>. See also Robert A. Neimeyer, Dennis Klass, and Michael Robert Dennis, “A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning,” *Death Studies* 28, no. 8 (2014): 485–498, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2014.913454>.

14. Marilyn McCabe, *The Paradox of Loss: Toward a Relational Theory of Grief* (Westport: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 13.

15. Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis, “A Social Constructionist Account”; Wehrman, “‘I Don't Even Know Who I Am'.”

16. Marušić, “Do Reasons Expire?” 6.

tical-identity view of grief. We may still suffer a loss, even if death is a blessing to the deceased. And since the process of figuring out who we now are naturally invites a range of emotional reactions, it's no surprise that we may experience anger, resentment and even joy as we grieve.

More deeply, we suspect that the appeal of the thesis that grief is directed at losses suffered by the deceased stems from accepting an unattractive dualism about grief's possible objects: Either grief is directed at the deceased or it is narrowly self-interested. But this overlooks a third possibility. In a mutually loving relationship, the participants normally sustain that relationship together over time. To invoke a nautical metaphor, we may see the participants as holding opposite ends of a rope that binds them together. Ideally, this rope is taut, and their practical identities are intertwined and integrated. But when one participant dies, this rope "goes slack", leaving the surviving participant the task of *picking up the slack*, that is, of building or sustaining the relationship on their own. The process of reshaping their practical identity in light of the other's death is how they pick up that slack. And so, while our account is self-directed, it's not self-centered: that we need to reconceive of our practical identities in light of a loved one's death is merely evidence of the extent to which our sense of self was entwined with theirs.

We now have a story about what grief is. And this story implies a further story about the *content* of the duty to grieve: if there is such a duty, it's going to be a duty to undergo the active process of practical identity reconstruction that other peoples' deaths provoke. Specifically, we want to suggest that the duty to grieve (if indeed there is one) is a duty to:

1. embrace, rather than avoid, the grieving process by:
2. actively attending to one's transformed relationship with the deceased in order to:
3. adapt one's practical identity to the relationship that has been transformed by death.<sup>17</sup>

17. Losing a loved one may be a transformative experience in L.A. Paul's sense of the term. See L.A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198717959.001.0001>; also Markovic, "Transformative Grief." We simply don't know from the onset who we're going to be once our loved one is gone. This, however, does not mean that grieving is always *radically* self-transformative. Indeed, some deaths can elicit grief without being very transformative at all. We might grieve the loss of a grandparent without feeling that we have been significantly transformed by their passing. See Melissa A. Smigelsky et al., "Investigating Risk for Grief Severity: Attachment to the Deceased and Relationship Quality," *Death Studies* 44, no. 7 (2020): 402–411, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1548539>; Celia B. Harris, Ruth Brookman, and Maja O'Connor, "It's Not Who You Lose, It's Who You Are: Identity and Symptom Trajectory in Prolonged Grief," *Current Psychology* 42, no. 13

Note what this duty isn't: it is not a duty to *feel* grief.<sup>18</sup> And that's a good thing: if feelings are indeed non-volitional, as we might reasonably suppose they are, then it's not obvious that we *could* be obligated to feel grief. Instead, we think that the duty to grieve is a duty to undergo the active process described above, thus reckoning with the loss of our loved one. This reckoning will normally, and perhaps inevitably, prompt various emotional reactions, but our obligation is not to have those reactions directly.

Here's an analogy. If you're an ER doctor at a busy hospital, then you owe it to your employer to work your shift in the ER. You can't just not show up without warning, or decide that you feel like working your shift in orthopedics instead. Fulfilling this obligation will almost inevitably result in you being exhausted at the end of your shift. But this doesn't mean that you owe it to your employer to be exhausted. In the same way, the duty to grieve that we've described is a duty to respond to the loss of a loving relationship and to actively attend to the ways in which we have been transformed by that loss. Insofar as that loss is a *loss*, it will paradigmatically involve a range of negative emotions, like sadness, anger, and of course, that feeling that we call "grief". Nevertheless, the duty to grieve is not a duty to directly experience those emotions, but rather a duty to undergo an active process the performance of which will reliably lead to those emotions.

This means that, while it's theoretically possible to discharge the duty without feeling any negative emotions, it's highly unlikely that one could in practice actually pull off such a feat. While the grieving process can take many forms, and involve many different emotions, a complete absence of negatively valenced emotions will generally be a sign that one isn't really grieving.

So far, we've construed our account hypothetically: *if* there is a duty to grieve, here's what it will look like. But a hypothetical story isn't worth very much if its antecedent turns out to be false. In the next section, we'll argue that we do indeed owe it to our loved ones to grieve their demise.

(2023): 11223–11233, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02343-w>.) Nevertheless, even more "subtle" forms of grief can mark a transformation in a relationship: when we lose a grandparent, we must reckon with the fact that whatever tensions in our relationships with them existed will never be fully resolved, that they won't be present for some of our major life milestones, and that we will never have a chance to talk with them again about their life experiences or ask them for life advice.

18. In this way, our account departs sharply from Robert Solomon, "On Grief and Gratitude," in *In Defense of Sentimentality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 75–107, <https://doi.org/10.1093/019514550x.003.0004>, who construes grief as an "obligatory feeling."

## II.B TO WHOM MIGHT WE OWE OUR GRIEF?

Why think we might have a duty to grieve? We'll answer this question in two steps. First, we'll settle a question about grief's object: to whom do we owe our grief? Then, we'll consider *why* grief is something that we may owe, arguing that a duty to grieve is derivative of a much larger relational obligation.

Intuitively, if grief is something we can owe, then there must be someone *to whom* we can owe that grief. Initially, we might think that if we owe anyone grief, it must be the people at whom our grief is directed. But duties to the dead come with thorny metaphysical issues: how can the dead be the beneficiaries of duties, when they can't be subjects at all? To avoid such issues, we might wish to locate the beneficiary of a duty to grieve amongst the living.

But *which* living? Perhaps we might think that grief is something that we owe to affected third parties. A mother, for instance, might owe it to her children to grieve the demise of their father, even if she was going through an acrimonious divorce with him at the time of his death. Grieving alongside her children would be a way of sharing in their loss, and standing with them in their time of need.

Here, however, we might wonder whether *grief* is really what's called for. We might think that a weaker duty—such as a duty to *mourn*—would do the trick just as well without inviting difficult questions about whether one can actually be obligated to grieve a death that does not naturally engender feelings of grief.

More fundamentally, however, we should wonder how well that story generalizes. Certainly, it seems to generate both false positives and false negatives. You might have strong moral reasons to treat your best friend's losses as your own, but if you've never even met her grandfather, then surely you can't be obligated to grieve his death alongside her. Similarly, if your dear grandmother's death turns out to affect nobody but you, then this account would imply that you don't have a moral reason to grieve.

If we have a duty to grieve, it's unlikely to be found in what we owe to third parties. Perhaps we'd do better to construe grief as a self-regarding obligation. On this account, our duty to grieve derives its normative force from a broader duty of self-knowledge. Insofar as we owe it to ourselves to strive to know ourselves,<sup>19</sup> and insofar as grief provides us with prime opportunities for self-discovery,<sup>20</sup> then we may owe it to ourselves to grieve.

19. Cholbi, *Grief*, ch. 6. See also Jordan MacKenzie, "Knowing Yourself and Being Worth Knowing," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 2 (2018): 243–261, <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2018.19>.

20. Cholbi, *Grief*, 77–83.

We're more sympathetic to this self-regarding account than to the third-party account. We think it's plausible that we owe it to ourselves to try to know ourselves, and that this duty of self-knowledge can sometimes imply a derivative duty to grieve. What we deny is that it is *this* obligation that we're characteristically responding to when we feel the moral tug of grief.

To see why we think this, just consider a case in which a death provides an opportunity for self-knowledge, but where grief still seems totally optional. Consider the deaths of celebrities. If you're a fan of a particular celebrity musician, then their death might be a prime opportunity for self-discovery: you might gain new insights into what their music meant to you. But if their death arrives at a bad time (say, a stressful period at work), we think that there would be nothing particularly wrong with pushing aside your grief. Or consider the sorts of self-insights that might come from grieving the loss of an abusive father from whom one is estranged. Again, grief seems totally optional here, even if it would provide significant self-insights.

To be sure, the self-regarding account has a natural answer to these worries: the duty to grieve (like the duty to know oneself) is a broad, imperfect obligation, and so we're not wronging ourselves by failing to heed its call in any particular instance. But this answer merely raises another question: why does grief sometimes seem *absolutely required*? Imagine that the celebrity was also your best friend. If that were the case, then there would be something morally off-putting about your failure to grieve—and you wouldn't get off the hook for this moral failure by pointing out that things were busy at work.

This result suggests that if there is a duty to grieve, the individual to whom we owe grief *really is* the deceased. And it suggests something further still: we don't owe our grief to just *any* deceased person. We don't even owe it to just any deceased person who features in our practical identity (as a celebrity might). Rather, we owe grief to people with whom we share certain sorts of intimate relationships—like friendship, familial relationships and romantic partnerships. These relationships, we'll argue in the next section, are what ultimately ground our duty to grieve.

### III. Grief and the Duty of Practical Fidelity

If the practical identity account is right about what grief is, then a natural story suggests itself about what a duty to grieve would have to be. To be bound by such a duty is to be under an obligation to participate in the process of grieving by actively reckoning with the question of who we are now that our loved one is gone. This process is self-transformative: in grieving, we

reconstruct our practical identities to accommodate the ways in which our loved one's death has altered us. The duty to grieve is thus a duty to undertake a certain sort of transformative process, a process whereby we factor our loved one's death into our practical identity, thus determining who we now are, and what we take to be reasons for action.

But why think that there is such a duty? We will argue that the duty to grieve is actually a specific instantiation of a much broader obligation that features within loving relationships. Individuals in mutually loving relationships, we argue, owe each other a duty of *practical fidelity*. By this, we mean that they owe it to each other to factor their loved one into their practical identities, and to encourage and help their loved one to do the same. Insofar as death irreparably changes who our loved ones are to us, we owe it to them to attend to that transformation by grieving them.

### III.A PRACTICAL IDENTITY, PRACTICAL FIDELITY, AND LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

We'll start by saying something about how we're understanding the term "practical fidelity". The easiest way to understand what practical fidelity is, and why it matters to loving relationships, is by appreciating the sorts of loving relationships that lack it.

First, think about relationships in which one party fails to acknowledge important facets of the other party's practical identity. Within this category, we find parents who refuse to acknowledge their children's sexual identities, older siblings who refuse to reckon with the fact that their younger siblings are now adults, and people who are in denial about the extent to which their spouses have changed over the course of their marriages.

Second, consider relationships in which one party refuses to change in response to changes in the other's practical identity. Here, we find people who insist that they should never alter themselves to meet the needs of their loved ones, adult children who ignore their aging parents' increased frailty, and friends who get upset when their companions find romantic partners or have children.

Third, think about relationships in which one party tries to "rush ahead". Parents, for instance, sometimes plot their children's educational trajectory while those children are still in diapers. Overeager romantic partners, meanwhile, might find themselves picking out their future children's names before their relationship has even gotten serious.

Finally, consider relationships in which one party seeks to control the self-transformations of the other or prioritize their own practical identities at

the expense of their loved ones' practical identities. Here, we find spouses who hide important self-discoveries from their loved ones to keep the relationship the same, parents who demand that their children simply "get with the program" when they announce that they're getting a divorce, and romantic partners who deny that their loved one should have any say over major life decisions.

There is something deeply unideal about the relationships described above. And even though these relationships may look different from each other in various ways, they evince the same fundamental failure. Specifically, the people within them have shown themselves to be unwilling to have their practical identities shaped by their loved ones' practical identities. Sometimes, these failures involve failures of acknowledgement—as in cases of parents who are unwilling to accept that their child is gay, adult children who cling to images of their parents as healthy rather than infirm, and parents who, by obsessing over their children's futures, fail to appreciate their distinctive needs as children. In other cases, these failures are failures of self-transformation: the romantic partner who would rather stay the same than make some personal changes to help his loved one is prioritizing the maintenance of his own practical identity over the interests of his beloved. Taken together, these failures are *failures of practical fidelity*.

Crucially, these failures are simultaneously *epistemic*, *practical*, and *moral*. The adult sibling who can't reckon with the fact that her younger brother is now fully grown is failing epistemically, insofar as she's failing to see him as an adult and thus to see herself as the sister of a grown man. This epistemic failure, in turn, will have practical implications for how she treats her brother: because she infantilizes him, the older sister may be more likely to paternalistically meddle in his affairs, leave him out of important family deliberations, and so forth. Her relationship with her brother may suffer as a result.

Such treatment isn't simply prudentially bad (insofar as this sister cares about having a good relationship with her brother): it's bad morally as well. Insofar as we stand in loving relationships with others, practical fidelity is something that we can owe them. To motivate this intuition, just think about how rejected you would feel if you found out that your spouse felt no pressing need to keep you informed of major life decisions, or if you discovered that your friends had long ago created an idealized image of who you are because they couldn't tolerate the reality. It hurts to feel unseen and unacknowledged by the very people who are meant to be most invested in us. It would be natural to blame our loved ones for such failures of acknowledgment.

Now let's motivate the claim that we owe practical fidelity to our loved ones with a bit more precision. To start, consider what it means to be in a "loving

relationship". On first blush, we might think of relationships as things that we *stand in* with regard to others. You stand in the relationship of "neighbor" to the person who lives next door, and you stand in the relationship of "colleague" to fellow employees. But this thin, passive sense of the term seems ill-suited to capture the experience of being in a relationship with another person, especially a loving relationship like a friendship or romantic partnership. At times, relationships seem like a thing that we *do*.

The distinction between an active and passive sense of the term "relationship" is no mere philosophical artifice. To demonstrate, imagine a daughter who laments that her estranged mother is "no mother at all". In describing her mother in these terms, the daughter is trading on two different usages of the term "mother": a thin biological sense, and a more robust, active sense that we use to describe the central maternal figure in our lives. The estranged daughter's mother may be a mother in the thin, passive sense, but not in the robust, active sense that she yearns for.

What does it mean to have a relationship in the active sense of the term? We think that having this sort of relationship can best be understood as engaging in a certain sort of joint project. The relationship "colleague", for instance, picks out people who are engaged in a collective project at an institution or place of business.

What sort of project are we engaged in when we participate in a loving relationship? This is something that can't be answered in advance. Rather, the project has an atelic quality to it. When we start to pursue it, we have only a vague sense of what ends will come to constitute it. It is through the pursuit of the project that we come to determine these ends. In this way, the project of sharing in a loving relationship is what Talbot Brewer would call a "dialectical" activity—an activity that we throw ourselves into without fully understanding it at the onset:

Whenever we undertake to kindle a friendship, initiate an intimate love relationship, parent a child, start up a conversation with an intriguing stranger, or deepen our appreciation of an unfamiliar genre of music, we are initiating an activity whose value cannot be grasped with perfect lucidity from the outset, but must be progressively clarified via engagement in the activity itself.<sup>21</sup>

21. Talbot Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199557882.001.0001>. See also Benjamin Bagley, "Loving Someone in Particular," *Ethics* 125, no. 2 (2015): 477–507, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678481>, who associates love with a joint improvisational activity in which two people help to create one another, and

This is still all rather abstract, so let's bring it down to earth. Think about the start of your last romantic relationship. There was a point in time, or perhaps a period of time, in which your relationship began to take shape. You might have even made a commitment—to be exclusive, or to graduate from a “situationship” to a “relationship.” We might think of this commitment as akin to setting a particular end—the end of sharing a relationship. But at the time you set this end, the end that you were setting was still very vague. You might have been able to see the contours of the relationship that you were creating, but its details remained obscure.

It is through participating in a relationship that its details become clear. You and your partner make concessions, you draw boundaries, you discover each other, you figure out who you are as a pair. The loving relationship that you've committed to sharing with them starts to take a definitive form.

This is where practical fidelity becomes important. Because the project of sharing in a loving relationship is an atelic project, we don't know exactly what we're committing ourselves to when we commit ourselves to it. And so, we need some commitment to practical fidelity in order to ‘tie ourselves to the mast’ of a project that may very well change who we are.

When we commit ourselves to practical fidelity, we affirm that we are:

1. susceptible and committed to having our practical identity transformed by changes in our loved one's practical identity; and
2. willing to help our loved one incorporate our own evolving practical identity into their practical identity.

For the projects that are our loving relationships to have a chance at success, we must make this commitment. This is because loving relationships *perdure*—or at least, we typically want them to *perdure*. But longevity isn't easy when it comes to relationships. People change, and those changes can imperil our relationships.

Without a commitment to practical fidelity, the perdurance of our loving relationships becomes a mere fluke. Sure, you might occasionally find yourself in a relationship with someone who happens to change in the same ways that you do, or you might happen to be the sort of person who never changes

(and who is able to find similarly stalwart companions). But most of us are not so lucky or static. We change, and maintaining relationships through changes takes work and commitment.

The duty of practical fidelity thus speaks to what it means to value the project that is constitutive of a loving relationship and the person with whom we share that project. Samuel Scheffler has argued that valuing invites a certain conservatism: when we value something, we want to preserve it, to keep it as it is.<sup>22</sup> The duty of practical fidelity reflects this aspect of valuing: to value a loving relationship is, among other things, to try to preserve it and to not do things that will unnecessarily hasten its destruction. Nevertheless, the content of the duty of practical fidelity acknowledges an unarticulated truth about conserving loving relationships: if we want our relationships to last, we need to be willing to change alongside the people with whom we share them.

We can thus see the commitment to practical fidelity within loving relationships as playing a role analogous to the role played by solidarity in social groups. Solidarity, which Michael Zhao<sup>23</sup> understands as a commitment to “sharing fates” with fellow group members, is often required for the continued existence of those groups. If we don’t have enough commonalities, we eventually lose our group identity. But solidarity does not mean keeping everything the same. Rather, it is compatible with growth—so long as that growth happens collectively.

Solidarity thus helps us preserve groups over time in a way that still allows for evolution within those groups. But just as abstract concerns about group perdurance aren’t what loom large in our psyches when we feel solidarity with fellow members of our social groups, so too are concerns about the survival of loving relationships over time alien to how we actually think about these relationships. When we’re in a loving relationship, we don’t want to change alongside our loved one because we know that doing so maximizes our chances of our relationship persisting. Rather, we care about changing alongside them because we love them.

To see what we mean by this, consider three constitutive components of loving relationships. First, love requires a degree of unconditionality.<sup>24</sup> We shouldn’t stop loving our friends just because they’re going through a rough patch, or because they occasionally get bad haircuts. To be sure, there are

22. Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199982509.001.0001>.

23. Michael Zhao, “Solidarity, Fate-Sharing, and Community,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 19, no. 46 (2019): 1–13.

24. Bagley, “Loving Someone.”

limits: everyone has some bottom-lines. But these limits are compatible with the thought that our love should be able to withstand alteration in its object. A commitment to practical fidelity is an affirmation of this (near) unconditionality: by “tying ourselves to the mast,” we affirm that our love isn’t conditional on our beloved staying exactly the same.

And so too does a commitment to practical fidelity reflect a broader commitment to knowing our loved ones. One of us (MacKenzie) has argued that loving someone gives us reasons to know them that go beyond whatever prudential or moral reasons we may generally have to know other people:

To understand the pervasiveness of [love’s] reasons, think back to the fascination you felt towards your first crush or the interest you took in learning about your grandfather’s war stories. If I were to ask you to explain why you were interested in *his* war stories over the war stories of the other veterans in the nursing home, it would be sufficient for you to say “I’m interested because I love him.”<sup>25</sup>

We owe it to our loved ones to act on love’s reasons, and thus to seek to know them. But we might construe this requirement even more broadly, as a requirement to *take an interest in* the people with whom we share loving relationships. After all, we don’t want to simply be dispassionate collectors of facts about our loved ones. Rather, we want those facts to inform our practical deliberations and to shape our identities. And so too do we want our loved one to take an interest in our personal identity, and to be transformed by what they discover.

Finally, loving relationships often involve a commitment to “sharing a life.” When we share a loving relationship with someone, we commit ourselves to factoring them into our major life decisions. This is why self-transformations undergone without concern for our loved ones seem objectionably narcissistic. You are within your rights to quit your job or get a face tattoo. But insofar as you care about your spouse’s practical identity, and insofar as you recognize that their identity is tied to yours, you should be careful about how you pursue such transformations. This might require you to compromise your vision of your practical identity to ensure that you aren’t unrecognizable to them. At very least, it should involve serious dialogue.

A commitment to practical fidelity is not simply something that we dispassionately consent to in an effort to prolong our loving relationships. Rather, it is reflective of the very love that propels us into those relationships.

25. MacKenzie, “Knowing Yourself,” 246.

Of course, there are limits here, in much the same way as there are limits to the unconditionality of our love. And sometimes it's for the best that a relationship doesn't survive a particular self-transformation. We shouldn't feel duty-bound to tie ourselves to the mast of loveless marriages or hollow friendships. Once we exit a relationship, the commitments that structured that relationship cease to be morally binding. But so long as we remain in a loving relationship, we have a duty of practical fidelity.

### III.B PRACTICAL FIDELITY AND GRIEF

To see what practical fidelity has to do with grief, recall the connection between death and practical identity. Death engenders a massive disruption of practical identity<sup>26</sup> on the part of both the deceased and the bereaved. For the deceased, it represents the transformation of all relationships and goals. For the bereaved, it replaces many previous concerns and commitments with new ones, while also irrevocably altering the relationship that they shared with the deceased. In this way, our practical identity is transformed: We no longer need to plan for our loved one's futures or factor their subjective wellbeing into our deliberations about what to do.

By grieving our loved ones, we affirm our fidelity to them in the way that morality requires. Their deaths are not events that simply "pass us by," or that we can brush off. Rather, they are events that irrevocably alter our respective practical identities in ways that command our attention. And so, grief enables us to fulfill the first component of the duty of practical fidelity, which requires us to be susceptible and committed to having our practical identity transformed by changes in our loved one's practical identity.<sup>27</sup>

The practical fidelity account thus provides a natural answer to the question of to whom we owe grief. We owe grief to the people to whom we owe practical fidelity, i.e. the people with whom we share loving relationships. This means that the range of people whom we may intelligibly grieve will be broader than the range of people to whom we owe grief. We may intelligibly grieve anyone in whom our practical identity is invested: this may include celebrities, politicians, and passing acquaintances. But we only owe grief to

26. We might conceive of this alteration in different ways: death might represent the *cessation* of one's practical identity, or it might merely radically transform that identity. Our account is officially neutral on this question, as both interpretations represent a massive change in practical identity to which our loved ones have strong moral reason to attend. Thanks to E.M. Kamm for this observation.

27. The second requirement, which involves a willingness to help our loved one incorporate our practical identity into their own, won't be central to the duty that we're establishing.

the people with whom we share loving relationships, as the duty to grieve is derivative of a duty that features exclusively within those relationships.

And so too can the account generate a story about morally unideal grief. First, consider grief that is *qualitatively* unideal. In grieving, we might refuse or be unable to fully give ourselves up to the process, by seeking to avoid certain complicated emotions (like guilt or resentment) or by engaging in idealizations about the deceased. In either case, we'll fail to fully reckon with the ways in which our relationship, and thus our practical identities, have been changed by our loved one's demise. Qualitatively deficient grief is thus a violation of the duty of practical fidelity in the same way that refusing to see the bad in a loved one is a failure of practical fidelity: it might be *kind*, but it's not the sort of genuine perception that we owe within loving relationships.

Next, consider *quantitatively* unideal grief. Grief might be quantitatively unideal insofar as there is too little of it. In this case, a failure or refusal to attend to death's alterations is tantamount to a failure to properly value one of the relationships that make us *us*. Just as we owe it to our loved ones to attend to alterations in their practical identities while they are alive, so too do we owe them this attention after death.

Alternatively, grief might be unideal because there's too much of it. Again, we might construe such excesses as violations of practical fidelity. To see what we mean, consider the following case:

*Stasis:* Agnes reacts to the death of her five-year-old son by entering a sort of stasis. She refuses to put away the toys that he had strewn all over his room on the day of his death, or to allow other people to express grief at his passing. In some ways, she even continues to act as though her son is still alive—she lets other people know what she thinks he would have thought about various movies and TV shows, and she invites his friends over to increasingly age-inappropriate birthday parties. Further, she does her best to preserve her life exactly as it was before his passing—she recoils from new friendships and refuses to update her appearance to fit the changing times.

This sort of extreme grief is intelligible, and perhaps even admirable. And yet, we think that it too can violate the duty of practical fidelity (albeit in a way that seeks to respect the value that it undermines). The duty of practical fidelity requires that we acknowledge our loved ones as they are and update our own self-conceptions in light of that fact. And this is what Agnes fails to do: by freezing her life in place, she fails to fully acknowledge the fact that her son is no longer alive.

The practical fidelity interpretation of the duty to grieve thus has a natural story about grief's limits. It is through grieving that we attend to the ways in which other peoples' deaths change us. When those people are people with whom we share loving relationships, that attention is a duty. But at some point, we've attended to the transformation successfully: further attention will not achieve greater practical fidelity. Grief's abatement thus marks the successful incorporation of a loved one's transformation into one's practical identity. And this story should be familiar to anyone who has attended to a radical change in a *living person's* practical identity. We might initially experience such changes as unsettling: we might find ourselves wondering *who we are* when our spouses switch careers, or when our best friends affiliate themselves with new political parties. But at some point, the question is settled: we know who we are because we know who they are. At that point, further unsettled feelings are not a sign that we *really care* about our loved ones, but are rather a sign that we aren't really comfortable seeing them as they are. The same can be said for excessive grief: in grieving excessively, we may lose sight of the person at whom our grief is aimed.

### III.C GRIEF, GUILT, AND BLAME

We now have a story about why we may owe our loved ones our grief. Now we must ask: what follows from this story? Talk of moral duties naturally invites questions about guilt and blame. Should we feel guilty when we fail to grieve our loved ones? And should others blame us for our failures? We'll take up both questions in turn.

If we think that guilt is, among other things, a fitting first-personal response to violations of moral obligations, then we must be committed to the thought that we should feel guilty when we fail to grieve. This might initially seem like a bitter pill to swallow—aren't we suffering enough when our loved ones die? And yet, it's a bitter pill that we *do* readily swallow. Consider how Sam Holladay, the protagonist in Michael Knight's *Divining Rod*, describes his inability to grieve the death of his father:

To my amazement, I found I couldn't muster sadness. I wanted to be in agony, like my mother, shattered and useless, feeling his absence in my body like a wound, but, more than anything else, his death had left me stunned and blank... I spent the rest of that summer trying to be in misery... I was terrified someone would discover I wasn't wretched with loss.<sup>28</sup>

28. Michael Knight, *Divining Rod: A Novel* (New York: Dutton, 1998). For a discussion of this example and the duty to grieve, see Wasserman and Liao, "Issues in the Pharmacological Induction of Emotions."

Holladay is, of course, a fictional character. But his response to the absence of grief, which seems to blend together guilt and anticipatory shame, is psychologically familiar: it's not unusual to feel guilty about absent grief.<sup>29</sup>

We might also make this bitter pill more palatable by pointing out that feelings of guilt are also *part* of grieving.<sup>30</sup> Recall that grief is not a single emotion, but rather an emotionally-laden process. Guilt can be part of that process, as we come to terms with the fact that we will never resolve certain issues with our loved ones, and that their deaths are not always wholly bad for us. By attending to our guilt, we may make progress towards fulfilling our duty.

But what of the person who doesn't feel any guilt, who responds to a loved one's passing with sheer indifference? Our account has one of two things to say about this sort of person. First, if they actually *had* a loving relationship, then they *shouldn't* be indifferent. And so, guilt would be fitting (even if their indifference precludes them from feeling it).

Second, indifference might be evidence that one did not actually share a loving relationship. Here, the question about whether one should feel guilt will turn on the question of whether one should have exited the relationship once it ceased to be loving. Sometimes the answer to this question may be "no"—imagine, for instance, a wife who gradually fell out of love with her husband as his dementia progressed, but who continued to care for him until his death. In other cases, the fact that one no longer loves the person with whom they share a purportedly loving relationship *is* a decisive moral reason to exit that relationship. The so-called life partner who won't shed a tear at your funeral is not much of a partner at all—and they owe it to you to exit the relationship while you're still alive so as to allow you the opportunity to form more genuine relationships. If they insist on continuing to play the role of life partner, then their eventual failure to grieve will be a sort of "double" moral failure: it will both constitute a failure to abide by the duty of practical fidelity after your death, and a sign that they had previously failed to abide by that duty while you were alive.

As this discussion makes clear, the question of whether we should feel guilt over absent grief is complex, and its answer will be responsive to various contextual factors. What about blame? Here, an objection naturally

29. J. Trig Brown and G. Alan Stoudemire, "Normal and Pathological Grief," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 250, no. 3 (1983): 378–382, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1983.03340030038025>.

30. Jie Li et al. "Guilt in Bereavement: A Review and Conceptual Framework," *Death Studies* 38, no. 3 (2014): 165–171, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2012.738770>.

arises. Surely, the bereaved have already suffered enough without us telling them that they have a duty to grieve. Who are we to blame them if they don't respond to death in the way we think they ought to? But this objection runs together two distinct questions: the question of what people owe their deceased loved ones, and the question of whether it is ever permissible to demand that other people fulfill these obligations. When it comes to the obligations that ground loving relationships, third parties generally *don't* have standing to blame others for their non-fulfillment. You might be able to *judge* that a distant acquaintance is insufficiently committed to practical fidelity within his marriage, but that doesn't mean that you should *blame* him. What goes on within his intimate relationships, after all, is largely none of your business.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, there is one person who *definitely* has the standing to blame you if you fail to fulfill your duty to grieve: the deceased person themselves. But they obviously can't exercise this standing. Here, we might think that some of the guilt that we feel is really best construed as proxy-blame: we blame ourselves for our lack of grief because our loved ones aren't there to blame us.

So far, we've concentrated on *deficiencies* of grief, rather than excesses. And of the two failures, deficient failures are more morally jarring. But we think that there's still room for blame within grief's excesses. Think back to Agnes, the grieving mother who encases her life in amber following the death of her son. Third party blame in this case seems cruel. And yet, there is still something morally off about her grief. To see what we mean, imagine what her son might have thought about this reaction (if he could have known about it while he was alive). He might reasonably object that Agnes's reaction belies a failure to respond to him as he actually is. By trying to keep him alive, she is ignoring an important truth about him—namely, that he is dead. Further, if her son had lived, he wouldn't have remained five forever. In trying to keep everything as it was, Agnes is thus failing to acknowledge both who her son is and who he might have been. Thus, even if third party blame is unduly punitive, Agnes's actions nevertheless reflect a morally regrettable failure of practical fidelity.

31. There are exceptions. If your acquaintance is abusing his partner, then you might have a moral obligation to intervene. But these exceptions have to do with impartial moral obligations (like the duty to prevent abuse), not partial ones (like the duty of practical fidelity). We might also sometimes have standing to blame in cases where we share an intimate relationship with one of the parties in a relationship. Your spouse's best friend, for instance, might permissibly blame you if you fail to grieve her death. We might explain this standing by considering the sorts of duties that people have to ensure that their loved ones are being well treated in their intimate relationships.

#### IV. Grief and Duties to the Dead

We've argued that we owe the people with whom we share loving relationships a duty of practical fidelity and that this duty can ground a derivative duty to grieve.

At this point, it's time to address a nagging worry head-on. Our argument so far rests on the unarticulated assumption that we can coherently owe things to the dead. This assumption has some intuitive appeal: we often feel duty-bound to honor deathbed promises, for instance. But as Joan Callahan has argued, we ought not treat psychological intuitiveness as philosophical proof. There is, after all, a plausible error theory for why we often feel duty-bound to the dead: we often erroneously fall into the trap of thinking of them as though they were still alive.<sup>32</sup>

And indeed, there are good philosophical reasons to question whether we can really owe things to the dead. For starters, it's not obvious that the dead *exist*.<sup>33</sup> Nor do they have desires, experiences of pleasure or pain, or the ability to be straightforwardly benefitted or made worse off.<sup>34</sup> Given these challenges, it's tempting to reinterpret the duty to grieve as something owed to the living.

As we've already argued, such reinterpretations run into their own challenges: simply put, the duty to grieve just doesn't seem like something that we primarily owe to ourselves or living third parties. Given this, we must face the apparent incoherence of duties to the dead head on.

To begin, let's take a closer look at why duties to the dead often strike us as incoherent. Much of the skepticism about such duties flows from metaphysical doubts about the dead meeting the conditions for being moral subjects. Suppose that in order for a duty to be owed to someone, they have to be harmed by its non-fulfillment (and benefitted by its fulfillment). Philosophers sympathetic to Epicureanism will insist that to be benefitted or harmed is to *experience* a good or bad state.<sup>35</sup> Unfelt harms and benefits are thus inco-

32. Joan C. Callahan, "On Harming the Dead," *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (1987): 341–352, <https://doi.org/10.1086/292842>.

33. If people continue to exist after death, then obligations to the dead will be easier to justify. Still, there will be questions here as well: can we actually owe things to entities that exist on a different cosmic plane?

34. Though for dissent on this question, see Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199557967.001.1>, and Neil Feit, "Death is Bad for Us When We're Dead," in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Michael Cholbi and Travis Timmerman (New York: Routledge, 2020), 85–92, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003106050-14>.

35. Or being in a state of affairs that will lead one to experience such states. The Epicurean picture allows for instrumental harms and benefits.

herent. Why Epicureans reject duties to the dead is therefore obvious: If failing in our moral duties results in harm, there must be a subject to be harmed (i.e. to experience the mental states associated with harm). But after death, there is no subject of experience. And so, death doesn't harm. Thus, Callahan notes that "the reason that all arguments for harms and wrongs to the dead must fail is that there is simply no subject to suffer the harm or wrong."<sup>36</sup>

It's no wonder that proponents of postmortem duties largely deny the Epicurean picture of harm. George Pitcher, for instance, turns towards a non-experiential account of harm, according to which being harmed just is a matter of being in a state of affairs that is contrary to one's important desires.<sup>37</sup> Insofar as we living folks have desires that can be thwarted or satisfied after our deaths, we can thereby be harmed or benefited post-mortem. And so too does David Boonin propose that any act whereby one makes a proposition false that another desires to be true, where that proposition is "relevant to" the latter's life, is harmful.<sup>38</sup> On these views, an act or event that occurs once a person is dead harms the once-living person by thwarting a desire that person had while alive. To the worry that this involves metaphysically dubious "backward causation," Pitcher and Boonin reply that this "backward harming" merely alters facts about the deceased non-causally. If, after Barack Obama's death, the US were to elect another Black president, it would no longer be true that Obama has been the only Black president. In this sense, posthumous events would have changed facts about the past—in this case, facts about Obama's biography—without changing Obama. This illustrates how facts about a person can be changed without those changes being effects of *causes* working backward through time, and *a fortiori*, how posthumous events can change facts relevant to the person's pre-mortem desires despite not changing the person.

We are broadly sympathetic to Pitcher's and Boonin's accounts. But our aim here is not to rehash the various arguments that could be, and have been, leveled in support of such accounts, or to offer some sort of definitive refutation of the Epicurean picture of harm. What we aim to do instead is show that the duty of practical fidelity itself assumes a non-experiential account of harm. Whatever harm arises from violating the duty of practical fidelity, in other words, it won't be a harm that's capturable in Epicurean terms. Thus, it

36. Callahan, "On Harming the Dead," 347.

37. George Pitcher, "The Misfortunes of the Dead," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1984): 183–188.

38. David Boonin, *Dead Wrong: The Ethics of Posthumous Harm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 102ff., <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198842101.001.0001>.

is no surprise that an Epicurean theory of harm will play badly with the duty to grieve: it plays badly with the duty's living corollary as well. This raises the stakes of the debate: if you reject duties to the dead on broadly Epicurean grounds, then you must also reject many duties to the living, including those that feature prominently in loving relationships.

To get started, let's first consider how an Epicurean might justify the duty of practical fidelity. If there is such a duty, it exists to protect us from some sort of harm. But what harm exactly? Surely it can't be the simple harm of not having one's actual self reflected in our loved ones' practical identities, for that is not itself an experiential harm. At most, we are harmed when we become *aware* that our loved ones are inadequately reckoning with who we are, and when this awareness is unpleasant. But this doesn't give us a duty of practical fidelity: at most, it generates a duty to *act as though* you have accurately incorporated your loved ones into your practical identity. This new duty isn't just weaker than the duty of practical fidelity; it's actively anathema to it, as it involves a level of deception that would be morally objectionable to anyone who actually wants to know (and be known by) their loved ones.

Perhaps the Epicurean might account for the harm of practical infidelity in instrumental terms. If you don't see your spouse as she truly is, then you're going to be worse at promoting her wellbeing. And so, we're under a broad duty to know, insofar as we're under a broad duty to promote wellbeing. But this account is alien to our experience of loving relationships. We don't care about seeing and being seen by our loved ones *simply* because we think that veridical conceptions of one another will help us satisfy desires. We care because that's part of what love involves.

This point can be brought out by noticing how willing we often are to risk undesirable mental states in the pursuit of practical fidelity. Our loved ones sometimes perceive us as much *better* than we actually are. Such misperceptions might be outright *pleasant* for both parties: who *doesn't* want to be seen as funnier, sexier, or more likable than they truly are? And yet, we still have a legitimate moral complaint against our loved ones when they don't see us clearly. That we can cogently press this complaint even in cases where we benefit from the misperception speaks to the fact that the value of our identities being perceived veridically by our loved ones was never a narrowly instrumental value.

We can now apply Pitcher and Boonin's story to the duty of practical fidelity. The duty of practical fidelity protects one of our strongest interests: the interest that we have in maintaining our loving relationships over time. Having long-term loving relationships is certainly valuable on Epicurean grounds.

But the way in which we value such relationships is decidedly non-Epicurean, much as the way that we value other important life projects is non-Epicurean.<sup>39</sup> And just as we can cogently care about whether our novel gets published posthumously, or whether our business gets passed down to our kids, so too can we care about whether our loved ones grieve us after we're gone. Grief, after all, is one particularly poignant application of the duty of practical fidelity—a duty that we must fulfill to participate in a loving relationship.

Again, this analysis does not invite concerns about backward causation. If it turns out that your spouse does not grieve your death, it will also turn out that you were in a marriage with someone who would not grieve your death. And that fact is a harm to you, even if you will never come to know it.<sup>40</sup> This is because, when it comes to our most intimate relationships, we do not simply want the appearance of practical fidelity. We want the real deal.

To be sure, nothing we have said will convince the hardline critic of duties to the dead. But we think that the preceding discussion illustrates the costs of denying such duties on Epicurean grounds. If you think that we can't have duties to the dead because the dead cannot be experientially harmed, then you are ascribing to a picture of harm that also renders incoherent at least one foundational duty of loving relationships. And so, the critic is forced into a dilemma: they must either give up this duty or accept that there are at least some postmortem duties. Given the importance of practical fidelity within loving relationships, we would hope that the critic would accept the second lemma.

We'll close by dealing with one more basic metaphysical worry about duties to the dead, namely that such duties require metaphysically impossible alterations. To see this worry in action, consider what it would take to be under a duty to *aid* the dead. Such a duty might seem to require us to be able to alter the intrinsic properties of the dead—to bring them from one level of wellbeing to some higher level of wellbeing. But dead people don't have intrinsic properties. And so a duty to aid them seems metaphysically incoherent. We might think this story generalizes to other post-mortem duties as well, like a duty to express gratitude or a duty to exercise care in not harming them.

39. Steven Luper-Foy, "Annihilation," *Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 148 (1987): 233–252, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220396>.

40. If unknown harms seem bizarre, consider Thomas Nagel's case of the intelligent person who receives a brain injury that severely reduces his mental capacities in "Death," *Noûs* 4, no. 1 (1970): 77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214297>. Even if that person were in some ways better off because of the injury (perhaps his desires are now easier to fulfill), we would still want to say that he suffered a harm.

Yet the duty to grieve diverges from these metaphysically messy moral duties. In manifesting practical fidelity, we respond to the practical identity of another by altering the attitudes we have toward them and their practical identities. And so, fulfilling the duty to grieve doesn't require us to alter the intrinsic properties of the dead in any way. Indeed, it requires only self-alteration: we need to reckon with who we are now that our loved one is gone.

## V. Conclusion

This paper had two aims: one narrow and one broad. Narrowly, we aimed to defend a particular story about the grounds and content of the duty to grieve. Grief, we have suggested, is an active process of emotional attention, incorporating both feelings and choices, that we undergo when people with whom our practical identities are entwined pass away. Insofar as we may owe it to our loved ones to attend to such transformations, we have a duty to grieve. As we see it, this account captures the better part of the moral gravity of grief—of why grief *feels* obligatory. More broadly, this paper articulated an unnamed, but familiar obligation within loving relationships: the duty of practical fidelity. Grief, we have suggested, is a particularly poignant instance of its fulfillment.

It is no surprise that attending to our experiences of grief can shed light on the substance of this broader relationship-based duty. The obligations that structure our loving relationships are at once ubiquitous and invisible. They are ubiquitous because they feature prominently in our daily lives: we are constantly, in big and little ways, fulfilling our duty of practical fidelity. But perhaps because of this ubiquity, the content of these obligations is sometimes obscured from view. It is only when our relationships hit a crisis point that we come to clearly appreciate what we owe to our loved ones. And death is, undeniably, a crisis point.

We'll close by saying something about what we perceive as a significant practical upshot of the project. People often feel that they must apologize for their grief: grief, after all, can feel self-indulgent and even shameful. We hope that thinking about grief as an obligation might help people feel justified in grieving. Grief, after all, is not merely an entitlement or an indulgence: it's something we owe to the people with whom we have shared our lives.<sup>41</sup>

41. The authors have made equal contributions to this manuscript.

*Acknowledgements* The authors gratefully acknowledge the generous feedback they received on previous versions of this article from Benjamin Bagley, Tal Brewer, Luke Brunning, Rosalind Chaplin, Mercedes Corredor, Kathleen Higgins, Daniel Hoek, Troy Jollimore, F.M. Kamm, Euan MacDonald, Jelena Markovic, Dee Payton, Michael Ridge, Rebecca Stangl, Dan Werner, and the anonymous reviewers at *Free & Equal*, as well as from audiences at the University of California, San Diego, the University of Edinburgh, Rutgers University, the University of Virginia, Queen's University, Dartmouth College, and a Royal Institute of Philosophy Stapledon Colloquium at the University of Liverpool.

*Competing Interests* The authors have no competing interests to declare.