

On Grief's Ethical Task

Steven Gormley

To cite this article: Steven Gormley (27 Nov 2023): On Grief's Ethical Task, International Journal of Philosophical Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09672559.2023.2287651](https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2023.2287651)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2023.2287651>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 27 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 128



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

On Grief's Ethical Task

Steven Gormley 

Philosophy Department, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to bring into view an ethical task that we face when grieving the loss of a loved one. That task is to see the independent reality of the lost other. I shall do so through a reading of C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*. I shall try to show that Lewis's struggle to see the independent reality of his wife, Joy, provides an important, and troubling, insight into what it means for us to grieve well. Lewis's account forces us to reflect on a key, but largely overlooked, assumption in contemporary philosophical accounts of grief, namely, that we do indeed see the independent reality of the lost other. Lewis's account reveals that the struggle to see the lost other is at the same time a struggle to escape deeply-rooted aspects of the self.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 9 May 2023; Accepted 15 November 2023

KEYWORDS Attention; grief; ethical task; C. S. Lewis; object of grief; reality of others

Consider the following remark of a grieving husband:

I have a clear memory of Mr Harold Wilson, whom I have never met, looking at me out of my television set and talking in a serious, weighty voice. But my wife has become so complex and so familiar a person that I cannot view her as a whole at all. I suspect that it would take a long period of absence for me to fit together my numerous fragmentary recollections of her to make anything like a consistent picture. I am too close to see the wood for the trees. (Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 81)

There's something unsettling in the thought that one has a clearer picture of a stranger than of one's spouse. One would have thought that the intimacy between loved ones would allow for a clearer picture. But the husband suggests that it's precisely that intimacy – his wife is so familiar – that impedes his view. Such familiarity reveals his wife's complexity, and this complexity prevents him from seeing her clearly. Unlike Wilson, his wife has a depth (for him) that is irreducible to any clear picture. The familiarity that reveals his wife's irreducible

CONTACT Steven Gormley  segom@essex.ac.uk

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

complexity is the familiarity of deep emotional investment. We become deeply entwined with those whom we love. It is because of this deeply-invested entwinement that the husband is too close to see. The long period of absence that he suspects is required to see his wife clearly suggests a form of distancing, a process of untwining that would allow him to bring her into view.

The husband's remark seems to confirm Joan Didion's observation, made while grieving the loss of her daughter, that 'our investments in each other remain too freighted to ever see the other clear' (Didion 2012, 53). Love, however, refuses to accept that 'ever'. It's precisely because we are so deeply invested in those whom we love that we continually strive to see them clearly. The husband's remark suggests that seeing the independent reality of a lost loved one is a task. This, I suggest, is an ethical task. I shall attempt to show this through a reading of C. S. Lewis's account of his own grief over the death of his wife, Joy Davidman, as recorded in *A Grief Observed*.

In describing this as an *ethical task* I mean to suggest two things. First, the notion of 'ethical' is not meant to do the kind of work aimed at determining the appropriateness of another's grief or lack thereof. My aim is thus distinct from recent philosophical accounts of grief that argue we have a moral duty to grieve. Rather, I mean to suggest that seeing the independent reality of the lost loved one is an important aspect of grieving well. Insofar as I take myself to be grieving over the loss of someone who matters to me, I strive to see them in their independent reality.¹ Whatever position one takes on the question of moral duty, this ethical task remains.

Second, by describing this as a 'task' I mean to suggest that this will often be experienced as an ongoing struggle. Grieving well does not require that one finally achieves a state in which the lost loved one is fully in view, once and for all, in their independent reality. But it does require that we strive to see them clearly.² Recent philosophical accounts of grief tend to assume that we do see the lost other clearly,³ but there is little reflection on the struggle involved. As such, a fundamental aspect of what it would be to grieve well is overlooked.

I shall proceed by outlining two contemporary philosophical accounts of grief that adopt contrasting approaches to grief, what I'll call *outward* and *inward* approaches.⁴ Despite their different approaches, both take grief to be morally obligatory and, so I'll argue, take our seeing the independent reality of the lost other to be an important aspect of that obligation. While the difficulty involved in seeing the lost other appears in both accounts, it is not explicitly reflected upon and, as such, remains overlooked. I then offer a reading of C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* that attempts to bring that struggle into view. Lewis's account not only brings that struggle into view but provides important insights into what is involved in struggling well with that task. I do not have space to explore the latter in any detail here. My aim

in this paper is accordingly modest: to bring into view the ethical task to see the lost other and the struggle that may involve.

The Importance of Seeing the Lost Other

Janet McCracken's outward approach to grief is grounded in the claim that in grief we have a moral obligation to the person we have lost. Grief, McCracken argues, is not simply an internal set of emotions '*occasioned by*' a loss, but an emotional process that we go through '*for the lost object*' (McCracken 2005, 142). McCracken's emphasis seeks to shift (what she takes to be) the dominant view of grief (in Western thought): from an internal phenomenon wholly analysable in terms of the emotions of the bereaved, to 'a more outwardly-orientated view', in which the lost object – the person who has died – is central (141). This, for McCracken, is crucial for two reasons. First, it will enable us to develop a proper understanding of the objective nature of grief. Second, it reveals a moral dimension of grief. In our grief, McCracken observes, we wish to 'do honour to', 'show appreciation for', the life of the person we have lost (146). And part of what that honouring or appreciation involves is the pain of grief. On this view, those we have lost are 'owed the unhappiness' of our grief as part of our acknowledging the 'priceless value' of their 'whole life' (149). It is for this reason that McCracken argues that grief is not only a valuable experience (we would not want a life in which we did not suffer the pain of grief when we lose a loved one), but an 'obligatory emotion' (141). Failure to grieve appropriately, whether through insufficient grief or immoderate grief, would be to deny the lost other the 'proper recognition [that] is owed' to them (153).

If we have a moral obligation to accord the lost other the proper recognition owed to them, then meeting that obligation would require that we have that other clearly in view. This is part of what motivates McCracken to emphasise the external, objective nature of the loss, and downplay the internal, subjective responses of the bereaved. While not denying the importance of subjective assessments of one's emotions, McCracken argues that 'in grief the apparently objective assessment of the life of the deceased becomes salient to the griever' (McCracken 2005, 144). Presumably, we would fail to meet our obligation to accord the lost other the recognition owed to them were our view of them distorted or obscured in any significant way. Were we to have an overly idealised view of the lost other, for example, or were we blinded by our own pain, guilt, self-pity, etc., we would lose sight of precisely what we are called upon to recognise and honour – the lost other.

The way McCracken characterises these distorting forms of grief, e.g. they are 'melodramatic' (the griever draws 'attention to herself' that was 'perhaps properly attention due to the lost object'), 'self-indulgent', or 'self-absorbed' (2005, 152), points to the kind of struggle involved in seeing the lost other

clearly – a struggle with oneself. If my grief is to be appropriate in the way McCracken argues, then I must avoid distortions that forms of self-absorption can enclose me in.⁵

Although McCracken does not discuss this struggle, some sense of the difficulty involved appears in her remarks on reflective distance:

It is on account of the objectivity of grief, on account of the griever's refocus on the whole life of the deceased, that grieving tends to be a time of reflection . . . The socially distant, withdrawn attitude of grief is precisely the griever's step back from her own fleeting, subjective experiences of her interactions with others to a reflective distance from which she considers her own and others' lives as objectively whole entities. (McCracken 2005, 145)

This passage simultaneously points to and passes over the difficulty of bringing the lost other fully into view. McCracken suggests that reflective distance is arrived at through the griever stepping back and refocusing. If I am to focus on, bring into view, the life of the lost other, then I must first step back from the 'fleeting, subjective experiences' of my life with the lost other, that is, our particular interactions and the associated emotions, and refocus my attention on their life as a whole. That will require effort. For, as step back and refocus imply, the background picture here is one in which I am, for the most part, immersed in those fleeting subjective experiences, the day-to-day interactions and emotions through which my life with those I love unfolds. What I am called upon to do in my grief, on this view, is to step back and refocus my attention away from *that*. And notice that, according to the above passage, successfully bringing the life of the other into view as a whole requires considering my own life as a whole. Reflective distance is distance from myself as well as from the lost other.

While the difficulty involved in bringing the lost other into view appears here, there is no explicit reflection on that difficulty. Moreover, there is a sense in which the difficulty is not clearly recognised and, perhaps, downplayed. Rereading the passage, McCracken appears to identify the stance of reflective distance with the socially withdrawn attitude she takes to be 'characteristic' of grief. As she writes, that attitude 'is precisely the griever's step back . . . to a reflective distance'. The socially withdrawn attitude of grief is not, however, something the bereaved typically make any effort to arrive at. Rather, it is a painful place of exile they often *find* themselves in (Cholbi 2021a, 33; Neimeyer 2016, 25; Parkes and Prigerson 2010, 83–4, 112).

Perhaps the thought is that once I find myself in that withdrawn attitude, effortful stepping back is then required to take up the stance of reflective distance that enables the objective refocusing of my attention. But when McCracken considers the suggestion that we do not step back from our subjective experiences in grief, e.g. it's common in grief 'to regret an

unpleasant last interaction with a person who has died', her response gives little sense of the difficulty involved:

[W]hen one regrets, say, an argument one had with the deceased in her last days, one is implying that the unpleasantness should not interfere with the 'proper' memory of her, which should, for instance, be of the lifelong friend with whom arguments like this one have been forgiven and forgotten many times over'. (2005,, 145)

It seems right to say that I'm not grieving over the argument, but there's more to such regret than the implication McCracken identifies. It may be the case that my regret *should* not interfere with the 'proper' memory of my lost loved one. And it seems plausible to imagine telling myself in my grief not to let my regret obscure my lost loved one and our relationship as a whole. But among the things my regret involves is the pain I feel over that memory and my distress at having wronged the person I love. What makes this regret particularly distressing is the thought that this was the last moment we had together, that our lived relationship ended painfully. The pain and distress of this type of regret does not feature in McCracken's brief remarks, but it is here where we will most likely struggle in stepping back and refocusing.⁶

To take up a stance of reflective distance from subjective experiences of pain and distress and refocus my attention on the 'proper' memory of my lost loved one will often be a difficult process. (The scare quotes around proper are, perhaps, a silent acknowledgment of the struggle involved.) The griever's withdrawn attitude will often be reflective as McCracken suggests, but not necessarily in the way she presents it. To withdraw from aspects of *ourselves*, to step back from painful subjective experiences that we often find ourselves repeatedly returning to in our grief, will often involve extended struggle.⁷ For though the withdrawn attitude of grief is often reflective, it is also often emotionally and cognitively disorientating.⁸

More recently, Michael Cholbi has argued that while we do have a moral duty to grieve, that duty is a duty to oneself, not the lost other. Cholbi grounds this self-regarding duty to grieve in 'our duty to pursue self-knowledge' (Cholbi 2021a, 163). The type of self-knowledge Cholbi has in mind is knowledge of our practical identities, that is, of the values, emotional dispositions, concerns, and commitments through which we give shape and sense to our lives. For Cholbi, we have a duty to understand these aspects of ourselves as part of the 'moral requirement to respect and perfect ourselves as rational agents' (19). Lack of this self-knowledge would leave us inscrutable to ourselves as practical agents. We would be unable to rationally endorse the ends in light of which we take our choices and actions to matter and, ultimately, our lives to be meaningful.

The duty to grieve emerges from this, on Cholbi's view, because grief opens up the possibility of this self-knowledge, and in a way no other life

experience quite does (Cholbi 2021a, 86). And the reason for this is because our practical identity is deeply invested in those for whom we grieve. Those who matter to us have been incorporated into our self-understanding. They are part of us. When they die, our practical identity is shaken. Part of the pain and disorientation of grief is the deeply felt sense, often expressed in first-person accounts of grief, that part of ourselves has been lost. In our grief we struggle to make sense of ourselves because a fundamental part of who we are *has* been lost. In the ‘identity crisis’ triggered by such loss we are ‘forced to reconfigure’ our practical identities (82, 58). While that reconfiguration will involve focusing much of our attention on the person we have lost, Cholbi argues that in seeking to understand who and what we have lost, we are ‘obliquely’ trying to understand ourselves. We are trying to answer the question: ‘Who are we to become, now that a central facet of who we were is no longer so?’ (57) In contrast to the outwardly-orientated approach, Cholbi insists on the ‘essentially inward or self-focused nature of grief’ (153).

If, as Cholbi argues, the moral duty to grieve is grounded in the self-regarding duty to understand one’s practical identity, then crucial to that self-knowledge will be understanding those in whom our practical identity is invested. According to Cholbi, others play an ‘indispensable role in our practical identities’, such that our practical identity ‘would be impossible or incoherent without them’ (Cholbi 2021a, 31). With the loss of the other we are threatened with incoherence: we feel ‘unfamiliar or unrecognizable to ourselves’ (32). For Cholbi, successfully resolving this crisis necessitates reconstructing one’s relationship with the person we have lost and reconfiguring our practical identities in light of that transformation. A crucial part of this process will involve focusing on the person we have lost in order to gain an ‘appreciation of *who* is dead and *why* their deaths matter to us’ (78). And that, it would seem, will require having the lost loved one clearly in view. The deeper my practical investment in the lost other, the stronger the demand to understand that other.

But there are two potential objections to interpreting Cholbi in this way. First, Cholbi explicitly rejects the idea that such a requirement is a necessary feature of grief. ‘[I]ndividuals’, writes Cholbi, ‘can grieve for deceased persons whom they hardly knew or who were effectively strangers to them’ (2021a, 24). One of the virtues of the inward approach, according to Cholbi, is the scope of that account. In placing at the centre of grief one’s identity investments in others, the inward approach is able to make sense of instances of grief that outward approaches reject. For example, on the inward approach, we can grieve for those with whom we have no intimate relationship and thus do not know. In contrast to the more outwardly-orientated approach of Solomon, for example, Cholbi maintains that we can genuinely grieve for public figures.⁹ Despite not really knowing David Bowie, fans of

Bowie may well have invested their practical identity in him. And insofar as they did, Cholbi argues that his death could have prompted genuine grief in those fans (25). That those fans did not know Bowie has no bearing on the fact that their practical identity was invested in him and that his death may therefore have triggered the kind of crisis that prompts grief. There is no requirement here of seeing Bowie clearly.

A possible response here would be to embrace the scope of Cholbi's account and accept that there could be instances of genuine grief over the death of those who are effectively strangers. This would mean acknowledging that there will be cases of grief that do not require seeing the lost other clearly. Cholbi describes these as 'atypical cases of grief' (2021a, 23). The requirement to see the lost other clearly would still hold, however, for 'paradigm cases of grief', which, for Cholbi, do involve an intimate relationship with the person who has died (25).

But this raises a second potential problem. Cholbi, it might be pointed out, is constructing a philosophical theory that aims to identify the essence of grief. The inclusion of atypical cases, therefore, points to defining features shared with *all* cases of grief, including paradigm cases. The two key features of Cholbi's account are identified by what he takes to be the material and formal object of grief.¹⁰ The former is the death of a person in whom I have invested my practical identity; the latter is my (now altered) relationship with the lost other (Cholbi 2021a, 73–4). The emphasis in all cases appears to fall on the significance *I invest* in that person and what that relationship meant, and what it will come to mean, *for me*. 'Grief is . . . directed at those who play key roles in how *we see ourselves and our lives . . .*' (36; my emphasis). Ultimately, what I am trying to see, what I am trying to bring into view, is my practical identity. And so '[w]hat appear to be thoughts concerned with the deceased are, at root, concerned with ourselves' (94).

On this view, there is no *essential* difference between typical and atypical cases on what it is we must bring into view. In both, there is no requirement to have the lost other in view because the lost other is not really what my grief is about. Ultimately, my grief is about me, and more specifically, about the process of reconfiguring my practical identity in light of my now altered relationship with the person who has died. In a later paper, Cholbi rightly cautions against taking his claim about the essentially self-focused nature of grief as suggesting that in grief we 'linger, Narcissus-like over our own emotional condition' (2021b, 239). But understood as the material object of my grief, the lost other does fade into the background. What I must bring into view, according to this account, is the formal object of my grief, my (now altered) relationship with the lost other.

It might appear, then, that there is no requirement on Cholbi's inward account to see the independent reality of the lost other. I do not think this is the case. And we can begin to see why by noting that, for Cholbi, shared

essence does not mean shared forms of grief. As the formal object of grief, the nature of my relationship with the person who has died will shape the specific form my grief takes. Any particular case of grief, then, will be as unique as the relationship the bereaved had (and will come to have) with the person they have lost. ‘Grief’, Cholbi insists, ‘should be as variegated as the kinds of relationships human beings can have to one another’ (2021a, 28–9). The shape of grief in paradigm cases will, therefore, be significantly different from atypical cases. Or, more precisely, *ought* to be.

[H]ow we grieve – and how we *ought to grieve*—depends crucially on the nature of the relationship we have (or had) with the person whose death prompts our grief. We do not, and ought not to, grieve our spouses as we do our deceased siblings, our professional colleagues as we do our spiritual role models, our athletic heroes as we do our longtime neighbors (28).

On this view, grief must be appropriate to my relationship with the lost other. Indeed, grief that fails to ‘accurately represent its [formal] object’ is not considered genuine grief. Cholbi calls this ‘quasi-grief’, where we experience responses typical of grief ‘but do not have that [formal] object fully in view’ (117).

Two things to note. First, an outward aspect of Cholbi’s account emerges here. For my grief to be genuine, it must have its object, my relationship with the lost other, clearly in view. Would Cholbi insist that we must have that relationship ‘fully’ in view (as suggested above)? This requirement is repeated in a variety of ways.¹¹ However demanding a reading we opt for here, what we might call Cholbi’s vocabulary of correspondence makes clear that grief is not simply an internal matter of how I feel about the person I have lost.¹² Where my grief excludes emotions my relationship with the lost other ought to prompt, or includes the right emotions but at to an inappropriate degree, or includes emotions that do not reflect the relationship at all, my grief is inappropriate (Cholbi 2021a, 136–37). Cholbi’s notion of appropriateness is both qualitative and quantitative. Our grief will be genuine only where ‘*we feel the right emotions in the right degree*’ (17), where rightness is determined by our relationship with the lost other (Cholbi 2021b, 266).

Second, in paradigm cases of grief it is an intimate relationship that we must accurately bring into view. What would be required of me to successfully do that will be very different from atypical cases of grief, where the relationship may be with a stranger. In the latter case, one can make sense of the separation between the person who has died and the relationship the bereaved had (and may come to have) with that person. Fans of Bowie may have had a deeply invested relationship with Bowie, which they strive to bring into view in their grief, without having David Bowie, the person, in view at all. But can we make sense of that separation when it comes to grief over the death of a loved one? As useful as the distinction between material object and formal object is for understanding a range of experiences,

including certain forms of grief, it seems to break down when it comes to experiences of grief in paradigm cases. It is not clear what it would mean to bring my relationship with my lost loved one fully into view without also bringing my beloved clearly into view.¹³

A fundamental aspect of a loving relationship is precisely my striving to see the beloved, to know them, in all their independent reality. Cholbi writes eloquently on this:

[I]t seems contrary to love for others to not seek out knowledge of who they are [...] The yearning to be loved is, among other things, a yearning to be seen in our fullness, to be understood—in other words, to be *known* . . . [O]thers knowing us is the basis of our being *cherished* by those who ostensibly love us. In cherishing us, those who love us treat us as objects of contemplation, attention, and appreciation . . . Knowing someone we love is . . . an intrinsically valuable way of caring for them. (2021a, 100–1)

The point Cholbi wishes to make here is that just as love of the beloved and seeking knowledge of the beloved are inextricably entwined, so self-love and self-knowledge are equally entwined. But what he says here about what is to love the other suggests a phenomenology that resists the separation of material object and formal object and the claim that the latter is *the* object of grief. I cannot understand myself to be in a loving relationship without also understanding myself as striving to see the other in their fullness. And while my relationship with the lost beloved will undergo transformation in light of their death, it will remain a loving relationship with my (now lost) beloved. As C. S. Lewis puts it, the death of his wife is not the end of their marriage, ‘but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure’ (Lewis 2001, 50; cf.; Cholbi 2021a, 58).

When Cholbi says that in our grief we strive to appreciate ‘*who* is dead’ (Cholbi 2021a, 78), I would underline that emphasis as a way of highlighting the distinctive phenomenology of grief in paradigm cases and a crucial difference it suggests from atypical cases. In grief over a loved one I struggle to do justice to their independent reality with respect to *who* they are (or were). As part of that struggle, I strive to bring our relationship clearly into view. Atypical cases, by contrast, involve seeing only *what* the other person is (to me), e.g. a fearless artist, an inspiring political leader, etc.¹⁴ This distinctive phenomenology of grief in paradigm cases reveals the lost loved one, and my relationship with that loved one, to be different *aspects* of my grief, not separate objects.¹⁵

It is against the background of these two points that the difficulties involved in seeing the lost other come into view. As we have seen, Cholbi argues that genuine grief requires bringing my relationship with lost other ‘fully’ into view (where that involves grief responses that are both qualitatively and quantitatively appropriate). And I have suggested that, in

cases of a loved one, this would entail having the lost beloved fully in view in the ‘appropriate’ sense. This is demanding of any loving relationship. That demandingness only deepens once we consider the complexity of grief over the loss of a loved one. Cholbi draws attention to this: ‘Grief’s emotional complexity mirrors the complexity of its object’ (Cholbi 2019, 498; cf. 2021a, 135; Cholbi 2021b, 247). The disorientation, confusion, anxiety, anger, guilt, sorrow, pain, despair, etc., often experienced in grief, is, for Cholbi, triggered by our attending to various aspects of our relationship with the lost loved one (Cholbi 2021a, 74; 2021b, 240). As a form of ‘emotionally catalyzed attention’ (Cholbi 2021a, 48), grief, particularly in the case of loving relationships, will trigger a cascade of emotions and that makes it ‘trickier’ to bring that relationship fully into view (74). Part of the difficulty, Cholbi suggests, is that a ‘large quantity’ of the ‘psyche’s . . . emotional data dump’ that occurs during grief is ‘disclosed haphazardly’ (74, 75). Often this will mean ‘serious, long-term effort’ (82). But the difficulty may also be more directly related to ourselves. Cholbi suggests that not only can we fail to direct our attention in the right way, but we are especially vulnerable to ‘such misdirection’ (117) in the crisis triggered by grief. This aspect of the difficulty, however, is not developed.¹⁶

I have argued that both outward and inward approaches to grief require the bereaved to have the lost other clearly in view. The former assumes this in all cases of grief, the latter in paradigm cases. They share this requirement despite their contrasting accounts of the moral duties involved, and what they take to be the grounds of those duties. I shall now offer a reading of C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, which, I suggest, reveals the ethical struggle involved in striving to see the independent reality of the lost other. In not reflecting on the nature of this struggle, both accounts overlook a fundamental difficulty in what they take to be an important aspect of grieving well.

Lewis and the Struggle to See the Lost Other

A Grief of Observed is the published version of a journal C. S. Lewis kept after the death of his wife, Joy Davidman (referred to as H. in the journal). One of the struggles that appears throughout the four notebooks that make up the journal is the difficulty of keeping the reality of Joy in view. While Lewis notes, ‘I have no photograph of her that’s any good. I cannot even see her face distinctly in my imagination’, the struggle he describes is less against his fading memory, and more against his failure to see clearly (Lewis 2001, 15). Lewis takes such failure to be an ethical failure. This ethical self-critique emerges as early as the fourth paragraph:

[T]he bath of self-pity, the wallow, the loathsome sticky-sweet pleasure of indulging it—that disgusts me. And even while I’m doing it I know it leads me to misrepresent H. herself. Give that mood its head and in a few minutes I shall have substituted for the real woman a mere doll to be blubbered over. (4)

It’s not simply a case of Lewis watching helplessly as his wife disappears from his fading memory. He also watches, *disgusted*, as the distorting waves of his own self-pity threaten to wash away the real, unique woman, Joy Davidman. A damning judgment.

Perhaps a little too damning. As friends of Lewis, wouldn’t we tell him not to beat himself up, that he is being too hard on himself? One does not have to be a Nietzschean to hear lashings of a whip in that opening sentence. But this might provide Lewis with further reasons for tightening his grip on the whip. The disgust expressed about his own self-pity may itself appear as a second-order sort of indulgence. His disgust with himself yet another circling back to self (and thus a further turning away from his wife). Here, the threat of being pulled deeper into the self opens up (e.g. disgust at his self-centred indulgence in criticising his indulgence, and so on). While grieving the death of her husband, Joan Didion notes that, fearful of slipping into self-pity, those in grief ‘scourge our thinking for signs of it’. The problem, as she observes, is that ‘this attempt at corrective thinking serves only to plunge us deeper into the self-regarding deep’ (Didion 2006, 192–3).

As an external observer, we might be tempted to explain away such damning self-critique as a manifestation of anger and/or guilt, noting that such responses are a common stage of the grieving process. As the bereaved person moves past these stages, so such ethical self-critique will dissolve.¹⁷ From this external perspective, what Lewis takes to be an ethical failing is, in reality, a confused sort of anger and/or guilt.

We should resist settling for this type of external explanation for at least two reasons. First, adopting such an external stance, we would obscure from view the particular reality of Lewis’s grief. We would substitute for the real, particular grief of C. S. Lewis a general observation about grief for us to speculate over. We would fail to see Lewis clearly. Such an external observation would never get to the phenomenon:

One never meets just Cancer, or War, or Unhappiness (or Happiness). One only meets each hour or moment that comes . . . [a]ll manner of ups and downs . . . The thing itself is simply all these ups and downs: the rest is a name or an idea. (Lewis 2001, 12)

We might add: one never meets just Grief. If we are to understand Lewis’s grief, then we must keep in view the ups and downs of his experience. The task for us is to see Lewis clearly in his grief.

This is not to say that any external observation about the ways in which anger or guilt manifest in grief is incorrect. One or both emotions may have

played a part in Lewis's damning judgment. But to invoke that as explaining *away* Lewis's sense of ethical failure (that it's *really only* a manifestation of anger, guilt, etc.) would be to miss the significance of the moments he meets, the ups and downs through which the reality of his grief is lived. Even if we concede that a (confused) sense of anger or guilt explains the (damning) *tone* of his self-criticism, that does not explain away the ethical concerns *driving* that self-criticism. And this is the second reason why we should resist settling on general external explanations of this sort. Lewis's ethical concerns do not dissolve once the whip is put aside. Indeed, they expand out beyond his self-pity to reveal an ethical task that remains throughout his grief: to see the independent reality of Joy.¹⁸

We see Lewis struggling with this task at the start of his second notebook, which opens with another damning judgment. Lewis has just read back through his notes for the first time, and they 'appal' him. He explains: 'anyone would think that H.'s death mattered chiefly for its effect on myself. Her point of view seems to have dropped out of sight' (Lewis 2001, 17). The journal is then pierced by what appears to be an independent reality: "And I had so much to live for", we hear Joy cry out. While Lewis rebukes himself for not keeping such moments in mind, simply telling himself that he 'must think more about H, and less about myself' does not get to the heart of the problem. For he is 'nearly always' thinking about Joy (18). The problem is not that he is not thinking *about her*; it is that he will now only ever be *thinking* about her. Joy will now only appear as *his* representation of her.

I am thinking about her nearly always. Thinking of the H. facts – real words, looks, laughs, and actions of hers. But it is my own mind that selects and groups them. Already . . . I can feel the slow, insidious beginning of a process that will make the H. I think of into a more and more imaginary woman. Founded on fact, no doubt. I shall put in nothing fictitious (or I hope I shan't). But won't the composition inevitably become more and more my own? The reality is no longer there to check me . . . (18).¹⁹

The ethical problem remains. After the waves of self-pity, comes the incessant snowfall of 'my impressions and my selections' which, Lewis observes, already 'are settling down on the image of her'. Without the independent reality of Joy to check his representations of her, without the 'sharp, cleansing tang of her otherness', the Joy that remains once the waves of self-pity recede will be his image of her (20). Even when he cites her words, it is still *his* portrait of Joy that appears.

Lewis's desperate cry, 'Oh my dear . . . come back . . . and drive this miserable phantom away' does get closer to the heart of the problem (Lewis 2001, 19). For what this cry acknowledges is that the reality needed to check the self's conjuring of phantoms cannot be summoned by an act of will. A reality independent of the self is required to interrupt that self. The

problem is no longer the specific problem of being sunk in self-pity; it is the more general problem of being centred in a self. Lewis strives to keep the reality of Joy in view, to avoid introducing anything fictitious into his representations of her, but note the parenthetical remark in the passage cited above: he *hopes* to avoid this. This uncertainty emerges because the self cannot help but project its images (this is why it's not simply a problem of self-pity). And given the 'fatal obedience of the image' to our moods and emotions (22), and given that Joy's independent reality is no longer there to interrupt the 'phantasmagoria of my thoughts, passions, and imaginings' (66), Lewis experiences a sense of powerlessness: he is left hoping that the real Joy will not be lost entirely to the fantastical swirls of the self.

That this struggle emerges because of the image-projecting self, and not simply because of a particular emotion one may happen to find oneself in, suggests that the problem Lewis is struggling with is not simply *his* problem. The struggle now emerging into view points beyond Lewis's particular experience of grief; it is a struggle that reveals an aspect of *our* relation to our lost others.²⁰ Our griefs are as unique as the loved ones we have lost, but the ethical task of keeping the reality of the lost other in view structures each, singular grief. The bereaved all face the ethical task of grief's tragic dance:

We are 'taken out of ourselves' by the loved one while she is here. Then comes the tragic figure of the dance in which we must learn to be still taken out of ourselves though the bodily presence is withdrawn, to love the very Her, and not fall back to loving our past, or our memory, or our sorrow, or our relief from sorrow, or our own love. (Lewis 2001, 50)

How one might dance this dance is a question I cannot pursue here. But those moments where Joy comes into view reveal an aspect of the difficulty. It is when his mind is emptied of anxiety about creating fictions, e.g. when he is getting into his morning bath, 'that H. rushes upon my mind in her full reality, her otherness' (Lewis 2001, 51). This suggests that it is his desperation to keep the reality of Joy in view that prevents Lewis from seeing her clearly.²¹ It is the self-expanding force of his desperate longing that obscures the reality of Joy, leaving him enclosed in the anxious swirls of the self. 'You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears' (45).

While this may appear to be a specific claim about the grieving self, Lewis immediately generalises the point: 'You can't, in most things, get what you want, if you want it too desperately' (Lewis 2001, 45). Indeed, Lewis suggests that this general structure – of the self's desperation preventing it from reaching that for which it longs – also explains his inability to reach God:

Was it my own frantic need that slammed it [the door] in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be

helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear (46).²²

Our anxieties, doubts, needs, longings – in short, the whole desperate swirl of the self – can close us off from the reality we so desperately seek. This is what I meant earlier by saying that the problem Lewis struggles with in his grief is not simply that he's sunk in self-pity; it is that he's centred in a self. From the centre of this swirl of anxieties and longings, Lewis struggles to see the independent reality of Joy.

What Lewis's struggle suggests, then, is that the task of seeing the reality of the lost other is, at the very same time, a struggle to escape aspects of the self. Or, we might say, a struggle to calm the desperate swirls of the self enough to allow the lost other to come into view. If, as I have suggested, Lewis's struggle reveals an important aspect of what is involved in grieving well, then philosophical accounts of grief will need to bring that struggle with the self explicitly into view.

Concluding Remarks

My aim in this paper has been to bring into view the problem of seeing the independent reality of the lost other. This implies that this problem is not yet in view. Or not yet in view *as a problem*. As I have argued, seeing the reality of the lost other *is* an important aspect of contemporary philosophical accounts of grief. Indeed, there are moments when the problem *appears* in those accounts, particularly where failures to grieve appropriately are being identified. Recall McCracken's descriptions of immoderate grief as 'self-indulgent' or 'self-absorbed' (McCracken 2005, 152), or Cholbi's descriptions of inappropriate grief as excluding emotions the relationship with the lost other ought to prompt, or including the right emotions but at an inappropriate degree, or including emotions that do not reflect the relationship at all (Cholbi 2021a, 135). If my reading of Lewis is at all persuasive, then we should see these descriptions in all their troubling depth, pointing not only to potential (moral) failings of individuals, but to the struggle we all face in our grief: to quieten aspects of the self so as to allow the lost loved one to come into view. This is what I've called grief's ethical task. Reflecting on the struggle involved in that task is, I suggest, crucial to understanding an important aspect of what it would mean for us to grieve well.

A lot more needs to be said to fill out the picture I have attempted to bring into view in this paper. The picture that emerges from Lewis's struggle raises a number of questions. In the space remaining, I'll raise one that I take to be central.

The task, as Lewis sees it, is that we must 'learn to . . . be taken out of ourselves' (2001, 50). The active-passive aspect of that formulation suggests a difficulty. It's not immediately obvious how *being taken out of myself* is

something *I can learn to do*. Given that our difficulty to see the lost other emerges because we are centred in the desperate, reality-obscuring swirls of the self, how are we to get ourselves outside?

Lewis's own experience (recall those moments getting into his morning bath) suggests that rather than something *we do*, escape from self is something that *happens to us*. Escape comes through an interruption of the self, not the wilful striving of the self. And this, for Lewis, is no contingent matter. As we have seen, Lewis points to a general structure or 'psychological law' whereby the very intensity of our striving for a particular state of affairs can close us off from that desired state. Elsewhere he describes this as a 'deadly error, which appears on every level of life', namely, attempting to produce a certain inner state (1955, 168). This error is deadly because shifting one's attention away from the external situation or object toward oneself, we destroy the very possibility of the desired state emerging. Watching a sunset *because* I want to have a deeply moving experience, the sunset fades into a means for realising my desired inner state. The sunset itself, and the possibilities it has to offer, no longer arrive.²³ Similarly, in desperately trying to produce an accurate picture of Joy, Lewis blocks the possibility of her arriving. It is when he is not focused on his own inner states that Joy arrives in her independent reality.

But this does not mean that we remain wholly passive. In thinking about how we might *learn* to be taken out of ourselves, I want to suggest two directions for further reflection. The first is reflection on oneself. I cannot quieten the self if I have no understanding of the obscuring mechanisms of that self. This has its dangers. Self-reflection threatens to pull one further into those self-enclosing swirls. Although I cannot defend this claim here, Lewis, while acutely aware of this danger, thinks we have little choice but to try to get ourselves in view. If we are to see the reality of others clearly, then, for Lewis, we must become aware of the ways in which we may distort the reality we hope to bring into view. *A Grief Observed*, itself a record of Lewis observing himself as a means of not being entirely in thrall to the swirls of the self, constantly, and knowingly, runs that risk.

The second direction of reflection is suggested by Lewis's fleeting reference to our 'capacity to receive' (Lewis 2001, 46). This, Lewis insists, is precisely what the desperate swirls of the self block. Without that capacity, we remain enclosed in the phantasmagoria of our anxieties and longings. Insight gained through self-reflection can help temper these capacity-destroying propensities of the self. But we also need to cultivate this capacity. One way we might do so is to practice directing our attention away from the self. We might, for example, take up what Lewis calls nature's imperative – "Look. Listen. Attend." – and practice this in our everyday lives (Lewis 2016, 24). Here is where we might *learn* to be taken out of ourselves. Whether it's a sunset, a literary work, an area of intellectual study, a neighbour, or our loved ones, in directing our attention toward 'something

other and outer' we cultivate our capacity to receive (Lewis 1955, 168). We learn to be taken out of ourselves.

Sunsets may seem a world away from the crisis of grief. But we can think of the relation between this daily work of directing attention away from the self and the struggle we face in our grief as similar to the relation Murdoch suggests between the 'prior work of attention' and moments of explicit moral choice:

If we consider what the work of attention is like, how it continuously goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value around us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over ... *What happens in between such choices is indeed crucial.* (Murdoch 1997, 329, my emphasis)

In consciously taking up the task of directing our attention toward non-self things, we cultivate capacities of receptivity and develop modes of attending and ways of seeing that may prove crucial when we find ourselves in moments of crisis, such as grief:

What do you do with your mind when you are in prison? Or bereaved or suffering irremediable injustice, or crippled by awful guilt? What you are able to do with it then will depend very much on what you were doing with it before. (Murdoch 1993, 323)

If these suggested reflections point in the right directions, then grief over the loss of a loved one raises fundamental questions about the struggle we face not only in grieving well, but in living our everyday, undramatic lives well.

Notes

1. My focus is restricted to grief over the loss of a loved one.
2. This is not to suggest that grief that involves no struggle of this sort is thereby a deficient mode of grief. There may be those for whom the independent reality of the lost loved one comes into view with little difficulty.
3. Notable departures from that assumption include Atkins (2022a; 2022b) and Ratcliffe (2023).
4. I take outward approaches to grief to be other-directed. Alongside McCracken (2005), the focus here, outward approaches include Atkins (2022a), Marušić (2022), Moller (2007, 2017), and Solomon (2004). Inward approaches are self-directed. Cholbi is the key contemporary figure (Cholbi 2019, 2021a, 2021b).
5. Solomon (2004, 88) mentions narcissism and self-pity. Given McCracken's (and Solomon's) moral understanding of grief, these descriptions seem to be in the register of what Iris Murdoch called secondary moral judgments. I refer to *forms* of self-absorption to indicate that I am not suggesting that *any* form of self-absorption in grief should be judged in these terms.
6. In her account of 'desolate rumination', Carolyn Price (2010, 35) argues that the griever's 'attention is firmly fixed on the particular circumstances' and the associated emotions surrounding the loved one's death. One of the examples

she gives is focusing on an argument the day the loved one died. For Price, rather than obscuring one's view of the loved one, focusing one's attention on these particular experiences serves the epistemic function of helping the griever to realise, to bring into view, the loss of the other and the specific ways in which their death is a terrible thing.

7. I leave aside the question of whether we ought to step back in this way. I think there is reason to think that those subjective experiences need not be obscuring and may, in fact, help bring the loss we have experienced more into view. A 'proper' memory of the lost other may well be arrived at by working through, rather than stepping back from, these experiences.
8. See, for example, Price's account of 'desolate rumination' (2010).
9. Solomon (2004, 82) questions our '*right* to grieve' the loss of those with whom we have no intimate relationship. Part of the thought is that grief requires that we *really* know, and thus have in view, the person for whom we grieve. The required intimacy, Solomon insists, depends on the nature of the relationship, not the intensity of one's feelings. Thus those (members of the public) who took themselves to be grieving over the death of Princess Diana, were, for Solomon, mistaken (88). In such cases, there is no genuine intimacy, and thus, for Solomon, no genuine object of grief can come into view.
10. The distinction between material and formal object is a distinction between the object or state or affairs that triggers a response in me and what my response is ultimately directed toward. My fear may be triggered by the sound of a fire alarm (material object), but my fear is not fear of the sound. What I am fearful of is the threat of fire (formal object).
11. My grief must include 'all and only the emotions that reflect the *totality* of the relationship' (2021a, 138); I can fail to 'accurately and *comprehensively* represent' my relationship with the lost loved one (148). Both my emphasis.
12. Grief must 'fit the relevant facts', be 'adequate to', 'properly reflect', or 'represent accurately' the relationship with the lost other (Cholbi 2021a, 131, 125, 133, 136).
13. Cholbi, I take it, would agree: 'one cannot interrogate this relationship without in some way interrogating the deceased' (Cholbi 2019, 505).
14. I'm grateful to Dan Watts for help with the formulation of this point.
15. See Ratcliffe, Richardson, and Millar (2022).
16. Which is not to say that it does not appear in various places. In his brief remarks on Nussbaum on love Cholbi introduces issues surrounding 'self-deceiving fictions' and the resulting opaqueness of the lover's vision and makes a suggestive connection to grief (Cholbi 2021a, 76–77). And in an earlier paper, he suggests that in grief our vision is likely to be obscured by more general epistemic difficulties, such as 'our susceptibility to wishful thinking', and that we may lack the 'emotional discernment' and 'moral or epistemic virtues' that would enable us to grieve well (Cholbi 2019, 506).
17. The language of stages is associated with Kübler-Ross's 'stage theory'. In using such language, I mean only to draw on the way in which the idea of stages has filtered into our everyday ways of thinking and talking about loss and grief.
18. The self-pity Lewis describes is, as Atkins (2022a, 5) astutely notes, a response to an earlier phase of his grief. Lewis (2001, 4) describes recoiling into self-pity 'on the rebound' from a period of 'agony'. While he goes through various phases in his grief – as he observes, 'in grief nothing "stays put." One keeps on

- emerging from a phase, but it always recurs' (56) – the consistent thread throughout his reflections is the struggle to see Joy in her independent reality.
19. The 'H. facts' is an odd way to describe thoughts about a loved one. That formulation seems to express the difficulty Lewis faces: to do justice to *who* Joy is, as opposed to *what* she was. Absent the independent reality of her living presence, Lewis struggles against a seemingly inevitable process of objectification. (Thanks to Dan Watts for this point.) Ratcliffe (2023, Ch. 5) provides an insightful interpretation along these lines, suggesting that the difficulty Lewis confronts here is that no matter how accurate or exhaustive his mental representations of Joy may be, they will be never be able to capture her unique style for that involves ways of being affected that are not fully anticipated. For this reason, the very attempt to *capture* her with such 'facts' is self-defeating. But there's another aspect to this passage. The 'facts' Lewis mentions are not what we would typically think of as facts. What is the 'fact' of a look or laugh? If we think that the key term here is not 'facts' but 'real', then we might read this passage as Lewis trying to reassure himself: 'I *really* am thinking of how she *really* did laugh in all those unique ways, of those looks that *really* did cross her face when she was in a mischievous mood, exasperated, nervous, etc., of how she *really* did use that particular expression, with that particular tone, when excited, annoyed, etc. These thoughts capture *real* aspects of Joy; they're not my fabrications!' Seen in this light, the problem would appear to be not so much objectification, as fragmentation. Joy is already dissolving into fragments and it's increasingly left to Lewis to construct a picture.
 20. Scrutton (2022) argues that Lewis's fear of constructing false images of Joy is rooted in his theological commitments and, as such, his grief is distinctive. Lewis's grief is undoubtedly shaped by his faith, but the fear of misrepresenting others through false internal images is not a wholly theological concern. Both Platonic and psychoanalytic conceptions of the self can generate such a concern. Iris Murdoch's work would be one example. Consider her claim that there is a 'continuous breeding of imagery in consciousness' (Murdoch 1993, 329), and that if we are to see the other in their independent reality, then we must struggle to escape 'fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images' (Murdoch 1997, 254).
 21. I'm not suggesting that this is the *only* reason Lewis struggles. Atkins (2022b) argues that Lewis struggles because he doubts his capacity to love his wife in death. There is significant overlap with my concerns here and much I agree with. But I would say that we cannot fully understand Lewis's struggle – including the doubt Atkins identifies – without understanding the particular picture of the self that is in the background.
 22. In a letter Lewis explicitly points to a general structure: 'In both cases [i.e. calling for God's help and trying to see the independent reality of Joy] a clamorous need seems to shut one off from the thing needed' (2008, 355). In another letter, Lewis writes of a 'psychological law' whereby our desperate longings and needs 'often inhibit the very things they are intended to facilitate' (317).
 23. Or is unlikely to arrive. If one goes out into nature 'in order to be overwhelmed . . . nine times out of ten nothing will happen to you' (Lewis 2016, 27).

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Dan Watts and Alexandra Popescu as well as anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Steven Gormley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4285-7198>

References

- Atkins, A. 2022a. "On Grief's Sweet Sorrow." *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1): 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12649>.
- Atkins, A. 2022b. "On Grief's Wandering Thought: A Philosophical Exploration." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 103 (1): 95–117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12350>.
- Cholbi, M. 2019. "Regret, Resilience, and the Nature of Grief." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 16 (4): 486–508. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-20180015>.
- Cholbi, M. 2021a. *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cholbi, M. 2021b. "Grieving Our Way Back to Meaningfulness." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 90:235–251. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246121000308>.
- Didion, J. 2006. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. London: Harper Collins.
- Didion, J. 2012. *Blue Nights*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Lewis, C. S. 1955. *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harvest.
- Lewis, C. S. 2001. *A Grief Observed*. New York: HarperOne.
- Lewis, C. S. 2008. *Yours, Jack*. New York: HarperOne.
- Lewis, C. S. 2016. *The Four Loves*. London: William Collins.
- Marušić, B. 2022. *On the Temporality of the Emotions: An Essay on Grief, Anger, and Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCracken, J. 2005. "Falsely, Sanelly, Shallowly: Reflections on the Special Character of Grief." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19 (1): 139–156. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ijap20051917>.
- Moller, D. 2007. "Love and Death." *The Journal of Philosophy* 104 (6): 301–316. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil2007104621>.
- Moller, D. 2017. "Love and the Rationality of Grief." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Love*, edited by C. Grau and A. Smuts. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.013.35>.
- Murdoch, I. 1993. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin.
- Murdoch, I. 1997. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by P. Conradi. New York: Penguin.
- Neimeyer, R. A. 2016. "Reconstructing Meaning in Bereavement." In *The Wiley Handbook of Personal Construct Psychology*, edited by D. A. Winter and N. Reed, 254–264, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

- Parkes, C. M., and H. G. Prigerson. 2010. *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge.
- Price, C. 2010. "The Rationality of Grief." *Inquiry* 53 (1): 20–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201740903478384>.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2023. *Grief Worlds: A Study of Emotional Experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ratcliffe, M., L. Richardson, and B. Millar. 2022. "On the Appropriateness of Grief to Its Object." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2021.55>.
- Scutton, T. 2022. "Interpretation and the Shaping of Experience: Theology of Suffering and C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 29 (9–10): 201–221. <https://doi.org/10.53765/20512201.29.9.201>.
- Solomon, R. C. 2004. In *Defence of Sentimentality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.