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6 Retention and Loss

In the previous chapter, I showed how the experience of a person's *presence* can consist in a distinctive way of being affected, involving changes in the possibilities offered by one's surroundings. Such experiences can be fleeting or long-lasting, pronounced or subtle. In the context of bereavement, they sometimes amount to a sustained sense of connection with the deceased. This chapter turns to the complementary view that the bereaved often maintain *continuing* bonds with the deceased, rather than ultimately *letting go* or *moving on*. I identify a number of different ways in which one might be said to continue a bond and also consider whether it is *obligatory*, in some circumstances, to do so. I go on to emphasize the philosophical significance of continuing bonds. In philosophy and cognitive science, work on interpersonal and social cognition tends to consider only how we think about and relate to the living. Inclusion of the various ways in which we relate to the dead, experience and think of the dead, and regulate our experiences, thoughts, and activities through enduring attachments to the dead promises to broaden, diversify, and enrich this field of research.

Although I endorse the view that we often continue to feel connected to those who have died, I also suggest that the distinction between retaining a bond and letting go requires further refinement. The view that grief involves ultimately severing a bond is often attributed to Freud, among others. However, letting go of an experiential world that depended on the deceased need not amount to losing all sense of ongoing connection with the deceased. We can interpret Freud's position in terms of the former, rather than in terms of both, rendering the nature and extent of the disagreement unclear.

The chapter concludes by developing an account of grief's object—what it is that grief is about or *directed at*. I propose that what we experience as *lost* is not principally a concrete entity but a cohesive arrangement of significant

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possibilities. These include possibilities that were "mine," "yours," and "ours," the three being inextricable. Given this, what is lost can equally be described in terms of the death of a person, that person being dead, the loss or reconfiguration of a relationship, or the implications for one's own life. Hence, there is no single, concrete object of grief. To further support this position, I consider experiences of loss associated with involuntary childlessness, which illustrate how a sense of loss can arise without the subtraction of anything concrete from one's world. Although grief in response to the death of a person may differ from such experiences in many ways, I argue that it shares this structure; both are oriented toward the possible.

6.1 Kinds of Continuing Bonds

In chapter 5, I suggested that a sense of being in the presence of a particular person can involve being affected in a certain, distinctive way. Thus, it does not require a perceptual or perception-like experience of an entity being physically present in the surrounding environment. Instead, there is a feeling of connection that instills one's own experience and thought with dynamism and openness. Experiences of this kind are likely to play an important role in the development and sustenance of what have become known as "continuing bonds." The continuing bonds approach to bereavement spans a variety of largely complementary perspectives and claims. Together, they challenge a view that has become orthodox in some cultures, according to which grief ultimately involves severing a bond with the deceased—letting go or moving on. Instead, it is proposed, the bereaved generally maintain a sense of connection with those who have died, in ways that are interpersonally and culturally diverse. Since the publication of an influential volume in 1996, edited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman, the continuing bonds alternative has grown markedly in visibility and popularity. The overarching claim is not simply that some or all features of a relationship with a living person are *preserved* after that person's death. Sustaining a connection with the deceased also involves *altering* how one thinks about and relates to that person; the relationship is reconstructed in such a way that it remains viable. So, although the relationship may be changed markedly, it is not altogether lost. As Thomas Attig (2011, 174) writes, the deaths of those we love "challenge us to maintain

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meaningful connection and to integrate redefined relationships in our necessarily new life patterns."

Talk of continuing bonds accommodates considerable interpersonal, social, and cultural diversity. Even in cultures where the alternative view that we sever ties with the deceased is well established (at least in academic circles), proponents of continuing bonds approaches maintain that it fails to reflect how most people in those cultures actually think and act. Even so, the prevalence of narratives that emphasize letting go of the deceased will influence how people experience and interpret an ongoing sense of connection. The kinds of bonds we develop are also acknowledged to be historically variable. For example, Walter (2019, 389) suggests that Western societies are currently undergoing a "new integration of the dead into everyday life," aided by technological innovations, as when a bereaved person writes on the Facebook page of the deceased and the post is read by others. There is further diversity among individuals within any given culture. The age and gender of the bereaved, the nature of the relationship, the specific qualities of that relationship, the bereaved person's wider social situation and background, the circumstances of the death, and the availability of interpretive resources will all influence the kinds of bonds that arise and how those bonds are understood, both by the bereaved and by others.

Experiences of enduring connection are usually experienced positively, although they are sometimes unwelcome and/or associated with distress. Responses to the phenomenological survey that I have drawn on throughout this book complement the literature on continuing bonds, in pointing to various different ways of experiencing and relating to those who have died. For some respondents, any bond that remains is largely a matter of the significance of memories: "I only feel a connection to him based on my memories" (#8). Others emphasize an enduring love that involves frequent thoughts of the deceased: "I feel a connection in terms of the fact I still love my parents, I think of them all the time" (#11). Another recurrent theme is an enduring *feeling* of connection, which need not involve experiences with more concrete contents: "I cannot see him, but I still feel him with me" (#17); "I do still feel a connection, I feel like I'm still married to him" (#46). There are also references to dreams and their effects: "My dreams quite often feature my husband, and they are usually positive dreams and I wake up happy with whatever I can remember of them" (#180).

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As well as perception-like experiences, memories, thoughts, dreams, and feelings of connection or presence, there are reports of continuing communication. This can involve talking to the deceased, sometimes in particular situations or at certain times: "I still feel connected to D and talk to her in my head" (#40); "His ashes are in the study; I talk to them when I get overwhelmed, and I feel better" (#44). Sometimes, but not always, there is a sense of reciprocity: "I talk to him regularly and I can hear him reply to me" (#72). Continuing bonds also contribute to people's lives in practical ways. For instance, memories of the person who died can shape how one currently experiences and relates to the world. This sometimes involves taking on attributes of the person: "She lives in me, in my memories of her and the intricacy of how we were together" (#133). Some respondents describe calling upon the person in certain situations and receiving advice or guidance: "I always refer to him mentally when there's a decision to make" (#107); "I have been doing some decorating and he tells me when I am doing it wrong or the best way to do it" (#102). A sense of being cared for or supported by the deceased can also involve experiencing objects or events in terms of communications or signs: "If I feel I need advice, comfort, or reassurance I nearly always see a white feather close by and that is when I feel my husband's presence and that he is looking out for me" (#118).

Testimonies such as these complement a substantial body of work on continuing bonds, which documents various different combinations of perceptual experiences, memories, patterns of thought, dream contents, meanings attached to objects and events, interpretations of events as signs or symbols, activities (including commemorative activities), rituals and other practices, one- or two-way communication with the person who died, internalization of their values, and being guided or supported by them (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996; Klass and Steffen 2018). Common to different kinds of bonds is an enduring *feeling* of connection, which is not always attributable to the more specific contents of emotions, memories, thoughts, perceptual experiences, or imaginings:

> An internal connection. That's where he continues. A very positive and comforting feeling. (#13)

> I always feel he is with me and is safe and secure within my heart. (#107)

> When I am home alone, I feel connected to him. I can't be clear, but I think about him and relate to him in my mind as if he is still here. (#75)

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> I'm happy to have an ongoing connection. It's a constant and I want that feeling to continue. (#93)

As suggested in chapter 5, we can conceive of such *feelings* in terms of the distinctive *style* of the person who has died and how it continues to shape one's sense of the possible, in ways that might be episodic or enduring, localized, or all-enveloping.

Like our relations with the living, continuing bonds are not static; they change over time in ways that can enhance or diminish them: "My relationship with C has continued to grow and develop since her death. Far from it fading, I feel even more in love with her than I ever have" (#18). Others are equivocal over whether a bond remains. For instance, there may be an enduring connection in memory, alongside a sense of the person's irrevocable absence from the present: "I'd say I just feel a loss. I still feel close to my memories of her and I pray that they don't fade. But I feel strongly that she has absolutely gone" (#189). Whether and how bonds develop over time depends in part on what one does (and is able to do) in order to maintain, alter, or lose them. For instance, activities such as visiting particular places may foster a sense of connection: "I talk to him all the time and visit his resting place to feel the connection" (#28); "I have a memorial bench in the grounds where we married, I feel very close to him there" (#57).

Continuing bonds should not be conceived of in isolation from wider society and culture, simply as attachments that one individual has to another individual. Our relations with the living and the dead are entwined, such that interactions with other people, against the backdrop of larger social and cultural arrangements, contribute to generating, sustaining, enhancing, transforming, and weakening bonds with the dead (Walter 1999). In chapter 5, I discussed how the sense of interpersonal connection involves an experience of changing *possibilities*. This also applies to continuing relations with the living, which can shape our sense of relational possibilities involving the dead. Higgins (2013, 175) thus remarks on how sharing and coauthoring stories about the deceased can open up possibilities involving that person, augmenting one's sense of *who* they were: "Part of the value of jointly working out a story about the deceased is that it enriches each person's conception of the lost person. It reawakens and even enhances everyone's sense of what the person was really like."

Such interactions are shaped and regulated by social and cultural contexts that include the likes of shared practices, rituals, monuments, established

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narratives, and anniversaries. Objects such as personal possessions and the activities associated with them also have important roles to play. In her book, *Objects of the Dead*, Margaret Gibson describes how various objects act as reminders of the dead. As such, they can nurture connections and help to establish a person's enduring place in one's life: "For those who outlive a loved one, the objects that remain are significant memory traces and offer a point of connection with the absent body of the deceased" (Gibson 2008, 2). In chapters 2 and 3, we saw how arrangements of objects can be experienced as retaining significant possibilities, even though one *knows* that those possibilities have ceased to apply—*we* can no longer sit on the sofa, go for a drive in the car, read those books together, take the fishing rod down to the river, or watch television together. So, an experiential world endures, at least in part, despite explicit acknowledgment of its impossibility. However, although various possibilities associated with shared projects and pastimes no longer apply, other possibilities relate more closely to a person's distinctive style—to what it was like to interact with her, to memories involving her, to what she liked to do, to *who* she was. Such possibilities can be sustained in ways that do not conflict with one's current reality, something that may involve integrating significant objects into one's ongoing life and relating to them in new ways. As Gibson observes, objects associated with the dead are scattered throughout our lives—they are worn, used, displayed, and stored away.

On occasion, an object such as a cherished personal possession can evoke an especially pronounced sense of a particular person, their *style*. For example, my father was an avid birdwatcher, who took me on frequent trips to nature reserves when I was a child, where he would sit peering through his binoculars until long after I became bored. Recently, my mother gave me his binoculars, so that my two children could use them. As I opened the leather case containing them, I was immediately struck by their appearance, their texture as I picked them up, their weight (a little heavier than I had expected), and a subtle but distinctive smell. It had been over twenty years since my father's death. Yet, as I held them, I was taken back to a time before his many years of debilitating illness, to a way of relating to him, being with him, that I could not have summoned in their absence and that I had not felt for a long time. The experience did not involve any pronounced emotions. In fact, it was subdued, even peaceful—a diffuse, oddly mundane sense of what it was to be in his company, of *who* he was.

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In the event of a death, there is often a lengthy and complicated process of deciding what can and should be done with possessions, which can contribute to determining the kinds of bonds that are cultivated. This is not just a matter of making personal choices and sometimes negotiating with others. There are also established norms associated with what to keep, sell, or give away, sometimes involving a sense of obligation; it seems right to sell the house but to keep the ring and to donate the clothes to charity (Gibson 2008).

Even with shared practices and interpretive resources, experiences of connection can be difficult to understand and describe. A nonlocalized sense of being affected by someone is not adequately conveyed in terms of a more determinate sensory experience of that person. Furthermore, a sense of presence can be incomplete and is sometimes ambivalent or conflicted. One experiences some possibilities associated with a person's presence but not others. Furthermore, properties indicative of presence might be experienced alongside others that are indicative of memory or imagination. Hence, such experiences are not captured by unqualified talk of someone seeming to be there. Indeed, I will suggest in chapter 7 that a person's continuing presence, in the form of a *style*, can contribute to an ability to cope with that same person's absence from the world.[1]

One might think that, in all cases, a continuing bond at least incorporates some sense of currently relating, having related, or being able to relate to the deceased *as* present. However, there is another, quite different form of experience, which could equally be termed a continuing bond. What makes it distinctive is that one relates to the person who has died not as currently or formerly present but *as currently absent*. Experiences like this are especially challenging to describe. They do not involve a tension between simultaneous experiences of presence and absence. Neither do they involve the presence of an absence, as when Pierre fails to arrive in Sartre's café. There is an enduring connection, but of a kind that does not involve turning current absence into an impoverished presence. One continues to relate to the person *in the present*, but in a manner that includes full recognition that she has gone. For example, Helen Humphreys (2013), in her memoir *True Story: The Life and Death of My Brother*, addresses her brother as "you" throughout, sometimes referring to the time "after you died." She relates to him and reaches out to him, while acknowledging his death in the same sentence.

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In *Time Lived without Its Flow*, Denise Riley provides an especially detailed and evocative account of the type of experience I have in mind here. Unlike the self-affecting sense of presence identified in chapter 5, what Riley describes is a self-affecting experience of her son's irrevocable *absence*. She has an enduring connection with him, but not one that enriches her world with new possibilities. Instead, by continuing to relate to her son while at the same time fully recognizing his own complete loss of possibilities, she participates in his absent future. As discussed in chapter 4, this also amounts to an alteration of temporal experience. Riley describes residing in an endless present, cut off from the progressive unfolding of shared time by a kind of participation in death: "I tried always to be there for him, solidly. And I shall continue to be. (The logic of this conviction: in order to be there, I too have died)" (2012, 21). There is thus an ongoing bond, which involves relating to the deceased by participating in the impossibility of new possibilities: "You already share the 'timeless time' of the dead child. As if you'd died too, or had lost the greater part of your own life" (2012, 38). Other first-person accounts point to similar experiences. For instance, consider this passage from Adri van der Heijden's memoir, *Tonio*, which reflects on an enduring love for his son:

> My love for him is still there, and more intensely than it used to be. Grammatically, it makes no sense at all. If, under duress, I say, "I love him," then what *him* am I talking about? Tonio no longer exists as *him*. He *existed* (and how!) in what now is past tense. And yet I love him, like I used to love him.
>
> My love is genuine and sincere, but it has to make do without an object. (2015, 448)

The love is not directed at someone in the past; he continues to love his son in the present. But how can this be, given that his love also includes recognition of absence? Again, there is an enduring sense of connection with the person *as* absent.

Interestingly, Riley's account draws on the theme of touch and reversibility in Merleau-Ponty's writings, in an attempt to further convey the experience of relating to someone as absent (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 1968). In brief, when one of your hands touches the other, the touching hand is the subject of perception or perceiver, while the touched hand is an object of perception. However, the relationship is reversible; the touching hand becomes the touched, as the other hand takes on the role of perceiver. Similarly, when you take the hand of another person, your own hand is the

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perceiver and theirs the perceived. And, as with your own two hands, the relationship is reversible. There is thus a sense of the other hand—and the other person—as a distinct locus of experience. Riley indicates that a comparable experience of reversibility can characterize relations with the dead:

> Whatever's the name for this transfer of affect? It's rather like that blurring of physical edges that happens between lovers: you become the other one, you can feel as if through their skin. . . . You're fused with the dead, as if to animate them. They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them on your side. (Riley 2012, 39–40)[2]

According to Riley, this kind of experience is specific to parental grief and far from unusual among bereaved parents. However, less pronounced experiences of a similar kind may characterize grief more generally. This complicates the interpretation of remarks such as "I died with her" and "part of me has died," which could refer to either of two importantly different aspects of grief. An experience of connection with someone's absence, which dislodges one from the world, is to be distinguished from a diminishment of one's world due to that person's absence from it.

It is thus clear that the bereaved *do* maintain a variety of different bonds with those who have died. However, the question remains as to whether and how we *ought* to experience and relate to the dead. Klass (2006) regards the notion of a "continuing bond" as descriptive rather than normative. It identifies what actually happens when people die, as opposed to what ought or ought not to happen. To this, it can be added that continuing bonds envelop a range of phenomena and so the focus of discussion varies, in ways that are not always made explicit (Epstein, Kalus, and Berger 2006). Hence, claims concerning the appropriateness or inappropriateness of bonds in general are likely to prove insufficiently discerning.

In practice, continuing bonds are shaped and also "policed" by a range of different social and cultural norms (Walter 1999). They are not simply decontextualized attachments. Rather, they are elicited, sustained, and regulated within wider cultural and religious frameworks, which include shared interpretive resources for making sense of how someone can be gone but not simply absent, or still present but in a different way. For instance, Klass (1996, 59) considers Japanese ancestor worship, which involves "an elaborate set of rituals, supported by a sophisticated theory, by which those who are living maintain personal, emotional bonds with those who have died." It could be that contexts of rituals, practices, concepts, and narratives

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merely support the interpretation of experiences of connection. But it is also arguable that they contribute to the experiences themselves. Whether we endorse one position, the other, or both depends, in part, on whether a liberal or more conservative account of experiential content is adopted. So long as it is conceded that people experience entities of various types, along with significant ways in which those entities relate to one another, it is plausible to maintain that the actual content of an experience can be influenced by the social and cultural context in which it arises, which includes shared interpretive practices. In addition, whether or not an experience is beneficial will depend, to some extent, on whether or not it is consistent with and approved of within an established, shared cultural framework (Steffen and Coyle 2012).[3]

It has been proposed that some types of bonds are generally harmful or "maladaptive," in a specifically clinical sense that does not depend upon one or another contingent cultural arrangement. This is said to apply, in particular, to certain *externalized* bonds that involve illusions and/or hallucinations. In such cases, there is a failure to appreciate that the deceased "exists exclusively at the representational level" and thus to maintain a "boundary between the living and the dead," at least where the relevant experiences occur outside of culturally established rituals (Field 2006, 751).[4] However there is a need for caution here. We saw in chapter 5 how experiences of being affected by the *style* of the deceased, which are sometimes classified as hallucinations, do not need to locate that person anywhere in particular (whether internal or external to oneself). Hence, they do not conform to a distinction between internalized and externalized bonds. For instance, one might have an experience of being comforted by the deceased, here and now, without any clear sense of where that person is. Furthermore, an experience of presence can be equivocal. Although it incorporates certain possibilities associated with perceptual experiences, it also lacks others. The distinction between internal and external therefore fails to capture the subtlety or diversity of sensed-presence experiences. For example, Klass (1999, 41) describes how the relationships that bereaved parents sustain with their deceased children can have "the character of both inner and outer reality"; they do not experience their children as a straightforwardly "objective presence" or as "simply subjective."

Thus, in order to evaluate claims about maladaptive bonds, further clarification is required concerning their nature.[5] It could be that what singles

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them out is a failure of "integration" (Field and Filanosky 2009, 24). However, that claim risks being uninformative, unless the types of bonds that are likely to involve such a failure can be characterized independently of it. And it is not clear that they can be. Continuing bonds of various kinds will contribute to people's lives in different ways, in different circumstances. So, a type of bond that enhances the life of one person may not enhance the life of another, due to their differing situations, backgrounds, and life structures. It can be added that the qualities of a continuing bond are likely to reflect, to a large extent, the particularities of one's relationship with a person before they died and, sometimes, the circumstances of the death.[6] Where a relationship was always fraught with difficulties, those difficulties are likely to persist in some way. As Stroebe and Schut (2005, 482) observe, "insecure, dependent, or conflicted bonding" can equally characterize both pre- and post-death relationships. So, it seems unlikely that a broad type of bond (e.g., one involving an experience of ongoing communication with the deceased) will affect people in consistent ways. All we can say with confidence is that some kinds of continuing bonds are sometimes comforting and/or helpful and sometimes distressing and/or harmful.

It is therefore difficult to make any confident normative claims concerning continuing bonds. They are evaluated and shaped by a diversity of social and cultural norms. Furthermore, it is not clear that wider-ranging claims concerning which *types* of bonds are beneficial or otherwise can be sustained. However, there is a final possibility that I want to consider. Perhaps, regardless of what might be said about bonds of one or another type, it is at least clear that we ought—under certain circumstances—to maintain *some kind* of continuing bond. I am thinking here of a specifically moral claim. The issue of whether and when it is right to form a continuing bond is closely related to that of whether, when, and how we ought to grieve for someone. Grief, it could be argued, is not just something we actually experience; it is also something we ought to experience sometimes. To be more specific, grieving for someone we love seems morally obligatory. McCracken (2005, 141) proposes that this sense of obligation arises because grief is "felt to be *dedicated*" to the "*lost object*," Given that grief is dedicatory and the deceased merits our dedication, we ought to grieve.

One might object that any sense of obligation applies instead to the performance of certain activities and therefore to mourning practices rather than the emotional experience of grief. However, McCracken suggests that

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it applies equally to grief, which is something we *ought to feel* on occasion. Even if this is correct, it will not apply to all instances of grief. Sometimes, there is plausibly no fact of the matter over whether we should grieve in a particular way or even at all. Suppose that one person experiences grief upon hearing of an old friend's death, while another experiences only brief sadness, even though they both had friendships with the deceased that were comparable in almost every respect. It is not clear that one of them has got things right and the other wrong. Nevertheless, there are many occasions when it does seem plausible to maintain that someone *ought to* grieve. So, let us focus on those.

Drawing on McCracken's discussion, Solomon (2004b, 81) suggests that grief involves a "continuation rather than a cessation of love." Thus, consistent with a continuing bonds approach, the relationship does not end with the death. There remains what Solomon calls "the strong residue" of a relationship, and it is from this enduring love that obligations stem. Thus, if it is true that we ought to grieve, then it is also true that we ought to form continuing bonds. However, it is important to distinguish three claims: (a) grief is obligatory; (b) grief involves continuing bonds; and (c) continuing bonds are obligatory. The truth of (a) need not depend on (b) or (c), given that grief and associated activities might seem obligatory in light of a bond that one once had but no longer has:

> I feel as though I need to live my best life for him and I remember him every day, he's always going to be a part of my life, but more because of the memories and the fact that I miss him than because there's a connection. (#49)

There is also a need to further clarify which aspects of grief are obligatory and why. We have already seen that intuitions concerning the appropriateness of grief do not always concern *moral* appropriateness. As discussed in chapters 2 and 3, a grief process is integral to the recognition and accommodation of loss. So, an appeal to moral obligation is not required in order to understand why the relevant aspects of grief ought to arise. They are already *implied* by what has happened, at least under the assumption that a life structure is ultimately to be reconciled with the fact of bereavement. Thus, for the claim that grief is morally obligatory to be plausible, it must relate to other aspects of a grief process and how it unfolds. However, grief encompasses a diversity of experiences, thoughts, and activities, including many other emotions. What, exactly, are we obliged to feel, think, or do, and under what circumstances? To further complicate matters, numerous

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nonmoral norms influence our responses to bereavement, including legal and religious norms, as well as norms of etiquette (such as what to wear and how to behave at a funeral). More specific commitments are also made to the deceased, sometimes stemming from explicit promises to honor wishes. Once all of this is taken into consideration, it is not clear what remains to be accounted for under the general category of "moral obligations that apply in the case of bereavement."

Furthermore, although perceived obligations often *are* associated with enduring relationships, continuing obligations do not *imply* continuing bonds. As Solomon (2004b, 93) acknowledges, having a desire satisfied does not always require experiencing its satisfaction. Indeed, some desires concern states of affairs that will only arise after one's own death. One could even spend a whole lifetime working toward something while knowing that it will not be realized until long after one has died. Where a person's desire can still be satisfied even after that person has died, there remains the possibility of our striving to satisfy it. This is sometimes a matter of respecting the *wishes* of the deceased, but not always. For instance, we might know that they would never have wanted us to do *p*, given that *p* involves a great deal of effort or involves our incurring certain costs. And yet doing *p* still seems right. It could involve respecting their wishes in a wider sense, perhaps by bringing about something that they valued, rather than doing what they explicitly wanted. Doing something in response to a desire or a wish need not involve a sense of obligation toward the deceased. One might instead feel *inspired* to act in a particular way—to internalize certain values or to take on projects and make them one's own (in a way that would not generally be *expected* of a person in one's position). Commemorative activities and the like can thus stem from different kinds of attachments, commitments, and motivations. Not all of these require that one continue to love the deceased. Suppose that loving a person at one time is associated with a commitment to satisfying some of their desires by doing something at a much later date. It is not clear that subsequently honoring one's commitment need involve still loving that person. It is equally compatible with continuing to value a relationship that *was*, where satisfying or failing to satisfy certain desires is integral to the overall story of that relationship and, more specifically, to the significance of what was said and done in the past. Valuing a past relationship also involves valuing *how* it is remembered (McCracken 2005, 145). And what one feels, thinks, says, and does now can change the significance of

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past events, in ways that enhance or detract from the remembered relationship. So, a current sense of obligation does not require a continuing bond; it could involve retaining a bond or, alternatively, valuing a bond that was.[7]

Hence, there are no straightforward generalizations to be found concerning the obligation to grieve or to maintain one or another type of bond. More plausibly, what is experienced as obligatory in a given situation involves a degree of particularity, as does what might *actually* be obligatory in that situation. Relevant considerations include the nature of the relationship, the circumstances of the death, one's relations with other people, the biography of the person who died, and the structure of one's own life. Some obligations stem from bonds, but they are not themselves obligations to maintain bonds. In life, people are not ordinarily *obliged* to continue with relationships indefinitely or to insulate those relationships from substantial change. The same applies in the context of bereavement.

6.2 The Bounds of Social Cognition

I have indicated some of the ways in which philosophical (and more specifically phenomenological) research can cast light on the nature of continuing bonds and the norms associated with them. To this, it should be added that a consideration of continuing bonds also points to the prospect of enriching and diversifying work on social cognition in philosophy and cognitive science. For the most part, this field of interdisciplinary research has concerned itself solely with how we relate to the living. The scope of discussion can be broadened by further acknowledging the many ways in which we relate to the dead. This is not just a matter of supplementing existing areas of research; it also points to a need to rethink certain conceptions of how we experience, understand, and relate to the living.

It is arguable that recent work on social cognition has placed too much emphasis on a certain ability: attributing beliefs and desires to other people, in order to predict and explain their behavior. For the most part, discussions of belief-desire psychology take for granted that this is an adequate description of something we do and, furthermore, that it identifies what is most central to social cognition. The focus of debate has instead been on whether it is accomplished by "simulating" another person's situation and/or mental processes, by employing a "theory of mind," or through some combination of the two (e.g., Davies and Stone 1995a, 1995b). If the

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primacy of belief-desire psychology is assumed, then our relations with the dead would seem to be of little additional interest. When thinking about what someone might have said or done were they still alive, we use the same simulation mechanisms or theory that we would have used were they alive but not perceptually present. And, if we think of them as still having beliefs and desires after their death, we are employing these same cognitive abilities, but in a manner that is removed from any behavioral evidence. Hence, how we understand and relate to the dead might be regarded as—at most—a peripheral issue for social cognition research.

However, others have challenged this emphasis on belief-desire psychology, by drawing on themes in phenomenology, developmental psychology, and other fields (e.g., Gallagher 2005, 2020; Ratcliffe 2007; De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; Hutto 2008; Colombetti and Torrance 2009). It has been argued that much of our social interaction does not depend on belief-desire psychology. In addition, even where belief-desire psychology is at work, it is just one aspect of social cognition, which should not be ascribed undue importance. We ordinarily make sense of others' activities against the backdrop of a shared social world, where artifacts have established functions, people have prescribed roles, and behavior is regulated by shared norms. Immersion in this world makes a substantial contribution to our ability to interpret, anticipate, and explain other people's behavior, a contribution that is neither reducible to nor somehow secondary to belief-desire psychology. A further criticism is that we understand others *through* our relations and interactions with them. Much of the literature on belief-desire psychology assumes that, when addressing and interacting with someone in a second-person way, we rely on the same cognitive mechanisms that are involved in the detached scrutiny of their behavior. Contrary to this, it is arguable that interacting with someone as a "you," in a manner that involves *feelings of connection*, differs in important respects from the disengaged, third-person attribution of mental states. For example, when relating to a "you," it matters *who* that person is, not just what kind of thing they are and what mental states they have. Second-person experience is essentially a way of relating to someone as *this particular person*, something that is not captured by the attribution of mental states to one or another token of the type "possessor of mental states" (Ratcliffe 2015, chap. 8).

The extent to which such approaches pose a challenge to orthodox accounts of our everyday or "folk" psychology is debatable, and I do not seek

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to resolve the matter here.[8] But what I do want to suggest is that an overemphasis on belief-desire psychology leads to a highly selective account of how we experience, understand, interact with, and relate to other people. This is evident in reflecting on the phenomenology of grief and, more specifically, continuing bonds. For instance, in turning to sensed-presence experiences, we can see how distinctively *interpersonal* experience involves a certain way of being affected, along with a sense of particularity that does not apply to entities of other kinds. An emphasis on belief-desire psychology fails to capture this. In addition, experiences of grief reflect the many different ways in which other people are implicated in our lives; they contribute to a sense of who we are, shape and reshape our experiences of possibilities, and guide our actions. Furthermore, as argued in chapters 2 and 3, the world we take for granted when attributing mental states to other people itself depends on established relationships with particular individuals, while at the same time serving as a backdrop against which we anticipate, encounter, and interpret other people in general. In chapter 7, I will show how grief also makes salient the manner in which we rely on others to *regulate* our emotions, activities, and patterns of thought, both during times of upheaval and throughout the course of everyday life. Grief thus reveals the extent to which human lives are interpersonally structured. Other people are not simply *things* of a distinctive type, which we encounter and interpret. They are integral in various ways to an orientation through which we experience and engage with the world. Broadening social cognition research to accommodate grief and continuing bonds therefore requires acknowledging the many ways in which we experience, think about, and relate to the dead, while at the same reconceptualizing our relations with the living.

6.3 Letting Go

I have endorsed the view that the bereaved maintain continuing bonds of various kinds with the dead. However, this need not involve wholesale rejection of the view that grief involves severing bonds and moving on. As we have seen, the term "continuing bonds" encompasses various different ways of experiencing, thinking about, and relating to those who have died, all of which could be described in terms of "letting go" of certain things while "holding on" to others. If the alternative consisted of *severing all ties* with the deceased, then a straightforward contrast could be drawn,

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with continuing bonds in all their diversity on one side and letting go of the deceased on the other. But matters are not so clear. Indeed, it may be more fruitful to regard the two approaches as having different but potentially complementary emphases. In earlier chapters, I distinguished two broad aspects of grief: (a) the way in which an experiential world is reorganized over time so as to accommodate loss and (b) how one experiences and relates to the deceased. Continuing bonds approaches are preoccupied largely with (b), whereas the view that grief involves "letting go" can be thought of primarily in terms of (a). Suppose that one has adjusted to a loss, to the extent that one no longer experiences or interacts with the surrounding world in ways that implicate the deceased. One has—we might say—*let go* of a life structure in which that person was central. Nevertheless, a sense of the person's *style*, the distinctive manner in which she shaped one's possibilities and vice versa, is not exhausted by a comprehensive inventory of all the specific ways in which she contributed to one's life. It is indeterminate, nonlocalized, and irreducible to any number of roles in any number of situations. Given this, it retains the potential to endure.

Hence, there are importantly different ways in which people *matter* to us. Where a disruption of our practical concerns is temporary, concern for the person who has died need not be. The contrast between maintaining a bond and letting go is, I suggest, at least partly symptomatic of a failure to distinguish these types of concern and thus to make clear what *letting go of someone* amounts to. For instance, Bowlby (1980/1998, 25) refers to a consensus view that healthy grief involves "in some degree at least, a withdrawal of emotional investment in the lost person." This could be construed in terms of severing a bond altogether, but it does not have to be. There are emotional investments of different kinds; disengaging from projects, commitments, pastimes, and habits that one shared with the deceased (which have become unsustainable) is not the same as disengaging from the deceased altogether.

These two broad types of concern can be more or less prominent at different points during a grief process. Where one's own life structure depended substantially on the deceased, disruption of that structure might be conspicuous initially, in the guise of contrasts and conflicts between worlds, a sense of unreality, and a tension-riddled interplay between presence and absence. However, as new structure is established, what may then become more prominent is an enduring relationship with the deceased, along with

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an enduring sense of what has been lost. These two aspects of grief are often distinguished, although there is no consistent terminology for doing so. Rosenfeld (2020, 10) appeals to a distinction between "grief" and "mourning," suggesting that they are "fundamentally *different* emotions, the latter only reachable after the former in some way departs." The initial grief is preoccupied (in part, at least) with what has happened to oneself, inhibiting a sense of enduring connection that arises later: "Three long years or so after his death, he would begin to come back to me, but in a different way—as an alive but dead man. He began to *be* again, which I now see as the mourning beginning" (Rosenfeld 2020, 232).

As Rosenfeld observes, we find something like this in the writings of Freud, who is often ascribed a central role in establishing the "severing bonds" narrative. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud describes a process of detaching oneself from the deceased, which involves dynamic tensions between retaining and letting go of the attachment, culminating—at least typically—in detachment:

> So what is the work that mourning performs? I do not think I am stretching a point if I present it in the following manner: reality-testing has revealed that the beloved object no longer exists, and demands that the libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object. An understandable tendency arises to counter this—it may be generally observed that people are reluctant to abandon a libido position, even if a substitute is already beckoning. (Freud 1917/2005, 204)[9]

This passage could be interpreted in terms of letting go of the person or, alternatively, letting go of a life structure that has become unsustainable. If we opt for the latter, it is largely consistent with what I described in chapters 2 and 3 (setting aside terminological differences). In light of a bereavement, an experiential world that implicates the deceased in various ways is no longer sustainable. Yet one cannot simply abandon that world instantaneously. And so it persists, in a way that conflicts with explicit propositional acceptance of the death. Over time, there is alternation between what we might call "denial" and "acceptance." In this way, patterns of habitual expectation are altered, such that the structure of one's life eventually ceases to depend on the deceased. So, there is a progressive detachment from the relationship, of a kind that Freud refers to here: "Each individual memory and expectation in which the libido was connected to the object is adjusted and hyper-invested, leading to its detachment from the libido" (1917/2005,

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205). Although Freud describes the ego as "free and uninhibited" once this detachment has been accomplished, it need not be construed in terms of letting go of someone entirely. The process is compatible with retaining a kind of relationship that no longer conflicts with the realities of one's situation, something that can also involve an enduring sense of loss. Consistent with this, Freud later distinguishes, in a letter to Binswanger, whose fourteen-year-old son had recently died, an "acute sorrow" that will come to an end from an inconsolability that will endure (Rosenfeld 2020, 224–225).[10]

We find a similar distinction in Lewis's *A Grief Observed*. Here, Lewis remarks on an initial preoccupation with self-directed concerns, something that is not only distinct from but—in his case—also opposed to an experience of enduring connection with the deceased:

> For, as I have discovered, passionate grief does not link us with the dead but cuts us off from them. This becomes clearer and clearer. It is just at those moments when I feel least sorrow—getting into my morning bath is usually one of them—that H. rushes upon my mind in her full reality, her otherness. (1961/1966, 47)

For Lewis, we might say that letting go is not merely compatible with an enduring connection but required for it. The salience of one kind of concern risks eclipsing the other.[11] A reconfiguration of one's practical concerns will inevitably involve abandoning certain aspects of a relationship, such as the anticipation of sitting on the sofa together or being greeted upon returning home. But the continuing bonds approach does not claim that relationships are preserved in their entirety. Instead, they persist in an altered form, and some important qualities of the earlier relationship are lost. So, having adjusted practically to the implications of a bereavement remains compatible with an enduring sense of loss, even as one experiences a continuing bond.

Hence, the contrast between retaining bonds and letting go is not so pronounced as it might seem. Sometimes, grief does involve ultimately letting go of a relationship altogether. However, where a connection remains, it is compatible with letting go in another way: ceasing to inhabit an experiential world that presupposes the deceased. There can also be tensions between these two aspects of grief, as when a preoccupation with one's own world interferes with one's experience of the person who has died. Nevertheless, they are aspects of the same process, rather than contrasting trajectories that the process might follow. Furthermore, given that continuing bonds encompass considerable variety, it would be better to think of interpersonal experience

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in grief in terms of numerous different combinations of retention and loss than in terms of a simple contrast between the two.

6.4 The Objects of Grief

Acknowledging the difference between two ways of "letting go" or "moving on" helps to deflate a philosophical problem concerning grief's subsiding over time. According to Moller (2007, 2017), empirical findings concerning *resilience* among the bereaved show that most of us recover surprisingly swiftly from bereavement.[12] At the same time, however, it seems that the loss of someone immensely important to us warrants a longer, more intense period of grief. Indeed, it can be further argued that *any* fading of grief is either irrational or rationally incomprehensible from a first-person perspective, given that the significance of one's loss does not change over time in the manner that grief does (Moller 2007, 2017; Marušić 2018).

Once the practical impact of a death upon one's life is distinguished from a type of concern that one had—and may continue to have—for the deceased, the diminution of grief is not so puzzling. Reorganizing a life to accommodate loss does not require severing all connections with the deceased. What Moller (2007, 310) calls "functional replacement" of the deceased with someone new (via, e.g., remarriage or having another child) need not add up to comprehensive replacement.[13] Similarly, Marušić's formulation of the puzzle does not distinguish between a specifically personal way in which someone can matter to us and another kind of mattering that diminishes over time: "It is the discrepancy between the duration of grief and the extent to which the loved one matters to us that gives rise to the puzzle" (Marušić 2018, 5). The problem is less pressing once we acknowledge that there are two different things at play here: a profound disruption of one's own life, to which one adjusts over time, and a concern for the deceased that may endure and also continue to enrich one's life.

However, this does not dispense with the problem entirely. Suppose we set aside any preoccupation with what has happened to one's own world. It is plausible to maintain that other aspects of grief, concerned specifically with the loss of the person, similarly diminish over time. For Moller (2007, 2017), the object of grief is there having been a loss, while Marušić (2018, 6) maintains that grief's "primary object" is a person's "*being dead*." Whichever the case, what grief is *about* does not change, at least not in a way that

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corresponds to the course of grief. So, if grief is both directed at and justified by its object, there remains the question of why it diminishes over time in the way it usually does, or even at all. Granted, all manner of psychological explanations might be given for why grief subsides and how this is beneficial to us. But they do not address the problem. Emotions in general are not only directed at their objects; they are also judged to be *appropriate* or *inappropriate* in light of their objects. For instance, being happy about a friend's traffic accident, angry with someone for offering a friendly greeting, or frightened of the slow-moving shopping trolley would ordinarily be deemed inappropriate. Other examples of inappropriateness involve a mismatch between the cause and object of an emotion, as when we become angry with someone because we have had a bad day. Even when a type of emotion is appropriate to its cause, it need not be *proportionate* to it. For instance, where anger is appropriate to a situation, the extent of one's anger could still be deemed excessive. Under the assumption that grief is both caused by the death of a person and directed at the loss of that person, we can similarly ask whether it is appropriate and proportionate. Such questions also apply to more specific features of grief, including its temporal structure. Hence, if grief's object is the reason for grief and that object is unchanging or does not change over time in the same way as grief, then grief's diminution is unresponsive to our reasons, regardless of whether or not it is pragmatically desirable (Marušić 2018). Furthermore, to the extent that the duration of our grief fails to reflect the value that the deceased had for us, there are grounds for regretting the extent of our resilience (Moller 2007, 315).

Whether or not such concerns are legitimate hinges on the object of grief. And it is by no means clear that grief's object, or at least its sole object, is the loss of a person or that person's being dead. Cholbi (2017a, 2022) proposes instead that grief is about the loss or radical alteration of an important *relationship*. When combined with his endorsement of a continuing bonds approach, this provides an apparent solution to the problems that concern Moller and Marušić. Adapting to the radical alteration of a relationship and working out how, if at all, that relationship can continue is a process that takes time (Cholbi 2019, 498). Furthermore, so long as grief does not culminate in a complete loss of the relationship, there need be no tension between the diminution of grief and the value of the relationship. However, it is arguable that this emphasis on the relationship does not

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capture the manner in which grief is also concerned with the person who has died, with what *that person* has lost. It is not enough to say, as Cholbi (2019, 496) does, that a bereavement is "a catalyst for a crisis in our relationship with them" and that grief is an emotional response geared toward sustaining the relationship in a modified form. The sense of loss concerns something more than that. Were this not the case, then sentiments along the lines of "I would give my own life to have her back" or "I wish I could trade places with her" would be incoherent, and it is not clear that they are.

I suggest instead that it is a mistake to conceive of a person's being dead, there having been a loss, and the loss or transformation of a relationship as rival candidate objects of grief. Grief does not have a singular, concrete object. What we experience and engage with over the course of a grief process is a *loss of possibilities*, aspects of which can be described in terms of various other, more specific objects. Hence, the overarching object of grief is not something concrete that has ceased to be—a person or a relationship.[14] To support this position, I will first consider experiences of loss associated with involuntary childlessness. As these experiences do not involve first having something concrete and then losing it, they serve to make explicit how a sense of loss is oriented toward the possible. Of course, one could respond that experiences of bereavement differ in this respect from experiences of childlessness. However, the next step in my argument will be to show that, regardless of any differences between the two, grief over the death of a person is equally a matter of experiencing and engaging with a loss of possibilities.

The phenomenological survey introduced in chapter 1 was concerned specifically with bereavement. However, to our surprise, we received twenty-nine responses that instead described grief over childlessness. Some of these respondents also remarked on a widespread failure to acknowledge experiences such as theirs (a point to which I will return in chapter 8). All were women, who had been directed to our research by a support network for childless women. However, similar experiences have also been reported by childless men (Hadley and Hanley 2011).[15] The distinction between experiences of loss over childlessness and experiences of loss associated with specific life events is not always clear. Some respondents also described feelings of loss relating to abortions, miscarriages, failed IVF treatments, other medical treatments, relationship breakups, and the deaths of relatives. However, in the twenty-nine accounts I refer to here, the primary focus, and in some cases the exclusive focus, was on being unable to have children. We could

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take the line that—strictly speaking—these are not in fact *loss* experiences, as nothing concrete was taken away from the person. Surely, there is a difference between an experience of losing something and an experience of never having had something. However, respondents consistently describe their sense of loss as both similar in kind and comparable in profundity to an experience of bereavement: “The grief over a person that someone has welcomed/wished for/loved in advance but was never there can be as devastating as the grief over the death of a person that has lived a real life” (#210); “I’m mourning the loss of my daughter I never had” (#209).

Even if one can be affected by childlessness to an *extent* that compares to a significant bereavement, this does not entail that the relevant experiences are similar in *kind*. Perhaps emotional responses to involuntary childlessness involve various combinations of disappointment, regret, sorrow, and longing, which together differ in some way from an experience of grief or loss? Instead, I suggest that, where something matters deeply to a person, two different scenarios are compatible with the same type of loss experience: (a) it was the case but is no longer the case, and (b) it was once anticipated but will never happen. Common to both is the sense of *lost possibilities*, which is a prominent theme in first-person descriptions of grief over childlessness:

> This is unlike any other grief I have experienced. Because I haven’t actually lost a person but lost the life I thought I would have, which was children, it feels all-consuming. (#225)

> It is the loss of a dreamed-of future, a life you have imagined since you were a child. (#261)

> This is a lifetime dream since I was a little girl. And it is a loss of memories that would never happen, I couldn’t get past, couldn’t let go of, I could never experience. (#209)

> I am experiencing grief and loss around being unable to have children. I am grieving the future children I imagined and believed I would have but am unable to. (#262)

Hence, what is lost is a potential state of affairs, which was sought, anticipated, and also imagined in varying degrees of detail. Of course, that something fails to occur is not ordinarily a cause for grief, even when it was something highly desirable. For instance, my failing to win the lottery only ever elicits very mild disappointment, if that. An important difference, though, is that having a child was expected, at least for a time, perhaps

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with such confidence that the prospect of childlessness was not even contemplated. Furthermore, having children was something that respondents cared about deeply and actively sought. Even so, it remains the case that anticipating, caring about, and investing a lot in something does not always make its nonoccurrence a cause for grief. It may instead bring surprise, disappointment, sadness, frustration, disillusion, and demoralization. However, what does distinguish an experience of grief or loss is that the relevant possibilities are not associated merely with some envisaged future self but also with who one was and who one now is. Some testimonies refer to *becoming a different person*. It is not a matter of picking oneself up and embarking on new projects. Instead, one faces the task of reorganizing the structure of a life, including one's values, how one relates to others, what one strives for, and the categories that one falls under (which no longer include "future parent"):

> I live with the grief for the children I never had and the identity I lost as a result. (#223)

> This grief was the worst ever. It was the loss of my dreams and future. The loss of who I was meant to be. (#198)

> I am a completely different person. (#196)

> My identity has shifted gradually . . . which brings ease. (#223)

> Loss of one's identity as a mother and becoming a mother is endless. (#238)

Thus, recognition of the inability to become something can also affect *who* one is now.[16] The relevant sense of *self* or *identity* corresponds to what I have described in terms of life structure, practical identity, and the experiential world. The anticipation and pursuit of certain possibilities depends on values, projects, and commitments that are central to one's life. When those possibilities are recognized as counterfactual rather than futural, there is a change in *who one is*. This can involve "the death of an assumed way of life" (#253); the "collapse" of the "world as I knew it" (#258).[17] While some accounts of involuntary childlessness emphasize losing the possibility of loving a child, others indicate something different—*actually* loving a child who never came into being: "Although they never came to this world, I feel and know them as real, truly existing persons that I never will have the chance to get to know" (#210); "I felt I knew the baby, that it was a boy, and that he was waiting for me" (#233). Such testimonies are challenging

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to interpret. Is human experience structured in such a way that we can actually love someone who is no more than a counterfactual possibility? Alternatively, do people borrow narratives and ways of thinking from other contexts, perhaps including that of bereavement, so as to interpret and articulate a form of loss that is otherwise intangible?

More generally, it can be difficult to tease apart the self- and other-directed aspects of loss experiences. For instance, grief over the forced adoption of a child might concern what one has been denied, what one's child has been denied, or a relationship that was never allowed to develop. In contrast, we might think that an experience of lost bodily capacities, caused by chronic illness or serious injury, is straightforwardly self-directed. But it could also include an awareness of all the joint activities that one's children will now be denied. Likewise, a person's first thoughts upon losing a job might concern what others, especially family members, will lose as a consequence. Experiences of grief and loss can also involve conflicts between one's own life structure and that of someone else. In the case of a relationship breakup, one's life may be shaped by a concern for the other person's possibilities, while that person seeks to be free of one's concern in order to actualize her possibilities. Experiences of loss thus involve various different combinations of what I have lost, they have lost, and we have lost.

Despite their complexity and diversity, loss experiences share something in common: they involve recognizing and engaging with lost possibilities.[18] And this, I suggest, is equally central to grief in response to bereavement. It seems right to say that grief is about a death, about a person's being dead, *and* about the loss of a valued relationship. But consider a puzzle that applies to all three accounts of grief's object. What exactly is lost when someone dies? Suppose Person C dies at time 5. At this point, do we also lose C at earlier times 1, 2, 3, and 4? The answer, surely, is no. When C is a teenager, C as a baby is already gone. And, when C reaches the age of forty, C as a teenager is long gone. It seems wrong to insist that the loss over which we grieve includes the person at all life stages. Then again, it is just as implausible to maintain that we grieve only the loss of a current time-slice of whatever duration. The point applies equally to relationships, which change over time, often in radical ways. The relationship that one might have had with a newborn baby is quite different from the relationship one later has with a teenager. Granted, that relationship has changed over time and in some ways endured, but it also seems right to say that a

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certain *type* of relationship is now gone, in the past. Yet, unlike a death, this transformation is not something that ordinarily elicits profound grief—just occasional moments of sadness and nostalgia.

What, then, is lost when we grieve? Grief over a death, like grief over involuntary childlessness, is not principally about the subtraction of a concrete entity from one's world. Comprehension of what has happened is inextricable from the recognition, over time, of lost possibilities: "I feel I've been robbed of my future" (#55); "I am grieving for the loss of my future, of my whole life" (#83); "there's a constant feeling of being cheated out of your future" (#47). It is not that one first acknowledges a loss of possibilities and then grieves. Rather, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3, it is through a grief process that we recognize and negotiate loss. Phenomenologically speaking, at least, the object of grief does not precede the experience of grief; it is entwined with it. Grief changes over time because an engagement with possibilities is dynamic, as is one's relationship with the deceased.

This is not to imply that grief is directed exclusively toward the future as opposed to the past. Grief over the death of a person is not simply past- or future-oriented; the two are inseparable. How we remember our past, the significance that past events have for us, and how those events relate to one another depend in part on where we are heading—on whether commitments, values, projects, and pastimes are retained, revised, or lost. We can feel more or less connected to aspects of our past, and its meanings are altered in light of unfolding events. In this way, Sartre (1943/1989, 497–499) suggests that we can and do change our past, by continuing to actualize meaningful possibilities that transform its significance:

> The past as "that which is to be changed" is indispensable to the choice of the future and . . . consequently no free surpassing can be effected except in terms of a past, but we can see too how the very *nature* of the past comes to the past from the original choice of a future. . . . All my past is there pressing, urgent, imperious, but its meanings and the orders which it gives me I choose by the very project of my end. . . . It is the future which decides whether the past is living or dead.

The point applies more specifically to grief. For instance, Peter Goldie remarks on the parallels between how we relate to our past during grief and free indirect style in literature, where the perspectives of narrator and character are entangled. Memories involving the deceased are altered by the death, insofar as they are recontextualized in light of our current situation:

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> In grieving, we relate to our past in a special way, realizing that things as they used to be, and as we remember them, can never be the same again. Our position is, in just this sense, agonizingly ironic, and our thinking about and remembering our past, from the perspective that we now have on it, can reflect this irony through the psychological correlate of free indirect style. (Goldie 2012, 56)

What transforms these memories is not just the fact of the death but also the loss of certain future possibilities involving the deceased. There is a contrast between what the future now offers and the kinds of possibilities attached to events-as-remembered, resulting in tensions and conflicts that are negotiated over time.

An emphasis on lost possibilities can accommodate the self-directed, other-directed, and relational aspects of grief and loss. We can distinguish the following broad categories: my possibilities; your possibilities; our possibilities. In the context of an interpersonal relationship, one is not just concerned with furthering one's own projects and utilizing the other person in order to actualize relevant possibilities. One also cares about the actualization of *her* possibilities and acts in ways that are intelligible only relative to that end.[19] Sometimes the distinction between what is mine and what is yours does not apply; possibilities are instead experienced as *ours*. The three are phenomenologically inextricable, both before and after a bereavement. When Person B thinks of Person A and concerns herself with A's well-being, B does not first of all detach herself from any relationship with A, so as to look upon A from a detached standpoint of selfless concern. As we saw in chapter 3, B encounters A against the backdrop of a shared world that itself presupposes their relationship. Hence, B does not have a wholly independent sense of *who* A is. Instead, B's practical identity is partly constituted by the relationship with A and vice versa. Concern over the same unitary loss of life possibilities can therefore be directed more specifically at B's current predicament, at what has happened to A, or at the relationship between A and B:

> I am grieving not only him, but the loss of our life together, past, and future. (#17)

> Losing my husband meant losing the future I thought I had, the everyday routine that we had, the security I felt and the deep love that we shared. (#41)

> The future had looked as though it was all falling into place and we were so excited to be sharing it. (#47)

> In that instant I lost the love of my life and the whole of my future. (#54)

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Thus, in conceiving of grief as an engagement with lost possibilities, I have in mind something that is phenomenologically unitary, encompassing a "me," a "you," and an "us." For current purposes, we can be agnostic about the metaphysical status of the "us." The point is simply that some of the relevant possibilities are encountered in the first instance as "ours," rather than as mine and also yours; the subject that one initially assumes when experiencing and contemplating them is plural. Although it is also right to say that grief is about the loss of a relationship, the death of a person, or a person's being dead, these are not incompatible objects of grief. Instead, they are different aspects of a unitary disturbance of possibilities.

One might object that a loss of possibilities is merely the *formal* object of grief. Hence, the issue of its concrete object remains unresolved—is it the death, the person's being dead, the loss of a relationship, or something else? The formal object of an emotion is generally conceived of as an evaluative property attributed to its concrete object, which renders an emotion of that *type* situationally appropriate.[20] For example, while the concrete object of a particular experience of fear may be a hungry tiger, the formal object of that type of emotion is threat. Similarly, we might say that the concrete object of grief is a death or the loss of a relationship, whereas the formal object is loss. However, it is misleading to think of grief in these terms, as a singular emotional experience with a formal object and a concrete object. If the formal object of grief is a loss of possibilities, then it is not something that we "take in" fully at any particular time. Instead, it is something that we experience, comprehend, and navigate over a prolonged period. Our emotional experience at a given point during the process is concerned with one or another aspect of this loss. Depending on which aspect, the experience might be said to be directed at the death, the person's being dead, the circumstances of the death, loss of a relationship, the implications for one's future, how one will cope, and so forth. Hence, the temporally extended process of experiencing and engaging with a loss of possibilities has different concrete objects at different times. Furthermore, objects of experience have varying degrees of concreteness and specificity. For instance, having thought "we will never sit at our favorite table in that restaurant on a Friday evening again," one might then be struck by a more diffuse sense of a future that is lacking in significant ways. So, the *phenomenology* of grief does not conform to a straightforward distinction between concrete and formal objects. The difference between the two is a matter of degree. In

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addition, the formal object is experienced, understood, and engaged with over a prolonged period. Given this, the distinction needs to be reconceived as involving a part–whole relation; constituent experiences are directed at more localized aspects of a larger sense of loss.

Grief thus has a range of variably concrete objects, which qualify as objects of grief insofar as they are integral to a larger loss of possibilities. An experience of loss is not directed at a death per se but a death as a loss of possibilities for you, for me, and for us. There may well be good (non-phenomenological) reasons for retaining a clear-cut distinction between the concrete and formal objects of emotion processes, such as identifying and distinguishing types of processes by appealing to their formal objects. However, in considering what the *experience* of grief is directed at, the relationship proves to be more complicated. Grief is not an emotional experience with a singular, concrete object but an extended engagement with a wide-ranging loss of possibilities. So, what might at first appear to be directed primarily at something in the past turns out to be future-oriented. Nevertheless, it remains inseparable from how we relate to our past, from how the past matters to us in light of where we are heading.

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Grief Worlds

A Study of Emotional Experience

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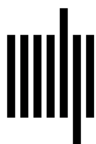

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