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Grief over Non-Death Losses: A Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract

Grief is often thought of as an emotional response to the death of someone we love. However, the term "grief" is also used when referring to losses of various other kinds, as with grief over illness, injury or impairment, unemployment, a relationship breakup, or loss of significant personal possessions. In this paper, we address the question of what, if anything, the relevant experiences have in common. We argue that grief over a bereavement and other experiences of loss share a common phenomenological structure: one experiences the loss of certain *possibilities* that were integral – and perhaps even central – to the unfolding structure of one's life. Grief can thus be conceived of in a broad but still univocal way. To develop this position, we focus on the example of grief over involuntary childlessness, where the lack of a concrete, historical object of emotion serves to make explicit the way in which grief concerns future possibilities. We go on to suggest that the phenomenological complexity, diversity, and prevalence of grief are obscured when approached via an abstract, simplified conception of bereavement.

Keywords: bereavement; childlessness; grief; identity; life structure; loss; possibilities

1. Introduction

Grief is often taken to be an emotional response to the death of someone we love. However, the term "grief" is also used in a broader way that encompasses losses of various other kinds. Grief, or at least grief-like experiences, are said to arise in response to a range of situations and events, including relationship breakups, serious illness or injury, loss of employment, homelessness, and other circumstances (Harris, 2020). It should not simply be assumed that the English language term "grief" refers to a singular phenomenon; perhaps some of the relevant experiences have little in common. However, it has been suggested that there are indeed important similarities between experiences of bereavement and other losses. Given this, there have been calls for a new research field, focused around a more inclusive conception of loss (Harvey and Miller, 1998). Nevertheless, there remains the concern that a permissive conception of grief might bring together a diverse assortment of life circumstances and emotional experiences that have little in common. For instance, how – if at all – are we to distinguish grief from a chronic sense of unfulfillment, where certain achievements appear forever beyond one's reach? And what of regret, disappointment, failure, guilt, shame, sorrow, and loneliness? It will not suffice to insist that an experience of grief is somehow qualitatively distinct from all of these. For

one thing, any such claim would need to be substantiated. Furthermore, grief is not an episodic emotion but, more plausibly, a temporally extended process that varies markedly over its course and incorporates emotional experiences of many other kinds (Goldie, 2012; Ratcliffe, 2017a, 2022). Hence, we are concerned with the question of what – if anything – distinguishes this temporally extended pattern *as a whole* from other types of episodic and diachronic emotional experience. Closely related to this is the issue of what the *objects* of grief share in common: which characteristics make something an appropriate object of grief, rather than – say - regret or dismay?

In what follows, we will set out a phenomenological case for a broad conception of grief, which addresses concerns about heterogeneity by identifying something that is common to experiences of loss and also distinguishes them from other forms of emotional experience.[1] We do not thereby seek to preclude an additional, bereavement-specific conception of grief. Indeed, it is plausible that experiences of personal loss are distinctive in important ways (Ratcliffe, 2020, 2022). Rather, our position is that it can *also* be informative to think of grief in broader terms, given the structural similarities between various experiences of loss. Furthermore, by doing so, we can enrich our understanding of bereavement grief.

Our discussion will focus specifically on the example of grief over involuntary childlessness. We have chosen this example because it is particularly effective in showing how grief is not simply *past-directed*, but centrally concerned with losses of *future possibilities*. What also becomes apparent is that these possibilities are integral to *who* one is – to one's life structure, sense of identity, or experiential world. Of course, it should not simply be assumed from the outset that grief over childlessness is informatively similar to other experiences that might be referred to as grief. However, we will go on to argue that this same analysis captures what is common to and distinctive of grief experiences more generally, including grief over a death.[2] Importantly, it also enables us to recognise the phenomenological complexity of loss. This complexity is obscured when the paradigm case of grief is taken to be a decontextualised scenario where one person dies swiftly, and perhaps unexpectedly, after which another person grieves over their death. In bereavement and other situations, grief is seldom so neatly bounded. This is largely because its *object* is not neatly bounded, rendering the experience difficult to conceptualise and articulate.

2. Grief Over Involuntary Childlessness

For a broad conception of grief to be tenable, a sufficiently encompassing account of grief's object is required. The object of grief – what it is *about* – is often taken to be the event of someone's death or their being dead (Moller, 2007; Marušić, 2018). This restricts grief to the context of bereavement. But it also renders grief anomalous, given that emotions of other kinds are not generally classified by appealing to their concrete objects. For instance, one could – in principle – be afraid of anything (although whether an entity, event, or situation is an *appropriate* object of fear depends on the particulars of one's situation). We thus identify *types*

1 We do not go so far as to maintain that our phenomenological account maps neatly onto how the English language term "grief" operates in everyday discourse. Talk of grief may well play a number of different roles in describing, conveying, and expressing emotion. For instance, referring to one's experience as one of "grief" could serve to emphasize the level of difficulty and distress involved, rather than being an attempt to categorize the experience accurately.

2 This account will also accommodate grief over the death of nonhuman animals, but does not apply so obviously to the grief *of* nonhuman animals. Regardless of whether other animals experience something that might be termed "grief", the experiences we are concerned with require a temporally organised life, involving projects, commitments, expectations, and aspirations that may stretch far into the future. Human lives are distinctive in this respect. For the same reason, human infants may not experience loss in quite the way described here.

of emotion, such as fear, relief, anger, and happiness, rather than the likes of shark-fear, not-losing-one's-job-relief, anger-at-queue-jumpers, and woodland-walk-happiness. To render grief consistent with wider practice, we could appeal instead to its distinctive *formal* object: a value property possessed by its concrete object, which is associated with an emotion of that type (e.g., de Sousa, 1987; Teroni, 2007). This would be in line with how other types of emotion are identified by their characteristic formal objects, as with the case of fear where the formal object is threat. A natural candidate for the formal object of grief is loss. To make this specific to bereavement, we could refer more specifically to the loss of a *person*. That would still accommodate the likes of relationship breakups and close family members moving overseas. So, we could refer still more specifically to *irrevocable* loss. Although this would not suffice to identify an emotion experienced exclusively in response to the deaths of those we love, the formal object of grief would approximate this very closely.

We have no objection to such an approach, but the question remains as to whether there is also a broader type of grief experience, the formal object of which is *loss* of a more general kind. The answer depends on whether or not this alleged "grief" can be distinguished from a host of other emotional responses, such as disappointment, regret, remorse, frustration, resignation, sorrow, and guilt. We will suggest that it can, while adding that the relevant phenomenology, which it shares with emotional responses to bereavement, has been obscured by tendencies to (a) construe grief as a reaction to *historical* loss, and (b) think of loss in ways that are too generic and abstract. To make explicit and challenge both tendencies, we will focus on the example of grief over involuntary childlessness, which can involve a sense of loss that is not concerned primarily with something specific, concrete, and past. To do so, we will turn to some first-person accounts obtained via a qualitative survey of bereavement grief. Participants were invited to provide open-ended, free-text responses to a series of questions about their current or past experiences of grief. In total, 265 responses were received, most of which included detailed descriptions of emotional experience. However, to our surprise, 29 respondents did not address bereavement grief, but instead grief over childlessness. Some of these respondents remarked on a tendency to overemphasise bereavement when thinking about grief, and on a consequent failure to recognise and acknowledge experiences such as theirs.[3] These responses were all submitted by women, who had been directed to our survey by the network Gateway Women, which provides support for women who are involuntarily childless.[4] However, similar experiences of loss are also described by some childless men (Hadley and Hanley 2011, 61; Hadley, 2021).

It is not always clear when an experience involves grief *over* childlessness, rather than grief over bereavements or losses of other kinds. Some respondents who mentioned childlessness also described feelings of loss associated with specific historical events or sequences of events, including abortions, miscarriages, failed IVF treatments, illnesses and treatment outcomes, relationship breakups, and the deaths of relatives. However, in the 29 testimonies we refer to here, the primary focus was on not having children. Respondents explicitly identified the principal object of their grief as childlessness *per se*, even when they also described more specific, historical losses. Involuntary childlessness was attributed to a variety of causes and concerned – for the most part – not having children at all, rather than a more specific inability to have biological children. Some remarked that they found the frequent question "why not adopt?" insensitive, in failing to acknowledge the emotional and practical complexities of the situation. As one respondent wrote, "The phrase 'why not just adopt' is the bête noire of all childless women. It is said [as if it is like] going to the supermarket. [….] Everyone wants to suggest a fix, but there is no easy fix" (#264).

3 The study was conducted from 2020 to 2021, as part of the AHRC-funded project "Grief: A Study of Human Emotional Experience". For further details, see Ratcliffe (2022).

4 The network founder, Jody Day, has also published a detailed account of her own grief over childlessness, which emphasizes distress caused by predominant social and cultural attitudes (Day, 2016).

In what follows, we are concerned with childlessness as an object of grief. At the same time, we acknowledge that the relevant circumstances are diverse and that emotional experiences of loss further involve various different concrete objects of emotion. One might take the line that grief over childlessness is not, strictly speaking, an experience of *loss* at all, as nothing concrete was *taken* from the person. After all, there is surely an important difference between emotional experiences of losing something and of never having had it in the first place. However, we will instead show how first-person accounts of grief over childlessness challenge that way of thinking about loss.

Some respondents to our survey emphasize just how emotionally painful involuntary childlessness can be, comparable even to the effects 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" (#213). Of course, that an emotional experience affects someone so profoundly that they compare it to bereavement does not imply that the two experiences are also similar in *kind*. It could be that emotional responses to childlessness – however distressing they might be – are quite different from experiences of actually losing someone or something important. Perhaps they involve painful feelings of disappointment, regret, sorrow and longing, which do not add up to grief. However, although these survey respondents do not attribute their grief to the effects of particular historical events, they still describe it in terms of *loss*:

> Because I haven't actually lost a person but lost the life I thought I would have, which was children, it feels all-consuming. (#228)
>
> This is the death of a future life. (#222)
>
> It is the loss of a dreamed-of future, a life you have imagined since you were a child. (#264)
>
> I had to say goodbye to the child I desperately wanted but was never able to have, they died in my heart and will never leave. (#258)
>
> 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. (#265)

What seems to be lost in these cases is a significant *possibility* or cluster of interrelated possibilities that was sought, anticipated, and often imagined in varying degrees of detail. Now, the failure of something highly desirable to occur is not ordinarily a cause of grief. For instance, not winning the lottery ordinarily brings only mild disappointment, if that. An important difference, though, is that having a child was not just taken to be possible – it was also anticipated, perhaps with such confidence that the prospect of childlessness was never really contemplated. Furthermore, having children was something that these women cared about deeply and actively sought. Nevertheless, it remains doubtful that anticipating, caring about, and investing considerable energy into something makes its non-occurrence a sufficient cause for grief or an appropriate object of grief. Instead, it might elicit some combination of surprise, disappointment, sadness, frustration, regret, disillusion, and demoralisation. Take the scenario – familiar to many academics – of having a major grant application rejected. This can bring marked and prolonged disappointment, spanning a range of emotions, but it is not clear that some or all of these are sufficient for grief. A conception of grief that accommodates all major disappointments seems too permissive, failing to capture a more specific type of emotional experience. A failed grant application is not typically experienced as the *loss* of something (at least not in the relevant

sense of "loss"), but as something that was never gained, however deserving one may have been.[5] What, then, marks the difference between experiences like this and those that we might term "grief"?

What is crucial is that the lost possibilities towards which grief is directed are not just much-desired states of affairs in an imagined or anticipated future; these possibilities are also integral to a sense of *who one is now* or – at least – to who one *was* before full acknowledgement of their foreclosure. Consistent with this, experiences of lost possibilities associated with involuntary childlessness are sometimes described in terms of the loss, diminution, disruption, or transformation of a kind of *identity*:

> I live with the grief for the children I never had and the identity I lost as a result. . . . Sometimes it was stabbing grief with sobbing, other times it was a numbness, an incomprehension of how I had arrived at that point, who would I be now? (#226)
>
> This grief was the worst ever. It was the loss of my dreams and future. The loss of who I was meant to be. (#201)
>
> I am a completely different person. (#199)
>
> The nature of my relationship was with an identity that I would be a mother and then repeatedly to have that dashed and eventually destroyed because of my age. (#241)

Thus, appreciation of the inability to become someone or something affects who one is now. An anticipated or imagined future self or future situation was integral to one's current sense of self. With the acceptance that certain outcomes are irrevocably beyond reach and are now counterfactual rather than futural, one's identity is profoundly altered. This disrupted sense of *identity* can equally be described in terms of a *life structure* or an *experiential world*; one's life is turned upside down or on its head, and one comes to inhabit a different world (Ratcliffe, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020, 2022). It is this, we suggest, that distinguishes the experience from one of disappointment. Where the latter is concerned, a future possibility might be negated or foreclosed, but it is not experienced as lost in quite the same way, given that the anticipated state of affairs was not integrated into one's life to the same extent. Hence, although a failed grant application is not ordinarily an object of grief, one might well experience grief in a scenario where repeated disappointments eventually lead to the loss or abandonment of a career in which one was heavily invested. In the case of grief over childlessness, one can similarly be tasked with reorganizing a life. Survey respondents were at different points in this process: "My identity has shifted gradually. . . . which brings ease" (#226); "loss of one's identity as a mother and becoming a mother is endless" (#241).[6]

Grief is thus distinctive insofar as it involves recognising and comprehending the implications of lost possibilities for the structure of one's life or world, and – over time – coming to reorganise one's life accordingly (Attig, 2011; Ratcliffe, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020, 2022; Fuchs, 2018; Read, 2018; Mehmel, 2021; Ratcliffe and

5 This is not to say that a life could not be organized in such a way that a failed grant application would be experienced as a loss. Rather, the point is that this is typically not the case.

6 In an interesting recent discussion, Mehmel (2021) appeals to a similar example: grief over a stillbirth, where there is no history of shared habits and projects involving the deceased. Drawing on this example, Mehmel also observes that grief is not simply past-directed, but oriented towards future possibilities of the self. However, it remains the case here that one's grief is concerned with a concrete, historical loss. Grief directed at childlessness per se is thus different; it does not have a concrete, historical object. Hence, the example works differently, pushing us towards the conclusion that the object of grief is a loss of possibilities.

Byrne, 2022). In referring to an experiential world, life structure, or sense of identity, what we have in mind is a network of interrelated projects, commitments, relationships, and expectations, which could be loosely termed a person's distinctive "value system". This constitutes the unique organisation of a life, an answer to the question of *who* someone is: I am a teacher; I am a husband and parent; I am committed to this and that; I enjoy doing those things; these are my habitual, daily activities; these are my future plans (which reflect my projects and commitments); this is how the current organisation of my life is shaped by those plans.

A life structure is thus closely related to what Korsgaard (1996) calls a "practical identity": a set of categories through which we think about ourselves and engage with the social world.[7] Practical identity – in contrast to some bare, undifferentiated sense of being a singular locus of experience – includes the likes of being a parent, spouse, or teacher, along with one's sex, gender, sexuality, political and religious affiliations, and numerous other categories that incorporate action-guiding norms and shared expectations. When someone describes a loss or change of identity in realising that they will not have children, "future parent" was one of the categories that made up their identity. Another relevant notion is that of the "narrative self", conceived of as a unifying, temporally organised story that comprises *who* one is, something that need not be explicitly *told* in order to constitute one's distinctiveness and coherence.[8]

However, when we say that the loss experienced in grief impacts upon *who* one is, what we have in mind is broader in scope than both narrative and practical identity. Values – broadly construed – can be reflected in emotional experiences of situations and events without their being explicitly or implicitly integrated into an organised narrative. Furthermore, not all aspects of a life structure are conceptual or articulable. Much of the relevant organisation is integral to an experiential world that our more specifically directed experiences, thoughts, and activities take for granted. Things appear immediately significant to us in ways that reflect an established value system – they *matter* to us as they do in light of our established projects, commitments, relationships, and pastimes. For the most part, how things matter is grasped pre-reflectively and habitually, as inherent in our surroundings. The delayed train time on the departure board, the football that bounces off the goal post, the child falling off their bike, and the five hundred new messages in one's inbox appear immediately significant in distinctive ways that reflect one's values. Whether or not we regard such experiences as specifically *perceptual*, it is plausible to maintain that gauging how something matters to us does not ordinarily require explicit inference from experience. Nor should it be construed as specifically *cognitive*, at least not in a way that is to be contrasted with what is bodily, habitual, and felt. It is – in part, at least – through a range of felt, bodily dispositions that we experience and respond to significant events (Ratcliffe, 2008, 2015, 2022). To classify all of this as narrative would be to adopt a conception of narrative that is too broad to be informative. A similar point applies to practical identity, construed as a "description under which you value yourself" (Korsgaard, 1996, 101). Much that makes us who we are would not figure in such a description, if by this is meant something we can articulate. In fact, it may only become salient to us, and perhaps to others as well, with the loss of certain possibilities that were previously taken for granted.[9]

7 Cholbi (2022) also highlights the relevance of practical identity to grief, although specifically for understanding which deaths we grieve over. On his view, "the more central another person is to our practical identity, the greater cause we have for grieving them upon their deaths" (31).

8 See, for example, Zahavi (2007) for a good discussion of conceptions of the "narrative self" and for the view that they do not add up to a comprehensive account of self.

9 Thus, as Cholbi (2022) suggests, there may be interesting relationships between experiences of grief and the acquisition of self-knowledge. Experiences of loss have the potential to make salient, disrupt, and problematise aspects of oneself that might otherwise be taken for granted.

Importantly, the structure of a life is not something that ordinarily remains constant, something that is disrupted only by occasional life events. Rather, it is dynamic in nature and also experienced as such. As indicated by descriptions of grief over childlessness, who one is *now* depends on the possibilities of becoming someone or something. One's life is oriented around those possibilities, and the significance of unfolding events is experienced as a movement towards or away from them.[10] With that movement, the possibilities around which a life is organised also change – often in a subtle, gradual fashion. However, where an event or situation has profound implications, the temporally extended process of recognition, comprehension, and adaptation can involve profound upheaval. Faced with lost possibilities, such as that of becoming a parent, one may experience "the death of an assumed way of life" (#253) or the "collapse" of the "world as I knew it" (#258), something that involves a sense of uncertainty over how to go on (Ratcliffe, 2017b, 2020; Mehmel, 2021).[11] A scenario where one actually had the winning lottery ticket in one's pocket but unintentionally discarded it is importantly different.[12] There might be a profound feeling of regret or disappointment, involving a distressing and lingering sense of what could have been. Nevertheless, this does not amount to grief, at least when the relevant possibilities were not integral to the shape of one's unfolding life.[13]

3. Lost Possibilities

For current purposes, the example of grief over involuntary childlessness is informative in showing how a profound sense of loss can be experienced without there being a historic, concrete object of emotion. One might think that this makes it an exception to the rule. However, we will now suggest instead that the example serves to make salient something that applies more generally. In those instances of grief (including bereavement grief) where there *is* a concrete object of emotion, the experience is similarly concerned with a loss of life possibilities. It can be added that something is an *appropriate* object of grief insofar as it constitutes such a loss. This point can be couched in both phenomenological and nonphenomenological terms. There is a fact of the matter concerning the potential and actual implications of an event or situation for a person's life. For instance, where project P is central to one's life and the integrity of P presupposes R, the irrevocable absence of R amounts to a loss regardless of whether it is experienced as such. However, we are concerned more specifically with the associated phenomenology, which involves experiencing and navigating – sometimes over a lengthy period of time – the negation of possibilities that were integral to one's life.

10 Consistent with these observations, Di Paolo (2020, 2021) suggests that emotion is integral to the experience of becoming. Recognising the significance of something does not involve the rupturing of a previously static and complete sense of self. Instead, he suggests, we are "unfinished creatures" and "to feel an emotion is to experience a moment in our own becoming" (2020, 229).

11 Appealing to themes in the work of Merleau-Ponty, Ratcliffe (2020, 2022) refers to this sense of uncertainty as an experience of pervasive "indeterminacy". Mehmel (2021), drawing on the work of Harbin (2016), refers to the same phenomenon as "disorientation".

12 As Jody Day (2006, 220) writes, "the shift in identity from being a woman who hopes, one day, to become a mother to one who knows, without question, that it's never going to happen is so huge that it throws everything into question". This is not to say that any subsequent identity must be organised around one's childlessness. As Day (2006, 5) also observes, accommodating something does not require making it central to who one later becomes.

13 That is not to deny that one could, under certain circumstances, experience genuine grief over not winning the lottery. Suppose one's entire life had been organised around doing so. In eventually resigning oneself to the fact that it will not happen, one might then experience a significant loss of life possibilities. Here, the grief would be genuine and in some sense appropriate, in that it would accurately reflects the implications of a situation for one's life structure. Grief in such circumstances can nevertheless be inappropriate in the sense that relates to the moral or pragmatic impropriety of one's pursuits, including the overall organisation of one's life. The same could be said of numerous far-fetched scenarios, such as a life that is organised around the prospect of becoming Emperor of the Galaxy, which is eventually renounced. See D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) for a discussion of the significance of the distinction between the two ways in which an emotion can be appropriate. Unless otherwise stated, we use "appropriateness" here in the former sense of accuracy or "fittingness".

To suggest that grief in general is concerned with the loss of possibilities is not to suggest that it lacks a concrete object. Losses of possibilities can also be described in more concrete terms. Nevertheless, even where grief is associated with a particular event, it would be an oversimplification to say that it has a single, concrete object. In the case of bereavement, grief involves intermittent preoccupation with many things: the event of the death, how it occurred, the fact that someone is dead, what I have lost, what that person has lost, what might have been, how I will cope without them, what the future holds, the impact upon others whom I care about, and so forth. All of these objects of emotion can be understood as integral to a wider-ranging loss of possibilities.[14] Furthermore, there is no straightforward distinction to be drawn between the formal and concrete objects of grief. Instead, losses of possibilities are experienced with varying degrees of concreteness (Ratcliffe, Richardson, and Millar, 2022). What is lost may appear quite precise or utterly inchoate, with the content of one's emotional experience varying over time. Likewise, grief over childlessness might concern being a parent, having a child, having a girl or boy, having a child with a certain name, loving that child, or even being a grandparent.

What we have not yet shown is that grief over a death and grief over childlessness do indeed have a common phenomenological structure. It turns out, though, that there are good reasons for thinking that grief in response to a death, like grief over childlessness, is not simply about something that has happened – both concern losses of *future* possibilities. In support of that position, consider the differences between our emotional responses to bereavements and our responses to certain substantial changes in people and relationships (especially when those changes occur over extended periods of time). The parent of a teenager does not usually grieve over the loss of the baby, toddler, or young child who once was, even though all of the distinguishing properties of the child may have changed, and even though the relationship is now radically different to how it once was. Granted, there may be moments of nostalgia, sorrow, and regret. Nevertheless, the combination of these is altogether different from profound grief over a death. How is this to be explained? The contrast, we suggest, stems from an intuitive sense of the difference between possibilities being actualised and built upon, as when a child grows from baby to teen, and possibilities being negated, as when someone dies. As the child grows older, the process is – in most instances – experienced largely as one of unfolding development rather than loss. Hence, to appreciate what is lost – and also experienced as lost – when a person dies, we need to acknowledge that it is not something concrete and historic. Instead, it is a certain kind of *potentiality*.

One might object that this analysis fails to accommodate instances of bereavement where we grieve despite regarding the death itself in a mostly positive light—perhaps an end to someone's suffering in old age, at a time of life when they had accomplished all they set out to do. Why would we experience the loss of something future-directed in such a case? However, a range of different circumstances can be accommodated via the simple acknowledgement that, in bereavement and other situations of loss, the balance between loss of *my* possibilities, *their* possibilities, and *our* possibilities can vary markedly. For instance, when faced with unemployment, one's first thoughts might concern oneself or, alternatively, the impact on one's family. In this respect, bereavement is plausibly distinctive: we are confronted with the complete, irrevocable loss of someone else's possibilities or, at least, those possibilities that depended in some way upon that person's

14 In the case of bereavement, another candidate object of grief is the loss or radical transformation of an interpersonal relationship (Cholbi, 2019). As a concern with relationship loss also involves attending to the fact that someone has died, we might say that the object of grief is broader in scope than a person's death or their being dead. However, we suggest that this is still overly restrictive – grief involves a wider-ranging engagement with losses of possibilities.

continuing experience and agency.[15] However, bereavement experiences involve various different balances between possibilities that are experienced as mine, theirs, and ours. Grief over the death of a suffering and accomplished loved one may be concerned with *my* and *our* lost possibilities, more so than *theirs*.

In returning to the case of grief over involuntary childlessness, it might seem that the balance here is skewed towards one's own possibilities. The sense of loss could also envelop the children that a *partner* will never have or that *we* will never have together. Nevertheless, it might be assumed that the absence of children is experienced as one's own loss or our loss, rather than a loss that *they* incur by not coming into being. As one respondent reflected, "maybe I don't feel their absence as much as I feel what I am not" (#214). But the children one will not have are sometimes described with remarkable specificity – they might be a girl or boy, with a name and certain characteristics. Some respondents go so far as to ascribe a kind of past or ongoing existence to children who never came into being:[16]

> Part of my healing has been to bring her to life. I say her name out loud now, I can see her hair, her smile, I talk about her to the one person who allows me to talk about her. It warms my heart and gives me great peace to acknowledge her existence. [....] I had a bracelet made with her name engraved in it so I can wear it whenever I need to feel her near me. (#212)

> It is hard to explain, but I can feel their love and my love for them when I am bringing them up in my mind and heart. (#223)

> 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. (#213)

Testimonies such as these are challenging to interpret. For one thing, it is not clear whether, when, or how to distinguish one's emotional experience of a child who never came into being from the imaginative embellishment of a less determinate loss experience (which could involve borrowing from narratives and practices associated with bereavement). However, they do suggest that grief over childlessness may not be limited to the lost possibilities of the living. Insofar as one is able to contemplate an absent child as an individual who was denied being, one's grief might extend to their possibilities as well.

In other circumstances too, relationships between one's own possibilities and those of others can be complicated, and are sometimes riddled with tensions. Take the case of a parent suffering from "empty nest syndrome" after their adult children have left home. It is arguable that this can approximate an experience of grief, even though it involves the lives of one's children progressing in ways that were expected and viewed positively. One single father describes the predicament as follows:

15 That said, it could be maintained that certain possibilities are able to remain and be realised posthumously. For instance, it is arguable that a person's desires can still be satisfied or frustrated after death (See Solomon, 2004, for further discussion). There is also the difficult question of how various beliefs concerning life after death shape our experiences of loss. Even so, it seems plausible to maintain that death affects a person's possibilities in a manner that is more profound than all, or almost all, events that occur in life.

16 This points to a potentially interesting extension of "continuing bonds" approaches to grief, which propose that bereavement involves revising and sustaining a relationship with the person who has died, rather than "letting go" (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, 1996). Certain descriptions of grief over childlessness suggest that it may also be possible to form, sustain, and develop a sense of interpersonal connection with someone who never was.

> When they left I lost direction. . . . I found it quite difficult to know what my role was. . . . As a parent, from the minute they go to playgroup their relationships impact on you. When they moved out all that suddenly went and I missed it. Suddenly I hadn't got anybody to talk to me about their friends and stuff. So there was an emptiness. (Dodd 2011, 72)

In circumstances like these, *my* loss of possibilities can at the same time be *your* actualization and further pursuit of possibilities. So, the sense of loss is equivocal. Certain of my own possibilities are negated, while others – which include striving to advance someone else's possibilities – have been actualised. In this way, a grief-like experience can co-exist with a sense of achievement, gratitude, and even joy. There are many other scenarios where the possibilities central to one's own life include striving to actualise someone else's possibilities, in ways that involves losing - in the process - other possibilities that are integral to who one is. Human relationships in general can be thought of in these terms, as fraught with tensions between development and loss. Hence, by attending to grief as a loss of possibilities, instead of fixating upon a singular, clearly defined, historical object of grief, we can come to better appreciate the complexities of emotional experience, including tensions between possibilities lost and possibilities realised.

To further complicate the picture, lost possibilities also relate in various different ways to one's biography and to time. For childless men interviewed by Hadley (2021, 4), "fatherhood was viewed as a reconnection, repayment, repeat or replacement of their childhood experience". As this indicates, the emphasis that we have placed upon possibilities should not be taken to imply that grief is exclusively future-oriented. Possibilities, as experienced pre-reflectively or contemplated explicitly, can have a complex temporal structure. For example, one survey respondent described "a loss of memories that would never happen" (#21). Here, what is lost is not just the possibility of certain events occurring in the future, but also that of remembering them at a later date. As this suggests, lost possibilities should not simply be conceived of as future-directed in contrast to past-directed. Instead, the two are inextricable. How past events *matter* to us reflects where we are heading; it depends on which possibilities remain open and which have been extinguished. So, even where grief does not have a concrete, historical object, it retains a concern with the past. Complementing this observation, Goldie (2012, chap. 3) draws attention to the ironic structure of memory in grief. One continues to experience the significance that events had when they occurred and for a period thereafter. But one's recollections also integrate what is now known: the person has since died and the possibilities towards which past events point, the paths to which they lead, have therefore shifted radically. These two perspectives intermingle, although uneasily. Sartre ([1943] 1989, 498-9) makes the broader point that there is a sense in which we *choose* the past. How past events matter to us – how they feature in significant, temporally organised patterns – depends on which future possibilities are currently central to our lives, which possibilities we make our own. So, a loss of future possibilities is also a shift in the significance of the past. In the case of involuntary childlessness, there may not be a single, most salient past event or pattern of events. Nevertheless, what it shares with other experiences of loss, including bereavement, is a wider-ranging significance attaching to events in one's biography, in light of life possibilities and their negation.[17]

17 Here, we agree with Mehmel (2021) that the phenomenology of grief cannot be understood solely in terms of a loss of previously established, shared practices, and that it should also be conceived of in terms of one's orientation towards the future. See also Ratcliffe (2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2020, 2022) for such a position. However, it is important to distinguish this clearly and consistently from the stronger claim that grief concerns our sense of what the future holds instead of the habitual organisation of experience, thought, and activity. That profound grief need not always involve the loss of a life structure that was shared with the deceased remains consistent with grief's involving the disturbance of one's previously established sense of what is and what was. For instance, a loss of possibilities that were central to the overall organisation of one's life is at the same time a transformation of the significance of past events and how they hang together in one's biography, even where the loss in question is not attributed to specific historical events. We thus take it that, in engaging with a loss of possibilities, one's experiences of past, present, and future are inextricable.

Hence, the common theme is that grief involves engaging – over a period of time – with how the shape of one's life has been, continues to be, and will be affected by losing certain possibilities. This generalises to experiences of loss in a wide range of other situations. For example, consider the following passage from a book by the clinician Paul Kalanithi, which describes the moment when he was about to receive a terminal diagnosis:

> A young nurse, one I hadn't met, poked her head in.
>
> "The doctor will be in soon."
>
> And with that, the future I had imagined, the one just about to be realized, the culmination of decades of striving, evaporated. (Kalanithi, 2017, 16)

Confirmation of his illness is experienced *as* an abrupt and conspicuous loss of possibilities, as the negation of a future around which his life has been organised. Later, there is a more determinate appreciation of all those possibilities that will no longer be actualised, a growing realisation that amounts to the loss of an identity he had taken for granted:

> My life had been building potential, potential that would now go unrealized. I had planned to do so much, and I had come so close. I was physically debilitated, my imagined future and my personal identity collapsed, and I faced the same existential quandaries as my patients faced. (Kalanithi, 2017, 120)

What distinguishes the experience of grief from other forms of emotional experience is not a specific feeling quality, evaluation, or other ingredient that is present at a specific time. There is no single moment at which we experience a loss of possibilities and no single way in which we do so. We experience and respond to more profound forms of loss over lengthy periods of time, in ways that encompass habitual patterns of thought, ways of experiencing our surroundings, autobiographical memory, bodily anticipation, and more specific emotional experiences of various different kinds. A grief process can involve immediate, pre-reflective experiences of absence and lack, sliding into habitual patterns of thought and then realising that they no longer apply, having a sense of detachment from one's surroundings (which no longer embody significant possibilities for projects and other activities in ways they once did), feeling disconnected from other people (who carry on regardless), and being struck by tensions between propositional beliefs that reflect the realities of one's situation and an experiential world that seems to endure – at least for a time – in spite of them (Ratcliffe, 2022). All of this becomes more apparent once we attend to the dynamic ways in which networks of possibilities and their negation are experienced, sometimes spanning all aspects of a human life – past, present, and anticipated. Taking a case where there is no single, discrete, concrete object of emotion as our exemplar prompts us to do so.

4. Bereavement Grief Revisited

We have argued that there is a broad kind of loss experience with a distinctive phenomenological structure, which encompasses bereavement grief and also a wide range of non-death losses. In this section, we will elaborate on our suggestion that conceiving of grief in this broad way stands to enrich our understanding of bereavement grief, enabling us to better appreciate its complexity and diversity. In the case of grief over involuntary childlessness, we find an experience without a circumscribed historical object or a clear-cut

starting point. One might suggest that this is to be contrasted with bereavement: "it's a long slow grief that comes and goes; it's not like the sudden death of a loved one" (#206). However, it is important to acknowledge that experiences of bereavement vary considerably, depending in part on the circumstances surrounding a death. If we think of a death as something that happens swiftly, perhaps unexpectedly, and consider a person's subsequent grief in abstraction from their situation as a whole, it might well seem that bereavement grief is directed at a specific, clearly demarcated event or situation and that it is quite different from the sense of loss sometimes associated with childlessness. But deaths can be expected for some time and are often preceded by other losses (such as losses of bodily or cognitive abilities). Many possibilities – for *them*, for *oneself*, and for *us* – may be lost before the person dies. So, in seeking to develop an adequate account of how people experience loss, even in the context of bereavement, it is important not to place too much weight upon a generic, simplified construal of bereavement. It can be helpful to begin instead with a more encompassing and less tidy conception of grief and its objects.

The example of childlessness grief also draws attention to a range of other factors that complicate the structure of grief experiences, in ways that sometimes render them difficult to conceptualise and convey to others. One useful concept here is that of "ambiguous loss" (Boss, 1999). This concerns predicaments of two broad kinds that can render one's experience of loss equivocal or conflicted. Sometimes, one does not *know* exactly what has happened to a lost object. A body might never have been recovered, the circumstances of a death may remain unknown, or perhaps the person has simply disappeared. In the other kind of case, it could be said that the situation is *metaphysically* rather than *epistemically* challenging. For instance, when a person has changed radically, we might wonder whether and in what sense it is *still them*. The common theme is that we are suspended indefinitely between two scenarios, one where a possibility is negated and the other where it remains. Faced with this, we may vacillate between hope and resignation. Both forms of ambiguous loss appear in first-person accounts of involuntary childlessness. There might be no specific moment at which it becomes fully clear that one will not have children; one hovers between possibilities for an extended period of time. In addition, the nature of one's loss can be challenging to make sense of – what, exactly, has been lost, when did the loss occur, and by whom was it incurred?

Another complicating factor is whether or not there are established norms, rituals, and narratives for responding to one's own and others' experiences of loss. In the case of childlessness, there is no grave, no anniversary, no recorded name, no special place, no memorial service, and no shared practices for narrating and making sense of the loss.[18] Partly for that reason, grief over childlessness is sometimes described in terms of "disenfranchised grief", a term introduced by Kenneth Doka to capture a variety of ways in which grief can be unacknowledged, misunderstood, or denied legitimacy (Doka, 1999, 2002).[19] First-person accounts of involuntary childlessness identify several factors that contribute to disenfranchisement, including a lack of shared practices:

> The deaths of both my grandfathers in 2015 and 2020 were honoured through rituals and funeral day events. [....] Their death is absolute whereas my losses are both not only not seen but also, they sweetly haunt me through life-long grief. (#229)

18 However, this has started to change. For example, the Mariposa Trust welcomes women who have not been able to have children to its "Saying Goodbye" ceremonies.

19 See also Day (2016) for a detailed discussion of the various causes of disenfranchisement among those who grieve over involuntary childlessness.

Some also mention, as a source of disenfranchisement, living in a society that is structured around parenthood, where much that people do relates in one or another way to having children. There is thus a failure to accommodate those who are involuntarily childless and to recognise the extent of their loss: "Society does not make room for those women who are childless not by choice" (#224). Also contributing to disenfranchisement is the tendency to think of grief and loss in exactly the sort of way that we have challenged here – as a matter of responding emotionally to the historic subtraction of something or someone concrete. Because grief is conceived in that way, it is not even acknowledged that there has been a *loss*:

> No one can understand what it's like to carry this loss. In their minds, no baby meant no loss. (#212)
>
> To start with nobody got it. My grief was invisible. (#254)
>
> For the most part, the loss is unrecognized, there have been few people who have treated being childless as a loss and have acted sensitively. (#265)

Lack of understanding on the part of others can be compounded by one's own difficulties in comprehending and articulating the sense of loss, due to the absence of individual and shared interpretive resources. Initially, the experience might not be recognised as one of grief: "It took me a while to understand that what I was feeling was grief" (#214); "I never realised this was grief until I found others in a similar situation" (#254).

However, although ambiguity and lack of clarity might be especially salient in grief over childlessness, they are not specific to it. Similarly, vast swathes of a person's life could be affected by a significant bereavement, in ways that relate more or less closely to the death. Much of this remains invisible and intangible; it is not marked by shared practices, even if the death itself typically is. So, we might go so far as to say that unacknowledged losses are not only characteristic of occasional *disenfranchised* grief, but ubiquitous in bereavement and other challenging life circumstances (Rinofner-Kreidl, 2016). Hence, the sense of loss associated with bereavement can also be difficult to conceptualise and communicate, in ways that are not so evident if we take as our paradigm an emotional reaction to a death, abstracted from the context in which it occurs.

In the case of bereavement grief, we have noted that not all lost possibilities need be traceable to the event of the death. The term "anticipatory grief" is sometimes employed to refer to an experience of loss that occurs before someone actually dies (see, e.g., Sweeting and Gilhooly, 1990). We could think of this primarily in terms of a grief had in *expecting*, rather than responding to, a death. In other situations, though, anticipating something does not generally elicit the same kinds of emotions as its occurrence. We fear something before it has happened rather than afterwards, and we do not experience relief while anticipating it. However, it is often the case that certain possibilities are *already* lost before the death: we will no longer do that together; they cannot do this anymore. Similarly, those who are themselves dying may experience grief over what others will lose through their deaths (Varga and Gallagher, 2020). Thus, if we think of bereavement grief in terms of a wide-ranging experience of lost possibilities, it becomes clear how anticipatory grief can have a similar phenomenological structure to grief in response to a death. Conceiving of grief in this way also helps us to recognise the instability of its objects. The concrete objects of grief (and associated losses of possibilities) can include moving targets, as when experiencing grief over one's own or someone else's chronic progressive illness. As Kalanithi (2017, 16) observes, "the tricky part of illness is that, as you go through it, your values are constantly changing. You try to figure out what matters to you, and then you keep figuring it out".

Another feature shared by bereavement and other forms of loss is that both frequently affect how we relate to other people, and to the social world as a whole. Again, this is especially apparent in the case of involuntary childlessness. Being a parent involves being responsive to various shared norms, acting out established narratives, and participating in rituals, practices, and pastimes involving children. Lacking access to such possibilities can involve feeling "alone and different than others" (#208), in a world that continues to be structured around the anticipation and pursuit of parenthood. Survey respondents remarked, in particular, on finding "baby showers" emotionally difficult or unbearable. Others mentioned "daily reminders" from which there was "no escape", and how childlessness disrupts friendships with those who are parents. Analogously, in the case of bereavement, someone who has recently been widowed may find themselves faced with a world of couples, with friends who were always *our* friends, and with social activities that were always ways in which *we* interacted with others.

Construing bereavement grief as an instance of a broader phenomenological kind also reveals the complexities involved in individuating token grief experiences. It can be difficult to determine whether someone is experiencing a single wide-ranging loss or, alternatively, multiple losses. Suppose that someone loses their job, health, marriage, and then home. Are these to be regarded as objects of a single, unitary grief process that engages with the unravelling of one's life over a period of time, or as what Harvey and Miller (1998, 431) call a "pileup" of distinct losses? Importantly, the same question applies to bereavement, at least when we no longer consider it in abstraction from a larger situation. Worsened relationships with friends or family members, and also financial problems, are often occasioned by a bereavement (Eisma, de Lang, and Stroebe, 2022). Are these to be regarded as integral to a singular loss of possibilities?

It is arguable that a grief process should be construed as unitary to the extent that it engages with a unitary disturbance of life structure. A person's death can *imply* the unsustainability of an integrated network of projects, activities, patterns of thought, and interpersonal relationships (Ratcliffe, 2017a). Even so, we are doubtful that there is a sharp distinction between unitary and non-unitary losses, or between *experiences* of single and multiple losses. A grief process may involve experiencing losses in different ways at different times, sometimes as interrelated and sometimes not. Furthermore, a sense of lost possibilities could become more or less integrated over time.

5. Conclusion

We have set out a case for a broad conception of grief that encompasses bereavement grief and also a wide range of significant non-death losses.20 According to our account, grief involves experiencing – over a period of time – the loss of a network of more or less integrated possibilities that are integral to the structure of one's life. While accommodating a wide range of loss experiences, this conception still enables us to distinguish grief from the likes of disappointment and regret. Our account has implications for the understanding of bereavement grief. Although we do not seek to challenge more restrictive uses of the term "grief", which apply specifically to bereavement, we maintain that it can also be helpful to conceive of grief in more general

20 This conception of grief complements, and is corroborated by, empirical findings suggesting that clinically significant forms of grief (associated with labels such as "complicated grief" and "prolonged grief disorder") are common to both bereavement and other life situations. For instance, Shear et al. (2011) discuss "complicated grief" in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, in response to both bereavement and other losses such as losing a home or possessions. See Papa, Lancaster, and Kahler (2014) for further findings indicating that people who have suffered losses of various kinds can meet the criteria for prolonged grief disorder. Grief has also been reported in serious illness, as a response to various associated losses (Jacobsen et al., 2010).

terms. Doing so brings into view a phenomenological complexity that is overlooked when bereavement grief is construed as an emotional experience with a singular object and clear starting point, in abstraction from a larger situation. The acknowledgement of non-bereavement losses and their phenomenological structure also has important implications for whether and how we think about and respond to certain forms of human suffering. Without explicit, shared conceptions of these losses, they will shape human lives while evading established taxonomies, narratives, performances, rituals, and practices. Perhaps many of us are haunted in this way by inarticulate and unacknowledged feelings of loss, which amount to significant privations of the ability to sustain and develop who we are.

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