Michael Cholbi. *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton University Press 2022. 219 pp. $24.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691201795).

As a thanatologist, I came to my reading of Cholbi's book with a question in the back of my mind. I was interested in knowing whom he saw his readership to be, i.e., *for whom is he writing this book?* One of the signatures of Cholbi's reflections is that he strives for clarity—even when it comes to the relatively muddied waters of the human experience of grief. So it was not surprising that Cholbi gave essentially three answers to my question.

One was that he wrote for fellow philosophers, to elevate grief from the 'bit player in the history of philosophy' (1) to advocate for its being '*extremely* interesting' (2). Cholbi attributes the disinterest in or neglect of grief by philosophers to grief's being 'a source of shame' (6). Cholbi asks, not altogether rhetorically: 'But why should grief elicit shame?' (9) He attributes the philosophical neglect of grief to fear of 'our finitude, vulnerability, and interdependence' (10) as well as our mortality.

Still, 'everyone stands to benefit from this book insofar as they can benefit from a more robust philosophical understanding of one of life's "big emotions."' (15) For Cholbi, this may not be 'those *in the midst of grief*,' but perhaps 'this inquiry is likely to be more beneficial to those for whom grief has waned' (15). As he sees it, 'this book thus fits into a tradition that sees one of philosophy's key tasks as that of *consolation*' (16).

As I read, I found his initial audience to be more likely than the other two.

Cholbi grounds his perspective in what he calls our 'practical identities.' Grief thus becomes a '*practical identity investment*' (30) in our self-knowledge that makes us aware of the degree to which our practical identities are '*invested* in the existence of others' (31). Grief reveals that our self-knowledge has both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects (39). Cholbi reaches at least a preliminary conclusion 'that grief is an active process of emotional attention, incorporating both feeling and choice, causally instigated by the death of someone in whom the bereaved has invested her identity' (55).

The 'feeling and choice' duality of grief leads Cholbi to what he calls 'the *paradox of grief,*' namely, that because grief makes us feel bad, we should avoid it, but because grief is valuable, we 'should be grateful that we grieve' (69). Inasmuch as grief is recognized as valuable, one chooses to engage in the activities of grief in order to make the transition from 'no longer fully knowing who one is' to the 'successful resolution' of grief which 'will involve a *reconstruction* of one's knowledge of self.' In sum: 'the good of grief … is *self-knowledge*' (83), which is 'intrinsically valuable, worthwhile for its own sake' (100). Once Cholbi has made this claim, he can say that we owe it to ourselves to grieve, which is to say, we have a *duty* to grieve because 'we have a duty to pursue such self-knowledge' (155), a duty that 'is often fulfilled by bereaved persons for whom the pursuit of self-knowledge plays little if any part in their own conscious understanding of what they do as they grieve or why they do it' (156).

This conclusion seemed to me to be a bit like wanting to have it both ways. That is, if to grieve is to *choose* the activities that realize one's duty to improvement in self-knowledge, yet fulfilling

this duty does not necessarily entail making *conscious* choices—doesn't this obviate the necessary recognition of the values of grieving in the first place? Doesn't this imply that self-knowledge and re-integrating one's practical identity is going to happen regardless of the choices one makes?

I would suggest there are a few, what I would call conceptual remedies. The principle one would be for Cholbi, and other philosophers considering grief in his footsteps, to posit that grief entails another paradox in addition to the one he names. On the one hand, as Cholbi's analysis thoroughly sifts through, grief presents itself as a problem to be solved after the death of a loved one, and even before, as he astutely recognizes the influence of anticipatory grief on the surrogates designated to make decisions on behalf of the dying (139f). The problem of grief becomes the activities of grieving. The problem-focused concerns of grief find support in psychologists like William Worden, whom Cholbi mentions, who proposes the 'four tasks' of grief. And it leads to what Cholbi calls successful grieving as well as his inferring that grief is up to the one grieving to manage, because solving the problems of grief does entail activities and decision-making.

Yet grief, like other aspects of the human experience, also comes with a sense of mystery. What I mean by this is that grief befalls one during the dying and after the death of a loved one. One finds oneself participating in grief whether one chooses to grieve or not. This is to stress that grief has its voluntary aspects represented by grief-as-problem and its involuntary aspects represented by grief-as-mystery.

In this regard, I was relieved to see Cholbi imply the mystery aspect of grief as he concluded his book by quoting Julianne Chung, saying that grief 'isn't something that can be accomplished by imposing a plan' (195). This mitigates the 'grief as activity' focus of the book. Yet because Cholbi's sole, selected occasion for grief is what follows the death of someone significant in one's life, he largely overlooks the myriad of griefs that come in the course of living, such as the degradations of body and mind that occur as we age. Yes, he mentions events such as divorce or unemployment or imprisonment, but what I might call the accumulation of little griefs that entail erosions of one's identity are equally worthy of philosophical attention.

One of the strengths of Cholbi's book is in the range of authors from whom he takes accounts of grief: from the personal disclosures of C.S. Lewis to Joan Didion to the fiction of Tolstoy, Camus, and Shakespeare, just to name a few. These narratives were not only valuable in themselves in providing voices as existential witnesses to the experiences of grief, but also suggested that Cholbi might have done more with what I would call narrative identity as a way of illustrating his term, practical identity. He hints at this when he notes that 'the deaths [of others] disrupt our autobiographies' (32) and when he states, 'more deeply, grief can be seen as corresponding to a *narrative disruption* in our lives.' He concludes: 'our narratives will have to adapt' (81). Yes. And how we tell our life's stories will be how we witness to whether we have done our duty to grieve, whether we've done this consciously in our choices or simply reintegrated and adapted in the course of our participation in the mystery of grief. The narrativity of our practical identity would illustrate how, while grieving, we articulate who we think ourselves to be in relationship to someone who is now physically absent from us but whose presence persists for us.

It is a small thing for me to note that when Cholbi discusses Kant, he does not mention his Categorical Imperative. I missed that on the grounds less of what successful grieving might be than on those of honoring *exemplary* grieving—which I would have taken Lewis, Didion and others to represent.

At the same time, for this thanatologist, it was not a small thing how Cholbi repeatedly mentioned the stage theory of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. For me, this detracted from his otherwise excellent and determined analysis. While he noted that Kubler-Ross's stage theory had been debunked subsequently in both practical and theoretical ways, his repeated reference to it contributed to its retaining its place in the public mind and now being given a certain validity. Given that this is a philosophical guide, Cholbi would have helped himself to have given prior consideration to a number of historical factors: a) that Kubler-Ross took staging from the disease model of oncology and applied it to her observations of those dying in the Chicago clinic where she worked; b) that this schema first appeared in her seminal book, *On Death and Dying* (it is telling that this is the sole text of hers which Cholbi cites); c) that only later did she, in collaboration with others, extend stage theory to patterns of grieving; and d) most important of all, when she realized the impact her use of stage theory had had on how we think about death, dying, and grief, she publicly repudiated it and expressed her sincere regret!

Cholbi does recognize the doubtful applicability of 'Kubler-Ross's five stage' model in both theoretical and practical terms: 'many bereaved persons have expressed frustration at grief counselors who subscribe to the model' (179). Yet, having done that, Cholbi offers this apology: 'The five-stage model has thus become as much prescriptive as descriptive, an account of how grief ought to unfold instead of an explanation of how it actually does' (180). This is to give the five-stage model entirely too much credit. As an alternative, I would suggest that Cholbi would have done better to limit mention of Kubler-Ross' denial, substituting instead the more authentic experience of *shock* felt by the bereaved commonly enough to claim a universality that would not apply to denial.

In sum, I do not believe that those who are grieving and those who would say their grief has waned would find *Grief* to be either consoling or comforting, as Cholbi hoped. However, *Grief* certainly fulfills its aim of encouraging other philosophers to consider the existential phenomenon of grief. Cholbi has prompted such a conversation here in a significant, thoroughgoing, and engaging way.

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