Grief as Attention

Michael Cholbi, University of Edinburgh
mcholbi@ed.ac.uk
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ABSTRACT

Grief seems difficult to locate within familiar emotion taxonomies, as it not a basic emotion nor a hybrid thereof. Here I propose that grief is better conceptualized as an emotionally rich attentional phenomenon rather than an emotion or sequence of emotions. In grieving, that another person has died, the loss incurred by the grieving, etc., occupy the forefront of the grieving subject’s consciousness while other candidate facts for their attention recede into the background. The former set of facts thus sit near the top of their mental “priority structures” throughout a grief event. The hypothesis that grief is attentional helps to explain several common phenomenological features of grief experience, underpins a credible ‘metaphysics’ of grief, accounts for the extent to which grief is susceptible to choice and agency, and addresses a recent puzzle regarding our reasons to grieve and our apparent proclivity toward ‘resilience’ in the face of grief.
Grief as Attention

One longstanding program within contemporary emotions research holds that certain emotions are “basic,” with other emotions in turn composed of these. (Ekman 1999). For example, in Robert Plutchik’s taxonomy (1982), each emotional episode corresponds to either one of the basic emotions (anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy); to a quantitative variant of a basic emotion (for example, rage is the more intense variant of anger, annoyance its less intense variant); or to a complex hybrid of basic emotions (remorse, for instance, purportedly combines sadness and disgust (Plutchik 2001)).

Where might grief fit into such a combinatorial taxonomy of the emotions? For Plutchik, grief is not a basic emotion but a more intense variant of sadness, contrasting with its less intense variant, pensiveness. On its face, this is a plausible hypothesis. Sadness is no doubt a defining feature of grief experience. Still, not all of the sadness we feel during grief is intense. Some of it has a pensive character, more a wistful pinprick rather than a howling cry. Assuming that Plutchik is correct that grief is not basic, this seems to leave only one possibility for how grief might be located within such a taxonomy: grief is a hybrid of one or more basic emotions. This too might seem like a plausible hypothesis: Grief events are known to include other emotions besides sadness, including several of those that Plutchik counts as basic (anger, fear, surprise, and joy). (Maciejewski et al 2007, Bonnano 2009, Konigsberg 2011) But it is unlikely that grief is a hybrid of other emotions. For one, grief’s more basic emotional components do not conform to a uniform pattern. Virtually every grief event includes sadness, but only some involve subjects who experience anger, fear, surprise, or joy. Hence, if grief is a hybrid emotion, it is a highly variable hybrid, built from different emotional components depending on specific facts about the grieving subjects and (one suspects) facts about their relationships to the deceased individual whose deaths prompt their grief. In addition, grief seems less like a single (admittedly complex) emotional condition
than an emotional process involving multiple distinct emotions. (Goldie 2011) These emotions may be felt simultaneously, and a particular emotion may recur in a grief event. But the affective multiplicity of grief does not consist in its being an emotion, however complex. Rather, grieving subjects experience series of emotions, some of which (guilt, for instance) may themselves be hybrid in nature.

If grief is neither a basic emotion, nor a version of a basic emotion varying in intensity from that basic emotion, nor a hybrid of more basic emotions, then it follows that, at least according to the combinatorial model of emotions exemplified by Plutchik’s theory, grief is not an emotion at all. This may be a surprising conclusion: If grief is not an emotion at all, then what is it? My central thesis is conceptualizing grief as an instance of attention is more theoretically fruitful than conceptualizing it as an emotion.

William James famously described attention as the taking possession by the mind in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought … It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state. (James 1890: 403-04)

I shall argue that grief results when another’s death ‘takes possession’ of our psyches, thereby consigning other possible foci of our emotional engagement to the margins. In the course of grieving, the subject undergoes a temporally extended process wherein particular facts made evaluatively salient by another’s death occupy an outsize place in their affective consciousness. As I shall use the term, a grief event refers not to the particular states or phases of this process but the totality of one such process, so that (for instance) the grief an individual undergoes in response to the death of A represents a distinct grief event from the grief that individual undergoes in response to the death of B, etc. Grief events can thus be
further defined as attention-object pairs. A grief event is a condition of heightened focus (principally though not exclusively emotional in nature), causally instigated by another’s death. For the purposes of this discussion, I will remain somewhat agnostic about the exact nature of the other half of this pair, the object of grief’s heightened focus. A subject in a condition of attention focuses her consciousness on something, and the growing philosophical literature on grief contains competing accounts of what this object of grief is (Cholbi 2022: 49-62, Ratcliffe et al 2022). Fortunately, the arguments I offer for grief being an instance of attention do not require settling these disputes. Hence, I shall speak of the object of grief generically, as a loss to the subject caused by another’s death.

As we shall see, that grief is an instance of emotional attention proves to be an explanatorily fecund hypothesis, helping account for several common phenomenological features of grief experience, providing a credible ‘metaphysics’ of grief, according well with the ways in which grief is susceptible to our agency, and addressing a puzzle about grief’s diminution or resolution.

I shall first provide a general sketch of the nature of attention. This sketch will draw heavily on the work of Sebastian Watzl (2017) for its articulation, though I intend my sketch to be neutral with respect to various philosophical controversies concerning the nature of attention. In section 2, I outline how grief being attentional accords with a number of commonly observed features of grief experience. Section 3 proposes that conceptualizing grief as attentional offers the foundation of a plausible metaphysics of grief: when and how grief events begin and end, how the various parts of grief events interrelate while forming a coherent process, and why the character of grief events varies intrapersonally and interpersonally. How, and to what extent, grief is agential — that is, an activity individuals participate in rather than simply a passive emotional state they endure — is the concern of section 4; I argue that as an attentional phenomenon, grief can be shaped to some extent by
the grieving subject’s attitudes and choices. In section 5, I propose that my thesis casts new light on a puzzle about why grief seems to diminish despite the fact that our reasons for grief (that is, the losses to which grief is an affective response) persist after grief diminishes.

1. The Nature of Attention

Our mental lives are crowded. They contain a wide array of different states of different kinds: beliefs, desires, and other attitudes; sensorial perceptions and bodily awareness; evaluatively significant states such as intentions or emotions; etc. It is not feasible (nor likely desirable) for our consciousness to engage with all of these states simultaneously. Our abilities to learn about our environment and to choose and act in light of that knowledge seem to require a wider background ability to momentarily assign some states greater importance than others. This ability does not alter the intrinsic nature of these states. Rather, the ability in question enables us to shift our concentration among these states, so that some of these states become objects of greater conscious intensity or concern. For instance, it is one thing to see a storm cloud, another to look at it; one thing to hear a flute playing, another to listen to it; one thing to taste rye bread, another to savour it; etc. In each of these mental transitions, a certain sensorial state is ‘heightened,’ while other aspects of our mental lives come to occupy more marginal places in our consciousness.

Attention is this capacity for certain of our conscious states to be prioritized over others. (Watzl 2017:3) Think of workaday examples of concentration: A tennis professional preparing to serve must ‘block out’ a spectrum of mental facts: sensorial (a flag flapping atop the stadium, their opponents’ movements, a brightly colored shirt worn by a spectator), cognitive (memories of an argument earlier in the day, awareness of the match score) and affective (fears arising from past failures, irritation at their opponent’s smug facial expression) in order to confidently attend only to the ball, their racket, and their bodies.
When successful, the player’s attention shunts the former facts to the margins of their conscious awareness so as to permit the latter to dominate that awareness. In paying attention, we may say, we momentarily ‘forget’ some mental facts in order to ‘recall’ others that are practically salient in our circumstances.

According to Watzl’s theory, attention is not an additional item in our first-order mental inventory. Attention is not one more state that co-exists with our sense perceptions, beliefs, desires, and the like. Rather, attention is instead a structural feature of our mental lives, a relation among our different psychological states or capacities:

Attention is not another element of the mind — like perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation, or intention. Attention is not a separate box or capacity in the organization of mind. Attention is constituted by a structure of the mind that contains elements of the mind as parts. Attentional structure is organized in the mind into parts that are central or prioritized and those that are peripheral. … Attention thus crosscuts the usual divisions of the mind: between the cognitive and the conative, the perceptual and the intellectual, the active and the passive, the epistemic and the practical. (Watzl 2017: 2)

For Watzl, attention is that by which it is determined which of our mental states will occupy our “mental territory.”

Attending thus consists in regulating the “priority structures” of our minds. (Watzl 2017:70). Watzl offers a useful metaphor to grasp these priority structures: Our mental life resembles a newspaper (or perhaps to make the metaphor more current, a news website). A newspaper contains various stories and reports, much in the way that our mental lives contains various mental states and events. In a newspaper, the stories and reports are organized in ways that render some of these more prominent and others less so. Some are front page items, others consigned to the back pages or to small print. Attending is what
allows this newspaper-like structure to develop and evolve. An object is an object of attention, on Watzl’s view, when it is, we might say, front page mental news, occupying the top of our “priority structures”:

Object of Attention: What it is for o to be s’s object of attention at some time t
(i.e., what it is for s to attend to o at t) is for s to regulate a priority system S such that a psychological part that is intentionally directed at o is of top priority in S at t. (Watzl: 83)

Admittedly, this metaphor is inexact. For in the case of attention, we are both ‘publisher’ and ‘reader’, our psychologies both generating the priority structures and responding to the facts represented or registered within those structures. Nevertheless, Watzl’s metaphor captures nicely how attention operates to structure our consciousness.

Two other claims about attention will prove important in making my case for grief as an instance of attention. First, attention is a subject-level phenomenon. Many of our particular mental states are intentional; they have objects in the environment that they represent or are ‘about.’ But none of our particular mental states attend to the environment as a whole. In propositional terms, attention is not reducible to any distinct propositional attitude or set thereof, even though attention depends upon and incorporates such attitudes. (Watzl, 2018) Attention is thus a feature possessed only by creatures with the complex, even untidy, mental lives of the sort human beings tend to have. For attention emerges only in subjects whose consciousness has a holistic character in which it is possible for some states to be prioritized over others.

Second, Watzl argues that attention is less an action than a type of activity. Attention has what Steward (1997) has called “temporal shape.” Like other activities, attention unfolds over time. It is therefore in principle possible to measure the temporal duration of an instance of attention. But attention is not merely a temporally extended event, in the way that (say) a
A person undergoes an instance of pain for a measurable temporal duration. Consider again our tennis player preparing to serve: Suppose the player raises their racket arm perpendicular to the ground with the ball in their opposing hand. The player is in a condition of attention, but by itself, this ‘time slice’ is only a partial description of that condition. A full description would also refer to bodily or mental facts in the “temporal neighborhood” of this fact by reference to which the player raising their racket arm is rendered an intelligible act or state. Again, in preparing to serve, some facts or states become more prominent in the player’s consciousness, others’ less so. And in transitioning to the next act (getting into position for their opponent’s return of serve), attention will restructure her conscious awareness so that some facts that were previously peripheral are now central (their opponents’ movements, the position of their feet relative to the baseline) and vice versa. This highlights a congruity between attention and activities in general, namely, that activities are more than sequences of events. They are instead ordered sequences wherein making sense of any part of the sequence requires referencing other parts of the sequence. Attention thus resembles other activities in being a dynamic process, a “temporal occurrence” defined by an “internal form” (Watzl 2017: 53-57). Put differently: Attention is activity-like in that both are structured so that the occurrence of the whole explains the occurrence of its parts.

That attention has this holistic character or “internal form” also sheds light on how attention can be subject to some measure of agential control. For instance, our tennis player willfully guides their attention (Watzl 2017: 65ff) in order to prepare to serve. The player thereby exercises control over their attention, inasmuch as their attention is deliberately informed by her aim. In other cases, attention may be intentional but more spontaneous rather than deliberate. A driver who suddenly spies an oblivious pedestrian walking into the vehicle’s path will suddenly shift their attention to the pedestrian and to braking in order to stop. But note that despite this attentional shift being reactive rather than deliberate, the
driver nevertheless exerts control over their attention, moving the pedestrian to the forefront of her conscious awareness while other elements (the lyrics to the song they were singing along to) recede from their awareness. In still other cases, attention is controlled but not by any apparent purpose or intention. Our experiences of narrative art, for instance, will often involve periods in which our attention is absorbed by a novel or a film, despite our having no recognized intention or purpose for that activity beyond engaging in it (van der Berg 2019). This is not to say that attention is wholly subject to our control. A driver who “rubbernecks” while passing a roadside accident may be unable to control the morbid curiosity that leads them to pay attention to the accident. But to whatever degree attention is amenable to our control, this is facilitated by its having an unfolding, holistic character. We exert control over our attention by responding to prior moments of attention, sometimes with the aim of catalyzing its progress toward its next phase. Attention thus seems to occupy an unusual place in our psychologies: open to control, including deliberate and even intentional control, but not wholly responsive to our efforts to being controlled.

In sum then, our capacity for attention enables us to create, maintain, and alter our priority structures so that certain states (or certain facts in our environments) become more salient and are thus foregrounded in our consciousness while others become less salient and thereby shrink to the conscious background. Attention is thus a structural condition of our minds, metaphysically dependent upon our more specific mental states without being itself among those states. Attention can also to some extent be controlled, guided by our purposes or intentions.

2. Attention and Grief’s Phenomenology

Let us now turn to the case for theorizing grief as an instance of attention. This section advances phenomenological reasons; the next section metaphysical reasons.
To begin, grief feels like a condition of attention, one in which a deceased individual, as well as one’s relation to that individual, recurrently dominates a subject’s consciousness while other matters or concerns become less significant for the grieving subject. In his grief memoir *A Grief Observed* (1964), C.S. Lewis artfully articulates how grief can seem all-encompassing, pushing other concerns to the periphery of one’s consciousness. On the one hand, Lewis seems unable to escape the eerie absence of his deceased wife “H.” Her absence, he says, is “like the sky, spread over everything.” Lewis’ awareness of this absence pervades all he does. At the same time, his efforts to shift his focus elsewhere are stymied. He perceives an “invisible blanket” between the world and himself that hampers his ability to “take in what anyone says.” Lewis is likewise surprised by the “laziness” of his grief, as he is unable to undertake routine tasks such as shaving or writing a letter.

Lewis’ experience typifies how grief often seems to allow for only one reality – the loss of the deceased other, etc. — to occupy centrestage in our awareness. Grieving individuals often descend into a “brain fog” wherein they struggle to muster the energy to make decisions, undertake initiatives, or develop plans. Meanwhile, thoughts concerning the deceased can intrude on our awareness, resulting in rumination or even insomnia. A further manifestation of this dynamic — being preoccupied with the relevant loss while setting aside other concerns — is the phenomenon of social withdrawal. Grieving individuals can undergo periods of melancholic introspection in which they forego social interactions with others. (Zisook and Shear 2009) This is not surprising if such introspection and withdrawal are emblematic of attention. In secluding themselves from others, grieving subjects seem to be blocking out potential distractions that might divert their attention away from the deceased individual and the loss thereof.

That grief is an attentional phenomenon also sheds light on a particular affective dimension of grief that might otherwise be difficult to explain. Grief is often accompanied by
bewilderment, disorientation, or alienation. Lewis, for instance, describes his own grief in terms of feeling “mildly drunk, or concussed” and finds himself, including even his own body, unrecognizable or “empty.” (1964). As Colin Parkes observes, “when someone dies, a whole set of assumptions about the world that relied upon the other person for their validity are suddenly invalidated” (1996: 90) Perhaps unexpectedly, experiencing the world as strange or uncanny is a common dimension of grief experience. Many bereaved subjects report that grief makes the familiar unfamiliar, rendering the mundane strange and so necessitating a “re-learning” of our experiential worlds (Attig 1996). Grief thus seems to upend our expectations for our lives, leaving us to wake up “each day in an unfamiliar world where all the rules are scrambled” (Shulman 2018: 45).

Grief therefore appears often to include a class of emotions largely absent from basic emotion taxonomies such as Plutchik’s, namely, essentially epistemic emotions. Michael Brady has proposed that our emotions sustain attention to their objects in order to enable us to better ascertain their evaluative significance. Fear allows us to attend to danger; anger allows us to attend to unfairness; etc. (2013:92) In so doing, our emotions facilitate the acquisition of evidence bearing on the “correctness of our emotional response" beyond that afforded to us by our initial appraisal of their significance. (2013: 87) The case of grief, I suggest, provides evidence for a variant of Brady’s thesis:¹ For grief is less an emotion than a complex attentional event in which emotion is particularly prominent, with some of its most distinctive emotions having an essentially epistemic character. The confusion, bewilderment, and the like found in grief are emotional indicators of our not knowing precisely how to live

¹ I am not certain as to whether Brady would say that all emotions are epistemic; much of his discussion of emotions as having epistemic value indicates as much. However, one might think that even if fear or anger perform the functions Brady suggests, they differ from emotions like bewilderment or confusion in not being essentially epistemic, i.e., emotions whose phenomenological content seemingly concerns the justification of our beliefs or attitudes.
in a world absent the person whose death prompts our grief. Their deaths have rendered problematic or incomplete our previous practical know-how. As a result, grief can instigate a period of sustained questioning about ourselves, our relations with others, and the value of our lives.

Admittedly, grief could involve epistemic emotions without being, as I propose, an attentional phenomenon. Yet these ‘epistemic’ affects and behaviours — alienation, confusion, uncertainty, questioning, etc. — are, on my view, different manifestations of the underlying attention that constitutes grief. Attention can have many roles, but one of its roles is clearly epistemic. Attention amplifies our capacity to gather information about our environments and ourselves. Grief responds to a loss that disrupts knowledge we have come to rely on, namely, that someone else who matters to us lives in the world we share with them. In attending to this loss, we are (among other things) ascertaining the importance the individual had in our lives, acquiring greater knowledge of our own values and commitments, and working toward a new self-conception that incorporates the fact of this loss. (Cholbi 2022: 76-86) Granted, grief is sometimes an unruly condition, so it is not a straightforward enterprise to acquire this knowledge. Grief can be an “emotional data dump,” (Cholbi 2017b: 102) unleashing a tumult of affect that it may be difficult for us to sort through. But by guiding our attention toward this loss, we position ourselves to make better sense of this loss and its meaningfulness to us. We thus resolve the confusion or bewilderment experienced in grief events by means of attention, by transitioning among emotions or other mental states that help render loss discernible or articulable. The epistemic emotions therefore contribute to the condition of attention that constitutes a grief event.
3. Attention and Grief’s Metaphysics

That grief is an instance of attention also accords well with key observations about grief’s ‘metaphysics’.

First, to conceive of grief as an instance of attention suggests a rough temporal boundary for a grief event. A grief event begins when a subject’s attention (a) is directed at the loss caused by another’s death, and (b) other possible loci of the subject’s attention recede to the margins of their awareness. Conversely, a grief event concludes when other loci of attention displace grief at or near the centre of subjects’ attention. Granted, both grief’s onset and its diminution can be gradual and non-linear. All the same, our ordinary ways of talking about grief support these claims regarding the arrival and departure of grief. “She’s not grieving yet” need not refer to the absence of specific emotion (sorrow, say) but to the fact that an individual’s attention has not yet shifted such that her consciousness is pervaded by awareness of the deceased, the fact of her death, etc. Likewise, to “move on” from grief can be interpreted as referring to the reduction of attention that marks the end of a grief event.

Second, recall that attention is a structural feature of our minds as a whole, a state wherein different mental states or items interact whilst being anchored in the object of attention that sits atop our “priority structures.” As we have already noted, grief typically involves multiple distinct emotions. But grief also “crosscuts the usual division of the mind” as well. For the emotions involved in grieving co-exist with, and bear complex relations to, other mental (or even bodily) states. The emotions we undergo in a grief event are obviously dependent on various beliefs of ours (about the deceased individual, their lives, our relations to them, etc.), as well upon other states with cognitive content (for instance, remembering an interaction with the deceased or imagining how the deceased might react to some event that took place posthumously). Emotions, beliefs, and other states also interact with more practical capacities of motivation, choice, and action. For example, when a bereaved
individual has an obligation to make choices concerning the interment and funeral services on behalf of the deceased, those choices and actions are influenced by their emotions and beliefs. The bereaved’s experiences of the interment and funeral can then in turn influence their subsequent emotions and beliefs. Grieving can also include heightened states of the body that are among the states contributing to attention. (Brinkmann 2021: 92-126) Hence, grief (like other instances of attention) draws upon multiple sectors of our mental lives.

A third advantage of conceiving of grief as attentional is that it vindicates the intuition that grief events are coherent episodic wholes. If grief is a process of affective states of varying intensities, on what grounds can we speak of grief as organized into identifiable events instigated by the death of another person? Suppose that Georgia grieves the death of her sister Hazel, undergoing several distinct but perhaps overlapping emotions whose intensity ebbs and flows over a period of several months. Given the heterogeneity of the emotions, etc., why is not the more plausible description of Georgia’s grieving a mere emotional sequence rather than a coherent emotional process? If so, then to speak of grief in terms of ‘events’ may misrepresent them as having a kind of integrity that they lack. And the mere fact that Georgia’s various affective states have an apparent common cause (the death of Hazel or Georgia’s awareness thereof) is not sufficient to make these states components of a larger, integrated affective event. A person who arrives too late for an important plane flight may feel a sequence of emotions: panic, anxiety, frustration, despair. But it would strain credibility to think of these as elements of some previously unnamed emotional condition as opposed to simply a sequence of affects with a common cause. What, then, differentiates grief events from mere emotional sequences? In a word, attention. The grieving subject undergoes a temporal interval in which the fact of another’s death, along with whatever evaluative and emotional implications carry for them, occupies a disproportionately large amount of their mental territory. The various emotions (and other states) involved in grieving
thus have more than a common causal origin; they are elements within an interval of attention, wherein the attention in question depends upon but is not simply a temporal sequence of component states.

Finally, grief being attentional allows for the rich diversity of the content of grief events while also making sense of these as events with a common nature. Everyone grieves differently, it is sometimes said. Not only will one person grieve different deaths differently (a person will grieve their parent’s death differently from their sibling’s), but different people will grieve the same person’s death differently (a child of the deceased will grieve that death differently from how a sibling will). Most all grief events contain sadness, but beyond this, they vary considerably in their duration, intensity, and affective tenor. But seeing grief as an instance of attention directed at loss provides a broad enough conceptual umbrella to count these myriad events as grief events.

5. Grief and Agency

Some of the language surrounding grief depicts it as a passive condition. That we ‘suffer from’ grief, for instance, invites us to see grieving subjects as helpless. But this, I propose, is incorrect. For grief is an instance of attention, and attention is itself an activity in which we exercise our agency and shape our experience.

No doubt a good portion of grief experience is passive. Grief occurs because of events outside of our control and arrives unbidden. Furthermore, many of the emotions and other states that contribute to grief are unchosen. But we should not underestimate how grieving nevertheless involves exercise of active agency through which we attempt to understand our loss and reconstruct our self-conceptions in its wake. (Attig 1996)

Cholbi (2021: 45-49) offers a useful metaphor to capture the place of agency in grief: Grief resembles musical improvisation. On any given occasion, we are to some measure able
to decide whether we sing or play a musical instrument. But sometimes the urge to perform, including to sing along to a song already underway, seems irresistible. And once we begin performing a given song, the song itself dictates much of our experience. Yet we can improvise as we go, altering the tempos, colour, etc. of what we play. This ability to improvise reaches limits; we cannot just play anything and still be performing a given song. We thus have the ability to direct attention to music, and once we have done so, we can shift our attention among various aspects of that experience.

Likewise, grief, as an instance of attention, is both something we do and an activity in the context of which we choose and act. Attention itself, as Watzl observed, is to some extent an object of choice. We have some latitude over what we choose to direct our attention at, and this is no less true of grief. Upon being ‘informed’ that we are grieving, we can suppress it, striving to ensure that it remains, for the time being, near the periphery of our consciousness. Alternatively, we can embrace grief, deliberately bringing it the forefront of our consciousness. In this respect, the psychological tribulations of grief may not constitute suffering if (as Brady (2018) proposes) suffering is unpleasant affect that we wish would cease. For on some occasions, we may desire that the sadness and other adverse emotions associated with grief continue rather than abate, despite lamenting the death that prompted the grief event. (Kauppinen 2019) Even in the midst of the negative emotions that tend to dominate grief, we may therefore tacitly appreciate the value that grief has in directing our attention at facts that call out for our attention. (Cholbi 2022:115-117)

These claims should not be exaggerated: As noted earlier, grief is often intrusive and seemingly resistant to our bidding. But it does not follow that we never have an agential say in whether we attend to the losses that instigate grief. Yet grief is also agential in that grief events themselves can include many moments of choice and action. Among these:
- Deciding about details of funerals and interments, composing or arranging eulogies, etc.
- Actively imagining the deceased
- Journaling or writing letters to the deceased
- Deciding which of a deceased person’s belongings to retain or to discard
- Choosing whether to seek religious guidance, medical treatment, or counselling
- Lifestyle decisions (for instance, a spouse deciding whether to continue to live in the same dwelling as before)

Through these choices, we shape the contours of our grief in ways that both reflect our attention to our loss and shape that attention. A grieving subject who, for instance, creates an online memorial of a deceased loved one is acting in light of the attention she has already dedicated to her loss, presumably having reached a point where she is emotionally prepared to communicate publicly about the deceased and her loss. The memorial will likely shape her subsequent attention as well, fostering a transition from a backward-looking phase of grief concerned with the loss to a more forward-looking phase concerned with how to live on with that loss. (Stroebe and Schut 1999) Subjects thus have (limited) agency both over whether they grieve and (limited) agency over how their grieving unfolds.

6. Resolving the Puzzle of Resilience

Finally, that grief is attentional also bears on a puzzle concerning grief, recovery, and adaptation discussed in the recent philosophical literature.

Contrary to folk wisdom, the most profound losses that give rise to grief, such as the death of one’s spouse, do not result in intense or long-lasting emotional turmoil. Bereaved spouses appear to ‘recover’ from these losses more quickly both than they expect and than cultural norms would lead us to expect. Most return to their antecedent level of well-being
within six months of their spouse’s death, for instance. As Dan Moller summarizes these findings,

The results of empirical investigation thus seem to conflict with a widely held view in our culture that the loss of a partner or spouse is invariably or at least usually an agonizing blow with long-lasting and significant impact. Contrary to this folk view (and certain non-empirical bereavement theories), empirical research seems to show that most people manifest … resilience in the face of loss: although they are initially traumatized, they quickly recover and manifest little long-term distress. And, again contrary to folk wisdom, this does not seem to be the result of repression or of having had an unfulfilling relationship; most people simply adapt far better to their loss than we tend to believe. (2007: 302. See also Moller 2017: 2-3)

For Moller, that we recover from the losses associated with profound grief — that our emotional “immune system” enables us to so readily adapt to the absence of those we care about — raises troubling questions about the interplay of our emotions and our interpersonal relationships. This apparent discrepancy between the magnitude of our grief events and the importance to us of those whose deaths we grieve suggests either that our typical grief responses are in fact insufficient to their losses— that “most people who lose someone they love do not experience grief in a way that reflects the nature of the loss that they have sustained and is thus inapt” (Moller 2017: 2) — or that the typical trajectories of grief and resilience show that we never valued the deceased individual as greatly as we supposed (Moller 2007: 305). Berislav Marušić (2018) presents this puzzle of resilience in similar terms. The deaths of loved ones provide reasons for grief. These reasons presumably do not change; whatever facts provide a person their reasons for feeling grief at another’s death (say) a day later do not alter, obtaining the next day, the next week, the next year, etc. And
yet grief diminishes, as if the facts that provide reasons to grieve do alter over time. If our reasons for grief do not “expire,” Marušić asks, why is that grief itself seems to expire?

The puzzle of resilience, then, is why there is an apparent mismatch between typical grief events and their objects. We do not seem to grieve as extensively or arduously as those objects warrant. Our grief thus seems to fall short of what we grieve for, either ethically (as Moller presents the puzzle) or rationally (as Marušić presents it). I am not sure if the puzzle of resilience can be addressed in the terms that Moller and Marušić provide. However, if my arguments thus far are compelling and grief is attentional, then the puzzle does not arise, or at the very least, can be reframed.

Neither Moller nor Marušić offer a detailed account of the nature of grief or of the emotions more generally. Nevertheless, both represent grief as if its normativity is largely exhausted by its aptness to its object. In motivating the puzzle of resilience, Moller assumes that grief is justified by appeal to whether it is ‘fitting’ (2017:6), while Marušić worries that grief’s end amounts to “a failure to adequately respond to our reasons” (2018:3).

For Moller and Marusic, this puzzle arises because the belief, judgment, or perception concerning the loss in question seems to survive the affective features of grief: Even after my grief has diminished or disappeared, the facts about my loss that make it intelligible or rational do not diminish or disappear. One challenge to this picture is that it assumes that the appreciation of the loss is a cause of grief rather than one of its effects. As we saw in section 2, grief has an epistemic dimension. Grieving individuals often undergo bewilderment or disorientation, which in turn decrease as individuals grasp the nature of their loss and how they might incorporate it into their lives henceforth. As an instance of attention, grief thus

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2 Indeed, Moller (2017: 6) attempts to articulate the puzzle while prescinding from any such theoretical commitments.
appears to be as much as a search for the reasons that vindicate the various affective states that constitute it (sadness etc.) as it is a response to the prior recognition of such reasons.

More fundamentally, if grief is an instance of attention, then its rationality can be appraised in terms different from those on which the puzzle of resilience rests, namely, in terms of whether the attention involved in grief is itself rational. On its face, intervals of attention can be appraised for their rationality. Phobias are typically understood as disorders involving excessive or irrational fear or anxiety, where a principal manifestation of such excess or irrationality is a persistent “attentional bias” toward the object of the fear or anxiety. (Aue et al. 2013) An individual with arachnophobia (fear of spiders), for example, will tend to have their attention more easily engaged with spiders than with other stimuli, are slower to disengage their attention to spiders than to other stimuli, and are less susceptible to distractions when engaging with spiders. One respect, then, in which phobias are irrational is that they involve irrational attention, attention that exceeds the apparent evaluative significance of the feared phenomenon. Conversely, those with the “inattentive” presentation of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) struggle to direct their attention to a single activity, easily succumbing to distractions. Whether these instances of difficulties with attention should be thought as bona fide disorders is not an issue I explore here. They underscore, however, the coherence of seeing attention as itself open to rational appraisal.

What might this amount to in the case of grief, understood (as I have proposed) as an attentional phenomenon? As we noted in section 1, attention prioritizes particular facts or states within an individual’s psychology. In the course of grief events, attention may shift among various emotions (sadness, anxiety, etc.), as well as among other mental states (imagining that the deceased is still alive, making decisions concerning the deceased’s personal effects, recalling to mind memorable events in the deceased’s life, etc.). Grief is thus a dynamic interval of attention, unified by how the various states involved in grief respond to
the loss of the deceased. The component states of grief events can themselves be rationally appraised. Grief can go rationally awry if it does not measure up to the loss it registers, either quantitatively (if we grieve more or less than the loss merits) or qualitatively (if the particular emotions we undergo in a grief event would prove to be either based on mistakes of fact or are simply not emotions that the loss in question renders intelligible). (Cholbi 2022: 123-148)

But attention itself can be appraised for its aptness in a more holistic way. Consider phobias again. Phobias are instances of misplaced and exaggerated attention. They are inapt both in a backward-looking sense (the arachnophobe has false beliefs regarding the dangerousness of spiders) and in a forward-looking sense (the arachnophobe who confronts a spider forms the irrational desire to flee as a result). (Cholbi 2017a) The inaptness of the arachnophobe’s attention to spiders reflects the inaptness of these particular states, but it can neither be reduced to them nor captured by aggregating them. The arachnophobe simply should not pay spiders as much attention as she does, nor should she pay attention to them for the reasons she does. And in paying attention to spiders as she does, other possible foci of attention (foci to which she has stronger reason to attend) are marginalized and neglected within her mental life.

So too with regard to grief: While the component states of grief can be apt or inapt, so too can the attention involved in grieving. Note that the target of our judgments regarding the aptness of attention, and hence the aptness of grief, are persons, not mental states of persons. Grief does not grieve; persons do. And sometimes individuals grieve too little or with insufficient intensity; the loss they have undergone has not occupied their attention for long enough or to a sufficiently high degree. In other cases, individuals grieve too long or with too much zeal. In proclaiming that such events of grief are inapt, we make contrastive judgments about the place of grief within the subject’s economy of attention. To say that a person’s grief is insufficient is to imply that other foci of their attention have played too large a part in their
attention. They need to ‘take a pause’ from other concerns to attend to their grief. On the other hand, to say that a person’s grief is excessive is to imply that other foci should (now) play a larger part within their attention. They need to ‘get on with their lives.’

Understood in this light, the puzzle of resilience takes on a different cast. For one, even if we ‘recover’ from grief more quickly than we might expect (i.e., our sadness diminishes and our prior sense of well-being returns), that recovery will not necessarily coincide with our attention. (Cholbi 2019) A deceased loved one and our relationship with them may continue to draw our attention in other ways even after the diminution in sadness that represents our supposed ‘recovery’ from grief. Conversely, we may continue to feel occasional sadness when thinking of a deceased loved one well after the attention that I have suggested constitutes a grief event has diminished. The aptness of the judgments, beliefs, perceptions, etc. that contribute to grief can thus come apart from the aptness of the attention involved in grief. All the more, if grief is (a) an instance of attention instead of a judgment, belief, or perception of an evaluative fact, and also (b) appraisable for its aptness, then the better question to ask is not why we fail to feel sadness, etc. even despite the facts that render such sadness intelligible continuing to obtain, but whether the attention involved in grieving is adequate to its object.

The puzzle of resilience that grips Moller and Marušić therefore does not arise if we jettison the atomistic picture of grief as consisting in an emotion grounded in judgments or perceptions of loss in favor of seeing grief as an attentional phenomenon. Notice that this raises the possibility of a descendant of the puzzle of resilience, a puzzle of attention wherein we systematically devote less (or more) attention to grief than the relevant losses seem to warrant. Perhaps our patterns of attention revert to normal more readily than they ought to in light of the conditions that attention must meet in order to be rational. Obviously, I have not given a decisive argument against the possibility of such an attention-based version of the
puzzle of resilience, which may well require an overall account of what renders attention rational or irrational. Yet as I hope the earlier discussion of phobias and similar phenomena indicate, instances of attention can be irrational. Only more careful empirical study on grief and attention could indicate whether we typically allocate adequate attention to grief. At the very least though, if grief is an attentional phenomenon and attention is amenable to rational appraisal, then the issue of whether we typically grieve as we rationally ought to grieve can be reframed.

7. Conclusion

Brinkmann (2018) has proposed that grief is among what he calls the “foundational emotions,” emotions constitutive of human subjectivity that are typically elicited by facts implicating human relationships and mortality. I concur with Brinkmann that grief has this ‘foundational’ importance, but I hope to have shown that although grief is saturated with emotion, it is better thought of as a condition of attention than an emotion. Admittedly, to speak of grief as ‘an emotion’ likely poses little harm. But grief is not a basic emotion, nor a quantitative variant of such a basic emotion (such as sadness), nor a hybrid of more basic emotions. Rather, grieving is an instance of attention in which a particular object (the loss signified by another’s death) displaces other possible objects of emotional concern and situates itself at the centre of our consciousness. For the duration of a grief event, a bereaved subject regulates their “priority system” such that an array of states (primarily emotions, but also beliefs and other cognitive states as well as bodily states) are directed at the loss signified by that state.

In these regards, grief may not be unique among the ingredients of our mental lives. Pain, for example, can capture our attention and consign other aspects of our consciousness to the mental periphery. Other emotions seem to be open to an attentional analysis (for
instance, the pathological jealousy sometimes called “Othello syndrome.” Some philosophers advocate for the general thesis that emotions in general are attentional (Brady (2013)). Strictly speaking, my claim that grief is an instance of attention rather than an emotion is at odds with this thesis. Nevertheless, my claim echoes the spirit of such views inasmuch as it suggests that thinking of our affective lives in terms of particular emotions is sometimes misleading inasmuch as particular affective states are in turn elements of wider (and more explanatorily fundamental) instances of attention. In the case of grief at least, I have sought to argue that viewing it as an emotion is less theoretically satisfying than viewing it as an attentional phenomenon in which emotions are the most prominent elements.

Grief is sometimes described as a form of madness, as an “obliterative” condition of being “literally crazy” with loss. (Didion 2005) If my hypothesis that grief is a particularly acute state of attention, this ‘madness’ is unsurprising. States of extreme attention can seem like waves of directionless mental chaos. At the same time though, that our psyches realize states of attention allows us to direct our mental resources at the losses prompted by grief and, in most instances, ultimately manage such chaos. The attention involved in grief thus signals to us the importance of the loss it registers, but also offers us a path by which to cope with that loss. (Shulman 2018)

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