

GRIEF, CONTINUING BONDS, AND UNRECIPROCATED LOVE¹

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ABSTRACT: The widely accepted “continuing bonds” model of grief tells us that rather than bereavement necessitating the cessation of one’s relationship with the deceased, very often the relationship continues instead in an adapted form. However, this framework appears to conflict with philosophical approaches that treat reciprocity or mutuality of some form as central to loving relationships. Seemingly the dead cannot be active participants, rendering it puzzling how we should understand claims about continued relationships with them. In this article, we resolve this tension by highlighting two fundamental aspects of paradigmatic loving relationships that can, and often do, continue in an adapted form following bereavement: love and mutual shaping of interests, choices, and self-concepts. Attention to these continuing features of relationships helps to capture and clarify the phenomenological and behavioral features of continuing bonds. However, love and mutual shaping must also change in important ways following bereavement. Love becomes unreciprocated, and although the dead continue to shape our interests, choices, and self-concepts, we predominantly shape their legacies

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and memories in return. These changes place important constraints upon the nature of our interpersonal connections with the dead.

1. INTRODUCTION

Grief may appear to be an experience focused on endings: the ending of a loved person's life, the ending of a relationship, the ending of expectations about a shared life together. However, the "continuing bonds" approach to grief, which is widely accepted among psychologists and has in recent years been endorsed by various philosophers of grief (e.g., Higgins 2013; Norlock 2017; Cholbi 2019), tells us that rather than grief involving the severing of one's relationship with a loved one, it instead often involves the continuation of it in an adjusted form. This approach builds upon the idea that grief is in some sense a continuation of love (e.g., as has been expressed by Solomon [2004]), and the framework is made plausible by first-person accounts that indicate feelings of continuation of one's relationship as well as behavioral evidence that people engage in activities aimed at sustaining one's relationships with the dead. However, there is an apparent problem for this approach: intuitively, *relationships* cannot be one-sided. They are often spoken about in terms of reciprocity or mutuality. For example, some have taken them to necessarily involve interaction, and *loving* relationships, such as romantic partnerships and friendships, seem to further require reciprocity of love if they are to constitute genuine relationships of those types. Thus, on the face of it, it seems that death must result in the ending of one's relationship after all, challenging the continuing bonds framework. However, if one were to, on that basis, reject the continuing bonds framework, a problem would arise regarding how to understand the phenomenological and behavioral phenomena that motivate the approach in the first place.

In this article, we aim to resolve the apparent tension between the continuing bonds approach and the idea that loving relationships require reciprocity. We argue that certain key facets of paradigmatic loving relationships often *do* continue following the death of one of the parties, helping to explain the phenomenological and behavioral features of continuing bonds and of grief more broadly. We do not take a stance on whether the continuation of these features constitute a "relationship" that continues with the dead: the answer to this question will depend upon how expansive a notion of relationship one wishes to adopt. Our aim is rather to clarify which elements of relationships do continue and which do not and what this tells us about the concept of continuing bonds. First, we argue that *love* can continue

following a bereavement and that this love remains a kind of *personal* love directed at the specific person who died, but importantly this love becomes unreciprocated. A second important aspect of loving relationships is the way in which participants mutually shape one another's interests, choices, and self-concepts. We argue that something akin to this mutual shaping can also continue, in an adapted form, following a bereavement: the deceased continue to shape our self-concepts, choices, and interests, and we in turn shape the memories and legacies of the deceased. How these features of relationships change following a bereavement, however, places constraints upon how we ought to understand our connections to the dead. In particular, insofar as any kind of "relationship" can continue, we argue that one's ties with the dead can no longer count as a friendship or romantic relationship since these types of relationship require specific friendship or romantic reciprocity. Such considerations provide much needed clarification to both the literature within both the philosophy of grief and the philosophy of love.

2. GRIEF AND CONTINUING BONDS: A PROBLEM FOR THE APPROACH

When a loved one dies, what becomes of our relationship with them? The "continuing bonds" approach to grief has become increasingly influential in recent years. Advocates of the framework typically situate the approach in opposition to an alternative model of healthy responses to bereavement, often attributed to Freud (1917), which emphasizes the importance of emotional disengagement from the deceased. The continuing bonds approach instead tells us that rather than normal bereavement involving the dissolution of ties with a loved one, it instead involves adjustment and adaptation of one's relationship. The framework is most comprehensively presented in a collection of works edited by Klass et al. (1996), which highlights their rejection of the "detachment" hypothesis, with many more recent accounts endorsing and developing the approach (e.g., Klass 2006; Valentine 2008; Klass and Steffen 2018). Earlier research also presents important precursors to the framework. For example, Bowlby (1980) tells us that grief involves a phase of *reorganization*, rather than detachment from the deceased.

A number of philosophical works have endorsed the claim that grief involves *maintenance* and *adaptation* of one's relationship with the deceased—the central idea of the continuing bonds framework. Michael Cholbi tells us that death "does not entail the cessation of the bereaved's relationship with the deceased. Our relationships to the dead continue, both emotionally and symbolically" (2019, 503). In fact, he argues that the *object* of grief—what it

is directed toward—is a *changed*, rather than necessarily annihilated, relationship with the deceased. Kathleen Higgins too endorses the continuing bonds perspective, stating that she believes “this conception of grief is vastly superior to one that urges the dissolution of bonds to the deceased” (2013, 172), as it better captures the ways that our personal identities and narrative practices are entwined with our deceased loved ones.

The phenomena discussed within the literature on continuing bonds is heterogeneous, which is perhaps unsurprising given the diversity of grief experiences among different people and cultures, and even within the same person over time. The nature of grief is difficult to pin down, as it is widely accepted that it is not a simple and singular emotional state, but rather a complex and temporally extended *process* that unfolds over many months or years, and which may involve wide-ranging constituent emotional episodes (e.g., Klass et al. 1996; Goldie 2011; Ratcliffe 2017). It is also controversial how we ought to understand the principal object of grief, with candidates including a loss, the loss or death of a person, a loss of life possibilities (e.g., Ratcliffe et al. 2022), or a transformed relationship (e.g., Cholbi 2019). However, there are certain paradigmatic aspects of grief that are often taken to exemplify and support the notion of continuing bonds. In particular, the framework often emphasizes various behaviors of bereaved subjects, certain phenomenological features of grief that are taken to be indicative of continuing bonds, and aspects of how our personal identities continue to be tied to deceased loved ones. With regards the behaviors of bereaved subjects, it is noted that people often engage in activities aimed at the maintenance of connection with the dead, such as attempts to converse with the dead, retainment and use of the possessions of the deceased, attendance of gravesites, and memorialization activities. Relatedly, people often engage in the construction of narratives about their deceased loved ones. As Higgins (2013, 175) notes, one’s “continuing relationship with the deceased is nurtured through ongoing reflection and reconstruction of the story,” and narrative practices can symbolically “reanimate the dead.” Such behaviors are taken by continuing bonds theorists to be indicative of one’s sustained, and adapted, relationship with the dead.

Continuing bonds theorists also frequently appeal to first-person reports that tell us that bereaved people often *feel* a sense of continued connection to the dead. Subjects may, for example, feel as though they are still in contact with the dead or that the deceased is still in some way *present* (e.g., Valentine 2008; Castelnovo et al. 2015; Steffen and Coyle 2017; Ratcliffe 2020; Millar 2021). Steffen and Coyle (2017, 373) recount one participant in their research saying, “Sometimes I feel that he’s here or something. I just can’t explain it but I just know that he’s here.”

Valentine (2008, 133) likewise speaks of interviewees making reports such as the following: “With Vera I go to the special places that she used to go to. And then I’m in immediate connection with her.” References to experiences of presence and reports of continued connection and communication with the dead consistently appear throughout the empirical literature on continuing bonds. Within this framework, it is emphasized that these experiences are often normal, healthy, and adaptive.

One final and closely related motivating factor for the continuing bonds framework is the way that one’s sense of identity often continues to be tied to a relationship to the deceased loved one. One might think that maintaining key aspects of one’s sense of identity requires the continuation of certain loving relationships, especially if these are what Cholbi calls “identity-constituting relationships”:

To have an identity-constituting relationship with another is to conceptualize her not merely as shaping who one is but also what one cares about. Such relationships depend on the past, but they also shape our future. Our identity-constituting relationships reveal who we want to be and to become. They are the relationships that . . . matter to how we value ourselves. (2017, 99)²

Higgins notes, “To actually eliminate the relationship with a beloved dead person in one’s psychic life would entail eliminating much of one’s sense of self as well” (2013, 172). Thus, to Higgins, the alternative “detachment” picture does not adequately capture how one’s sense of identity can continue to involve a person who has died. Valentine (2008, 125) likewise emphasizes this continued role that the dead can play, stating that “for some people, a deceased loved one may become a more permanent and integral part of their day-to-day lives and sense of identity.”

With these motivations for the continuing bonds framework in mind, it is also important to briefly highlight the limitations of the approach. The framework does not generally claim that *all* grief involves continuing bonds, or even that continuing bonds are always a requirement for healthy adjustment to loss. Some bereaved people may feel a total sense of detachment from their deceased loved one, in which case, continuing bonds is not a *necessary* component of grief. Instead, the approach makes the more minimal claim that the maintenance of bonds with the dead is common, and (much of the time) it is normal and nonpathological (e.g., Klass 2006). That the continuing bonds approach should not be taken to

² Cholbi draws this definition from Christine Korsgaard’s (1996) concept of “practical identities”—“descriptions[s] under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions worth undertaking” (101).

apply to every case of grief can be further observed by noting that there can arguably be cases of grief where there was no existing relationship whatsoever, and thus no “bonds” to continue. For example, some profess to grieve over the loss of the chance of having children in the future (Day 2016), and in such cases there is no child with whom to have an existing relationship. One may arguably also be able to grieve over someone that is not known personally, like a celebrity, or experience grief over nonbereavement losses, like a lost piece of art, a destroyed home, or an unsuccessful career.³ Whether or not these kinds of cases truly involve “grief” in the same sense that one suffers grief over the death of a family member or friend will not be our focus here. However, such cases do serve to highlight that the continuing bonds framework may not capture how all forms of grief are negotiated, but instead only tell us about an important subset. Here we shall focus on those cases that provide the paradigmatic examples of continuing bonds, that is, bereavements where the deceased and the griever had some form of personal relationship beforehand. Specifically, we focus on *loving* relationships and not merely instrumental relationships. In these cases, where a prior loving relationship existed, the continuing bonds framework tells us that this relationship is often maintained and adapted following the death.

However, a worry arises about cases of “continuing bonds,” even in the paradigmatic cases where someone had a prior loving relationship with the person who died and where they report that it feels as though this relationship is ongoing. Intuitively, *relationships* cannot be one-sided. Across various branches of philosophy, interaction, reciprocity, mutuality, or joint action of some sort has been treated as a fundamental component of relationships. For example, Aristotle’s account of friendship tells us that shared action is crucial to these kinds of relationships.⁴ Søren Kierkegaard ([1847] 1995) sees reciprocity as one of the components of friendship, but one that makes friendship problematic and lesser than the love for God, while Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 1956) thinks that reciprocity is an element of loving relationships that needs to be based on mutual, equal recognition. In the

³ While accounts that take grief’s object to be a *death* specifically would clearly preclude grief over artworks, homes, and careers, other accounts would not. For example, those that take grief’s object to be a *loss* more broadly or a loss of life possibilities can allow for a more expansive conception of grief.

⁴ In *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 2004, Book VIII), Aristotle sees perfect friendship as a vehicle for virtuous shared action. With his view, mutual affection and shared decisions—in essence, a shared life—are necessary conditions for such friendship (see Sherman [1987] for an analysis of Aristotle’s approach to friendship and shared life, which also uncovers similar claims on reciprocity in Kant’s work).

philosophy of cognitive science, dynamic interaction has been taken to be central to our relationships with others (e.g., McGann and De Jaegher 2009; Candiotta and De Jaegher 2021) and empirical work has emphasized the involvement of mutual bodily regulation in our relationships (Hofer 1984; Atzil and Barrett 2017). Elsewhere within contemporary analytic philosophy, some form of reciprocity has been treated as a requirement for, or at least a very important element of, relationships like friendships or romantic partnerships (Rorty 1987; Nozick 1989; Cocking and Kennett 1998; Kolodny 2003; Foster 2008; Helm 2010; Krebs 2014; Bagley 2015; Nehamas 2016). Although our focus here will be on *loving* relationships, less important personal relationships may also be taken to require some form of interaction or mutuality (e.g., see Scanlon 2008).

The accounts mentioned differ in how they construe the requirement of reciprocity. We unpack these differences in sections 2 and 3. For now, it suffices to note that if some form of interaction, reciprocity, or mutuality is needed to sustain our relationships with others, this raises an apparent problem for the continuing bonds approach. It is unclear how a relationship with a deceased loved one could *ever* be said to continue. This is because, according to certain common assumptions, the dead can no longer be active participants. It is worth mentioning here that such assumptions and the puzzle to which they give rise occur against the backdrop of a Western, scientifically-oriented outlook; with certain other frameworks for thinking about the dead, such a puzzle may not arise, or at least not so overtly.⁵ For example, if someone sees their ancestors as present within the context of a ritual or believes they are actually communing with the dead, the question of how reciprocity could be maintained may not occur (see, for example, Morioka [2021] for helpful discussion of various Japanese outlooks on the ontological status of the dead). Importantly, the continuing bonds theory itself is ontologically neutral about how we ought to understand experiences of the presence of the dead (as is made clear, for example, in Klass and Steffen [2018], particularly in their introductory and concluding chapters). For now, however, we take seriously the starting assumption that it is puzzling how the dead could be involved in a reciprocal relationship.⁶

⁵ We are grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting consideration of this issue.

⁶ Insofar as our central puzzle is predicated upon a particular ontological perspective, our arguments can be seen as illuminating how a continuing bonds approach can be made plausible *even if* one endorses the kind of scientific, materialistic worldview that would make the approach less *prima facie* plausible. For those who adopt an outlook that makes our central puzzle less pronounced, we think this article still provides clarity and important arguments regarding at least a subset of the ways that we relate to the dead.

There has been limited research tackling the question of whether, and how, a relationship could continue with the dead given a lack of reciprocity (though see Norlock [2017] for one exception). Moreover, there has been little scrutiny of which specific aspects of relationships continue and which do not continue following a bereavement. This is the task with which we are engaged in what follows. We argue that there are very important *components* of relationships that do continue following bereavement, even if there is no longer full-blown reciprocity. Careful consideration of these components helps to explain the feelings of continued connection that bereaved subjects report. We further argue that these facets of relationships that do continue are *altered* in distinctive ways, which can offer further insights into the phenomenology of grief and clarify how we ought to understand our connections with the dead.

3. ENDURING LOVE

As noted above, paradigmatic cases of grief involve the death of one with whom some form of loving relationship was shared. One facet of such relationships that might continue even after the death of one party is *love*. Love is often treated as the flip side of grief. The author Julian Barnes writes, “Every love story is a potential grief story” (2013, 102) and psychiatrist Colin Parkes similarly observes that grief “is, perhaps, the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment” (1972, 20). It is also quite natural to think of the *continuing bonds* that endure following a bereavement in terms of love. Higgins (2013) supports such an idea, drawing upon her late husband Robert Solomon’s claim (see Solomon 2004, 90) that grief is a *continuation* of love. As Higgins puts it, “One does not cease to love someone because that person dies. Indeed, one’s sense of one’s love for the person is, at least for a time, intensified by loss” (2013, 172) and because of this, the alternative to continuing bonds that emphasizes relinquishing one’s connections to the dead “misconstrues what grief is all about” (172). In fact, according to Higgins, rather than detachment being at the heart of healthy responses to bereavement, a *lack* of continuing love “is more likely than not to represent serious dysfunction” (160).

However, even if one agrees that love can endure and that this is an important aspect of grief, it cannot be denied that the death of a loved one—and the consequent cessation of interaction, reciprocated feelings, and a shared life together—entails important changes to the nature of one’s love for that person. If we are to clarify the ways in which love can serve as an important aspect of our continuing bonds with the dead, we need to examine how love is changed through bereavement. In this

section, we argue that love can indeed persist following the death of the object of that love, even if certain significant aspects of loving *relationships* are no longer possible. Moreover, love for the dead can remain a *personal* form of love; it is love for *her* as the person she is. Importantly, though, we argue that the love changes to an *unreciprocated* form, which as we shall see in section 4, places constraints upon how we ought to understand our continuing bonds with the dead.

As we advanced above, philosophers differ in how they think about reciprocity. For philosophers of love, these differences stem from the fact that their accounts differ in their definition of *love*. A first cluster of approaches understand love as a type of mental state or phenomenon. This is the case for accounts that see love as an emotion (Brogaard 2015), a mode of valuing (Velleman 1999), or a mode of concern for one another's interests (Frankfurt 2004). With such a framework, love of a reciprocal form may be cashed out as "A is the object of B's love, and B is the object of A's love." A variant of this interpretation is "A loves AB, and B loves BA," where love is not directed to *another* but to a shared identity, "the two of them" (Smith 2011; see also Krebs 2014). A second set of views understands love not as purely mental but as behavioral, defining it as shared action (Sherman 1987), which in turn results in some sort of shared or merged identity (Nozick 1989). In this case, reciprocity is not understood as a bi-directional attitude, but as interaction and shaping of one's choices, interests, and self-concepts. We need not choose between these approaches in this article. The first reason for this is that we intend this article's argument to be compatible with a variety of views, without making strong metaphysical commitments regarding what love or loving relationships are. The second reason is that our strategy here follows the trend to abandon a "central element" approach, which consists in defining love through one main defining feature (Lopez-Cantero 2018). Most contemporary philosophy of love has moved away from such an approach, with recent accounts seeing love as a combination of elements like valuing and emotion (Abramson and Leite 2011); shared action and valuing (Helm 2010); or emotion and behavior (Naar 2017; Pismenny and Prinz 2017). Our strategy for the purposes of this article is, then, to simply assume that both loving attitudes and loving interaction are components of loving relationships, without determining their centrality or defining role. In this section, we discuss *reciprocity of love* understood as a bi-directional attitude, and in section 4 we discuss *mutual shaping* as interaction within a loving relationship that contributes to shaping one's choices, interests, and self-concepts.

Reciprocity of love, understood in the first sense, is not a requirement for all forms of love. This can be seen in the first instance by noting that reciprocity is an *impossibility* in certain kinds of love. You may love basketball (Wolf 2015), but basketball cannot love you back. The same goes for love toward other objects that cannot reciprocate but could (with some philosophical accounts) be grieved, like nature (see Cunsolo and Ellis [2018] for discussion of “ecological grief”),⁷ one’s home, or precious artworks. Sam Shpall (2018), who sees love as a type of devotion that makes one’s life meaningful, explores the examples of a writer’s attitudes toward his grand literary project, or a mystic devoted to God as the way of perfection. These types of love are *nonreciprocal*: they have objects that are by their nature unable to reciprocate. One initial possibility would be to understand continuing bonds as involving continuing love of this sort. Love for the dead might be said to have an object—a deceased person—which is, like an artwork, nature, or a religious ideal, unable by its nature to reciprocate.

However, *nonreciprocal* love of this form should be distinguished from what we shall call *unreciprocated* love, which has its paradigm in romantic unrequited love but may also arise in other relationships (one can love one’s parents without being loved back, or one can love someone as a friend while merely being considered an acquaintance in return, and vice versa). *Unreciprocated* love is a type of love that paradigmatically, by its nature, can be reciprocated by its object, but is not reciprocated in the case at hand. The difference between *nonreciprocal* and *unreciprocated* love is that the latter is a kind of *personal* love or love for persons.⁸ Love is personal insofar it is (1) directed at a specific person (for example, Emma and not Ryan or Dylan) and (2) rooted in that person’s characteristics (for example, that Emma is kind, funny, and good at poker). There is extensive literature dedicated to determining the role of personal characteristics in love (whether it justifies or explains love, what kind of characteristics are appropriate, or whether someone with the same characteristics can or should be an object of love are some of the most common questions in this area). These debates are beyond the scope of

⁷ However, see Bannon (2017), who proposes that we can in some sense have a reciprocal friendship with nature.

⁸ “Love for persons” should be understood as love for any being to which personhood, or elements of personhood, can be assigned, and not necessarily only for human beings. In this article, we restrict our argument to relationships with human beings, but we do not reject the possibility of loving relationships with nonhuman persons—and the subsequent formation of continuing bonds after they pass away.

this article. We simply note that when love is personal, the characteristics that make that person who she is matter to some extent (see Jollimore [2011] for a more detailed defense of such a position regarding the role of personal characteristics in love).

The characteristics of the loved person matter in grief, and that is why unreciprocated love for the deceased cannot be understood as analogous to nonreciprocal love for nature, artworks, and basketball. It is generally the loss of a specific person that causes the pain of grief. We miss things that they used to do, like making their tea in the wrong order, or things that they used to say, like asking us to call when we were home safe. However, this is in large part because these were expressions of this person's characteristics, such as being quirky or being caring. The fact that we see another person making the tea in the wrong order, or that someone else asks us to call when we are home safe, does not replace the loved person doing so—if anything, it may increase the emotional pain, making us all the more aware of the absence of the deceased and reminding us that they cannot do these things anymore. A deceased loved one is still loved for these characteristics being *theirs*—they are irreplaceable as objects of love. In the case of bereavement, our appreciation of such characteristics comes from a history of interpersonal interactions that allow one to value another's traits—and love the deceased *for her*—even when the reciprocal relationship ceases.⁹ Love for the dead is thereby disanalogous to the cases of nonreciprocal love discussed above. The loved person who has passed away does not simply become a love ideal or abstract entity. She is still loved for the person she is. In that sense, in bereavement love can continue, and the love for the deceased continues being personal, but it becomes unreciprocated.

That love changes to an unreciprocated form following a bereavement accords with grief's disruptive nature, forcing a revision of deeply held expectations. Grief is often taken to be characterized by the shattering of core beliefs and a disruption to one's world (e.g., Parkes 1988). One's love no longer being returned provides an important way in which a death can cause major alterations to one's system of core assumptions. Moreover, it is worth noting that paradigmatically, unreciprocated love involves preoccupation and yearning for the loved one, as in the case of

⁹ Shpall (2018, 95) discusses Pedro Almodóvar's film *Talk to Her* as an example of unreciprocated love. In the film, Nancy is devoted to her bed-bound, unresponsive daughter Alicia. We do not intend to make a commitment about whether such a case is analogous to a loved person passing away, but it is plausibly an example of a loving relationship where love is unreciprocated, but still personal, in the sense we suggest here.

the unwanted dissolution of romantic relationships (e.g., see O'Connor and Sussman [2014] for discussion of yearning in breakups), and this is indeed also notably exemplified in the case of acute grief (see Parkes [1970] and Bowlby [1980] for discussion of yearning in grief). This comparison suggests that the yearning characteristic of grief may stem, in part, from one's love becoming unreciprocated.

One potential worry about taking continuing bonds to be explicable in part through continued but unreciprocated love is that some have argued that unreciprocated love is not genuine or valuable: a "lesser form" of love. Sara Protasi (2016) discusses such a view of unreciprocated (or "unrequited," in her terms) love, according to which it is "unruly and immoderate" (218). This is a phrase she borrows from Niko Kolodny, who also says that this type of love is "futile pining" (2003, 171). Such critical accounts of unreciprocated love stem from the fact it is sustained mostly in thought by the lover and is not realized in interaction. Protasi challenges the critical view by arguing that unreciprocated love can be valuable if we take valuable love to be of the kind that involves appreciating the loved person for who she is. However, she tells us that unreciprocated love is not equal in all respects to reciprocated love, since in the former, the loved person remains "an overall *passive object* of attention, appreciation, and love" (227, emphasis added).

Unreciprocated love, even if it is authentic love, may then still be construed as a "lesser" type of love insofar as it gives a passive role to the loved person. The idea that a genuine object of personal love can be treated as a disinterested and passive object of concern has been criticized by many philosophers of love (Ebels-Duggan 2008; Foster 2009; Helm 2010; Wonderly 2017; McKeever 2019). If we were to treat the dead as such, this would present an important *disanalogy* between paradigmatic loving relationships and any continued connections we bear to the dead. Such an understanding of unreciprocated love for the dead seems to conflict with the importance that the bereaved place upon their continuing love for the deceased and the apparently active role that the dead play in their lives. Recall Higgins's (2013) claim that one's love for the dead is in fact *intensified* by the loss. This worry can, however, be resolved by recognizing that in the case of bereavement, one need not construe the object of unreciprocated love as merely "passive." There remain dynamic aspects to one's connections to the dead even in the absence of full-blown reciprocity, and these dynamic aspects play an important role in first-person accounts of continuing bonds. To better understand such aspects of one's connections to the dead, we shall turn in the next section to a further element of paradigmatic loving relationships, which we argue can continue in

an adapted form following the death of one party. This component is what we shall refer to as “mutual shaping”—the way in which lovers play a role in guiding and altering one another’s identities, concerns, and self-concepts.

4. MUTUAL SHAPING AND THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF CONTINUING BONDS

We have seen that love understood as an attitude is one important element of relationships, which can continue following bereavement in an unreciprocated form, and plausibly plays an important role in experiences of continuing bonds. Recall, though, that there was a worry that such an account may treat the deceased as a mere passive object of concern, which does not seem consonant with the reports of those who feel that a relationship has continued with their deceased loved one. On the contrary, many report that their loved one continues to play an *active* role in their life. As a response to this worry, we now turn to the second type of reciprocity involved in paradigmatic loving relationships, which we argue can also continue an adapted form: interaction that contributes to shaping one’s choices, interests, and self-concepts. This helps to capture some of the more dynamic facets of continuing bonds phenomena.

In section 1 we introduced the notion of identity-constituting relationships. This notion of relationships being part of one’s identity or sense of self is present in philosophical accounts of love that are focused on shared action: the things we do with the people we love change us, in virtue of us acquiring new desires, traits, or beliefs through interaction with the person we love (Rorty 1987; Cocking and Kennett 1998; Helm, 2010). As Dean Cocking and Jeanette Kennett note, “each person is receptive to developing interests or activities, which they do not already pursue, primarily because they are the interests and activities of the other” (1998, 503–4).¹⁰ Such an approach is plausibly extended to other close relationships that are likely to give rise to grief following the death of one party. Others add that loving relationships not only require mutual shaping of one another, but also a process of mutual *improvisation* to adapt to the changes that the relationship brings about (Rorty 1987; Bagley 2015). People’s values and interests are dynamic, and with such

¹⁰ It is important to note that interaction need not be understood merely as *doing* things together. For example, Cocking and Kennett (1998) identify as a condition of friendship openness to having one’s behavior interpreted by one’s friend (like being told one talks too much, and giving serious consideration to this input in a way that one would not if told this by a stranger). If I am going to brush off anything that you tell me about my behavior, I cannot really call myself your friend, and vice versa.

an approach, loving relationships involve a mutual process of continued improvisation and adjustment. This is taken to enable one's beloved to be "endlessly interesting and surprising" (Bagley 2015, 507).

As we shall now argue, although technically speaking this sort of mutual shaping ceases, something closely akin to it can persist even when a loved one has died. This helps to capture and clarify the dynamic aspects of continuing bonds phenomena. As discussed, part of the motivation for the continuing bonds framework is the fact that those who have suffered a bereavement often engage in activities—such as narrative practices, memorialization behaviors, putative conversations with the dead, and so on—aimed at maintenance of one's connections with their deceased loved ones. Such activities, we argue, can be understood as enabling an adapted form of the mutual shaping element of loving relationships.

The first thing to note is that the dead can continue to shape our lives, choices, identities, and self-concepts in myriad ways. For example, it is reportedly common for those who have suffered a bereavement to adopt traits of their deceased loved ones (e.g., Klass 1993; Normand et al. 1996, 93). One may begin to make their tea in the wrong order, just as their loved one used to, or adopt aspects of their loved one's humor or kindness. The involvement of the dead in a bereaved person's life can also, according to Valentine (2008, 127), be "extended to sharing in, as well as contributing to, their well-being." As mentioned in section 1, within the philosophical literature, researchers have likewise emphasized the ways the dead can continue to shape one's social identity (e.g., see Higgins 2013).

The ways we are shaped by the dead are not static and can change over time, presenting an important analogy with the continued and changing ways in which such shaping occurs while both parties are alive. For example, where a child loses a parent, the way the child negotiates the loss and retains connection to the dead matures and adapts over time. Some of these changes are wrought simply by the fact that young children have very different cognitive capacities to those of adolescents or adults. Clinical psychologist Betty Buchsbaum (1996, 114) tells us that "the fragmented, egocentric, and often contradictory images of the preschooler provide a much more tenuous ballast than do the consolidated, objective, and multidimensional recollections of the adolescent," but changes to one's connections with the dead continue into one's teenage years and beyond. Silverman and Nickman (1996) report of a teenage girl saying in an interview that she could "imagine my mother yelling in heaven if I didn't do well in school" (78), highlighting the role her

deceased parent might continue to play in motivating certain choices and behaviors. When she moves into adulthood, the deceased parent is likely to shape her life in different ways, perhaps influencing her career choices or how she raises her own children. As Silverman and Nickman note, “Memorializing, remembering, and knowing who died are active processes that may continue throughout the child’s *entire life*” (85, emphasis added), and so the way that a deceased parent influences their child is likely to move on from motivating them to work hard in school towards more adult concerns.

One may object at this point that while the dead can shape who we are, we can clearly not shape who they are in return. However, it is a mistake to think of this process as merely one-directional, even if it lacks full-blown reciprocity. Typically, just as the deceased can shape the bereaved, there is equally a process of the bereaved shaping the *legacies* of, and *memories* about, the deceased. This allows for a closer analogy with the *mutual* shaping central to paradigmatic loving relationships and further enables a sense of dynamicity in one’s continuing bonds with the dead. Parkes and Prigerson describe this as “a gradual piecing together of the pieces of a jig-saw that, eventually, will enable us to find an image and a place in our lives for the people we have loved and lost” (2010, 81). This construction of memories and legacies of the dead is also a continuing process that changes over time. For example, in the case of a bereaved child, as they grow up, they are able to construct increasingly detailed descriptions of their deceased parent (Buchsbaum 1996, 117). More broadly, this process of reconstruction is something done throughout our lives as we come to terms with the loss of a loved one. The ways that we conceive of our deceased loved ones shift and develop over time. Often this process involves collective memorialization activities and narrative practices done together with others. We employ strategies to collectively remember and reconstruct images of those we have lost. While the dead shape us, we shape their legacies.

In virtue of the dynamic nature of this process of shaping, something akin to the additional feature of “mutual improvisation” endorsed by various authors can also be met. In particular, narrative practices can enable a continued adaptation of the legacies and memories of the deceased, and in turn one’s own self-concepts and interests can adapt alongside these legacies and memories. Importantly, this allows for the element of surprise that Bagley (2015) took to be an element of the process of improvisation involved in loving relationships. As Higgins argues, “Narratives [can] symbolically reanimate of the dead because they allow fresh insights, recalling something of the continual

potential for surprise in an ongoing relationship” (2013, 175). We tell stories about the dead with others and find out new things about our loved ones that we were not previously aware of, perhaps discovering different facets of their personality through dialogue with their friends. These revelations can color one’s understanding of the deceased and may further influence one’s own sense of identity in light of these altered legacies and memories.

Finally, a further analogy can be drawn by appreciating that it is plausible that deceased people retain some interests, even if those interests are *non-experiential*. Some have argued that the dead have specific interests (or even rights): we may owe to them that we keep our promises (Brecher 2002); they may have a right to privacy which includes respectful treatment of their remains or not revealing embarrassing facts about them (Scarre 2012); or they may retain future-focused interests, such as political commitments, after their death (Thompson 2016). If the dead do have interests, we can certainly continue caring about and acting upon these interests, much as we care about and act upon the interests of the living. This is then another sense in which something akin to mutual shaping can continue after our loved ones pass away.¹¹

Thus, something closely analogous to the “mutual shaping” central to loving relationships with the living can continue when a loved one dies. There are two key upshots of this. First, this dynamic component of loving relationships captures many important motivators for the continuing bonds framework. Consideration of “mutual shaping” thereby offers a means of better understanding the notion of *continuing bonds* and situating it within existing philosophical discussions about love and relationships. Whether or not a full-blown *relationship* continues with the dead, there are important similarities between our connections to the living and to the dead. Both *love* and something akin to the *mutual shaping* central to our relationships with the living can continue. Secondly, this allays the worry that our love for the dead might involve treating the dead as mere passive objects of concern, thereby relegating the love to a lesser status. As we have seen, the dead can continue to play an *active* role in our lives, and our memories and legacies of the dead are likewise not static. Thus, unreciprocated love for the dead is not akin to cases where one treats another as a mere passive recipient of love.

Although we have so far emphasized important similarities between our connections to the living and to the dead, we do not wish to downplay the magnitude of the *dissimilarities*. As we shall now discuss, the way that love and mutual shaping must change following a bereavement also places very

¹¹ We are thankful to an anonymous referee for suggesting the idea of shaping nonexperiential interests as another possible continuation of mutual shaping.

important constraints upon how we should understand our connections to the dead.

5. THE LIMITS OF OUR CONNECTIONS TO THE DEAD

As we have argued, love and mutual shaping can continue following a bereavement in an adapted form, helping to explain the sense of continuing bonds one may have with the dead. However, other aspects of paradigmatic relationships must cease. There are, of course, many obvious ways in which our connections to the dead must change following the death of one party. At least according to certain common, scientifically oriented assumptions, the dead cannot physically interact with us anymore: they cannot hold our hands or have (genuine rather than imaginal)¹² conversations with us. Here we do not take a stance on the definitional question of whether continued love and the adapted form of “mutual shaping” we have outlined are enough to constitute a “relationship” in the absence of such other features typical of paradigmatic relationships. Instead, we wish to point toward important *constraints* that our discussion places upon the kinds of connections we can retain with the dead.

Of particular interest, in the case of our connections to the dead, there can no longer be reciprocity of love, understood as reciprocal mental phenomena (such as emotions, valuing, or caring). As discussed in section 2, love for the dead changes to an unreciprocated form. Even though our love for the dead can continue, the dead cannot love us back. Although we have argued that this by itself does not necessarily obliterate all elements of our relationship with the deceased, we now explore a fundamental change that lack of reciprocity brings into the relationship. Regardless of exactly how reciprocity is cashed out, many researchers endorse the idea that certain forms of relationship require relationship-specific reciprocity (i.e., friendship reciprocity or romantic reciprocity) to count as relationships *of those types*.

Looking to the example of romantic relationships, Protasi (2016) argues that without reciprocity of romantic love, they do not count as genuine *romantic relationships*. There may still be a performance of a social role (of a “spouse” or “partner,” for example), but such performance alone does not constitute a genuine romantic relationship. Two partners may buy a house together and attend the same events but nevertheless

¹² See Norlock (2017) for detailed discussion of the role of “imaginal” content in our connections to the dead.

not love each other. If genuine romantic relationships are more than mere social roles, members of these relationships must love each other in the relevant ways. The same applies to other types of loving relationship, such as friendship: if two people do not love one another as friends, this does not count as a genuine loving relationship of this sort. According to Lopez-Cantero's (2018) account of break-ups, reciprocity of love within a romantic relationship may be understood as "shared activities performed out of concern and the fulfilment of expectations recognized as romantic" (2018, 701; see Foster [2009] for a related approach to friendship). Which activities count as contributing to "romantic reciprocity" or "friendship reciprocity" may vary from one relationship to another, but in the case of break-ups and in the case of bereavement, even if there is some form of mutual shaping, there is no reciprocity of this kind. Shaping the legacies and the memories surrounding the deceased—and being shaped in return—is not sufficient to capture this kind of reciprocity. This observation enables us now to highlight a very profound sense in which bereavement impacts our relationships.

If loving relationships like *romantic relationships* and *friendships* are taken to require relationship-specific reciprocity to count as those forms of relationship, any continuing connection with friends or lovers must be transformed in a very important way by their death. Namely, it can no longer count as a genuine romantic relationship or friendship. That the love becomes unreciprocated thus necessitates a dramatic change to the kind of connection that one has to the person who died. In making this claim, we do not intend to be prescriptive about how one refers to their deceased loved one or thinks about their continued connections with the dead. Rather, our aim is to acknowledge that bereavement forces one's interpersonal connections to change in a very dramatic way and that, because of this, these connections to the dead no longer fulfil a necessary condition that various philosophers place upon types of loving relationships.¹³

Other researchers have rightly emphasized that bereavement necessitates important changes to one's relationship with the deceased but have in our view sometimes slightly downplayed quite how dramatic this change is. For example, according to Michael Cholbi:

¹³ If one finds it implausible that one's connections to the dead no longer constitute a "friendship" or "romantic relationship," then (contra the approach we have advocated here) this article's argument could instead serve as a challenge to the requirement for reciprocity of love for certain relationship types.

Much of the change necessitated by the deaths of those we grieve for arises from asymmetries between us: our relationship to a deceased person is no longer a relationship to a peer or equal. We cannot relate to a disembodied, silent person as we relate to a fully corporeal one. (2019, 496)

He adds that bereavement involves a “relationship crisis” (500). Cholbi is surely correct that any continuing relationship with the dead must be diminished in the ways he highlights. However, saying that the changes largely arise from asymmetries understates the situation. It is not merely that one has a relationship crisis with a lover, or that the relationship has developed asymmetries, but rather one’s romantic relationship or friendship qua romantic relationship or friendship is altogether annihilated.

The experience of loving someone who has died but no longer having, for example, a romantic relationship with them following bereavement is captured by some first-person accounts of grief. For example, in her memoir recounting the loss of her husband, Juliet Rosenfeld says:

The central relationship for most adults is the couple. When one of the two dies, its status is diminished, a widow is not a wife, and a widower is less than a husband. (2020, 236)

In an important sense, the relationship of husband and wife ceases. This observation about how our connections with the dead must change aligns with how disruptive and painful a bereavement is.¹⁴ Negotiating the fact that, in this sense, one is no longer a husband or wife or that a friendship has been extinguished will involve a far greater disruption than would be implied by a relationship simply becoming more asymmetrical. One’s connections to the dead altogether cease to constitute a friendship or romantic relationship insofar as such relationships require that love is reciprocated. Something has been genuinely and completely lost. The relationship transforms into something else, which nevertheless retains certain important elements of the relationship that once was.

The considerations of this article highlight that the nature of our continuing bonds with the dead is more complex than is suggested by the claim that relationships with the deceased can simply continue. It also goes some way toward challenging the sharp distinction that is often

¹⁴ The writer Joan Didion highlights the difficult process of adjusting to the ways in which one’s relationship to the other changes following bereavement: “I have trouble thinking of myself as a widow. I remember hesitating the first time I had to check that box on the ‘marital status’ part of a form. I also had trouble thinking of myself as a wife. Given the value I placed on the rituals of domestic life, the concept of ‘wife’ should not have seemed difficult, but it did” (2006, 208).

drawn between the continuing bonds framework and the Freudian perspective, according to which healthy grief involves relinquishing one's bonds with the dead. As we have seen, certain central elements of relationships continue, suggesting a sense in which we can retain relations with the dead. However, as we have seen, loving relationships such as a friendship or romantic partnership are indeed severed insofar as they can no longer constitute relationships of those types. Successfully negotiating a bereavement will indeed involve a kind of relinquishment or "letting go" of this kind of relationship—for example, by adapting to one's new status as a widow rather than a spouse, and possibly reinvesting one's energy into new romantic relationships—which is suggestive of Freud's detachment model.¹⁵

This article highlighted two important aspects of relationships that can continue in some adapted form following bereavement—love and mutual shaping. The continuation of these aspects of loving relationships helps to clarify the sense in which one may have continuing bonds with the dead. However, we noted that the way in which these continuing aspects of relationships change also places constraints upon how we should conceive of our connections to the dead. If a plausible view of loving relationships is endorsed, bereavement involves the cessation of friendships, romantic relationships, and any other type of relationship that requires reciprocity of love. This account helps to capture the profound sense of loss at the heart of bereavement, while also illuminating the genuine ways in which our bonds continue and respecting the important and dynamic role the dead can play in our lives.

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¹⁵ See Ratcliffe (2023, chap. 6) for a closer examination of, and further challenges to, the sharp distinction between continuing bonds and "letting go."

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