RELATIONALITY AND FINITUDE

A SOCIAL ONTOLOGY OF GRIEF

by

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For Gunilla Fransson, with gratitude

Bob Dylan - Tomorrow Is a Long Time

If today was not an endless highway
If tonight was not a crooked trail
If tomorrow wasn't such a long time
Then lonesome would mean nothing to you at all
Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin'
Yes, and if I could hear her heart a-softly poundin'
Only if she was lyin' by me
Then I'd lie in my bed once again

I can't see my reflection in the waters
I can't speak the sounds that show no pain
I can't hear the echo of my footsteps
Or can't remember the sound of my own name
Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin'
Yes, and if I could hear her heart a-softly poundin'
Only if she was lyin' by me
Then I'd lie in my bed once again

There's beauty in the silver, singin' river
There's beauty in the sunrise in the sky
But none of these and nothing else can touch the beauty
That I remember in my true love's eyes
Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin'
Yes, and if I could hear her heart a-softly poundin'
Only if she was lyin' by me
Then I'd lie in my bed once again

English Summary

This dissertation develops a social ontology of grief, arguing that grief constitutes the most important link in the dialectic between relationality and finitude. It precedes from a longitudinal interview study with fifteen bereaved life partners in three different generations (five in their 30s, five in their 50s, and five in their 70s), with whom I have conducted interviews for one and a half years. The loss of a life partner embodies a boundary situation—an epistemologically privileged perspective for understanding the predicaments of relationality in general and the existential core of partnerhood specifically. Equally, grief qualifies as one of the most intense experience of finitude and can likewise inform an understanding of what it means to be live in relation to death. As such, grief makes up the heart of relational and finite life and by considering the intertwinement between these segments, we can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be loving, mortal, and grieving creatures.

The core of a social ontology of grief is that the loss of a loved one affects one's being. We *become* part of each other in and through the lives that we carry out together, and losing an other will alter not only our identity, narrative self-understanding, or discursive positioning but *who we are*. Any understanding of what it means to lose presupposes a notion of what it means to have and how that someone or something took part in one's life. There is no way of accounting for who we are without reference to the lives that we live, and since—to a certain degree and in various ways, these lives will be shared with others, losing a loved one will inevitably comprise a partial loss of self. In this way, a social ontology of grief offers a nonessentialist notion of belonging, rooted in the various undertakings that make up our lives, and shows how the partial loss of self that bereaved people suffer can be understood along the lines of losing possibilities for living a certain life.

Chapter 1, The Road, draws the methodological map for the qualitative study. Throughout the chapter, I present the participants, examine what kind of knowledge can be generated by conducting interviews, situate the dissertation within its proper social and scientific context, discusses how the relationship between theory and empirical material is treated in this dissertation, and how to conceive of the role of the researcher. While there is no plausible way of understanding grief without its lived experience, any broadened understanding of that experience requires a firm theoretical grounding. In that light, I develop a pragmatic and eclectic approach to the field. Investigating existential phenomena such as grief is and should be a

personal matter, where the delineations between researcher and person are continuously at stake. In this dissertation, the activity of understanding the subject matter (grief), the others (interviewees), the tools (theories), and the role of the researcher (myself) are deeply intertwined, and I view the art of qualitative research as navigating this nexus in a convincing manner.

Chapter 2, Life, investigates the dialectic between relationality and finitude in an existential-phenomenological, psychoanalytical, and deconstructive perspective. To understand what it means to end life (not to be), I argue that we need an account of how we begin life in the first place (come to be). Accordingly, I develop a notion of personhood rooted in the natal and historical nexus in which we all once started. We are given over to a world of others, and our progressively emerging psyches are deeply rooted in this primary relationality. We become who we are through our relations to others, and I argue that this process installs and socio-ontological openness that comes to the fore in later forms of belonging, love, and loss. An equally essential side of this process of subjectification includes the grasping of this life as my own and the increased degree of responsibility for conducting it in a particular manner. The different commitments that make up my life—what I choose to do with my time and whom I choose to spend it with—become defining features of who I am. All these undertakings, commitments, and relations that define me are finite and at risk of being lost through failure or death at any moment. This finitude is not a tragic circumstance but the very motor in the relational and mortal lives that we live, and ultimately works to qualify grief as one of the most poignant existential phenomena. The chapter ends with formulating five basic principles that guide the remainder of the dissertation.

Chapter 3, Love, provides a phenomenological analysis of the world of partnerhood—of what it means to share life with another person. With a point of departure in loss, I examine the singularity of the other, the gaze, we-ness, everyday life, and home, respectively. Losing a life partner brings the irreplaceability of human beings to the fore; the longings and yearnings always point toward *someone*. The gaze of one's life partner opened up a realm of possibilities and freedom for becoming. It functioned as a source of life-witnessing through which one's life story and personality were provided with a sense of necessity and coherence. Together with one's partner, a peculiar form of we-ness that transcends the sum of the partners' particular subjectivities is described as the core of this relationship. This mutuality is experienced in several ways—through care, safety, joint decisions, and joy—taking place within the domain of an everyday life. In the world of

partnerhood, this life is comprised of shared activities, meals, and the sharing of a bed, and one's partner often makes up the primary conversation partner in one's life. Life with a partner is sharing time and space, and the primary spatial arena is one's home. Accordingly, I end the chapter with a discussion of the existential meaning of co-habiting and the distinctive temporality of growing old together.

Chapter 4, Death, investigates our relationship to death and mortality in general and the extent to which this is altered through the death of a life partner specifically. I argue that grief provides a privileged experience of finitude and that a point of departure in loss can enrich our understanding of what it means to *be mortal*. Despite the fact that finitude marks our existence as such, the encounter with the death of the other strikes with unseen radicality. Our understanding of death is necessarily limited, and through grief, we are facing the edge of human understanding. *Any* confrontation with death is an encounter with the immanent aporias of life and calls for humility rather than resoluteness. Furthermore, I argue that a socio-ontological approach to grief deconstructs these borders between the living and the dead, opening up an expanded notion of Being-with that encompasses the ranks of the dead and the one's not yet born. Our natal, historical, and hauntological existence is permeated by others, dead or alive, and grief confronts us with the question of how to conduct one's continued existence and live on in this light. Lastly, I develop a notion of intergenerational death awareness, arguing that the crucial mark that the death of a beloved makes upon our ways of relating to mortality is mediated through our relations to others still alive. In the case of the life partner, these others are often children, and in this light, living in the light of death is less a contemplative affair and more a question of adhering to a life of continued care.

Chapter 5, Grief, develops a social ontology of grief in light of the notions of relationality and finitude exhibited in the preceding chapters. Grief amounts to the loss of possibilities for living a certain life, and correspondingly, a partial loss of self through which the bereaved person is necessarily called into question. Reckoning with this loss and rearranging one's way of living is a deeply normative endeavor that transcends the boundaries between the ontological and the ethical. I analyze aspects of grief related to solitude and how a life partner places herself in the wider bereaved network surrounding this person. Grief comprises an alternation of our being-in-the-world, and the second part of the chapter considers the spatial and temporal aspects of grief, respectively. I pinpoint how the embodied and material aspects of losing a life partner are both the source of a nurturing

continued bond and lonesome suffering. Grief is a temporal process, beginning with the radicality of death and the before and after it installs in one's life narrative. It could be aptly described as a vacillating arduous attempt at living on in light of this loss. Being alive without despair necessitates a future not exempt from possibilities, and I investigate how the excursion back to life is paramount with establishing a futural form of existence. The chapter ends with a note on destiny where the particular loss is seen from life's perspective as a whole. In the end, life is a continued and never-ending list of losses, and learning to live with them becomes tantamount to learning to live as such. A social ontology of grief can provide us with a deeper understanding of why doing so will always be a difficult yet loving endeavor.

Dansk Resumé

Denne afhandling udvikler sorgens sociale ontologi. Jeg argumenterer for, at sorg udgør det afgørende bindeledet i dialektikken mellem relationalitet og endelighed. Afhandlingen tager udgangspunkt i et longitudinalt interviewstudie med femten voksne i forskellige generationer (30'erne, 50'erne og 70'erne), som har mistet en livspartner indenfor det seneste år. At miste en livspartner indebærer en grænsesituation, og sorgen fremstår som et epistemologisk privilegeret perspektiv i bestræbelsen på at forstå relationalitet generelt, og partnerskabets eksistentielle aspekter i særdeleshed. Sorgen udgør ligeledes en af de mest intensive erfaringer af endelighed, og kan dermed bidrage til en øget forståelse af, hvad det betyder at leve i relation til døden. Sorgen udgør hjertet i de relationelle og endelige liv, vi lever, og ved at undersøge relationen mellem disse niveauer, efterstræber jeg en uddybet forståelse for, hvad det betyder at være de elskende, dødelige og sørgende væsener, vi er.

Kernen i sorgens sociale ontologi, er at menneskets væren er uløseligt relationelt forbundet, og at tabet af en elsket dermed fører til et tab af selv. Vi *bliver* en del af hinanden i gennem de liv, vi lever, og når vi mister en elsket, kommer dette til at påvirke – ikke blot vores identitet, narrative selvforståelse eller diskursive positionering, men *hvem vi er*. Enhver forståelse af, hvad det betyder at miste forudsætter en forståelse for, hvad det betyder at have, og hvordan det eller den mistede spillede en rolle i ens liv. Da enhver forståelse af hvem vi er forudsætter et udgangspunkt i de liv vi lever, og disse liv til enhver tid er delt med andre, fører tabet af en signifikant anden, uundgåeligt til et delvist tab af selv. På denne måde muliggør sorgens sociale ontologi et ikke-essentielt rammeværk for en forståelse af den tilhørighed, som er funderet i de forskellige aktiviteter og handlinger der udgør vores liv, og rationale for, hvordan et delvist selvtab kan forstås på linje med tabet af mulighederne for at leve et specifikt liv.

Kapitel 1 kortlægger de metodologiske principper, som ligger til grund for det kvalitative studie. Kapitlet præsenterer deltagerne, undersøger karakteren af den viden som et interviewstudie genererer, situerer afhandlingen i dens sociale og videnskabelige kontekst, undersøger relationen mellem teori og empiri, samt forskerens rolle i projektet. I min optik er det lige så indlysende, at enhver *forståelse* af sorg forudsætter et udgangspunkt i en *levet erfaring* af sorg, som det er at enhver dybere forståelse af fænomenet forudsætter en teoretisk grundlagsteori, og i dette lys formulerer jeg en pragmatisk og eklektisk tilgang til feltet. At videnskabeligt undersøge eksistentielle

fænomener som sorg er – og bør være, et personligt anliggende, hvor grænserne mellem forsker og person konstant er på spil. Gennem denne afhandling er fænomenet (sorg), erfaringen (interviewpersonerne), værktøjerne (teorierne) og forskeren (mig selv) uløseligt sammenfiltrede, og den kunst, som kvalitativ forskning i sidste ende udgør, består i at navigere dette felt på en overbevisende måde.

Kapitel 2 undersøger dialektikken mellem relationalitet og endelighed i et eksistentielt fænomenologisk, psykoanalytisk og dekonstruktivt perspektiv. Jeg argumenterer for, at en uddybet forståelse for, hvad endelighed (ikke at være) betyder, forudsætter en forståelse for hvordan livet (at være) begynder, og udvikler en forståelse af personlig væren i lyset af de natale og historiske vilkår, som definerer os fra begyndelsen. Vi er givet over til en verden af andre, og en gradvist udviklet psykisk struktur er til enhver tid forankret i denne forbundenhed. I gennem disse andre bliver vi dem vi er, og jeg argumenterer for, at denne ontologiske åbenhed nødvendigvis aktualiseres i senere former for tilhørighed og kærlighed. Den anden, lige så afgørende side af denne subjektiveringsproces, er forståelsen af dette som *mit liv*, og øget grad af ansvar for, hvordan det udleves. De forskellige aktiviteter og forpligtigelser som udgør mit liv – hvad jeg gør, og hvem jeg gør det sammen med, bliver definerende for hvem jeg er. Alle disse aktiviteter og relationer, bør betragtes som sårbare og risikoen for nederlag og/eller død, en immanent del af deres betydning. Denne endelighed bør altså ikke betragtes som tragisk, men snarere som selve motoren i vores relationelle liv, og det, som i sidste ende kvalificerer sorgen som et af livets mest eksistentielt prægnante fænomener. Jeg afslutter kapitlet med at formulere fem grundlæggende principper, som bliver vejledende for den resterende del af afhandlingen.

Kapitel 3 består i en fænomenologisk analyse af partnerskab – af hvad det betyder at dele livet med en anden person. Med udgangspunkt i tabet, undersøger jeg den andens singularitet, blikkets betydning, vi-hed, hverdagslivets og hjemmets betydning. At miste en livspartner aktualiserer den uerstattelighed, som præger menneskelige relationer – vi savner og længes altid efter *ham* eller *hende*. Den andens blik åbner op for et mulighedsrum, som er afgørende for frihedsaspektet i en livspartners tilblivelsesproces, og fungerer samtidigt – i rollen som livsvidne, som en afgørende kilde til nødvendighed i min personlige og livshistoriske forankring. Sammen med en livspartner opstår en særlig form for vi-hed, som overskrider summen af de to enkelte subjektiviteter, og dette "os" udgør kernen i partnerskabet. Denne gensidighed erfares gennem omsorg, tryghed, fælles beslutninger og delte glæder, og udspiller sig ofte i den arena vi kalder

hverdagslivet. I et partnerskab er dette liv resultatet af fælles aktiviteter, måltider, at sove sammen og daglige samtaler. Livet med en partner består i at dele tid og rum, herunder den mest afgørende rumslige arena, nemlig hjemmet. Jeg afslutter kapitlet med en diskussion af det at bo sammen, og den distinkte temporalitet som præger det, at blive gamle sammen.

Kapitel 4 undersøger vores relation til dødelighed generelt, og hvordan tabet af en livspartner påvirker forståelsen af dødelighed i særdeleshed. Jeg argumenter for, at sorgen udgør en privilegeret erfaring af endelighed, og at en undersøgelse, der begynder i erfaringen af at miste, kan bidrage til en øget forståelse af, hvad det betyder at *være dødelig*. På trods af, at endeligheden bør ses som et konstitutivt vilkår for livet, rammer den andens død med en hidtil uset radikalitet. Vores "forståelse" af døden er nødvendigvis begrænset, og gennem sorgen erfarer vi et af livets grundlæggende begrænsninger. *Enhver* konfrontation med døden er mødet med et af livets immanente aporier, og kalder på ydmyghed fremfor resoluthed. Jeg argumenterer videre for, at sorgens sociale ontologi åbner op for en udvidet forståse af samværen, der inkluderer de døde og endnu ikke levende. Vores natale, historiske og hauntologiske virkelighed gennemsyres af andre, døde som levende, og sorgen konfronterer os med spørgsmålet om, hvordan vi bedst lever vores liv i dette lys. Afslutningsvis udvikler jeg en intergenerationel forståelse af dødsbevidsthed, og argumenterer for, at den mest afgørende betydning døden af en elsket har på ens egen forståelse af dødelighed, er medieret gennem relationen til andre, endnu levende. For en livspartners vedkommende er disse andre ofte fælles børn, og i dette lys bør en konfrontation med døden ikke primært forstås i kontemplative termer, men som en måde at hengive sig til et liv præget af vedværende omsorg.

Kapitel 5 udvikler sorgens sociale ontologi i lyset af den dialektik mellem relationalitet og endelighed som er blevet fremskrevet i afhandlingens tidligere kapitler. Sorgen handler grundlæggende om tabet af muligheder for at leve et særligt liv, og i forlængelse af dette delvise selvtab er den sørgende kaldet til selvransagelse. At forholde sig til tabet og restrukturere livet er en iboende normativ opgave, som overskrider grænserne mellem ontologi og etik. Jeg analyserer sorgen i relation til det at være alene, og hvordan en sørgende livspartner ser sig selv i relation til det bredere sørgende netværk af medmennesker. Sorgen ændrer vores grundlæggende væren-i-verden, og den anden del af dette kapitel analyserer hermed sorgens rumslige og tidslige aspekter. Jeg fremhæver, hvordan de kropsliggjorde og materielle aspekter af sorgen udgør en kilde, både til et nærende, vedværende bånd og dybtfølt lidelse. Sorgen er en temporal proces – den andens død installerer et radikalt

før og efter i den sørgendes narrativ, og sorgen kan ses som et forsøg på at leve videre i dette lys. At være i live og undgå fortvivlelse forudsætter en fremtidig mulighedshorisont, og jeg begrebsliggør sorgen som en vej tilbage til livet gennem en stræben efter fremtidige muligheder. Kapitlet ender med en diskussion af skæbnen, hvor det partikære tab af en livspartner bliver set i et større livsperspektiv. I sidste ende udgør livet en aldrig ophørende række af tab, og at lære at leve med disse tab bliver på mange måder ensbetydende med det, at lære at leve. Sorgens sociale ontologi kan bidrage med en øget forståelse for, hvorfor dette til enhver tid, udgør et tillige sårbart som kærlighedsfuldt foretagende.

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Together with you, I have grown to know what it means to belong, love, and share a life. Thank you for everything.

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Introduction

"*I have lost part of myself.*"
— Clara

What does Clara mean by saying that she has lost part of herself? Is it possible that a part of us gets ripped off upon the death of another? If so, how? Can grief tell us something about who we are? All understandings of grief presuppose an understanding of what it means to have *and* what it means to lose. *Having*—in the general sense of being belonging creatures that are dependent on and given over to mortal others from the day we are born until the day we die, and specifically, with regard to the peculiarities defining the various relations that we engage in throughout our life course. *Losing*—in the sense of being creatures for whom death structures existence by providing the ultimate horizon for our lives and, again and again, make us acutely aware of the fragility and vulnerability that lies at the heart of the human condition. Struck by the encounter with otherness that any meeting with a given stranger encompasses, we can always be certain of two things: This person has belonged somewhere, and this person is going to die. My point of departure in this dissertation is that these two strains are inherently related and that grief becomes paramount for that very reason. Life plays out between relationality and finitude, between birth and death, between love and loss, and so, I will suggest, does grief. Could it be that grief—situated at the very heart of this dialectic—hereby deserves to stand first in line in the rank of existential phenomena?

The relationship that I will focus on in the following is one to a life partner. I will begin with the experience of losing a person with whom one has lived and shared one's life. The dissertation is empirically based on a longitudinal study with 15 bereaved life partners in different generations living in Denmark. I have visited them in their homes and sat down in their kitchens and living rooms to talk about their lives, their love, and their loss. In the course of these interviews, conducted on three occasions over a one-and-a-half-year period following their loss, Theresa, Sarah, Simon, Rebecca, Nina, Carl, Mary, Iris, Judith, Jack, Felicia, Tanya, Clara, Anne, and Alicia have generously opened their hearts and souls. Their lives are the very substance of the remainder of this dissertation.

The trope of "losing part of oneself," as uttered by Clara above and several of the other participants in various ways, has figured within the field of grief research from Freud (1917), over Parkes (1972) to Fuchs (2018), and Brinkmann (2018a). Drawing on psychoanalytical, deconstructive, and

existential-phenomenological theory, I will develop a social ontology of grief as an attempt to accommodate the significance of this notion better. The epistemological strategy then is a philosophically informed empirical analysis that I believe can provide a source of elucidation on several levels. To understand grief—like all existential phenomena—we are referred to the lived experiences of persons. Like profound happiness, love, and anxiety, grief will make us falter. Against our will, the world has become a different world, and navigating this new relational reality will often be one of the greatest challenges that life puts us through. Throughout these interviews, I have obtained vivid descriptions of this struggle, and throughout my readings and writings, I have sought to interpret this life in light of the writings of primarily Martin Hägglund (1976–), Judith Butler (1956–), Jonathan Lear (1948–), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Despite all their differences, these thinkers all operate with a dialectic between relationality and finitude that makes up the theoretical frame for what I have called a social ontology of grief. By seeing the quarrels, lives, and fates of Jack, Clara, Nina, and all the others in light of this broader frame, I aspire to sharpen the relation between first-person accounts of suffering and the existential universals that make up what we call human life.

Who are we? There is no way of accounting for that question without a recourse to the lives that we live. Everything starts with life, and so does this dissertation. After mapping out the necessary methodological principles for the interview study in the first chapter, I investigate how the mentioned thinkers view life in general and the relationship between relationality and finitude in particular in Chapter 2. What does it mean to be relational beings? Given that all persons arise from and grow out of an interpersonal nexus–that parents and care persons love and speak us into being and make a mark on our souls before we are given any opportunity to object, where do we draw the line between self and other? How and when is that line crossed, and what can grief tell us about the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity in general? And why is finitude necessary for understanding the full significance of relations? While one does not have to look very far in the shelves of literature to acknowledge that love and death always seem to come in pairs, my argument is that grief mediates this intimate relation. This chapter's primary goal is to work out the socio-ontological principles that will make up the necessary theoretical backdrop for the understanding of grief developed further on, and I do so specifically by formulating five guiding principles at the end of the chapter.

While partnerhood is one among innumerable ways of orchestrating relational life, it is a wide-spread way of living across the globe and has remained so for a substantial time. Why is it that, generation after generation, people continue to live their lives in this manner? My hope is that an inquiry that begins in loss can enlighten not only grief but our understanding of the existential core of partnerhood alike. The lives of the participants in this study were shared in a particular manner. While they are likewise children, parents, friends, and colleagues, I'm interested in them being or having been a life partner. Partnerhood is a far-reaching way of giving one's life over to another person, and the loss needs to be understood accordingly. In Chapter 3, I provide a phenomenological analysis of the world of partnerhood—of its joys and blessing, sorrows and struggles. Looking back—from the allegedly epistemologically privileged perspective of the one who has lost—what marks this life? What was it precisely that "they" had together? And how does one relate to and look back on that way of living when it is lost? This picture is pained with a grief-stricken paintbrush—a distinctive take on the subject that opens some gates and closes others. My overarching attempt, which grief surely provisions, is to take this way of living as seriously as possible and not reduce it to discourses, ideology, attachment styles, or blind instincts. There is, I suspect, something deeper and more important going on here, and that is what I attempt to explore. My sincere hope is that this type of loss can provide us with a focused outlook of what it means to live together. Taking seriously the peculiarities and specifics of this life is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for understanding grief.

In this dissertation, grief is related to death, which installs an irrevocableness from which our understanding can profit. That grief ultimately points to one person being alive and one person being dead does not prevent the dead from roaring around and haunting the land of the living in various ways. Neither does it provide a remedy for the existential perplexity emerging from the loss of the people deeply loved. Grief threatens the most fundamental of all borders, the one between the living and the dead. While an understanding of grief demands a nuanced concept of relationality, on the one hand, it certainly presupposes one of finitude on the other. In Chapter 4 on death, I aim to provide the second cornerstone necessitated for coming to grips with grief. Within the existential tradition, there has been a tendency to ascribe precedence to one's own death at the expense of others. If losing part of oneself means something, these boundaries likewise seem to falter. If we *are* part of each other, how does that affect how we understand death? What does it mean to live in relation to death? How do death, mortality, and finitude affect the life of partnerhood? And finally—if so, how does the loss of a life partner alter one's experience of being mortal and relating to death?

If who we are is a question of how we live, then the realms of ontology and ethics cannot be neatly separated. Just as no human beings live their lives as free-floating entities in a world without limitations, most of us have some say about the direction of our lives. In short, we are, to a certain extent, held accountable for how we live. Chapter 5 on grief, which is the final and longest chapter of this dissertation, begins with a formulation of a social ontology of grief and continues with laying out an argument for why that is an inherently normative endeavor. The remainder of the chapter, which attempts to provide a full-fledged account of what it means to lose a life partner, deals with solitude, the spatial and temporal dimensions of bereavement, as well as questions of fate. All these aspects awaken enigmas of ethical quandaries with which the bereaved person is forced to reckon. How to move on, how to honor the dead, what to remember, and what to forget? In short, how does one grieve? For the participants of this study, these are heartfelt questions on an everyday basis. Following them during a one-and-a-half-year period has granted me the opportunity to follow the process of bereavement. Grief, I gradually realized, is not an entity, feeling, or state-of-mind but an inherently temporal movement encompassing a nexus of existential, ontological, ethical, psychological, temporal, social, material, and bodily features. Given this complexity, any dream of final answers would amount to sheer hubris. Still, thinking about, with, and out of grief can provide a fruitful path for understanding who we are. Against this background, the empirical and theoretical research questions that I will grapple with in the following chapters are as follow.

Empirical questions:
What can partner bereavement tell us about the existential core of partnerhood?
How does the death of a life partner affect one's relation to mortality?
How can the experience of losing a life partner be understood?

Theoretical questions:
How can grief inform our understanding of the dialectic between relationality and finitude?
In what ways does grief transcend the border between the ontological and the ethical?
How can a socio-ontological perspective on grief inform our understanding of what it means to be human?

Chapter 1: The Road

"And what the dead had no speech for, when living, / They can tell you, being dead: the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living."

—T.S. Eliot

The dead—where are they? This, we ask ourselves when seated beside the deathbed. Upon the last breath of the dying person, we cannot but wonder what just happened. Everything stands still here—the silence of death is prodigiously loud, and the question is whether time itself has stopped. The intensity of finitude that strikes us at these moments seems almost impossible to comprehend and to bear. *How* can the person that was here moments ago have vanished? *Where* is she? *Why* did she have to die? *How* do I live on? If there ever was bewilderment, it is right here; these are the moments where, if only for a while, atheists come to believe, and believers lose faith. Following the death of a loved one, we remain "in disbelief itself" (Derrida, 1989/1988, p. 21).[1] Death stands out as "the ultimate humiliation of human reason" (Bauman, 1992, p. 15), and at these moments, words remain futile. The deceased, Kierkegaard writes in *At a Graveside* (1845/2009a), is "a silent man" (p. 71); language remains for the world of the living. The person who this is all about—the center of gravity in the world of grief—has left this world behind. But where? The faith in the omnipotence of the adult world quickly begins to wither when children ask these questions. Stories of continued existence in a divine afterlife will only hold sway for so long; radical finitude contests the most basic referential syntax that the child has just begun to get the hang of, and "never will we believe in either death or immortality" (Derrida, 1989, p. 21). Disbelief reigns.

In this dissertation, an encounter with grief amounts to an encounter with death, and the attempt to understand what grief is and how it shapes our lives will have to take seriously that the subject matter is bound to the limits of human understanding. Method, with its etymological origins in *meta* and *hodos* (way), is often apprehended as the way or road that one has to walk to approach the goal. In this case, we are entering a veritable jungle, and in this chapter, I will attempt to outline the methodological underpinnings of this *quest for uncertainty* to humbly reframe the title of John Dewey's book from

[1] When referring to a translated work, I will refer to the original year of publication the first time, and from then on to the version that I am quoting from or referring to exclusively.

1929. In the study of existential phenomena—be that of grief, love, anxiety, or happiness—one is always *at stake*. The "results" are filtered through the subjectivity of the researcher, and there is an inevitable risk that idiosyncrasies and preconfigured beliefs will hinder new insights. A deeper understanding of the subject matter must take it seriously that there is always *someone* speaking, which is the purpose in the the first section: "A grieving Inquiry." I continue by situating this dissertation in its proper scientific and social context. The fabric that this text is made of is not only the lives of the participants but equally the rousing world of fellow academics who I have been blessed to be part of during the previous three years. Widening the scope in a different direction, I end the first section by situating this contribution within the field of grief research.

In the next section, "Methodology," I engage in questions of what it means to study grief from an existential perspective. The relationship between experience and language is paramount for considering how the knowledge generated through an interview study can inform us about what it means to lose someone. Following Brinkmann (2012) and Alvesson & Kärreman (2011), I develop a pragmatically inspired craft approach to the field as a way of cultivating a disciplined form of bewilderment.

The third section, "The Interviews," briefly introduces the participants as well as the person they have lost. I then trace the development of my socio-ontological argument in tandem with a review of the three interview rounds. While it remains futile to stipulate a map of thinking, this section will give the reader a necessary background for an understanding of how the themes and interests have developed progressively throughout the course of the three rounds of interviews. In the final section, "Research as craft," I develop the craftlike approach further through a discussion of validity, reliability, and generalizability.

1.1 A Grieving Inquiry

Work/Life Imbalance

This is a grieving inquiry—an inquiry into grief, what it is, and what it might teach us about the relational and finite lives humans live. Its systematic objectives should not overshadow an ambition to "transcend the empirically specific and produce something that is of broader relevance" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 72). I'm convinced that to produce something of "broader relevance", the subject matter must be personally and existentially important to the researcher to the extent that necessarily blurs the borders between work

and life. Following Brinkmann (2012), I will argue that, in the case of grief, "there is no clear difference between 'doing a research project' and 'living a life'" (p. 4). As a researcher, I have become part of the project, and conversely, the project has become part of me. I have been working then, with the whole of my being, and grief has been on my mind day and night for the three years that I have dedicated to this dissertation. The question of what role grief plays in our lives has not gone on vacation.[2]

The situation described here is, without any doubt, incredibly privileged. Waking up in the morning and having the opportunity to read, write, and talk to others about some of the most important matters in life is a true gift. I often tell myself that if the university's paychecks were to stop arriving, I would keep doing what I'm doing today. The identification with this project transcends any borders securing "the razor-sharp classification" of the domains of life that Theodor Adorno claims bourgeois society tends to place on us.[3] While it might strike one as tendentiously morbid to *become* a project on grief, I will immediately object that any study on grief will necessarily be a study of life, love, and sometimes, even happiness.

In the article *Being-towards-grief: rethinking death awareness* (Sköld, 2020b), arguing that grief plays a vital role in our understanding of death awareness, I seek to neutralize the universalist claims by admitting that "*how* early encounters with death through loss of significant others affects selfhood, relational aspects and capacities for handling life should be subject matter for empirical studies" (p. 12). Applied to my own life, it is beyond doubt that grief has played a significant role and maybe even defined its course. At age 53, a lethal tumor was found in the right atrium of my mother's heart. 20 years old, sitting outside a guest house in Nairobi, Kenya, where I had headed off to save the world, I received the phone call that got me thrown back into the nexus I had left behind. During my flight home, the operation went well, and she survived another year on various treatments. I was 21 years old when my

[2] In the often-quoted lines from the essay *On Intellectual Craftmanship* (1952/1980), C. W. Mills notes that "you do not really have to *study* a topic you are working on: once you are into it, it is everywhere. You are sensitive to its themes; you see and hear them everywhere in your experience, especially, it always seems to me, in apparently unrelated areas" (p. 69).

[3] In the essay *Free time*, Adorno (1969/2005) makes a mockery with the notion of having a hobby, arguing that this, in and of itself, is a mockery of life: "I have no *hobby*. Not that I'm a workaholic who wouldn't know how to do anything else but get down to business and do what has to be done. But rather I take the activities with which I occupy myself beyond the bounds of my official profession, without exception, so seriously that I would be shocked by the idea that they had anything to do with *hobbies*—that is, activities I'm mindlessly infatuated with only in order to kill time" (p. 116). I'm grateful to Martin Hägglund for this reference.

mother died, so my first adult years were imprinted with intense grief. To this day, this loss remains an open wound—a final grasp of the manifold ways in which it has ensigned my life, forever out of reach. One qualified guess, though, would be this dissertation. Halfway into this study, my father, aged 71, died following severe brain damage a couple of years before. While passing through Heathrow Airport on my way home from a conference at the Center for Death and Society in Bath, UK, and in the middle of a study of grief, I was reminded again of the unpredictable turns our lives take and the new relational, existential, and generational circumstances in which we can suddenly find ourselves.

Intense mourning is frightening, hard to bear, and arduous to witness. That "there is death," as C.S. Lewis persuasively puts it in *A Grief Observed* (1961, p. 15), comes to me as no surprise. While I have not lost a life partner, and therefore cannot identify with the participants on this particular loss, I hope that this personal background has provided me, if with nothing else, a sense of earnestness about the subject of grief. This dissertation has been written in a time of global pandemic, an accelerating ecological crisis, and political instability, that is, a serious and thoughtful time, a time where the future of our world and our species are ominously debated every day. These are, however, contingent matters: The pandemic could have been avoided, we could have built a world that did not destroy the earth, and, theoretically at least, lived in perfect harmony with each other. Death, on the other hand, could not have been avoided. The dream of immortality remains precisely that, a dream. Death will continue to haunt us, and so will grief.

Since no valuable knowledge, as Kierkegaard writes in *Fear and Trembling* (1843/1983), can be transferred from one generation to another, since everything important in life needs to be relearned from the start by all of us, the predicaments of love and death will have to be thought through over and over again. By doing so, we inevitably start at a contingent but particular place, and the journey from the quarrels of subjective and culturally specific forms of suffering to the universal existentials and back, will never look the same. While there most likely is very little new under the sun, believing so makes the whole endeavor much more stimulating.

The Research Community

The image of myself sketched above—grief-stricken and lonesome—is far from a fair representation of my factual situation during the last couple of years. A major part of the argument that I will put forward in this dissertation concerns the constitutive status of our relational environments, and these

have, accordingly, contributed immensely to the thinking that this dissertation comprises. Even though "the image of the heroic researcher locked in a struggle for truth in splendid isolation certainly props up much identity work in academia" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 70), this is luckily far from reality for many of us. Belonging to a generation, Lisa Barrister writes in *Enduring Time* (2017), amounts to sharing time; "a generation engenders a future, and to belong to a generation is to notice, to be touched by, or become attached to, an historical period that, as you live it, is not yet history (p. 101). Sharing time is sharing life, and this dissertation has grown out in the company of many inspiring people and groups. These people have provided a great sense of belonging to the world of academics who have given their lives to the quest of understanding who we are and how we ought to live our lives.

As part of the research centre *The Culture of Grief*[4], I have been invited to an excellent interdisciplinary environment without clear-cut borders between scientific disciplines and philosophy. Growing up academically in this atmosphere has hopefully made me immune to the reductive tendencies and disciplinary battles that limit thought in so many ways. *The Culture of Grief* was launched in 2017 as a successor to an earlier project on *Diagnostic Cultures* (Brinkmann, 2016a), which studied our increased tendencies of understanding various forms of mental suffering in a potentially pathological language and place it within the confines of diagnostic categories. After decades of intense debate (Horowitz et al., 2009; Wakefield, 2012; Prigerson et al., 2013), the fact that grief was now becoming part of the World Health Organization's (WHO) classification of diseases (ICD-11), as *Prolonged Grief Disorder* (PGD) was a relevant impetus for the establishment of the centre. The numerous aims of this group of researchers working together stretch from providing a cultural analysis of contemporary understandings of grief and suffering, scrutinizing the consequences that the implementation of the diagnosis would have hereupon, to phenomenological and general psychological investigations of grief. The centre is divided into three different but interrelated work packages with their respective subprojects: *The personal and existential dimensions of grief*, *The cultural dimensions of grief*, and *The nature of grief and its dimensions.* This dissertation belongs to the latter with an explicit integrative function, where "the fundamental questions compris[ing] the natural expression and function of grief" (The Culture of Grief, p. 2) are addressed. Accordingly, this dissertation has the double aim of providing an account of partner loss and raise more general questions of the nature of grief.

[4] https://www.kommunikation.aau.dk/forskning/vidensgrupper/cqs/sorg/culture-of-grief/
Se Appendix 4 for the Project description.

Human life is an ongoing conversation (Mulhall, 2007), and intellectual work is an essential part of that exchange. The subject of that conversation, to which the philosophers and thinkers mentioned in the introduction have contributed substantially, is our very being, the question of who we are. In and outside of grief, I am "a great riddle to myself" as Augustine writes in his *Confessions*, and living that question in a dialogue with fellow men, dead or alive, is, for me at least, among "the most passionate endeavor of which a man is capable" (Mills, 1980, p. 70). Intellectual work is an almost paradigmatic example of how our being-with encompasses the ones that have wandered the earth before us (Hertz, 1907/2004; Schutz, (1932/1967). Quoting the dead should not be seen as a neutral act but a deeply ethical carrying-on of their work and unfinished business. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1982) and the hermeneutical tradition, no work of thought is ever finished but lives on through its ongoing alterable reception history. While I will later argue extensively that this being with the dead (Ruin, 2018) is an innate structure of the social ontology of grief, it will suffice here to point out that *any study* of grief places itself, more or less explicitly, in the record of the many writings that deals with grief since the time of Gilgamesh, over Sophocles, Shakespeare and onward to Ralph Waldo Emerson, C.S. Lewis, and Denise Riley. If anything does unite us across historical epochs and sociocultural domains, it is the loss of the people with whom we belong. Encountering any given stranger at the most distant places on earth, I can be certain that this other human being, at some point, has belonged somewhere *and* is destined to die. As loving mortals, we often remain "the community of those who have nothing in common" (Lingis, 1994), but when it comes to grief, we might, for once, justifiably speak of "us." "Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all" (Butler, 2006, p. 20). *How* we grieve surely divides us, but *that* we grieve in the very broad sense of reckoning with the fact that our loved ones are no more is one of the few things that can be said without taking necessary relativizing precautions.

The Battlefield

Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* is generally seen as the birthmark of the scientific study of grief (Archer, 2008; Granek, 2010). According to the dogmas of grief research, it is notoriously guilty of articulating the originary grief work hypothesis, the belief that grief ought to be worked through to reach a solution or detachment, that has haunted the field ever since (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Even though it might be argued to be an unfair description of the Freudian text (Sköld, 2020c), the works of Eric Lindemann (1944/1994)

and John Bowlby (1961) might have contributed to what critics have called the individualization and psychologicalization of grief (Granek, 2010; Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017). More or less static phase (Bowlby, 1961; Parkes, 1972), task (Worden, 2009), and stage (Kübler-Ross, 1970) models continued to view grief as a successive and demarcated process ending in a final resolution or acceptance. Despite their differences, a general assumption seemed to have been that the process of grief followed a predestined path and that a more or less objectively suited response was necessitated.

Qualitative studies of grief have played an important role in the "paradigm shift" that has been argued, have colored the field of grief research during the previous three decades (Klass et al., 1996; Klass and Steffen, 2018). In contrast to earlier theories' rigidity, recent frameworks seek to capture the fluctuating, constructive and narrative nature of grief. In the article *A Hopeless Search for the Hopeless: A Literature Review of Contemporary Qualitative Studies on Partner Bereavement* (Sköld, 2020a), I depict five of these dominating frameworks and theories within qualitative studies of partner bereavement: *Continuing bonds, Narrative meaning construction, The Dual Process Model, Post-traumatic growth,* and *Disenfranchised grief*. I still perceive this as a valid state-of-the-art, and instead of mechanically reiterating these results here, I will engage in an ongoing critical dialogue with these theories throughout this dissertation.[5]

Turning to the scientific literature of today, more or less explicit definitions of grief seem to be available. Grief is broadly by Stroebe et al. (2001) as "a primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death. It incorporates diverse psychological (cognitive, social-behavioral) and physical (physiological-somatic) manifestations" (p. 6). In his *The Nature of Grief* (1999), John Archer in an evolutionary perspective, speaks of how grief "in its most basic form— represents an alarm reaction set off by a deficit signal in the behavioral system underlying attachment" (p. 152). Grief, we learn, is a "natural human reaction" to loss (p. 1). *The Miriam-Webster Dictionary* defines grief as "deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement." This definition refers to the controversial distinction between grief, mourning, and bereavement. While grief is said to refer to psychological suffering, mourning encapsulates the culturally immersed way of expressing a feeling and bereavement, the time-limited phase during which this suffering lasts (Weiss, 2008). There are numerous reasons why this distinction is problematic. Assuming that our psychological experience of grief could be purified from any cultural mediation seem unlikely, and the assumption that

[5] The article can be found in Appendix 5.

the period of bereavement can be given a definite start and end date seem equally problematic. In this dissertation, I will speak preferably of grief while also referring to mourning and bereavement when the context encourages doing so.

Before moving on to the methodological section, I will make two critical remarks based on the mentioned literature review from which this present study hopefully can benefit. First of all, the loss of one's life partner was the empirical base for many of the theories that are now considered outdated. Widows from the Anglo-Saxon world were more prone than other groups to share their experiences after the wars, and the field of grief studies is probably the only scientific domain that has been developed largely based on women's experiences (Walter, 1999, pp. 170–172.). While the burden of grief has never been equally distributed, and women, from Sophocles' *Antigone* to *The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Bouvard, 1994; Thornton, 2000) have often made up the proletariat of grief work (Holst-Warhaft, 2000), much critique has been launched against perceiving (female) partner bereavement as a suitable model for grief as such (Stroebe, 1998; Walter, 1999). While I am inclined to suspect that this is emblematic of an exaggerated focus on differences at the cost of similarities within grief studies, it captures an important methodological memorandum. Being an English widow in 1955 is considerably different from being a Danish widow in 2020.[6] *Any* loss is intimately bound to the life that went before, and *any* plausible account of that loss will require an extensive interpretation of that way of living. Chapter 3 is my attempt to provide a reading of what a shared life with a life partner in a contemporary Western culture amounts to, based on grief-stricken testimonies.

The second critical remark that I wish to make is how the reviewed studies in my literature review all had "a positive aura" around them (Sköld, 2020a).[7] The case for the hopeless that I put forward in the literature review is based on a recognition that the so-called paradigm shift within grief studies has not changed the fact that grief is still framed within the vocabularies of possibilities and personal growth. Theories of narrative meaning construction (Davis & Nolem-Hoeksema, 2001; Gillies & Niemeyer, 2006) and post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006) have even contributed to a

[6] This seem true to the point that many of the female participants in this study refuse to identify themselves as "widows." See also Haase and Johnston (2012) and Jones et al. (2018) for a discussion hereof.

[7] See also Walter (1999) for an analysis of how several of the mentioned theories and the contemporary "clinical lore" of grief, "fits the power of positive thinking, a popular idea in North America for several decades" (p. 161).

growing assumption that grief is a process that should lead, not only to resolution but to personal development and acquisition of new life skills. The dilemmas, impossibilities, and aporias inherent to grief, not to mention the ethical aspects of grief, tend to be overshadowed in these theories, which restricts the prism through which we as researchers, practitioners, and bereaved alike perceive and approach the phenomenon. To remedy this, I argue throughout that a convincing account of grief related to death needs to grapple with the perplexities of mortality, which is the task in Chapter 4.

1.2 Methodology

The literal meaning of method as "the way to the goal" mentioned before is worth recollecting. According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2018), the *how* of any study must be determined by its *what* and *why*. While one cannot reach the goal without walking the road, it would be futile to build a road without knowing in which direction we were heading and, even more importantly, why we were heading this way. This is a study on grief (*what*), conducted because it is vital for an understanding of what it means to be human (*why*). Since grief is part of people's lived experiences, I have chosen to conduct interviews (*how*) to provide descriptions of these experiences. The semi-structured interview, which provides a suggested direction for the interview without excluding the spontaneous and unexpected parts of the conversation, has proven itself most suiting for this task.

Before getting into details with the interviews, we should stop and ask ourselves what characterizes this situation. What *is* an interview? An interview is, basically, a conversation between two people. Etymologically, *inter-views* points to "an *inter-view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of common interest" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 6). The theme of my interviews is grief. The interviewees are preoccupied with the subject in the position of being bereaved, and I in the position of a researcher. In this way, the situation is clearly asymmetrical, which gives this conversation some of its distinctive features. As Pierre Bourdieu points out in the methodologically oriented postscript to *The Weight of the World* (2000): "It is the interviewer who starts the game and sets up its rules" (p. 609). That said, the participants have themselves signed up for the study and displayed a great degree of dedication to its cause. Apart from two cases, all the interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees. When they invited me into their homes with the objective to interview them about their grief, the initial asymmetrical power relationship was at least partly counterbalanced. In this way, the interview was colored by a high

degree of mutual respect, collaborative effort (Ellis & Berger, 2001), and a common cause: to contribute to a deeper understanding of grief and the conditions for bereaved people in contemporary society.[8]

A Note on Language

Inter-views are carried by language, by the possibility of expressing our experiences and thoughts through words and share them with one another. What language is and what it means to speak is, long before the linguistic turn in philosophy, a question "whose fate is in turn faithful for human culture in general, and philosophy in particular" (Mulhall, 2007, p. 4). According to Steven Mulhall's reading, inspired by the late Heidegger, language is a fundamental mode of our being in the world. The way we are is conveyed in and through conversation: "Dasein is not just the locus and the precondition for the conversation of humankind; it is itself, because humankind is, a kind of enacted conversation" (Mulhall, 2007, p. 58). How the word was brought to the world figures in most religious mythologies, whereby it is indicated that the secrets of language are synonymous with the secret of mankind. While other animals surely communicate, we speak. We *are* a conversation—"riddles unto ourselves", that we both formulate and seek to resolve to by means of language. The situation is, in other words, deeply paradoxical; when we think, the tools we are applying are the mystery that we are trying to solve. In and through that conversation, we aspire to understand the conversation that we are.

Since Socrates, speaking about important issues in an interview-like conversation has likewise been an idealized form of philosophy. The realm of thought is said to prevail in a dialogical setting, and in Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes himself as a "midwife" of ideas. Only by being confronted by another do we push the inner limitations of thought and make an effort to provide earnest answers to anything at all. Within the field of psychology, interviewing has likewise enjoyed a hegemonic epistemological status. Freud launches the psychoanalytical "talking-cure," where the truth of psychic life only was accessible through the transference relation established via frequent analytical encounters where the only guiding rule is to speak one's mind as freely as possible. Within developmental psychology, Piaget's (1969) theories of child development were developed based on interviews with young children, "the clinical method," where the children were allowed to speak freely about various issues that currently occupied them. Also, the unexpected

[8] See the recruitment letter in Appendix 1.

results of the Hawthorne-studies (Landsberger, 1958), one of the paradigmatic studies within social psychology, were likewise based on numerous interviews with the employees (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

Freud's talking cure certainly did not imply that the more we talk, the more we will come to know ourselves. Talking can be used for a variety of purposes, some of them nobler and honest than others. What Richard Sennet (1977/2003) refers to as "the fall of the public man" is by some argued to have brought us toward an "intimization" and "therapeutization" (Bourdieu, 1984; Rose, 1990/1999) of our contemporary social world. We are living in an "interview society" (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997) where the sharing of feelings and experiences has become part of our everyday life to a previously unheard-of degree. Like an army of qualitative researchers, we wander around conducting interviews from the moment we awake until the moment we go to sleep. "With the development of the interview society, and the increasing deprivatization of personal experience, the interview is becoming more and more commonplace, also making it a 'naturally occurring' occasion for articulating experience" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 126). Today, *I talk; therefore, I am*.

Speaking one's mind, then, is something that we are trained to do from early childhood, and the premise that it is vital to put words on one's grief is almost unanimously embraced within the field of bereavement studies and the clinical branches aiming to provide help and support for bereaved people alike.[9] Throughout the course of the study, it becomes evident that several of the participants partake in part because they were expecting a form of cathartic effect from speaking with me about their grief. The fear underlying this motivation seems to be that grief left unspoken might turn into the black bile of melancholia or what is worse.

Research as Mystery

How, then, does one speak one's mind in an interview situation and generally? Can we tell the truth about ourselves? Can we tell the truth about our grief? Is there a direct link between our inner lives and spoken words? In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler investigates the conditions of possibilities for doing so and expresses a profound doubt about whether any subjective truth is accessible in this way. For as long as we are given over to others before subjectification and this otherness is installed as an integral part of our unconscious being, how, Butler asks, will we even know ourselves? Drawing

[9] I discuss this further in section 5.3 on "Solitude".

on the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean Laplanche, Butler identifies the limit of such an endeavor in the infantile traces that continually mark our lives; "The one story that the "I" cannot tell is the story of its own emergence" (p. 66). I did not talk myself into being; someone else did that. How, then, does one speak one's mind in an interview situation and generally? In Chapter 2, I will continue to explore how this socio-ontological grounding can be exhibited through grief. In this method-section, it will suffice to notice that the field of qualitative studies generally and grief studies particularly would benefit from recognizing that the fragmented subject will thwart all ambitions of providing integrated and coherent narratives (Frosh, 2007). While entering the symbolic order of language provides possibilities of becoming *someone*, it short-circuits any prospects of becoming *whole*. In Kreiner & Mortensen's (2005) well-chosen words, "No one is able to understand his or her position in the world completely, and even if he or she were, there would be tacit knowledge that cannot be expressed in words" (p. 173).

What, then, can we express? Is there any point whatsoever in conducting an interview study in this light? This question is genuinely tied to an investigation of what kind of knowledge is generated by the words that are uttered, heard, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in the course of an interview study. One way to begin a discussion of this question is by asking in what ways research is initiated. Traditionally, a distinction is made between *deductive* (theory-driven) and *indictive* (data-driven) methods. In the case of deduction, the researcher set about to test a given hypothesis, and in induction, data informs and builds theoretical development. A third option is *abductive reasoning*, closely tied to a pragmatic take on research. In a pragmatist strain, research is not something we do to uncover the truth about the world but an activity that we are occupied with for the cause of living better lives. Brinkmann (2012) notes that the revolutionary idea of pragmatism is that our ontologies should be seen less as representations or ideas and more as tools that we use to "transform, engage, and cope with the world as we go about living our lives" (p. 38). Abductive reasoning arises, is *called for*, because we are confronted with a phenomenon or situation that requires elucidation and reckoning with. In most cases, a varied and multidimensional toolbox will be needed. This dissertation rests on the assumption that no unified theoretical strand will provide the key to the secrets of grief and that an investigation will profit from a broad-spectral and moderately eclectic approach (Køppe, 2012).

In *Very little… Almost Nothing* (1997), Simon Critchley introduces the idea, in contrast to the generally accepted notion that philosophy begins in wonder (the Platonic *thaumazein*), that any form of thinking begins in disappointment, be that existential, political, or religious. Thinking does not come about freely; rather, we *fall* or *falter* into the necessity of doing so. Grief,

I would argue, can be observed as a "boundary situation" (Jaspers, 1932/1970; Fuchs, 2013), where one's relational nexus has collapsed and "I have the ground pulled from under my feet" (Jaspers 1970, p. 218). *How* we respond to a limit situation cannot, even in principle, be anticipated, but *that* we respond is a necessary feature of the homelessness that this situation entails: "The very need to ask about myself shows me that I have departed from my origin" (Jaspers, 1970, p. 26). If we ever find ourselves departed, floating around aimlessly on the open sea, it is in grief that we do so. It is because we are mortal and reminded about this through the death of others that we are forced to reflect on the lives that we live (Hägglund, 2019). The person who each of the participants in this study loved the most has evaporated from the surface of the earth, and they are left unknowing—about what to think, what to do, and how to live. While they have "volunteered" for the study, they would preferably have been without. For the bereaved, everything is always second best.

* * *

In the book *Qualitative Research and Theory Development—Mystery as Method* (2011), Alvesson and Kärreman utilize the boundary situation as a methodological tool. In their view, the "discovery-metaphor" that still pervades the field of qualitative studies offers only "constrained, incremental, and non-challenging work and modestly interesting contributions" (p. 78). Entering a given field with the explicit aim of finding the gaps that are still to be filled before our stock of knowledge is complete is a positivist ghost still pervading the most anti-positivist environments. Recently voiced critique against positivism and neo-positivism within much qualitative research "does not stop the majority of researchers from doing normal science more or less as if nothing happened" (p. 7). The bottom line of Alvesson and Kärreman's book is that most gap-finding research is boring and the mystery method approach a theoretically fueled way to remedy this.

For Alvesson and Kärreman, mysteries are not something that we accidentally run into. The process of *defamiliarization* amounts to taking a step back from the reality we tell ourselves to be well-acquainted with and ask more fundamental questions about its principal constitution. From their perspective, avoiding seeing the world as self-evident and self-explanatory is the key to interesting research projects. In *Qualitative Inquiry in Everyday Life* (2012), Brinkmann, in a similar strain, formalizes this abductive reasoning in the following manner:

1. We observe X.
2. X is unexpected and breaks with our normal understanding.
3. But if Y is the case, then X makes sense.
4. Therefore, we are allowed to claim Y, at least provisionally. (p. 46)

In a later article (Brinkmann, 2018a), an altered Kantian version of this line of thought is applied to grief. Given that we have such a thing as grief experiences, what are the conditions of possibilities for these? According to Brinkmann, three points are necessary for grief to occur: the deep relationality of the self, the limitations of evolutionary accounts, and the normativity of psychological phenomena. While I follow Brinkmann on the first point (deep relationality) and see little to no reason for objecting to the second or third point, I further pinpoint finitude as a necessary condition. From early on, life is one long encounter with various forms of finitude, death being the most final of these.

This preliminary framing does nothing but enunciate the mystery that grief is. Love is "inexplicable and enigmatic" (Søltoft, 2011, p. 37), and it should be beyond any conceivable doubt that death falls within that same category. Being confronted with the death of the other, I am reminded about the force with which we give over to each other and the unknowingness that surrounds existence at large. Death makes us falter, demarks the final exclusion of any *Aufklärung*. If there ever was a study guided by mystery, grief is a good candidate. Since we always tend to have our hands full of it, reality is difficult to both to question and grasp, and in an equal manner, partnerhood, which is how roughly 65% of the adult Danish population spend their lives (Danish Statistics, 2021), often seems self-explanatory. In an evolutionary account, a heterosexual partner can be seen as a key to the prolongation of the species. From an attachment perspective, one's partner will be the primary attachment figure providing a safe haven in a world of chaos. In a more critical strain, a Marxist or discourse-oriented perspective, partnerhood will be perceived as the core cell of a capitalist economy, an ideologically indoctrinated way of living that we are interpellated to accept and live by.

While these are all relevant points to make, an important part of this dissertation is that these perspectives often fail to capture the existential meaning of what it means to share a life with another person. Taking a step back, which is the preliminary move in any abductive reasoning, we might wonder what it is that makes generation after generation inclined to live their lives in this way. We live in a time where alternative family forms are less stigmatized, and still, the longing for that one person prevails. Why? To even begin to answer this question, we need, as Bourdieu (1999) point out:

> To learn to look at Yvette the way one so easily looks at Constantinople: to learn, for example, to give the marriage of a teacher and a post office worker the attention and interest that would have been given to the literary account of a misalliance, and to give the statements of a steelworker the thoughtful reception reserved by a certain tradition of reading for the highest forms of poetry or philosophy. (p. 624)

Sitting in the car in which I and my digital recorder traveled the country, outside of the house that I was about to enter for conducting an interview, I repeatedly sought to remind myself of the Emersonian line from *Intellect* (1991), that "the biography of the one foolish person we know is, in reality, nothing less than the miniature paraphrase of the hundred volumes of the Universal History" (p. 192). Turning what at face value strikes us as evident and uninteresting, for example, a "normal" couple relationship into a mystery, is one way of taking it seriously and accepting that this, after all, is only one among the myriad of ways in which we might orchestrate relational life. The research interview lends itself exceptionally to the cause of a sincere grappling with this way of living. Even though the notable differences between everyday conversations can serve as a critique of the interview as an artificial and alienating situation, it is worth pointing out that it is very rare that one's experiences, thoughts, and feelings are in focus for another person's attention for this long, and in the case of a longitudinal study, over the course of a longer period.

When the account of "losing part of oneself" was mentioned in the course of my interviews, my attention span was equally focused during my readings of grief-related literature, and the question of what this statement actually means became one of the principal mysteries of this study. Given that we take this account seriously—that people do lose part of themselves upon the death of another—how does subjectivity need to be configured to make this a real possibility? As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) also point out, the road to any mystery "is perhaps in itself often a mystery" (p. 76), and no researcher will be able to provide a straightforward trajectory of how certain thoughts and interpretations evolved.

Still, given my philosophical background and penchant for psychoanalysis, it was by no means accidental that this socio-ontological strain came into focus. No empirical material speaks for itself, and any reading is already an interpretation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011). The interpretation of any interview will, accordingly, be a laborious endeavor, far from a "pseudo-objective simple 'ticking'" (Stanghellini & Aragona, 2016, p. 326). The words that make up the transcriptions of my interviews are not to be treated as an

objective reality, independent of my theoretical and personal outlook. That is not to say that analyzing is a fully contingent endeavor where "anything goes" (Feyerabend, 1970/2010) but to point out that the outcome always is a result of the *craft* called qualitative research. Given the unfathomably rich material that my 50 hours of interviews make up, there would be enough "data" for numerous studies with an alternative focus. Because my reading is one among many, it needs to be qualified, and in the following section, I will attempt to describe the long and jerky road toward what I have called a social ontology of grief.

1.3 The Interview Study

During the early fall of 2018, half a year into my PhD-studies, I set out to recruit informants for this study. I aspired to find a total of fifteen, divided into three different generations (30's, 50's and 70's) with five in each group. Including participants across the life-span would provide me with a wide-ranging view on partnerhood and its internal temporal dimensions (Berscheid, 2010). Despite many overlaps, it makes an obvious difference to how the loss of a life partner is experienced whether one is aged 33, pregnant in 7th month and recently moved into a house bought from jointly borrowed money, or whether one's partner dies at old age. Conducting interviews with fifteen informants was partly a pragmatic decision – it was the number that could reasonably be managed within the confines of this study. While fewer certainly could have provided intriguing results, this number would also provide me with a wide enough distribution to identify mutual concerns and get a more comprehensive picture of partner bereavement.

The premise for any successful interview study—especially with a longitudinal design that requires continuous effort over a longer period of time and participation in several interviews—is motivated informants. Without a doubt, this criterion often comes to exclude some groups at the expense of others, and in company with many a study on grief, this study contains a majority of white females. That said, and being aware that other groups would certainly confront diverse issues following the loss of their loved ones, I will argue that many of the concerns that the participants in this study confront would be shared with a large majority of the world's population. As already mentioned, grief might be said to warrants universalizations to a greater degree than many other subjects, especially if the study has an existential focus and is predominantly interested in what unites us than what does not.

The Participants

During a couple of intense and communicative weeks, I sent numerous e-mails, placed information folders and posters at grief organizations, public hospitals, and churches, requested access to closed Facebook-groups for bereaved people, and asked colleagues and friends to post the information through their social media channels to recruit participants. The middle group, aged 50–60, was filled up almost immediately; it was evident that this was a group willing and capable of sharing their experiences for the sake of research. The older group, aged 70–80, came slowly but steadily, while the younger group, aged 30–40, proved to be more difficult, resulting in two participants in their 40s as well. While I aspired to find participants who had lost their partner within the previous six months, exclusions from that rule of thumb were made as well, including three informants who had lost their partner within the previous year.

The participants are described in the following short anonymized biographies. The person mentioned first in each pair is the one with whom I conducted the interview.

Group 1: 30–40

Nina and Oscar

Nina and Oscar grew up in the same town and had known each other at a distance many years before establishing a relationship in their mid-twenties. At some point, "it was them." They had lived together for five years when Oscar was diagnosed with testicular cancer. A year before his death, their son, Martin, was born, and they moved from a smaller apartment to a house in the suburbs of a mid-size Danish town. Nina and Oscar married during his prolonged cancer treatment. Oscar was an engineer by profession, a handyman with many plans for their house. This house was the incarnation of their dreams for the future, and they both felt that life had brought them right to the place where they were supposed to be. They wished for more children, and Nina finds it hard to face the fact that Martin might grow up without any siblings. She is a master's student struggling to finish her degree while caring for Martin and getting her life back on track after her loss. At the last interview, Nina has met Jonas, and they are planning to move in together.

Rebecca and Eric

Eric was in his late thirties when a tumor was found in his brain; Rebecca was a couple of years younger. He had been showing signs of illness for half a year before the tumor was found, and after receiving his diagnosis, a long and exhausting treatment begins. Rebecca has been overwhelmed by the burden put on her shoulders during this time, where she has been both a partner and a nurse. Eric was a librarian, and Rebecca is finishing her studies. They had been a couple for 10 years and lived together for eight years. Neither had much contact with their families and while they had many respective friends, it has been "them against the world." They had traveled the world together and shared most of their free time. Rebecca suffered from depression before Eric's death and often struggles to distinguish this from her grief. She spends most of her time at home and finds it difficult to see any light at the end of the tunnel.

Theresa and Daniel

Theresa and Daniel spent their entire adult life together. They met at age 18 and moved in together almost immediately. Together, they have two children, a son age 18 and a daughter age 14. Theresa's deepest longing for Daniel is felt in relation to her parenting role. Her children are moving toward the threshold to adulthood, and she would need Daniel as a co-parent. They had always worked a lot, and the life she tells me about has gone from unpaid bills all over the fridge door to a large house and means to travel. They had been looking forward to the time after their kids had moved out, where they, still young, could do everything they had dreamed of. Daniel worked in construction and died from an accident at his work. He left on his motorcycle one morning—"like he always did"—and never returned. Following her loss, Theresa has stepped down from her demanding management job and is pursuing a different career path.

Tanya and Fred

When Tanya and Fred met, they were both married, and it took them a while to figure out what to do. Fred was 15 years older than her and had three children from his earlier marriage. Due to the age difference, they were well aware of the prospects of Tanya being left alone at some point. But not "this soon." Fred is a firefighter and a physically active man. Without any antecedent signs of illness, he dies from heart failure at age 57. Tanya had never felt the unconditional trust and love that she and Fred had together and

doubts whether she will ever find it again. She works as a lawyer for a larger Danish law firm and often applauds the company's way of supporting her through this difficult time. Following Fred's death, conflicts with his ex-wife and children surrounding inheritance have been a bothersome burden for Tanya.

Clara and Michael

Michaels cancer began in his lymphatic system and spread rapidly. He and Clara had been together since their early twenties and had three children, one son and two daughters. Clara is a nurse, and Michael had earlier been a professional athlete and worked as a traveling salesman following the end of his sports carrier. Handball had been a significant part of family life, with all three children having played at various levels and Michael coaching. Clara describes a marriage that was based on mutual trust and respect despite considerable personal differences. She saw their roles as parents as complementary and suffers from the overwhelming responsibility of trying to guide three soon-to-be-adults by herself. Clara often speaks about her future, or lack of the same since most parts of it included Michael.

Group 2: 50–60

Sarah and Kristoffer

Sarah and Kristoffer met in high school and had lived together for 31 years. Marriage had never seemed like a necessity, but the year before Kristoffer dies, they marry each other without anyone else knowing. Kristoffer dies suddenly. Following the death of his own father, he is cleaning up in the old man's apartment one night and never returns. The morning after, he is located via his iPhone and found dead in the basement. Kristoffer had suffered from heart failure, and following the postmortem examination, it becomes clear that he might have had an uncommon heart disorder that is genetically transferred. Sarah worries on behalf of their two daughters and often expresses frustration with their poorly functioning health care provider. She works in HR and is one of the participants who changes workplace throughout the study. Both daughters have moved out, and even though they live in the same town, she finds everyday life empty without the light that Kristoffer brought into their home.

Simon and Edith

Simon and Edith met early and have lived together for 20 years. Edith survives three years of cancer treatment after the first tumor is localized. She used to work as a kindergarten teacher but is on sick leave for most of this time. Simon is her close companion during these years, trying to navigate the blurry landscape of cancer treatment. Edith grew more and more desperate and embarked on alternative therapies to which Simon did not quite know how to react. He had a feeling that he knew in which direction it was going before Edith did and struggled to remain hopeful. After her death, life is up and down. Periods of slight depression and an unhealthy lifestyle are substituted with hopes for the future. Simon also meets a new partner, Monica, in the course of the study. While this does not put an end to his grief, it does awaken various questions and dilemmas, often played out in relation to his daughters and remaining family.

Iris and Peter

Iris and Peter marry after having lived together for ten years. That same year, Peter has his first stroke, and a few years after, he is struck by another that makes him lose language skills, several cognitive functions, and mobility. He requires personal assistance 24/7, and Iris, who is a health worker, takes it upon herself to care for him in their home. Apart from a couple of days a month, they have spent day and night together for the previous ten years. Iris often talks about their peculiar ways of communicating with each other and how she misses having him nearby. Needless to say, Iris's whole world has to be renegotiated, and she often finds herself in existential bewilderment. Who is she now, when Peter is no longer around, and how will the remainder of her life look? She is very close to her one daughter from an earlier marriage, and throughout the study, she gradually develops a wider social network.

Judith and Jacob

Judith and Jacob have been together for 33 years, with a short break along the way. Jacob, who was in the military, had been stationed abroad and been unfaithful during this time. They had taken a break following his homecoming but got back together again. Judith describes a relationship that was primarily on Jacob's terms and testifies to being "freer" after his death. That said, she misses the great friend and life witness that he was, his role as a father for their two adult children, and, not to forget, his cooking. Judith develops a relationship with another man, Samuel, in the course of the study and often

talks about the differences between these two relationships. Jacob spends his last time at a hospice, and as for several other study participants, this provides ideal circumstances for a dignified farewell.

Alicia and Edward

Alicia and Edward had both been through a divorce before running into each other at work one day. Edward fell far outside the category of men that Alicia had fallen in love with earlier in her life, making him all the more special. She also sees her role in his life as someone who turned things upside down and primarily for the better. They were both ambitious professionals with busy schedules and had an ongoing conversation about their less hectic future. They had six years together before he is diagnosed with colorectal cancer and dies at a hospice half a year later. Alicia described a loving and caring man, the kind who would have made "a great grandfather" to her grandchildren. She has two sons from an earlier marriage and often talks about their worrying about her health and, since their father is also dead, she fears leaving them without parents.

Group 3: 70–80

Mary and Conrad

Conrad died of cancer at the age of 75. He was becoming increasingly tired and experienced trouble breathing the year before, and during a vacation abroad, it became clear that something was wrong. They found a tumor in his liver which had already begun to spread throughout his body. Throughout their 34 years together, Conrad had periods of excessive drinking, and Mary often wonders what role it plays in his illness. She alternates between being mad at Conrad for putting their relationship through all the consequent troubles and grateful for having what she refers to as a relationship in freedom. Compared to her first husband, with whom she has two adult sons with children of their own, Conrad never expected anything from her. He was always in a good mood, loved to read and travel. While they were both retired at his death, Conrad had earlier worked as an engineer and Mary as a secretary. Conrad spent his last month at a hospice close to their house and died shortly before our first interview.

Carl and Susan

Carl and Susan met in high school and have spent their entire adult life together. The year Susan died, they had been married for 49 years. Carl describes a very close relationship and a life that circled around the two of them. Susan's cancer developed rapidly, and she gradually lost the ability to speak. She spent her last couple of months at a nursing home, and Carl was there for the majority of his waking hours. Following her death, he grapples with how to manage on his own. He has lost his appetite, and apart from the dog, he sees little point in getting up in the morning. During this study, he gradually regains his will to live and pick up on the voluntary work that had kept him busy before Susan's death. Every Wednesday, he picks up his grandchildren from school and kinder garden and puts lots of effort into being there for his two children.

Felicia and George

Felicia and George met late in life and had lived together for seven years when he passed away. George also died from cancer, and Felicia believes that the intensive chemo treatment only made it worst. George had been married twice before meeting Felicia. His first wife, with whom he had three children, had died tragically at a young age. Following his own death, Felicia has become an important person in the lives of these children, to the extent that she feels that there has been no room for her own grief. George had worked in the harbor, and Felicia was a teacher until retirement. She describes an unstable relationship with many economic and domestic problems. It was like they never really got started, she tells me. She still misses her everyday conversation partner; George was the story-telling type, and once he got started, he could go on for hours.

Anne and Henrik

Anne and Henrik had both worked at the university until retirement. Anne, who had emigrated to Denmark in the early eighties, had begun working in the same department as Henrik, and a relationship quickly evolved. The times were chaotic since Henrik was in the middle of a divorce from his earlier wife, with whom he had three children. Anne describes a mutual relationship based on trust and complementarity. They had a strong intellectual connection, and she has not experienced with anyone else the unconditionality that their relationship offered. Life without Henrik is empty, and during the study, her closest friend dies as well. While Henrik was mostly a man of letters, he loved

to work around their house and the surrounding garden. He died of skin cancer, and they had to go through several exhausting years of sickness, filled with precautions, treatments, and worry.

Jack and Catherine

When Catherine dies, she and Jack had lived together for 52 years. They met in their twenties, shortly after Catherine's first husband had tragically died. Together, they have two sons with families of their own. Her time of death was chaotic—after living well with a pacemaker for 10 years, technical problems bring her acutely to the hospital, and given a different kind of treatment, her death might have been postponed. Looking back, Jack sometimes wonders whether he was a good enough husband and asks himself if he could have done things otherwise. He treasured Catherine highly, both as a partner and friend, and often says that he could not have imagined a better person with whom to spend his life. While he is still active playing sports and engaging in other hobbies, life without her is empty, and getting through the day is not always an easy task.

The Interviews

Round 1

The participants were interviewed on three different occasions, with approximately half a year in between. The first round was conducted during November and December 2018, and since the recruitment had explicitly sought to find *recently* bereaved life partners that have lost within the previous six months, this would be the first Christmas celebrated without their partner. The first year following the loss, I learned progressively, is a lingering confrontation with days and nights of special importance, either to the couple (birthdays, wedding days, etc.) or culturally (holidays, vacation time, and so on). For many of the participants, Christmas was one of these occasions, and many of their spontaneous thoughts and worries at this point circled what to do, how to do it, and why to do anything at all this Christmas.

The first goal of this round of interviews was to establish an alliance that would allow and encourage the participants to speak their hearts in a safe environment. Within qualitative research, an emphatic stance is not only a strategic tool but "the medium [through which] understanding takes place" (Stanghellini & Aragona, 2016, p. 23; See also: Svenaeus, 2018). While one might say that grief, in and of itself, calls for empathy, it would be jumping to

conclusions to say that grief is a morally superior position or that bereaved people are easy to be around. A high degree of ethical reflexivity is necessary throughout the entire study, and how one best "employs" an empathic stance puts the researcher's moral integrity to the test. As Brinkmann (2012) points out, "People may have very good reasons not to tell 'the whole story'" (p. 56), and given that the interview context is not therapeutically orientated, there will often be a contextual limit to how far one ought to push the investigation.

The interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants who lived spread out across Denmark. The first round of interviews began with providing the necessary background information for the project, a brief presentation of myself, and their rights as informants. They signed a document of informed consent (Appendix 2) where they agreed that I could use the transcripts for research purposes, that all participation was anonymous, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and they were encouraged not to respond to any questions that might be experienced as intrusive.

The first interview guide is presented below. It is important to point out that these are questions that *guided* the interview. That is, I jumped back and forth between the subjects and the spontaneous development of the conversation, left some parts out, and asked about others instead.

Table 1: Interview Guide 1

Subject:	**Question:**
Briefing and Setting	- Presentation - Short introduction to the project: *The Culture of Grief* - Thank you for participating! - A privilege to share in your story - Your rights as a participant - The three rounds - Focus today - Sign written consent - Any questions?

Your partner	- You have lost your life partner, x – **can you tell me about the loss**? When did it happen? How were the circumstances? Was it expected?
Context	- What was your **immediate reaction** to the loss? - How did people in your **surroundings** react? (children, family, friends) - What **significance** did the loss carry for your life—what is **changed**? (Relations, activities, traditions, etc.) - Have you received any form of **support?** From whom (friends, family, professionally) - Have you considered this helpful? Other sources of **support**? (books, movies, music, nature) - Is there something about your reaction that has **surprised** you? (ambivalence, anger, guilt, hate, relief, gratitude, etc.)
Relation	- Would you care to tell me **your story**? When/how did you meet? Moving in together Life-changing events Children - **Who was x to you**? (open question) How would you describe x's place in your life? - **Did you love x?** Did you experience this love as **mutual**? If yes: How would you **describe** that love? What did it **mean** to you? About this: Are there any **special occasions** that come to mind?
Grief and Love	- Do you think **differently of love** following your loss? - What **is love** in your eyes? - Do you think that grief can **teach** us anything about love? If yes: what? Other ways? - Is it possible to live **a good life without love**? If no: why not? If yes: what is a good life? - Seen in light of your loss: Is there anything that you wished would have **been different** between x and you? - Is there anything that you regret **not saying to x**? If yes: Why was that important?

Existential dimensions	- How would you **describe grief**? - Have you experienced **profound grief before**? Similarities/differences this time? - Can you find recognition in **other people's grief**? Comfort? - Had you talked about the prospect that one of you might die? - Have you thought about the situation where **you would have been the one who died**? - Do you think that we can **learn anything from grief**? Does grief make sense? If yes: How? If no: Why not? - Do you think differently about your own death than you did before? More **aware, thoughtful, careless, resolute**, other? - Does thought of death play a more vital role in your life than before?
Continuing bonds	- What is it that you **miss about x**? Can you give an example of when this happens? How do you feel when thinking of x? - Do you experience being **in touch with x**? If yes: How, when? Can you share this experience? - Do you **still love x**? How? How would you describe the love you feel today? - Would you like to be **relieved from grief**? If yes: Why? If no: Why not? Is grief necessary? - Is there something that you **do not miss about x**?
Future	- Have your **thoughts about the future** changed since the loss of your partner? - How do you think of the **future?** - Are there any **possibilities** that you appreciate having now? - If appropriate: How do you look upon the prospect of finding a **new partner**? - What do you think that **x would have said** if you meet someone else?
Debriefing	- We're getting close to **the end** - How was it to **speak about your grief** in this way? - Is there anything that you would **like to add**? - **Thank you.**

Directly after each interview, I wrote one or two pages with autoethnographic notes that sought to capture my immediate response to the interview—thoughts and feelings from before, during, and after the interview that were considered valuable for further analysis. Five of the interviews were transcribed by myself, and the remaining ten by a research assistant.[10] Upon receiving these transcripts, I listened through the interviews once more to secure the transcripts' correctness and quality. During this reading, I marked recurrent themes, clusters of meaning, and noteworthy quotations. This work could be seen as a rough and initial thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007) that was meant to guide the continuation of the study. The following primary themes emerged from the first round of interviews:

Table 2: Themes Round 1

Primary Themes			
Ontological insecurity	Identity	Home	The life witness/Conversation partner
Privileged grief	Gratitude	Practical issues	Different prioritizations in life
Secondary Themes			
Talking	Memory	The necessity of grief	Own death
Lack of role models	Wonder/ Understanding	Contact with the deceased	Jealousy
Hospice	Understanding	Parenting	

[10] See Appendix 3 for the instructions shared with the research assistant.

Round 2

Based on these themes and the literature read during the following six months, the second interview guide was developed. The questions and focus for the second round were equally discussed together with colleagues having extended experience of qualitative research and my principal supervisor, who is an internationally recognized authority within the field of qualitative methods in general and interviews in particular. Since the questions in this round were more focused, I often began by shortly introducing the theme. The second interview guide was composed as follows:

Table 3: Interview Guide 2

Subject:	**Question:**
Introduction	**The second interview:** I would like to know how you are doing and, otherwise, continue where we left off last time.
Since last time	**Introduce the theme:** It's been half a year since the last time. It's a long time, and I would like to know how you're doing. - How are you? - How have things been since last time? - Is there something in particular that you have thought of since the last interview?
Missing/longing Time Possibilities	**Introduce the theme:** Grief is tied to having lost someone or something that you loved or were attached to. You often hear about missing and longing in this context. - Do you miss/long for x? - Do you see any difference between missing and longing? - What is it that you miss/long for? - If relevant: Is there something that you do *not* miss/long for? - Do you miss/long for x in a different way compared to last time? - How do you look upon the future?

Grief and wonder	**Introduce the theme:** Many people speak about difficulties understanding and/or accepting death. - What do you think about this? - How do you *understand* that x is dead? - Are there any particular situations where this becomes evident? Conversely: situations where you are in doubt? - Do you ever imagine that x wasn't dead?
Existential vulnerability	**Introducing the theme:** I wanted to ask you some questions about how grief and vulnerability are related. - How do you feel about vulnerability today? Do you feel more/less vulnerable after x's death? - Have you changed since x's death? - What do you think about this change? - Do you think differently about life today? - Do you think more/less about your death?
The gaze	**Introduce the theme**: I would like to ask you some questions about the significance of having someone who sees you. - Did you experience being seen by x? - What did it do to you, being seen by x? - How did you see x? - Are there other people who see you in a similar manner?
Home	**Introduce the theme:** These questions concern your experience of being at home. - Has your experience of being at home changed since x died? - How is that felt? - Is that different from in the beginning? - Do you still perceive that x is at home here? - How do you think about your home when being other places?
Rounding up	- Is there anything that you would like to say before we quit for today? - Thank you very much. - I will contact you again before November/December 2019.

When initiating the second round of interviews, the strengths and complexities of longitudinal studies quickly became apparent. While I was expecting to find the interviewees in a situation equivalent to the first interview, it became increasingly clear that grief was a temporal phenomenon. Admittedly, the first round of interviews had been a very demanding psychological endeavor. Within one month, I listened to fifteen heartfelt stories about many lives that had fallen apart within the previous year and encountered bereaved people who were still devastated by their loss. Even though the role as an interviewer demands that one approach the interviewees with an empathic stance, the primary purpose is to conduct research and not provide help or support. As an interviewer, I did not expect or focus on any one-directional movement toward any form of resolution or used symptom-based measurements. That said, it is my clear impression that the majority of the interviewees were "better off" when I saw them for the second, and even more so, at the third interview.[11] This change should not overshadow the new dilemmas that had arisen since the first interview. The bottom line is that during the early summer of 2019, I encountered fifteen individuals at a somewhat different place in their lives.

After the second round of interviews was transcribed in a manner similar to the first, a preliminary analysis of the two initial rounds was conducted, with the primary aim to identify predominant themes. Afterward, all the interviews were read twice with the specific aim of finding relevant quotations answering the respective clusters. These quotations were marked with a distinctive color and copy-pasted into a separate document under a specific heading. This time, the following themes caught my interest:

[11] See Section 7.2: "Practical and Clinical Considerations"

Table 4: Themes Round 2

Primary Themes				
Social ontology				
Home	The gaze	We-ness/Twoness	Privileged grief	Continuing bonds
Putting words on grief	Thoughts of death	The immediate reaction	Meaning	Time—the past/memories
Time—the future	The succession of time/Survival	Vulnerability	Change/Possibilities	Loneliness
Children	A new partner	Missing/ Yearning		
Secondary themes				
Jealousy	Practicalities	The funeral	Help and support	
Gratitude	Anger	The good death	The killjoy	

The dissertation had now found its overarching socio-ontological focus. I had begun to understand how the loss of a life partner had turned these lives on their head, and in the course of that change, exhibited a vulnerability, which touched the very heart of who these people were. The working title had become *Relationality and Finitude*, and I had a growing sense of the direction in which I was heading.

During 2019, I attended several conferences and seminars where I presented the themes and categories of interest, which gave me ample opportunity to motivate and conduct the theoretical groundwork. I presented the basic socio-ontological line of thought under the rubric "The ontological dimensions of bereavement" at the *Qualitative Methods in Psychology and History and Philosophy Conference* in Cardiff, Wales. At the *International Human Science Research Conference* in Molde, Norway, I gave a presentation on the gaze, and at the 14th *International Conference on the Social Context of Death,*

Dying, and Disposal at Bath, U.K., my presentation focused on death awareness.[12] During late fall, I participated in a conference at Södertörn University, Sweden, *Toward an Asymmetrical Ethics: Power, Relations, and the Diversity of Subjectivities*, examining the obviously asymmetrical relationship between the living and the dead. Finally, the conference *AL(L)ONE: Solitude and what it tells us about Community* at Aarhus University, Denmark, gave me the opportunity to investigate how solitude is experienced following the loss of a life partner. The initial literature review (Sköld, 2020a) had likewise been presented to the members of *The Culture of Grief's* Advisory Board with distinguished grief researchers, philosophers, and social scientists.[13]

Writing a chapter of the Danish anthology that is a result of a joint effort of *The Culture of Grief* and edited by Anders Petersen and Svend Brinkmann, *Menneskets sorg—om et vilkår i forandring [Human Grief—A Changing Condition]* provided an opportunity to condense my empirical findings in an accessible language. Together with my principal supervisor, Svend Brinkmann, I have likewise contributed with a chapter (Sköld and Brinkmann, in press) on the normativities of bereavement from an ontological, existential, and cultural perspective, to be published in an English anthology originating from our project, *Grief Experience: Cultural, Existential, and Phenomenological Perspectives*, edited by Allan Køster and Ester Holte Kofod.

Round 3

In these ways, the "results" from my interview study have been analyzed continually, and before visiting the interviewees for the third and final interview, I had my doubts about whether this was actually necessary. The literature on interview studies suggests that one conduct enough interviews to answer one's research question(s) (Kvale, 1994; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), and by these standards, there would be no need to conduct another interview. The rationale for not conducting another interview—apart from the laborious task it is to make appointments and visit 15 private homes spread out across the country, would be to avoid "the 1000-pages question" and not drown in data. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) point out, it is often a low percentage of the empirical material that is actually used in the published writings, and

[12] The presentation was later rewritten and published (Sköld, 2020b).
[13] Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut, Paul Rosenblatt, Thomas Fuchs, Tony Walter, Allan Horowitz, Todd May, Jaan Valsiner, and Michael Hviid Jacobsen.

qualitative researchers often find themselves too exhausted after the empirical phase is over to get down to business with challenging theoretical work.

Considering the many surprises that the second round had offered, though, it seemed mistaken to miss out on the opportunity of a third interview. Furthermore, I had established a relationship with each of the interviewees, and ending the study at this point would be to break the bond. As mentioned already, the ethical aspects of a study are not limited to the formalities of informed consent and anonymization but pervade the entire study. Ethical considerations stretch from the fundamental *why's* of the entire study (Why study this at all? For whom is this worthwhile? How does this study contribute to the betterment of the world and the people inhibiting it?) to the concrete encounter with the people taking part in it. Unbeknownst, our conversations had become an important part of the process of grief for these people. Engaging in a conversation with a relatively disinterested researcher every once in a while, had created a room for speaking their minds without any explicit or implicit demands that their grief should move in a certain direction. They seemed to benefit by meeting someone who had no trouble listening to their words for more than an hour and even encouraged them to think about these matters in a serious manner.

For reasons that had to do with both a pressed conference schedule in December 2019 and a willingness to avoid an amplified focus on the upcoming holidays, I considered it preferable to finish the interview study at the beginning of 2020. This final interview had three main functions. The first was to cross-check the themes that I had been working on, and see how my interviewees responded to that picture. The second was to see where the previous half a year had brought them and how their life situation looked at this point. Thirdly, I wanted to end the study in a proper manner. The third interview guide is presented below:

Table 5: Interview Guide 3

Theme:	Question:
Introduction	- Last interview. - Like last time—continue where we left off. Your opportunity to say what you like.
Present	- How are things? - Do you consider yourself bereaved today? If yes, how would you describe this grief? - Do you think that the grief will ever end? - During our first interview, I asked you to describe the time so far. How would you describe time until today?
A shared life Existential aspects of partnerhood	- Why do you think many people live this way? - What is so special about this kind of life? - What was the most important part of your life with x? - Have you changed the way you look back on your relationship throughout this grief process? - Do you think that you will ever experience the same with someone else?
Everyday life	- How do you notice the loss in your everyday life? - Have you found a new/different rhythm in life? - Do you have a different life today?
Do you think of x?	- Is there a difference with regard to how you think of x today compared with two years ago? - Do you often imagine how life would have been if x were still alive? - Do you experience being in some kind of relation to x?
Future	- How do you think about the future? - Are you looking forward to something in the future? To what? - In what way do you think that the loss of x will affect your future life? - How has your view of the future changed since the loss?
Loneliness Other relations	- Do you see yourself as lonely? - Have you been lonely in this way before? - How have relations to others been affected? Friends? Children?
Remembering the dead	- How do you remember x? - Is it voluntarily? - Do you think that you "should" remember x? - Are you afraid of losing the memory of x?

Death and finitude	- If you look back on your relationship, did death play a role in that? - Did you speak about death? - Where you afraid of losing x? - Do you think more/different of death today?
Religion (if time)	- Have you ever had a religious faith? If so, is your relation to God changed after x's death? - Has this been a comfort?
Funeral (if time)	- Do you think about the funeral? - If so, How? - Is there anything in particular that you remember? - What function did the funeral have for you? - Is there a grave, and do you visit it?
Rounding up	- Thank you once more. - What next. - Contact you in time for the defense.

During February 2020, this last round of interviews was transcribed by myself, smaller adjustments were made to the included themes, and relevant quotations were added. On March 1, my research visit at Södertörn University began, and I moved to Stockholm. Two weeks later, COVID-19 paralyzed the world, and I had to return home immediately. Sad as this was—given that my impression of *The Centre for Practical Knowledge,* where I had planned to work as a visiting researcher during the spring, had proven itself to be the intellectually stimulating environment that I had pictured it to be, it gave me time to write. The PhD course *Suffering in Contemporary Society* that I had arranged with my colleague, Peter Clement Lund, was postponed until 2021, and many other seminars and events were cancelled. Due to home schooling and general global chaos, March and April were unproductive, but from the middle of May until the beginning of September, I worked passionately on what has resulted in Chapters 2–4 in this dissertation. A large portion of fall 2020 was devoted to organizing the digital seminar, *The Culture of Grief: Philosophy, Ecology, and Politics of Loss in the Twenty-first Century*, which was launched December 3rd.[14] The last three months before submission was spent in New Haven, USA, as a visiting researcher at the Department of Comparative Literature at Yale University. Despite the ravaging pandemic

[14] Information about the Seminar; Link to YouTube-video

and political instability, this provided me with space and time to complete the dissertation in a very inspiring environment. In the next section, I will outline more comprehensively how the analytic process has proceeded.

1.4 Research as Craft

Analysis remains the black box of qualitative research. The question "how to conduct a proper analysis" is the question that drives the publication of many a methodological handbook. As indicated several times already, I am convinced that a dissertation's quality will not be a question of "mechanically follow[ing] certain specified methodological steps" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 48). Given the complexity of human life and the central role grief plays in this endeavor, the question of whether we "really are to believe that the naïve and simple-minded rules which methodologies take as their guide are capable of accounting for such a 'maze of interactions'" (Feyerabend, 2010, p.1) is worth posing. While Feyerabend's anarcho-methodology posits the notion of "anything goes" as the only methodological maxim beneficial for science, Bourdieu (1999), in a slightly less sweeping tone, points out that:

> The so-called methodological writings on the interview techniques [that] remain faithful to old methodological principles which, like the ideal of the standardized procedures, [is] often derived from the desire to imitate the external sign or the rigor of the most established scientific disciplines. (p. 607)

These "old methodological principles" are the ghosts of natural science, that often forget how "Psychology is the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena and of their conditions", as William James puts it in the first sentence of his *Principles of Psychology* (1890/1983, p. 15). Brinkmann (2020a) argues that while psychology have fulfilled its assigned task when it comes to the *mental*, the psychology of *life* remains to be developed. Formalizing an interview might provide answers to the questions asked, but since every question already carries within itself the seed to an answer, little new will come out from such a study. The task of avoiding "methodoltary"—that is, being more "committed to method rather than topic/content or research questions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 28; See also: Holloway & Todres, 2003), in a qualitative study is a question of making the study one's own—to "own the study" and admit that any "results" will be filtered by the subjectivity and intellectual skills of the researcher. In short, it is about learning *the craft of research*. This is neatly captured by Mills' (2001) often-quoted lines: "Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his

own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft" (p. 224).

The task of becoming one's own methodologist does *not* mean ignoring the entire methodological tradition. "Method and theory are like the language of the country you live in: it is nothing to brag about that you can speak it, but it is a disgrace, as well as an inconvenience, if you cannot" (Mills, 1980, p. 64). *Not* doing something (e.g., following standardized methods) must be an informed decision that presupposes extensive knowledge of what it is that one refrains from doing. When initiating this project, I familiarized myself with and investigated the broad range of qualitative methodologies that were being applied to the field of partner bereavement (Sköld, 2020a). Without exceptions, all studies were interview-based, and with few exceptions, these were phenomenologically framed with either a descriptive (Giorgi, 2009) or interpretative (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2012; Van Manen; 2014) focus. Narrative and discursive framings figured as well, together with one study based on grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 1996). Apart from a few exceptions (Fasse & Zech, 2006; Richardson, 2014), these studies did not leave a significant mark on my understanding of grief. Compared with literary accounts (Lewis, 1961; Didion, 2006; Barthes, 2012; Riley, 2019) and theoretical writings linked to the subject (Heidegger, 1927/2008; Derrida, 1989; Butler, 2006; Lear, 2018; Ruin, 2018; Hägglund, 2019), which over and over again struck me with astonishment, I did not have the experience that many qualitative studies on partner bereavement contributed to or deepened my understanding of the subject matter. Being committed to doing things slightly differently presupposed a clearer account of *why* these studies failed to do so.

One of the reasons, as indicated above, is that the mentioned studies fail to address the current meaning of partnerhood, the question of the pathologization of grief, and were inclined to a positive focus. Furthermore, there seemed to be a lack of conceptual rigor and a taken-for-grantedness of fundamental concepts. Questions concerning what we are talking about when we talk about "grief," "death," and "love" were overshadowed or, perhaps, even actively ignored. Instead, many of the articles presented an overwhelming amount of empirical material—page after page with quotations that often seemed to be expected to speak for themselves. The lack of theoretical underpinnings seemed to limit the depth of these studies. Of course, one is free to argue that the task of qualitative research is to "give voice" in a descriptive manner to a limited number of people and no more. But in case one argues that no form of generalization falls on the table of qualitative studies, one needs to provide an answer to the question of how the

study contributes to our understanding of the subject matter and how it is relevant for others apart from the interviewed subjects.

As it is understood in this dissertation, the encounter with grief is an encounter with a universal existential condition that—if anything—transcends the borders between cultures and historical epochs. At the same time, the torments of grief are experienced singularly, and any comparisons remain a challenge. Importantly, these notions do not exclude one another; existential issues are not abstract and free-floating entities but lived, experienced, and heartfelt. Grief transcends the borders between the personal singular, the culturally specific, and the existential universal. Through the loss of this person (singular), whom I referred to as my life partner (cultural), grief (universal) plays out. Grief plays out on and through all these levels and can help us illustrate how these are not three different strata in life but intertwined aspects in *one life.* In the discussion of "the classical" in *Truth and Method* (1982), Gadamer notes how the classical "is certainly "timeless," but this timelessness is a mode of historical being;" it "says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it" (p. 290). Grief speaks to us in an analogous way; it unites us and separates us in one and the same movement. What interests me, then, is how the universals of love and death are experienced through the particular type of life that is partnerhood—how the loss of this one life partner, who neither is coming back nor can be replaced, can provide us with a solid base for a deeper understanding of who we are and why we live our lives in the way that we do.

Validity

Before moving on to the theoretical strains that have informed and hopefully amended this study, we should pause at the notions of validity, reliability, and generalizability. The notion of validity emerged concomitantly with psychometric testing in the mid-twentieth century, intended to signpost the extent to which these tests were measuring what they intended to. In interview studies, validity concerns how accurately the study portrays the relevant phenomenon. As pointed out by Kreiner & Mouristsen (2005), this notion is a heritage from a quantitative strain of science intended to minimize the influence (bias) of the researcher. Given the craft metaphor introduced briefly above and the assumption that the knowledge accumulated by an interview study is a joint result that depends heavily on the researcher's personal, moral, and intellectual dispositions, conforming to this standard would be close to self-defeating. Much post-qualitative research (St. Pierre, 2021) has voiced similar criticisms, and "given that the "posts" have been available for more

than half a century now," one might certainly wonder "how it is possible that analysis in qualitative methodology continues to be mired in positivism" (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717). Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) correspondingly argue that "after all the positivism critique of recent decades, it is time to be more bold in terms of how to interact with and creatively use empirical material" (p. 112).

It is not every day and certainly not within the field of academia that "being bold" provides a constructive guiding thread in one's undertakings, but if it means finding a "third way" in between scientism and "anything-goes" relativism, I am prone to agree and would argue that a pragmatically inspired craft metaphor (Kvale, 1994; Brinkmann, 2012; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) can do just that. Reframing the question of validity in a processual light, validation is "built into the research process with continual checks of the *credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness* [emphasis added] of the findings" (Kvale, 1994, p. 168) and not some final product. This everyday vocabulary is likewise consciously utilized by Brinkmann & Kvale (2018) to develop a more suitable terminology for what we are doing as qualitative researchers. If opening the black box of analysis does not exhibit a successive ten-step how-to guide leading directly to the results, *how* and *why* research is done still needs to be made apparent.

Throughout this study, I have often portrayed my pathway as one containing two segments: on the one hand, conversations with bereaved people, and on the other, the reading of a great number of books related to the subject of grief. I have attempted to understand and shed light on the interviews through these readings. Conversely, I tried to make the often abstract theoretical reasoning come to life through the interviewees' stories. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are the outcome of this iterative effort. I had no previous experiences of empirical research, and the nagging impression that the handbooks of methodology would not make up for this apparent lack of experience has made it into a matter of *learning by doing*. I had done quite a bit of counselling and advising work during my psychology studies, including volunteering part-time for one and a half years at the Danish Lifeline[15] and was not new to the situation of talking with people in great distress. Still, I had not done so to conduct research, and the first round of interviews did cause a fair degree of nervousness. My increasing understanding of the subject matter and a feeling that the interviews turned out to be a positive experience for the interviewees—despite the intense suffering associated with their loss—helped remedy this.

[15] A phone service for people with suicidal thoughts.

Reliability

The craftsman-approach to the field that I am developing here presupposes that the utterances and sentences that make up the empirical material in this study can be read and interpreted more than one way. In this light, the question of reliability—to what extent these results would be achieved or replicated by another researcher—is less relevant. In a post-positivistic framework, the world does not speak for itself, and the task of the researcher is to conduct a convincing interpretation and argue its case. The interviewees have not shared their experiences with a robot, and despite the undeniable presence of a digital recorder, they were talking to me, Alfred. In his attempt to pinpoint the specifics of the psychoanalytical relationship, which evidently parts with other forms of manualized psychotherapeutic treatment such as cognitive behavioral therapy, Johan Eriksson (2020) writes with suiting irony: "Try to achieve genuine contact with someone preoccupied with technical skills!" (p. 217). According to Eriksson, the psychoanalytical relationship—and on this particular issue, I suggest that we can preferably transfer it word for word to the interview study, requires "moral and psychological virtues such as being kind, authentic, engaged, judgmental, clear-minded, sensitive, receptive, honest, courageous [and] trustworthy" (p. 217). The only instrument, Anthropologist Jean Lave says in an interview with Steinar Kvale, "that is sufficiently complex to comprehend and learn about human existence is another human" (Lave & Kvale, 1995, p. 220). In this case, this human being is me, and the pride that I put in this study does not exclude the uneasiness springing from the fact that things could have been done otherwise and probably much better in many ways.

These questions touch on the epistemological question of the role of interpretation. Without a doubt, the experience of grief is unreducible to anything but itself. It is felt by the bereaved with a force that remains impossible fully to convey in words. The researcher studying existential phenomena—be that love, happiness, anxiety, or grief, must be "fatally aware of the fact that the intended subject matter of the study scarcely will be possible to grasp, but, in the end solely *lived*" (Holst, 2009, p. 21). That grief is an "experience" might strike one as superfluous, but when the task at hand amounts to translating these experiences into a text about grief, it is indeed worth mentioning an extra time. As the forthcoming theoretical chapter will make clear, the first-person standpoint is irreducible; a never-bridgeable otherness pervades human relations as such. The other is, namely, an *other,* and understanding him or her can never be a flawless enterprise. Despite my efforts throughout this study to get a grip on the person the interviewee had

lost, I will never have known the partners, and even if I had done so, that would be a much different outlook than that of their life partner.

With those precautions taken, I do not intend to present a type of constructivism denying the reality of the existence of grief nor suggest that grief merely has a discursive status. But I do want to suggest that what happens in and through this study—through interviews, interpretations, and writing—is that their grief becomes something else, and in the endeavor of creating that something, the interviewee and I are co-writers. The Latin root of dialogue "is that of talk (logos) that goes back and forth (dia-) between persons," and a longitudinal study offers excellent opportunities for conducting a *dia-louge* by ""dwelling with someone" or "wandering together with," the participants" (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 151). My reading and preliminary analysis of earlier interviews inspired the point of departure for the later interviews, and I often returned with an eagerness to find out more about the issues that had evolved from our last conversation. While many literary accounts of grief can make one astounded by the aesthetic qualities of the text and the truth conveyed through these words, sitting at the kitchen table—sometimes on the very chair that used to be "his" or "hers"—and talking to living people about their grief brought a sense of undeniable realness to the study. "*This is it*," I sometimes thought when tears came falling down their eyes after describing a life and a world that was nothing of what it used to be. "This *is* grief," and this dissertation is my attempt to describe and understand that grief. In the final end, the reader will be left to him- or herself to judge whether this strikes one as a plausible and trustworthy account.

Generalizability

A positivistic critique of qualitative studies in general and interview studies in particular would point out that any results of such an endeavor will be idiosyncratic, bordering on non-scientific. It could likewise be assumed that anyone can perform a qualitative study since it rests on few objective standards. This would be to overlook the discipline and skills required to produce a trustworthy result. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) points out:

> Often several possibilities of interpretations will be possible, and, in a sense, we need 'discipline' not only in order to avoid 'non-grounded' ideas but also that we may move beyond the habitual reproduction of a dominant framework and vocabulary. Imagination in this sense is not just tempered by 'discipline' but also presupposes it. (p. 61)

"All narratives tell one story in place of another story" (Cioux & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 178), and writing a dissertation within the field of bereavement studies, I could rather straightforwardly have framed the study within one of the most predominant frameworks (Sköld, 2020a). As already mentioned, this has been an attempt to do something differently, namely, to develop a social ontology of grief with a point of departure in a psychoanalytical, phenomenological, and deconstructive theory. I argue throughout the dissertation that a view on and off grief in this perspective can enlighten our understanding of a defining relational intertwinement and, in this way, make us understand how and why the loss of others alters not only the way that we see ourselves but the way we *are*.

One might ask if this is a "constructivist" take on the subject. If constructivism refers to a denial of a naïve realism that assumes the world's basic fabric to be a readymade entity and the task of the researcher to mirror that, I would be prone to accept that label. If it is taken to mean that the world as such, including our experiences of it, are created *ex nihlio* through language games or discourses, that label will be unsuitable. This dissertation rests on the assumption that there is such a thing as grief, and there are more or less suitable ways of representing this complex phenomenon. Following Bourdieu (1999), I think that we would benefit from rejecting a clear-cut distinction between realism and constructivism in the first place:

> True submission to the data requires an act of construction based on practical mastery of the social logic by which these data are constructed… against the illusion which consists of seeking neutrality by eliminating the observer; it must be admitted that, paradoxically, the only "spontaneous" process is a constructed one, but a *realist construction.* (p. 617-618)

A vital aspect of that endeavor is the interview questions. Two forms of questions that are either neglected or condemned within the interview literature are leading questions and follow-up questions. Following a general line of critique against qualitative research sketched in the sections above, leading questions are assumed to be a source of bias that shadows the truth of the subject matter. Kvale (1994) has made a virtue of arguing the opposite, namely, to utilize leading questions in the quest of "yielding new and worthwhile knowledge":

> Contrary to popular opinion, leading questions do not have to reduce the reliability of interviews, but may enhance it; rather than being used too much, deliberate leading questions are today probably too little applied in research interviews. (p. 156)

The prevalence of leading questions does not necessarily indicate an interviewer unable to see beyond the logic of his or her idiosyncratic world view but a sign of an interviewer interested to the point of being passionate about the subject. Any question will be leading in one way or the other, and the question is "not whether to lead or not to lead, but *where* the interview questions lead, whether they lead in important directions" (Kvale, 1994, p. 156).

* * *

In their account of the "active interviewer," Holstein and Gubrium (1997) point out that exploring several conflictual perspectives during the interview is a way of thinking *with* the interviewee. Correspondingly, Kreiner and Mouritsen's (2005) "analytical interview" attempts to "get findings 'beyond' common sense, and it aims to create new insight rather than confirm what was already known before the interview" (p. 154). Fulfilling this task will address one of the most important criteria for successful analysis, namely that it is done *in vivo* during the interview. The analysis begins with the formulation of the interview questions and continues in and during the interview. In this light, when the recorder is turned off, much of the work is already done; thinking goes on long before any "writing-up" phase begins (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

For Kreiner and Mouritsen (2005), follow-up questions make up the "true art of interviewing" (p. 158). While the interview guide is always based on previous knowledge, the follow-up questions that spring naturally from the conversation are seen as "the interviewer's major task" (p. 158). Additionally, a longitudinal design allows a welcome possibility to think in between rounds and continue where one left off the last time. Still, not all questions can be planned in advance, and the interviewer is left to his or her situational judgment. Never is the craft metaphor more suitable than in the midst of a conversation where something unexpected comes up, and failing to investigate it further would be missing something important. As in all kind's human communication, there are "moments," and moments never return. They offer an opportunity, and whether they are seized depends on a myriad of factors. Having the courage to explore some vague statement further might guide the entire study in another direction. Seizing these moments is a matter of accepting that much of what is most beautiful about human communication springs from the inability to control it fully. The fact that resonant relationships require letting go does not, on the other hand, reduce the art of interviewing to a purely contingent going with the flow.

> [The follow-up question] received little attention in the literature, probably because it is hard to plan, and probably also because it requires insight, prior knowledge, and skill on the part of the interviewer (Kreiner & Mouritsen, 2005, 159).

The "feeling" indicating that a certain statement is worthy of following is intuitive to a certain extent. This intuition, though, like any intuition worthy of its name, depends on an embodied form of practical knowledge, and the notions of an uncontrollable world and a skilled researcher never were mutually exclusive. It requires both a skilled *and* a humble researcher to handle a complex, unpredictable, and—in the end—mysterious world. The researcher often finds him- or herself, like Otto Neurath's sailor "who have to rebuild the ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock." (Neurath, as cited in Hägglund, 2019, p. 179). The only tool available are tools for this task is theory, which is the subject of the next chapter.

Part 1: Relationality

The first part of this dissertation will focus on relationality. Following the basic line of thought carved out in the introduction that all types of losses are losses of something or someone and ultimately the *loos of a way of life*, it seeks to delineate the existential meanings of relations in general and shared life in partnerhood in particular.

In Chapter 2, "Life", I develop the basic socio-ontological argument, drawing on psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology, and deconstruction. The primary purpose of this chapter is to offer an account of human existence that can provide fertile ground for a further investigation of partnerhood and partner loss alike. Furthermore, I aspire to provide a preliminary answer to the three theoretical research questions asked in the introduction; how the dialectic between relationality and finitude can be conceived of, in what ways grief transcends the border between the ontological and the ethical, and how a socio-ontological perspective on grief can inform our understanding of what it means to be human.

Chapter 3, "Love", develops a phenomenology of partnerhood. My primary aim is to answer the first empirical research question, what partner bereavement can tell us about the existential aspects of partnerhood. With a point of departure in the interview material, I do so by outlining predominant themes that seek to apprehend what characterizes of this way of living. Thus, this chapter makes up part of the necessary background responding to the third empirical research question, how the experience of losing a life partner can be understood, confronted further in the final chapter on grief.

Chapter 2: Life

"Life is our dictionary."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

How can we understand the relationship between relationality and finitude? My idea is that grief can function as a prism that can guide our response to this question. On the one hand, grief demonstrates how relationality is pervaded and defined by finitude, despite the wealth of positivity that it brings. On the other hand, our understanding of what it means to be mortal would be futile without an account of what it means to live among, with, and through others. The dialectical road of this dissertation begins and ends in grief by taking the route through relationality and finitude. Grief is *one* way of confronting these cornerstones of human life, and others are certainly possible. While my reading of partnerhood takes place in light of death, a study of joy or happiness would have painted a different picture. That said, grief and happiness are not mutually exclusive. My argument is that a point of departure in loss will make us grasp several aspects tied to this way of living that tend to go unnoticed and, more generally, that grief is a container of pure rocket fuel for the endeavor of understanding who we are and what it means to be human.

The theoretical underpinnings of the study, which this chapter seeks to outline, are not unrelated to the interviews that I have conducted. As made clear in the previous chapter, no interviewer enters the field as a Tabula rasa: "Everything described as a fact is already a theory" (Vygotsky, (1927/1997, p. 250). In an interview study, there is no *view from nowhere* (Nagel, 1980) and my way of listening to their stories and observing their lives, losses, and sufferings has been colored and framed by a preunderstanding of the world, and the task, hereby, is to become aware of and qualify this way of seeing, *to own it*. During these interviews, I heard some things and not others, and what I heard, asked about more piercingly, and found interesting to focus on in upcoming interviews was permeated by psychoanalytical, deconstructive, and existential-phenomenological theory. In this chapter, I will draw this theoretical eclectic map to qualify my readings and make the reader appreciate the conceptual apparatus that is being applied in the following chapters.

This relationship between theory and empirical material is not unidirectional. My readings of the works of Hägglund, Butler, Lear, Derrida, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Freud, and many others have been enthused by the

stories I have been told. When Sarah tells me that "part of her has been ripped off," when Clara tells me that "she has no future," or when Theresa describes her home as a fundamentally altered place after her loss, it makes me wonder. If these testimonies make sense – which an interview study must somehow presuppose, how could we then understand subjectivity, intersubjectivity, embodiment, our relation to the world, temporality, and death? What would it take, and what line of thought can justifiably underpin these experiences? Just as the theoretical frame outlined in the following is my attempt at providing a foundation for how grief can be understood and made sense of, these theoretical strands acquire their bearing in light of the lives that people live. The readings which in the course of the previous three years have found their rightful habitat under my skin—that have made themselves *at home* in the epistemological repertoire which I only partly control—are readings that have helped me respond to or think through the matters occupying the participants in this study in a more profound manner.

If, following Anne O'Byrne (2010) in her reading of Dilthey, "the human sciences have as their object of study the finite human being" (p. 60), they have as their object the life of existing persons. Theory does not begin in the ivory tower; it begins in life. Theory is always about life. But human life never was identical to itself; the curse and the blessing of our existence are that we cannot "just live," There is, as Hägglund (2019) puts it, "no natural way for us to be" (p. 177). We are, with Heidegger (2008), "the being which in its Being has made its own entity into an issue" (p. 68), or with Kierkegaard (1849/1980a), "a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation" (p. 13). While our lives are always "framed" (Butler, 2010/2016), in a way that defines and limits the cultural and normative network of meaning and recognition that guides our actions, development, and everyday doings, this frame is never waterproof, and the questions of who we are and how we ought to live continue to haunt us. "Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self" (Kierkegaard, 1980a, p. 13).

Throughout this dissertation, I will develop the thought that there is no way of answering the questions of who we are without reference to what we do and how we live. *We are the lives that we live*, and any account of who we are will have to begin here. The determining issue and point of departure here is that the lives that we live—all of us—are shared with mortal others and therefore, encircled by grief. Grief confronts us in various ways throughout our lives and might even be seen as a constituting feature of these lives. Without grief, life would be something different, and accordingly, *we* would be someone different. The dream, if there ever was one, of a world

without grief is a dream of a world without humans. If it is a contingent question whether there will still be humans in the future, "or the category *human* [will] be emptied out" (Lear, 2018, p. 26), grief becomes a question of both existential and ethical value. That is, the questions of ontology (*who we are*) and ethics (*what we ought to do*) are deeply intertwined.

* * *

If understanding what it means to lose someone to death presupposes an understanding of what it means to be someone, we also need an account of how we become that very someone. Section 2.1 of this chapter departs from the argument that any account of finitude is bound to relationality, and any account of relationality is bound to natality. The thrownness metaphor that pervades much existential thinking overlooks that we arrive in the world not as ourselves but as a bodily assemblage of sheer potentiality and only gradually become someone. We fade into being, and we do so *through* the world and the people inhabiting it. We "devour" (Lear, 1990, p. 61) the world, and through that process, we become who we are. While life *takes place* and is stretched out in between birth and death, natality and finitude are existentials that mark our lives in various ways throughout this time (O'Byrne, 2010). Grief is one of the moments where we are forced to reckon with what it means when someone leaves this world behind, when someone passes from life to death. Death happens with a momentary force that we cannot grasp; from one moment to the next, the heart stops to beat, and we tell ourselves that "he is dead." This condensed moment of nothingness does not alter the fact that death will make itself felt in myriad ways for the people left to mourn this person. We fade out of life, and to understand what that means, we need an account for how we fade into it. My hope, then, is that the beginning can teach us something about the end and also, how and why we keep aspiring to share our lives with others by locating the source of this relational craving that makes us so desperately in need of other people.

Grief is often described as the flip side of love, love that has become homeless and has nowhere to turn. Grief leaves us in a cold and indifferent universe, and we ask ourselves whether love is dead. How can I love myself without the other? How can I love all the others when the one who I loved the most is no longer here? At the heart of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* (1847/2009b) lies the question of how love survives the death of another. And at the heart of the despair in *Sickness unto Death* (1980a) lies the detachment from the world that we, at least somehow, belong to. Section 2.2 in this chapter considers how the digestive process of devouring the relational reality that we are born into begins and ends in love. Section 2.3 considers the

significance of loss in the process of subjectification with a point of departure in Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (2005) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923/2019) Following Butler's (1997) Nietzsche-inspired reading of how melancholic introjections grounds the subject, I will identify the inherent negativity in the love identified above. We become who we are in a dialectic of love and loss, and one cannot think of one without the other. In section 2.4, I turn to Heidegger and outline the worldly character of Dasein through his concepts of Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) and Being-with-others (*Mitsein*). Section 2.5 reverses to finitude once more and the question of how subjectification is structured by death through a confrontation with Heidegger's notion of Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) and Jaspers's boundary situation (*Grenzsituation*). This brings us to the final three sections, 2.6 through 2.8, that exhibit Hägglund's deconstructive thinking of finitude. The relationship between relationality and finitude is analyzed in light of Derrida's concepts of *différance*, spacing, and trace before turning to a lengthy confrontation with secular faith and spiritual freedom. I end this chapter in section 2.9 by formulating five synthesizing principles that will set the empirical stage and inform the remaining dissertation.

These principles are to be seen as the necessary hull of the ship that will take us through the hazardous oceans of grief as lived experience. This ship will, like Neurath's boat mentioned above, be rebuilt and transformed along the way. But it will hopefully not sink. Some assumptions and suppositions made on the basis of this chapter will turn to have little or no grounding in the experience of my informants; others will be confirmed. But without the hull, we would be left with "nothing but a trivial recounting of our quotidian activities" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 19). What follows then is an insistence to use theory for what it was always meant, namely, to think. That is, needless to say, a violent process in and through which the theories part from their origins, amalgamate with others and become what they are not. There are many reasons for this violence, the most important being that reality and our dealings with it never adjust, neither to isolated systems of thoughts nor methodological handbooks. The gap between being and knowing that Western thought has struggled to close remains an open wound.

The estrangement from this upbuilding cause of Philosophy and Science alike, which Husserl identifies on the first pages of the *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/1989) should be worked wholeheartedly against. Phenomenology, understood as the "reflective attentiveness that distances itself from everyday life in order in order get to the root of that very life," never was "a merely academic or neutral project" (Steinbock, 2007, p. 28). With its hands in the dirt and the head in the sun,

phenomenology has, from its beginning, cautioned against the danger of becoming "mere academics, mere professionals" and maintained a normative focus. The *movement* that is phenomenology takes place in between the first-person experiences and the existential universals that frame our lives. This is rooted in the lifeworld in which we are submerged and where any investigation must begin.

Psychoanalysis, which Freud's case stories and their remarkable impact on how we understand ourselves testifies to, begins in the sufferings of singular individuals, passes through the interpretations of psychical reality, and ends in metapsychological formulations of the archaic structure of the mind. The primary purpose of psychoanalysis was (and is) to help people live better lives, to help develop the means and courage to face up to reality instead of escaping it through repression and the wide variety of symptoms that the psychoanalytical repertoire offers. For all its overlaps with phenomenology, psychoanalysis is and remains, first and foremost, a clinical practice.[16] Utilizing it as an interpretive strategy would require more than the three rounds of interviews which I have access to, and while my readings remain psychoanalytically *inspired*, I stay reluctant to downright interpretation.

Given these precautions, one might certainly wonder how to deal with deconstruction, which is neither a theory nor a method (Derrida, 1967/2001a; 1972/1982). Just like psychoanalytically inspired qualitative studies that apply metapsychological concepts on empirical material from outside the analytical sphere, often give an artificial impression, deconstructive readings that hope to find what they are searching for (*différance*, traces) in the world, seem little convincing. There is no *différance* in the world. Rather, it is because of the work and movement of *différance* that there is such a thing as a world. What *différance* does—and I will argue extensively for this below—is to provide the basis on which we can understand the simultaneous spatialization of time and temporalization of space that lies at the root of finitude. And finitude is what we have identified as one of the cornerstones in the castle of grief. For now, back to before the beginning.

[16] See: Richard Askay & Jesen Farquahar's *Apprehending the Inaccessible, Freudian Psychoanalysis and Existential Phenomenology* (2006), especially Chapter 9, and Miguel Iturrate's *Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology, Toward a Human Synthesis* (1994) for a fruitful discussion of the overlaps and differences between these two traditions.

2.1 Being Born

We cannot choose to be born. We arrive to the world and are given life without previous consent. The Schopenhauerian cursing of the day we were born is only possible in light of the contingency that lies at the heart of our existence. There are no cosmological laws that assure my being, and the existential version of Leibniz's question, celebrated as the foundational question of metaphysics, why there is something rather than nothing, read: *Why am I*? That said, neither metaphysical speculation nor existential anxiety is a timeless entity. In the peculiar book, *A Short Treatise on the Metaphysics of Tsunamis* (2015), Jean-Pierre Dupuy points out how the Great Lisbon Earthquake that destroyed the city and adjoining areas on the morning of November 1, 1755, served to make the history of philosophy geological at its very core. Following the catastrophe, the foundational certainty of Descartes' philosophy, as well as Leibniz's notion of the best possible world, began to fragment.

On a less global account, birth or death are moments that tend to shatter our worldviews and make us wonder. In *Natality and Finitude* (2010), O'Byrne approaches the question of the meaning of birth through the notion of "syncopated temporality." Beginning with the existence of the Heideggerian Dasein as essentially temporal, she continues to ask how this peculiar temporality is lived and experienced. While Heidegger's existential analytic privileges our future-oriented way of being, ultimately our Being-towards-death, O'Byrne, following Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy, argues that natality – and not exclusively finitude—is to be seen as a governing principle of existence.[17] While death and mortality have been thoroughly investigated during the previous century, the question of whether "we really know what birth is" (p. 17) has not. If birth is the paradigmatic example of natality, what does it mean that we not only perish but convey something new to the world through our being and our actions? And further, if death, the fact that we at some point are no more, structures existence, how does the fact that we once did not exist affect our way of being? According to O'Byrne, it certainly does, and her important point is that these two strands often manifest simultaneously within life. "Death may be an event in my future, but I experience my mortality today. My birth may have happened years ago, but natality is a feature of my existence now" (p .4).[18]

[17] Natality runs as a thread through the works of Hanna Arendt (1978;1958/1998). Despite this, O'Byrne argues that Arendt, afraid of biological determinism, failed to grasp its bodily significance.

[18] In Chapter 5, I will argue that grief is characterized partly by this structure, confronting me simultaneously with the irreversibility of death and the imperative to live on.

The syncopated temporality that shapes our lives points to the fact that there was a world before I was born and that I only slowly became part of this world. Syncopated temporality is to be understood as a "mode of being in time that can grasp itself only belatedly and only in the context of an anteriority we have to struggle to understand" (p. 95). The event that was "my birth" was an event for others, my mother, my family, and the society that I was born into, but not for *me*. At that point, there only was, what Freud calls a body-ego, a disorganized gathering of sheer potentiality. Neither life nor subjectivity flow "directly from god to 'man'" (Barrister, 2017, p. 95). The important point is the perspectival asymmetry of this situation. O'Byrne exemplifies this with the child's astonishment when looking through a family photo album with pictures from before its birth and the often-asked question: "Where was *I*?" followed by an older sibling's jubilatory "That was before you were even thought of!" When looking at pictures from the day I was factually born, I likewise refer to it as "my birth", while the fact remains that only belatedly and retrospectively did this become *my* birth.

Our birth, "a very bodily event" (O'Byrne, 2010, p. 104) indeed, is neither identical to nor fully distinguishable from my entrance into the symbolic order of language. From day one, even before, if one includes pregnancy, I am treated like *someone*, as a person, not only in becoming but as someone with an intrinsic value and right to live. Despite these originary individuating gestures through which I am given a name, *my* name, the infant does not yet perceive itself as a separate entity. As Winnicott (1965/2005) writes, there never was an infant, only the dyadic couple of mother-infant.[19] In *Being Singular Plural* (1991/2000), Nancy generalizes this thought: "There is no way to talk about being and being-with in the third person, no way to say that "it is" or indeed "I am." Instead, the only term for the being of bodies together in the world is "we are." (p .137). From the very beginning, *we are*—the "we"' is the primordial ontological category for the way humans are—not the I.[20] That the "I" certainly comes into being at some point and that there is no point in denying its existence does not alter the fact that at the heart of this "I" lies a "we". Encountering a given stranger, we can be sure, as Derrida repeatedly points out, that this person is going to die. But we also know, which

[19] The question to what extent personality or any form of inner life is present during infancy is much discussed within developmental psychology (Stern, 1998; Sandler et al., 2000). The important issue, though, is that the passage from non-being to being happens gradually, and that *any* account of what came before will border on science fiction (Green, 2000).

[20] The notion of we-hood (*Wirheit*) can be traced back to Ludwig Binswanger's *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins* (1942) and played an important role in the discussions surrounding intersubjectivity within the existential-phenomenological tradition (Buber, 1923/2004; Thenuissen, 1984; Cohn, 2002).

is the important issue here, that this someone has *belonged* somewhere. We can be certain that the most isolated human being did not create him- or herself. And we can be equally certain that the gradual development of a psychical structure depends on nourishing relational surroundings (Lear, 1990). Before we are thrown into the world, "man is laid in the cradle of the house" (Bachelard, 1958/2014, p. 35), and "even he who takes his own life has loved it once" (Jaspers, 1970, p. 190). For as long as we are, we are part of someone else, and the most fundamental parental task, taught primarily but not exclusively through bodily care, is learning to love life.[21]

* * *

The precariousness coextensive with birth, implies, Butler (2016) argues, "a social ontology which calls […] individualism into question" (p. 19). There never was a me without a you and whenever I seek to give an account of myself, I am

> at once attesting to and taking distance from a primary impingement, a primary way in which I am, prior to acquiring an "I", a being who has been touched, moved, fed, changed, put to sleep, established as the subject and object of speech. (Butler, 2005, p. 69–70)

For Butler, the word "dependency" does not fully capture the magnitudes of this condition. We are "mired, given over, and even the word dependency cannot do the job here" (p. 82). As infants, we are *given over* to a world, and it is a contingent question whether this world proves itself "good enough" (Winnicott, 2005; Lear, 1990) to nurture our physical and psychical development in an appropriate manner. Rene Spitz's (1945) famous study of Rumanian orphans, has rightfully canonicalized itself in the history of psychology for showing that satisfying a child's basic physical needs of sleep and hunger does live up to the sufficient conditions for survival. Without the special type of recognition of the child, that we can give no better name than love, children will lose their grip, not only of the world and emergent selves but of the very capacity to live. Of course, less severe infidelities to lives that have not yet been given a chance to develop happen every day. In Butler's (2006) perspective, this does not alter the fact that "we cannot understand vulnerability as a deprivation unless we understand the need that is thwarted. Such infants still must be apprehended as given over, as given over to no one or to some insufficient support, or to abandonment" (p. 31). One important

[21] In a forthcoming book on the philosophical, sociological, and pedagogical aspects of parenting (Matthiesen, Sköld & Lund, forthcoming 2022), we discuss this further.

and, indeed, often-mentioned aspect of Winnicott's concept of the "good-enough-mother" is that she is *not* perfect, and this imperfection will gradually help prepare and motivate the child to deal with a world that more often than not leaves much to wish for. The point here, though, is that it is a downward limit to *how imperfect* this care can be and that the consequences of preoedipal traumas often cause the psychical wounds difficult both to live with and treat therapeutically.

Moving from infancy to a more general level "of the human," it is worth pointing out how Butler's discussion of precariousness and our given-over-ness to mortal others is related to subjectification in general:

> I propose to start, and to end, with the question of the human […] Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*? Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a "we," for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire. (Butler, 2006, p. 20)

Otherwise skeptical of the promises of humanism, Butler attests to a "general conception of the human" (p. 31) in the space between relationality and finitude. The question of the human—of what it means to be us, is carved out in the space between the fact that we all "have had," and conversely, that we all "have lost". This, and nothing else, is what unites us, and hereby, we become "constitutively vulnerable" (Lear, 2018, p. 21). Importantly, this is a vulnerability that is not out-grown or surpassed, but a vulnerability at the very heart of who we are.

From the notion of the melancholia inherent in homosexual attachments in *Gender trouble* (1990) and onwards, Butler's thinking has followed an ever-more intensified grieving trajectory. The political firewood that her grief analysis embodies— "*The Powers of Mourning and Violence*," to quote the subtitle of *Precarious Life*, originates in the fact that it is never given "whose lives count as lives." Every day, global and domestic warfare teaches us that many lives are placed outside this category and, correspondingly, taken without greater concern. "Politics begins in ethics," Critchley writes in *Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992/2014, p. 48) and ethics, we might suggest here, begin in grief. The concept of grievability installs a future anterior, an inevitable anticipatory mourning in every human bound. The prospect of loss that comes with the risk of losing whoever we hold dear and the likelihood that their death will not leave us unaffected fuels the way in which we care for them.

This section has shown that grievability remains unthinkable without the backdrop of our precarious infantile origin. The two fundamental questions pervading this dissertation, namely what role grief plays in human life and what it means to lose one's life partner, must begin here. There never was an I without a you, and there never was a "you" without the prospect of losing that you. Adult love relationships actualize our deepest longings, our need to belong and be part of a "we." The ontological openness that grounds this possibility finds its origins in the experience that binds us to primary others before individuation and, therefore, makes us subject to loss. The next section will show how the way toward individuation is countered by love, and section 2.3 how it is equally permeated by loss.

2.2 Being Someone

Who am *I?* This is often the question that brings us to the world of philosophy, literature, and science, the therapist's couch, and the life-long and never-ending project it is to understand ourselves. I have argued elsewhere (Sköld, 2020c) that grief likewise confronts us with this question; given the interdependency of human relationships—the unescapable we-ness identified in the previous section—the death of the other implicitly raises the question of who I am, who the other was, and who we were. Needless to say, none of these questions can be given a final answer, but grappling with them seems to characterize human life to a more or less intensive degree throughout our lives, and on a more general tune, the question becomes: Who are *we*?

> That is the question psychoanalysis sets out to answer, preserving the first-personal accent in the answer that is there in the question. It is grounded in the belief that in the peculiarities of the first-person, subjective experience of human suffering, it can delineate broad-scale features of the human condition, of what it is to be us. (Lear, 1990, p. 26)

If psychoanalysis can teach us anything about who we are that philosophy cannot, it is primarily because it offers a language for the facets of our being that scarcely offer themselves to reflection, language, and thought. No direct *Aufklärung* seems accessible within the areas of infantile life, dreams, sexuality, and death. Given that it is fairly uncontroversial to point out that these aspects are a major part of life, George Bataille's complaint in *Eroticism* (1962/1986) that "generally speaking, philosophy is at fault in being divorced from life" (p. 12) seem justifiable. Psychoanalysis—like an interview study—

finds its place in the midst of all matters—matters that are banal and, therefore, crucial. We *are* these lives, and this is where we need to begin.

This is, unfortunately, not the place for developing a comprehensive account of psychoanalytical ontogenesis with its rich conceptual apparatus comprising drives, desire, narcissism, object relations, and so forth. Focusing on Lear, I will limit the discussion to two important aspects. First, that subjectivity is a contingent entity, and second, that a loving environment is a premise for the development of persons. We will begin in *Love and Its Place in Nature* (1990). "In the most general case," Lear writes:

> A person is erotically bound to the world. That is a condition of there being a world for him: that is, it is a condition of his sanity […] That orientation demands that the world present itself to us as worthy of our love […] The infant is, ideally, born into a world of loving parents. And what it is to be a "good enough" parent is, in part, to be in tune with the child's emerging needs, to respond to them in loving and comforting ways, and in this way to reflect, at a higher level of organization, the child's emerging mentality. Without this loving responsiveness and reflection, children tend to die. So, it seems that a child needs to be born into a psychological world, a world permeated by mind and the emotions, not only to develop a mind but simply to survive as a functioning organism. (p. 153–154)

The entrance in the symbolic order of language and mind that in Lacanian writings is often framed as the beginning of a never-ending estrangement, a "castration" that makes up the very fount of the numinous *lack* permeating existence, is in Lear's writings described within a much more positive frame. In the introduction to this book, Lear put forward the uncommon claim that philosophy and psychoanalysis, alike, are the two most far-reaching lines of defense for the the *individual*. He immediately notices that most contemporary discourses about that subject are critically voiced, coming primarily from camps of social constructivism and cultural relativism. While defending the individual seems to be an uphill business, this theme pervades Lear's writings. No matter if the subject is love, courage, or grief, the guiding principle is that "the good" in all these cases is an upward struggle toward unity and *more* organized and integrated psychical forms, and conversely, less archaic states. Psychoanalysis, moral psychology, and philosophy go hand in hand in their attempt to "ground a conception of what it is for us to live *well*" (Lear, 2018, p. 18). This immediately raises the question about how the rudiments of a social ontology that we have identified above can be made sense of. Have we not just proclaimed the "we" as the most original ontological unity? How and when does the "I" come into the picture?

Lear's answer is certainly not an atomistic subject that exists in sheer self-sufficiency, excluding the other. Instead, he points to how much of the critique of the individual is philosophically unsatisfactory since it is launched against a very undeveloped notion of what it means to be one. The society that we live in is, Lear (1990) writes, "an individualistic society with no individuals!" (p. 19). There is unmistakably a cultural critique in these lines of a contemporary superficial and technified way of living that offers a thousand and one ways of wasting one's life. Lear's (2018) constructive response is a moral psychology that, to avoid becoming *moralizing*, presupposes that we can "ground a conception of what it is for us to live *well* by giving a nuanced psychological account of who we are" (p. 18). So again, *who are we?*

First of all, posing this question and grappling with who we are on a general level through philosophical discourse and individually by living the question "who I am" is an inevitable part of what it means to be us; this is where the *activity* of the human mind fuses with its *being*. Becoming an individual for Lear (2018) is indistinguishable from the "thoughtful, self-conscious activity of the psyche that takes responsibility for living a human life" (p. 28). While this self-conscious activity does not eradicate the archaic parts of our psychic life, the ideal of "speaking with one voice"—a voice that does not repress what is unknown and enigmatic about my being but, rather, takes responsibility for what I *also* am—remains a model for a healthy life. The "psychic integration" that Lear cherishes as the goal of personal development, philosophy, and psychoanalysis alike, is an ongoing activity without a clear end. The unconscious fantasies of infancy and childhood are exempt from the successive and chronological passing of time, and any integration of these will be "improvisational, ironic, syncopated, jazzy, and creative." (Lear, 2018, p. 28).

We can localize many resemblances in Lear's account of the individual with O'Byrne's syncopated temporality and Butler's primordial vulnerability. Being an individual means facing up to the reality that I once was not, that I only gradually became part of this world, that this world was one of others, and that these other's taught me how to love through their very love for me. In this way, there is no razor-sharp delineation between me, the other, and the world, an admittingly continuing confusing side of our lives. But there is, which is the hallmark for Lear, *some kind* of delineation, and that is not a negation of but an expression of the "cosmological principle" (Lear, 1990, p. 139) that is love. Being "erotically bound to the world" (p. 153) does not exclusively refer to our symbiotic merging with the other. For Lear, love is—likewise and equally important—the force that sustains the development

of further psychic integration, that is, individuation. Love is what drives our development into becoming individuals, persons, and the responsibility for our lives that this encompasses. Still, these lives take place in a "world where we have at best limited control" and one "cannot stand outside love and see what it really is" (p. 181); there is no non-passionate view from nowhere from which we could objectively judge and investigate who we are.

* * *

Before moving on to loss, the suggested relationship between love and personhood should be outlined further. In his majestic three-volume work, *The Nature of Love* (2009a; 2009b; 2009c), Irving Singer describes the history of love as one of *idealization*. The core of love is "a way of valuing something" (Singer, 2009a, p. 3). While the realist and idealistic strands differ with regard to whether this object worthy of love is *created* or *found*, love remains an affirmation of the goodness of this object. Love is a positive response to something in the world—be that transcendental-idealistic idea of Platonism, the incarnated Christian God, the Woman in courtly love, the whole of Nature in romantic love, or the objective characteristics matching ours on Tinder. The love of persons that, according to Singer, became a possibility through the development of courtly and romantic love is understood through the concepts of *appraisals* and *bestowals*. Through appraisals, I relate to the other as a person with certain traits and characteristics. Inspired by the Aristotelian *Philia*, this is a kind of love that I can make myself worthy and, accordingly, unworthy of. With regard to one's life partner, it is not wholly contingent with whom we choose to spend our lives. We cannot choose to fall in love, but we can find ourselves in a situation where a shared life with someone with whom we have fallen in love turns out to be impossible.[22] Shared life is, as Chapter 3 will delineate more comprehensively, a task that requires our most ample competencies for compromising and respect for another person.

While appraisals testify to the more rational side of love, and non-appraisive love "is foreign to human nature" (Singer, 2009c, p. 369), bestowals are, according to Singer, the most important, the driving force of

[22] In the article *An Existential Structure of Love* (2020), Tone Roald and I formulate an existential structure of love as a dialectic between the immediate and uncontrollable givenness of falling in love on the one hand and the long-term responsibilities and compromises of a relationship on the other. We argue that these strands ought not to be seen as successive phases, but as interrelated yet conflictual existential positions, and further that love is to be seen as a process of subjectification.

love.[23] Bestowal is described as a singular, spontaneous, and potentially infinite ascription of value. This natal creation of value "exceeds all attributes of the object that might be thought to elicit it" (2009a, p. 13). While I always love *you*, the "you" that I love is not a ready-made entity. Rather, we come into being through this love, through our relating to the beloved as "valuable for her own sake" (p. 6), independent of the characteristics that govern appraisals.[24] At the very end of his book on love, Lear expresses a similar line of thought, noticing how it is not the characteristics of the beloved that make us love her; it is love that enables us to see, appreciate, and value these characteristics (1990, p. 197). While love might certainly make us blind in some respects, it likewise functions as both epistemologically and morally privileged perspective of the other (Jollimore, 2011). We become who we are in the loving gaze of others, a process that continues throughout our lives.

The next section develops the line of thought that a deeper understanding of psychoanalytical ontogenesis touched on in this section necessitates an account of negativity. Through a close reading of Freud's canonical text on grief, *Mourning and Melancholia*, I will show how the subject's *arche* is concurrent with an originary loss and how this makes a clear-cut distinction between grief and melancholia a difficult if not impossible endeavor.

2.3 Being Undone

The often-raised critique against Freud's notion of grief as the paradigmatic example of relinquishment theory usually charges its weapons in some peculiar lines in *Mourning and Melancholia*.[25] Freud's principal task in the text is to understand the metapsychological difference between mourning and melancholia. While the greatest part of the text is devoted to melancholia, Freud (2005) does pose the question of what kind of work mourning performs and responds promptly in the same paragraph:

[23] The balance between these strands shifts and transmutes throughout history. Today, sociologists (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2007, 2012; Rosa, 2019) have argued that our late modern love life can be viewed as "post-romantic" and an overly rationalized way that gives precedence to the more or less objective standards of appraisals.

[24] See Frankfurt (2004) and Grau (2004) for a discussion of love and intrinsic value.

[25] Part of this section has been published earlier in Swedish as *Om melankolins nödvändighet—sorg och förbundenhet hos Freud och Derrida* [On the Necessity of Melancholia—Grief and Belonging in Freud and Derrida] (Sköld, 2020c).

> Reality testing has revealed that the beloved objective no longer exists, and demands that the libido as a whole sever its bonds with that object […]. Normally, respect for reality carries the day. But its task cannot be accomplished immediately. It is now carried out piecemeal at great expenditure of time and investment of energy, and the lost object persists in the psyche. Each individual memory and expectation in which the libido was connected to the object is adjusted and hyper-invested, leading to its detachment from the libido. *In fact, the ego is left free and uninhibited once again after the mourning-work is completed* [Emphasis added]. (p. 205)

Even though, as he writes further on, it appears "curious that this pain-unpleasure strikes us as natural," and that explaining this compromise—which strikes us as "so extraordinary painful" in "economic terms,"—remains an enigma, this seems to be exactly what Freud does. On this reading, grief work amounts to a pulling back of all the libidinal energy or love that I have been invested or *cathected* in the other. When that process is completed, the ego is free and ready to find a new object to love.

If this would be the whole story of the psychoanalytic theory of mourning, it would, without doubt, be severely limited. It would carry little explanatory power with regard to the experiences of mourning that people have, and there would be absolutely no rationale in Adam Philips's (1997) claim that "mourning has acquired the status of a quasi-religious concept in psychoanalysis" (p. 153). To understand why this is *not* the whole story, we need to look closer at Freud's notion of melancholia. While grief is seen as a conscious activity in which one knows "*what* it is about that person that [one] has lost" (Freud, 2005, p. 205) that causes the pain, this is not the case in melancholia. Melancholia takes place unconsciously, and it is notoriously unknown what it is that one has lost. Freud traces the origins of this indistinctness to the interpersonal differences between the two. While mourning is a more or less causal response to the loss of the other, melancholia involves a loss of self, a consequence of the stubborn refusal to mourn. In melancholia, I *sense the loss* of the other, but in my unwillingness to let go of the love object, I identify with the object, make it part of myself. To make room for this mummification of the other, I have to bid farewell to parts of my own self, causing a "great impoverishment of the ego." This difference is pinpointed by Freud, writing that "in mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so" (p. 205–206).

That the ego has become poor and empty is not entirely true since the other is now occupying its place. The tendency of people who have lost loved ones to take over traits and characteristics can, according to Freud, find its rationale here. And the self-reproaches that the melancholic person plagues

himself with are remnants from an always ambivalent relationship to the other, aggression that for various reasons has been held back but is now furiously aimed at the other in the form of one's own ego. "Their laments are accusations" (*Ihre Klagen sind Anklagen*) Freud (p. 202) writes, evoking a Nietzschean line of thought about how the origins of conscience that can be found in aggression turned inwards.[26] *Mourning and Melancholia* is the first text in which the constative role of the superego is recognized: "What we are seeing here is the agency that is commonly called conscience; we will count it among the great institutions of the ego" (p. 207). The internalization of the outside world, its discourses, norms, and people are an intricate part of becoming a self. Psychoanalysis, Lear (2018) writes, teaches us that "when we take in any teaching, the teacher comes along with it" (p. 196); whatever is internalized is personalized, and whatever is personalized, we might add, is valorized.

At the beginning of Chapter 3 in *The Ego and the Id* (1923/2019), Freud recalls this early notion of melancholia before noting that:

> At that time, however, we had not yet recognized the total significance of this process and did not know how frequent and typical it is. Since then, we have understood that *such substitution has a large share in the shaping of the Ego* [Emphasis added] and significantly contributes to establishing what we call character/personality. (p. 12)

Freud seems to be suggesting that the melancholic process of internalization is to be understood in more general terms, and thus, is not only relevant in relation to the loss of someone or something that we love but has a "large share in the shaping of the Ego."[27] How should we understand the claim that melancholia grounds the subject? On an ontogenetic level, it points to the role of the care persons in the life of the infant. We become the ones we are, that is, human beings, through taking the already existing persons in our

[26] In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887/1967) Nietzsche writes "All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward*—this is what I call the *internalization* [Verinnerlichung] of man: thus it was that man developed what was later called his 'soul'" (p. 84), and in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883/1961) we read, on a note even closer to Freud's: "Is not all weeping a complaining? And all complaining not accusing?" (p. 273).

[27] Following Hans Loweald (1980), I use internalization in inclusive manner, encompassing "such "mechanisms" as incorporation, introjection, and identification" (p. 262). While there are notable differences, internalization could be used as "a general term for certain processes of transformation by which relationships and interactions between the individual psychic apparatus and its environment are changed into inner relationships and interactions within the psychic apparatus" (p. 262).

surroundings within ourselves, a reading highly compatible with Lear's notion of how the gradual development of the psyche takes place through a devouring of the mindful world we are born into. On a similar note, Freud notices that this process is not foreign to the ethical domain. Objecting to the claim that psychoanalytic theory would be exempt from or even against the realm of morality, Freud (2019) writes, "This is the higher being, the Ego Ideal or Superego, the representation of our relationship to our parents. As small children, we have known these higher beings, admired, feared, and later absorbed them into ourselves" (p. 18).

Our ability to relate to ourselves *as* selves is dependent on and comes *after* our relating to others. The very material that our minds are made up of is the mental world of others. In Freud's terminology, narcissistic libido comes after the object libido for the sole reason that there is no self to love before "I" have learned to love by being loved by others. *Je est un autre* in the most fundamental meaning—the ego is constituted through internalizations of others. After a certain time, Freud (2019) writes, the rudimentary ego turns to the libido: "Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object" (pp. 24-25). Of course, I can only love others if the world has proven to be "good-enough" in the sense of loving me into being. "Therefore, life for the Ego is synonymous with being loved, loved by the Superego, which also crops up here as a representative of the Id" (p. 36).

While the superego is peopled by others, it is fueled with libidinous energy from the Id. This energy can take on two different facets that are not easily distinguishable. If what Freud in various contexts refers to as the death drive is let loose, we will see the clinical picture of depression with an unseen degree of self-hatred and suicidal tendencies. But it can also, which is why psychoanalysis, despite the "vistas of psychopathology" (Lear, 2018, p. 10) exhibited on the couch, work against annihilation and negativity; it can work *for life* and, thereby, ground a theory of health and mental flourishing. The often-repeated picture of the psychoanalytical subject as fatally divided—slaughtered in the interminable battle between the Ego, Id, and Superego is not the inescapable condition; rather, it is a sign of illness. In Lear's perspective, a divided soul is a sick soul, and even though there will always be limits to the harmony, *fewer* degrees of conflict between these parts are the different parts of the mind—that is, "speaking with the same voice" (Lear, 2018, pp. 30-49) should remain the goal of mental life in general and psychoanalytical therapy specifically.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, mental health is no jigsaw puzzle. The riddles that Freud identified at the origin of melancholia, where it is unclear "*what* it is about," the lost object that hurt so much, remains an unavoidable part of relational life. Since the rudiments of myself were

accomplished through a loss of originary unity, a sense of complete belonging with the other before the eve of meaning, this originary loss is unconscious. All later losses will carry traces from this defining but never present mourning, and in the remaining part of this section, we shall investigate how this loss is undistinguishable from who I am.

* * *

The internalization of significant others takes place concomitantly with a dawning realization that what I originally thought *belonged to me* or, indeed, *was me* has a life of its own, is distant from me. I come to be as a person in response to a loss of the originary unity with the world and others. Loss—and accordingly grief—is a precondition for my existence as such. Love in the sense that I am welcomed into a world of care is originate, but my capability to love, both myself and the other—any form of libidinal movement, presupposes that *I am* a self and can *relate* to another, which in turn presupposes a fundamental loss of the waterproof belonging to a world and a sense of owning the other that infantile fantasies comprise. This impenetrable drama motivates Butler's following question in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997):

> Is there a loss that cannot be thought, cannot be owned or grieved, which forms the conditions of possibility for the subject? Is this what Hegel called "the loss of the loss," a foreclosure that constitutes an unknowability without which the subject cannot endure, an ignorance and melancholia that makes possible all claims of knowledge as one's own? […] On the one hand, melancholia is an attachment that substitutes for an attachment that is broken, gone, or impossible; on the other hand, melancholia continues the tradition of impossibility, as it were, that belongs to the attachment for which it substitutes. (p. 24)

Before continuing on this route, we might ask ourselves what all this has to do with grief in adulthood. How the mind comes into being is one thing; how we react to and experience a life partner's loss is something very different. That is, does the fact that our subjective being relies on an interpersonal structure colored by loss have any consequences for later losses? Freud (1905/1960) famously writes that "every finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it" (p. 222), and Butler insists that in giving an account of myself, I will always attest to me as a child. Freudian symptomatology can generally be seen as one long line of argument that there is no perfectly healthy refugee from the unconscious remnants and their infantile traces, and Lear's writings as an insistence that mental health presupposes a reckoning with these shaded

aspects of who we are. Whether we find ourselves madly in love, simply living our lives, or have lost the person with whom this life was shared, the wound that lies at the bottom of our psyche will be activated, touched on, and felt. Every "new" love awakens the ghosts of the ones that have come before, and the love that brought us into the world plays a special role here. That every relationship encompasses features of natal newness does not exclude the repetitive eccentricities of our unconscious being and the way earlier "love objects" have made their mark on us. Within attachment theory, it is often pointed out that our adult partner relationships are prime examples of adult attachment bonds (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). They do differ substantially in crossing family borders, being symmetrical, and often involving genital sexuality, but still—partnerhood makes up a widely culturally available frame for how we find our homes in an otherwise *Unheimlich* world.

When this other dies, the archaic melancholic wounds are awakened. The reading of Freud's libidinal cathexis that has pervaded the field of grief research overlooks how the socio-ontological predicaments that ground the subject are indistinguishable from loss. *All* attachments are melancholic since they are grounded on an internalization of the other as a response to the impossibility of owning or merging with the other. Melancholia is, in Butler's (1997) words, "the birth certificate of the subject," and what Freud refers to as the "character of the ego" appears to be "the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archeological reminder, as it were, of unresolved grief" (p. 133). The dream of a finite and clearly delineated process of grief work that once and for all would clean up the mess inside and place the urn steady on the shelves of personal history remains a dream. We will never know "what it was" about the other that made her the love of my life; her otherness prevails and composes the rock bottom of any process of bereavement. That said, we might still benefit from comprehending grief in "work" metaphors, and perhaps even restore *Trauerarbeit* as a more general feature of mental activity. Grief always put the mind to work and can be seen as the reckoning with the mystery that he or she was, I am, and we were: a way in which we "relate transparently to the fundamental in-transparency of *why we become who we are*" (Lundsgaard-Leth, 2018, p. 128).

"If something is to stay in memory, it must be burned in; only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory" (Nietzsche, 1967, p 61); Nietzsche's claim in is replicated, if one wishes, by much psychological research on the relation between memory and negative bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The origin of that which never ceases to hurt is the gradual event that was my becoming a person. Psychic life never was for free, and "one becomes what one love but

cannot or mustn't have" as Kirsten Hyldgaard (2020, p. 154) eloquently puts it. We remain living graveyards, the distinction between grief and melancholia is forever blurred, and the only thing we can be sure of is that it is only by internalizing the other that we become something in the first place. In this way, we might reasonably wonder whether love is the price we pay for grief and not the opposite.

2.4 Being in a World of Others

The following two sections will follow a similar trajectory as the two previous. The goal is, first of all, to ground relationality and finitude in an existential-phenomenological perspective, and second, to exhibit the dialectic between them. Accordingly, this first section will continue the delineation of the worldliness of the subject, drawing primarily on Heidegger's existential analytic in *Being and Time*. Bridging the road to finitude with Jaspers and Kierkegaard, I will move on, in the proceeding section, outlining how existence can be understood in light of death. Hence, my hope is that the reader increasingly will begin to sense and appreciate the *rhythm* of the dialectic between relationality and finitude.

In the previous section, we have identified the libidinal attachments of love as a precondition for there being a world. Not in the sense that the world is created through our loving it, but that "it is a condition of there being a world that it be lovable by beings like us" (Lear, 1990, p. 142). In this sense, it is fair to say that "the world exists because we love it" (p. 140). A *world* is dependent on a first-person perspective, *someone* who is expressing herself in and through the creation of this world. Deconstructing the distinction between subject and object has, from the beginning, been one of the major tasks of phenomenology, and intentionality has been the primary weapon in this struggle. It is the directedness of consciousness—the fact that we are always conscious *of something*—that provides the key to the world-opening character of the subject and the ultimate reason why any objectification of our way of being misses the point entirely: "Essentially the person exists only in the performance of intentional acts, and is therefore *not* an object" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 73). That "there is a part of me that feels that the world will not survive my death." (Jollimore, 2011, p. 89), that saving the life of someone amounts to saving the world, and that the loss of someone answer to the loss of the world, should be seen and understood in this light. According to Binswanger, echoing Husserl's early critique of psychologism, the distinction between subject and object makes up the "the cancer of all psychology until

now" (Binawanger, as cited in May, 1958, p. 11), an obstruction for a deeper understanding of how our existence is constituted.[28]

The task, then, is to understand and think not of our relationship *to* the world but our being a constitutive part of it. Dasein, which is Heidegger's term for the way human beings exist, roughly translates as "being there," Human beings always find themselves *there*, immersed in and attuned to the world. Heidegger's concept of mood (*Stimmung*) differs from feelings and emotions in referring to the way we always respond to the world; it refers to the state of mind (*Befindlichkeit)* with which we always find ourselves in the midst of all matters. While Dasein always lingers between more or less authentic (*Eigentlich*) ways of being, "both ways in which Dasein's Being takes on a definite character, and they must be seen and understood *a priori* as grounded on that state of Being which we have called "*Being-in-the-world*"" (p. 78). Just as Lear points out that there is no outside of the realm of love, there is no outside of the world, a world which is, in every way "constitutive for Dasein" (p. 77). It is, as Levinas (1993/2000) points out in his reading of *Being and Time*, it is "in the world that we come into the world, and in the world that we go out of the world. There is no liberation" (p. 91). For as long as we *are*— the world is "already old" (O'Byrne, 2010, p. 5), life has already begun, and it has begun *somewhere*. We arrive in the world too late for any objections to be made; in Heideggerian terms, we find ourselves "thrown."

What does it mean, then, to be thrown into a world? On Heidegger's (2008) account, thrownness is not a one-time event, but "Dasein's facticity is such that *as long as* it is what it is, Dasein remains in the throw" (p. 223). Heidegger wishes to point out that the being of Dasein is essentially *groundless*; Dasein exists *factually* and has *fallen* without any ground other than its own existence. "The self, which as such has to lay the basis for itself, can *never* get that basis into its power; and yet, as existing, it must take over Being-a-basis" (p. 330). Even though we cannot provide a basis for our existence, we must, Heidegger says, "take over" this being. This taking over, then, presupposes a confrontation with the groundlessness of existence, that there is and never was a ground for my being. We are, in O'Byrne's (2010) words, "children of chance, and there is no reason or ground for my having been born" (p. 27). This feature, likewise, is the key to an understanding of the privileged status Heidegger ascribes to anxiety. Anxiety, which should be

[28] Hartmut Rosa's (2019) concept of "resonance" connotes this line of thought: "[if] we accept this notion of a fundamental relatedness that precedes the division of subject and object and serves as the very basis both of the presence of world and subjective experience, then resonance appears not as something that first develops between a self-conscious subject and a "premade" world, but as the event through which both commence." (p. 35).

sharply distinguished from fear, does not have a particular object (Kierkegaard, 1845/1980b). The anxiety that pervades human existence *cannot* be avoided since it is rooted in the groundlessness that foregoes our being. Anxiety is essentially about nothing, and dealing with nothingness remains a blank page in most self-help books.

We will return to this subject shortly after exploring the relational aspects of our being in the world. While anxiety confronts us in our loneliest loneliness, this does not exclude an equally fundamental co-original or equiprimordial (*Gleichursprünglich*) social ontology.

* * *

That the world is always one among others is developed by Heidegger (2008) through his notion of Being-with (*Mitsein*):

> The phenomenological assertion that "Dasein is essentially Being-with" has an existential-ontological meaning […]. Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived […]. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with; its very possibility is the proof of this. (p. 156–157)

That is, even in the middle of a forest with no living human beings nearby, the others are still *with me*, in the sense that my world, any world, is infused by them. While Heidegger has defined our relationship to the world broadly as care (*Sorge*), our dealings with other Dasein's differ from dealings with other matters. While we are concerned (*Besorge*) with the world in general, we relate to others through solicitude (*Fürsorge*). Importantly, for our future discussion, it is worth pointing out that Heidegger identifies two diverse modes of solicitude. In relating to the other, I can either leap in for him (*Für ihn Einspringen*) or leap ahead of him (*Ihm Vorausspringen*). In *leaping in* for the other, "I take over for the Other that with which he is to concern himself" (p. 158). That is, I try to imagine the other's view of the world and step in on that space to act on behalf of him or her. This form of solicitude is inauthentic in Heidegger's view since it does not respect the freedom and unbridgeable mineness (*Jemeningkeit*) of the other. In *leaping ahead*, on the other hand, I do not aspire to take away the "care" of the other "but rather give it back to him authentically for the first time […] It helps the Other to become transparent to himself in his care and to become free for it" (p. 159).

Just as everyday life is a going back and forth between more or less authentic modes of existence, our way of relating to the other is likewise a matter of constant change. However, *when* we are together, Heidegger writes,

it is often with some purpose or common concern. Few relationships are maintained without a common third that unites us, be that friendships, professional relations, or partnerhood. In various ways, we are seeking to achieve something, make something happen, or at least maintain a status quo that likewise requires a mutual effort. And in devoting themselves to a common affair in which "their doing so is determined by the manner in which their Dasein, each in its own way, has been taken hold of," there is a possibility of being "*authentically* bound together […] which frees the Other in his freedom for himself" (p. 159).[29]

It would be fair to argue from the above that Dasein should be described as inherently relational, that it finds itself factually existing in a relational world impossible to escape. Upon this picture, Heidegger's reputation as a notoriously individualistic thinker seems worth questioning. It is indisputable that, for Heidegger, existence is "*in each case mine*" (p. 67), and, in this way, we will approach a dialectic not much different from the one between belonging and individuation that we have identified with Lear and Butler. Grief can teach us that the question of relationality and individuality never was an either/or, that we are or were always concurrently relational *and* individual, or rather, that I *become* an individual by relating to how I *am* relational and the opposite. Nuances are much needed in this nexus, and Heidegger's thinking can provide us with the conceptual machinery for how and where to draw the blurry line between self and other.

2.5 Being in Time

The spatial connotations of the "there" (*Da*) of Dasein should not overshadow its temporal dimensions. Dasein is not an object, and the only substantialized definition of Dasein's mode of being that Heidegger (2008) is willing to give is one that mainly de-substantializes it: "Man's '*substance'* is not spirit as a synthesis of soul and body; it is rather *existence*." (Heidegger, p. 153). The very essence of Dasein, then, is not a substantial trait but is to be found in its temporal way of being, its *existence*. In his delineation of Existenz, which shares many features with Heidegger's Dasein, Jaspers points out that: ""I am an Existenz" […] is an impossible statement, for the being of Existenz is not an objective category" (p. 21). There is no outside of this way of being from where I could grasp myself. We remain, in Kierkegaard's (1980a) words, "nailed" (*forneglet*) to ourselves, and despite the fact that we always find

[29] The question of to what extent partnerhood might be an example of authentic Being-with and if this question is even relevant for our lived experience will be a recurrent feature in Chapter 3.

ourselves thrown into and fallen in a world of others, there is an irreducible first-person account that cannot be shared or overtaken by someone else. When addressing Dasein, we must, Heidegger says, use a personal pronoun: "'I am,' 'You are'" (p. 68).

I am. I exist. The question of what it means to exist from a Heideggerian perspective remains—despite the constitutive status of Being-with, deeply individualistic. What he refers to as an "authentic" (*Eigentlich*) way of being means primarily facing up to the irreplaceability of this existence. Despite being inescapably immersed in "the They" (*das Man*), I am still called upon to take over this "Being-a-basis." There is an implicit normativity installed at the heart of our being through which I ought to, in a Pindarian or Nietzschean line, *become who I am*. Asking what it means to take over this being is an implicit aspect of being it; Dasein, we recall, is "that entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 68). The fact of our existence frames an unrelenting questioning of how "we go along with life reflectively without unliving it?" (Kisiel, 1994, as cited in O'Byrne, 2010, p. 38):[30] It is no fun being a question, but life never promised to be a joyride, and it forces us, again and again, to a reckoning with the fact that—despite the impossibility of fully distinguishing ourselves from the world that we are both a part of and made up of, human life is one of individuation, and this question must be reckoned with.

In *Sickness unto Death* (1980a) Kierkegaard frames this question within the framework of possibility and necessity and the ever-present menace of despair. Leaving the second part out for now, the two fundamental forms of despair circle around a lack of and/or surplus of either necessity and possibility. Human life is described as an impossible balancing act between accepting the raw facticity with which we exist and the never-ending unfinished-ness of the same life. While people lacking necessity figure as free-floating entities without any firm grounding in the world, people lacking possibility are filled up with matters—making the thought that we, after all, live in only one of all possible worlds impossible to even fathom.

This brings us to the more future-oriented aspects of existence. For both Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers, future possibilities are not only out there—to be realized at some point in the future. Rather, these possibilities are an intricate part of our being. Heidegger (2008) speaks of this as Dasein's

[30] In *The Life of the Mind* (1976) Hannah Arendt, quotes the following lines from Etienne Gilson: "A man of seventy-five should have many things to say about his past, but… if he has lived only as a philosopher, he immediately realizes that he has no past" (p. 43). In no way does this prevent her from, later on, quoting Aristotle: "One should either philosophize or take one's leave of life and go away from here" (p. 134).

"Being-ahead-of-itself:" "Dasein is always 'beyond itself' ["uber sich hinaus"], not as a way of behaving toward other entities which it is *not*, but as Being towards the potentiality-for-Being which it is itself" (p. 236). According to Jaspers (1970), "There is thus no totality of what I am" (p. 33). As Existenz or Dasein, I *am* the possibilities of becoming until the day I am no more. Human beings exist with an ontological openness, and existence is a call that we can only respond to in one way or another. The responses that are our lives will never make up a final answer that will bring us safeguarded over the finish-line. "To complete life itself is to us an absurd notion" (Jaspers, 1970, p. 200).

Heidegger (2008) still argues that to grasp "Dasein in its possibilities of authenticity and totality" (p. 276), we need to account for the fact that this future is finite and that this finitude is not sufficiently captured through the notion of "the end of life. That is, we are brought to finitude in the shape of what it means to *live in relation to death*. Heidegger (2008) begins his infamous death analysis by pointing out that death, in one way, is the end of Dasein: "When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its "there" (p. 281). Death has no *there*; it is no*where*, which brings Heidegger to the conclusion that if death is to have an existential significance, it must be part of this life. In this perspective, death—understood as being-towards-death, becomes indistinguishable from life itself; we fade out of life in and through our fading into it. The not-yet, which is death, "belongs to Dasein as long as it is" (p. 284). It is not death as "perishing" (*Verenden*) that carries this immense existential weight; that we share with plants and animals alike. It is, rather, "proper dying" (*Sterben*) that is the key to the existential analytic:

> On the contrary, just as Dasein *is* already its "not-yet", and is its "not-yet" constantly as long as it is, it *is* already its end too. The "ending" which we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify Dasein's Being-at-an-end [Zu-Ende-sein], but a *Being-towards-the-end* [Sein *zum Ende*] of this entity. Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die. (p. 289)

Since death, existentially understood, "remains purely this-worldly," Being-towards-death as an individualizing moment is a key to becoming one's own. Proper dying is "in each case is mine," and Heidegger's "full existential-ontological conception of death" reads as follows: "*death, as the end of*

Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility—non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped (p. 303).[31]

Being-towards-death is the key for Heidegger's existential analytic and has spread like fire through the many writings of death in the twentieth century. I have argued elsewhere (Sköld, 2020a) that the resoluteness of this analysis has made its mark on and transmuted through areas of existential, humanistic, and positive psychotherapy and all the way to the Carpe Diem-memorandums of our refrigerator magnets. Confrontation with finitude, we are informed hereby, can spur the intensity of our lives and make us grasp existence in all its vividness. The fundamental impossibility that Heidegger installs, namely that of dying the death of the other, gives me, the survivor, a free ride to a better life. Chapter 4 engages further in these questions in dialogue with the interview material. What kind of confrontation with death does grief provide? Does it alter our views on finitude? And given the intertwinement of human life, can the "mineness" of death be upheld?

So far, we have investigated life and subjectivity from a psychoanalytical and existential-phenomenological perspective. I have outlined how relationality and finitude are related to one another in various ways by showing, first, how the precariousness of our birth and arrival into a historical world makes others an integral part of who we are. From that starting point, I have sketched the development of personhood as one that parts from yet stays related to its relational origins. Existence is a constant pending between belonging and solitude, and in both perspectives, this is a task that can only succeed to a certain degree. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will outline Martin Hägglund's thinking of finitude, where the same dialectic comes with a slightly different tenor.

2.6 Being Mortal

Hägglund's thinking on finitude has its origins in Derrida's differential logic. As was the case with psychoanalysis, this empirically orientated dissertation does not allow a comprehensive exploration of the deconstructive conceptual apparatus, and the reader will have to do with a brief introduction. Following

[31] A further elucidation of this definition would occupy the reminder of this chapter. I refer the reader to Chapter 4 where I elucidate Heidegger's notion of Being-with the dead (*Mitsein mit dem Toten*) and critically discuss his distinctions between proper dying (*Sterben*) and perishing (*Verenden*) in light of Freud and Derrida.

Hägglund's reading's in *Radical Atheism—Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008) and *Dying for Time—Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (2012), I will point to some of the determining features underlying the major arguments in his latest work, *This Life—Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (2019). Through the notions of secular faith and spiritual freedom, I will strengthen the inexorable relation between relationality and finitude and the constitutive vulnerability that grief exhibits. In light of Hägglund's analysis, we will reach the rock bottom of Butler's account of grievability: *why* the prospect of loss is and must be inscribed in everything that we become attached to.

In *Radical Atheism* (2008), Hägglund reads Derrida against Husserl, Levinas, and Caputo, arguing that the finite core of Derrida's philosophy renders any "living presence" (Husserl), "infinite other" (Levinas), or messianic reading of Derrida (Caputo) excluded from the start. A similar trajectory is followed in *Dying for Time* (2012), where Hägglund argues that a form of transient temporality can be found in the modern novel. Instead of aspiring to transcend time, the works of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov testify to a finite and mortal struggle for living on.

Différance (with an 'a'), which in French connotes both "difference" and "deferral," is generally celebrated as a fundamental facet of Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence. While Derrida admits that any word and any language remains metaphysical ("There is no outside-text" as the often-quoted lines from *Of Grammatology* (1976) reads), *différance* ought to function as an inescapable reminder of the impossibility of any "unique name, even if it were the name of Being" (Derrida, 1982 p. 27). *Différance* connotes the movement that sets any process of becoming in motion through the co-temporality of temporalization and spatialization:

> In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as an "originary" and irreducibly nonsimple synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions […] that I propose to call arche-writing, arche-trace, or *différance*." (Derrida, 1982, p. 13)

Following the deconstructive logic of *différance*, whatever comes to be, vanishes in and through *the very moment* of its becoming. On the one hand, for anything to be, it must be inscribed in time since, without time, there would be nothing but an eternal now where nothing could occur. On the other hand, spatiality is an equally necessary condition since, without a spatial inscription, nothing could remain over time. Through his use of "spacing" (*espacement)*,

Derrida enunciates a logical co-implication of spatialization and temporalization, and the key concept to understand how this movement is important for our understanding of finitude, is "the trace" (*trace*):

> Given that every temporal moment immediately ceases to be, it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The spatiality of the trace is thus the condition for the duration of time, since it enables the past to be retained for the future. The very concept of duration presupposes that something remains across time and only that which is spatial can remain. The spatiality of the trace, however, is itself temporal. Without temporalization it would be impossible for a trace to remain across time and retain the past for the future. Accordingly, the duration of the trace cannot be exempt from the negativity of time. The trace enables the past to survive, but it can do so only through the exposure to a future that gives it both the chance to remain and to be effaced. The tracing of time that makes it *possible* for life to survive makes it *impossible* for life to be given or protected in itself. (Hägglund, 2012 p. 16)

The trace plays an important part *Specters of Marx* (1993/2006) where Derrida likewise introduces the notion of *hauntology*, pointing to how every now is haunted by its past and how this spectral notion determines historical existence through and through. Even though Derrida's explicit focus in the book is the way Marx and Marxism haunt both philosophy and the realm of politics, it can and has been seen as a more general dynamic of time. This crystallization of the moment is "not to render it eternal but to record it so that it may live on in time" (Hägglund, 2012, p. 57). In other words, the fact that the trace is necessarily spatial does not make it eternal and safeguarded from the duration of time. *Which* traces that are kept alive for the future is partly a question of how we respond to the historical predicament of being born and becoming who we are in a world that is already old, and "in which we have, at best, limited control" (Lear, 2018, p. 21). In a structure that resembles Freudian "afterwardsness" (*Nachträglichkeit*), nothing is stored securely on the selves of history; everything has the potential (and tendency) to return in the most unexpectable circumstances. While Freud sought to point out how the psychical effects of traumas are often deferred and altered depending on the course of our lives, Derrida's hauntology opens up for an understanding of sociality that transcends the border between the living and the dead.

* * *

In this way, Hägglund identifies the a priori conditions of life, love, and desire as temporal, that is, as mortal. *Per definition*, life is mortal. There is no life without its inherent negation, which is what Hägglund points to as the "auto-immunity of life." Life is mortal, and everything that we do is likewise exposed to the risk of failing and, in the end, dying.

> There can be no cure for autoimmunity since life is essentially mortal. From the definition of life as *essentially* mortal, it follows that immortality is death. To live is to be mortal, which means that the opposite of being mortal—to be immortal—is to be dead. If one can no longer die, one is already dead." (Hägglund, 2008, p. 50)

The critique of religion that Hägglund launches is immanent in the sense that it seeks to exhibit the inner temporal contradictions of otherworldly longings. The drive for immortality is, Hägglund argues, a struggle for a continuation of this life, a struggle for living on, for *more life*. In Jaspers's (1970) words: "I want this life; without it I do not exist" (p. 29). That we are attached to "this life" does not exclude radical turns, nor does it make us less responsible for the way in which we conduct our lives, but it does mean that "wants to live on as mortal[s]" (Hägglund, 2012, p. 5).

The important question that Hägglund can help us answer is where we left Butler, that is, with a vulnerable, precarious, and grievable life as a condition for being human. Hägglund's mortal logic can help us appreciate the motivational force that springs from vulnerability. The question remains: w*hy* is it that we should care in the first place? In Hägglund's perspective, the answer is not unrelated to grief, which is installed as a relational a priori where the risk of the other dying, betrayal, or failure remains an inescapable *always already* throughout any relationship. By grounding vulnerability in a deconstructive logic of time, we can thus shed light on the origins of this care, and conversely, of grief. If life would be positioned outside the temporal logic of *différance*, if life would repose in a timeless presence that was not exposed temporalization and spatialization, it would not *be*, at all. "There must be exposition to an unpredictable future; there must be finitude and vulnerability, there must be openness to whatever or whoever comes" (Hägglund, 2008, p. 31). Without the risk of losing, there would be no care, attachments or love.

In *Dying for Time*, Hägglund identifies the dialectic between love and loss through the terms of "chronophilia" and "chronophobia"; how our love (*philia*) for what it temporal (*chrono*) is inseparable from our fear of losing it (*phobia*). The double bind that Hägglund identifies makes any attachment and, therefore, any relationship dependent on negativity and effort alike.

Because nothing is given and survives without effort, it is always at risk of being lost. The important point is that this risk is the condition of possibility for care and love in the first place. Without my *effort* to sustain the life that I lead, without continued effort to keep this particular trace alive, it will shatter and die. This installs an active moment at the heart of any love. Despite any initial *falling in love*, any sustenance of this love will be a question of effort and activity.

It is a central point in Hägglund's thinking that as long as I am "invested" in life and survival, I *cannot not care*—that everything is at stake in what we do, and that for temporal beings, there never was anywhere to hide and "never time to wait" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 369). Since we are always already among the others, always already bound to the other, we cannot but care. He is well aware of the violence and hate that goes for much of human relationality. But any forms of negativity, any hate, presupposes a binding in the first place. Any nihilism is a priori excluded since:

> The constitutive investment in survival designates the impossibility of being indifferent to survival. Such a constitutive investment, I argue, follows from the necessity of binding. Because one is always already bound (as a condition for experiencing anything at all), one is always already invested. (Hägglund, 2012, p, s. 13)

Since what I am invested in and bound to is mortal and temporal finitude is the source of everything we desire, this binding will be necessarily ambivalent. But this ambivalence does not have its origin in a disappointment over an absent divine resolution. This binding paves the ground for both "acknowledgment and denial, compassion and aggression, vital change and deadening repetition" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 143), the point being that we cannot get the one without the other. Whoever or whatever we devote our lives to will never be perfect or make up the answer to all our questions. This "lack" is then nothing that we seek to overcome but a non-fulfillment that is on the side of life. "I am never more haunted by the necessity of dying than in moments of happiness and joy" as Derrida (2005, pp. 51-52), puts it in his last interview. Our love of life and each other is sparkled by an unyielding finitude, without which it could not persist. In his most normative book to date, *This Life*, Hägglund introduces the concepts of "secular faith" and "spiritual freedom" to further unfold this mortal logic, which we turn to in the next section.

2.7 Being Free

"This is it," Hägglund writes in *Dying for Time* (2012); "the bond to mortal life is the condition for everything we desire and everything we fear" (p. 145). What Hägglund's argument adds to Jaspers's already quoted lines "I want this life. Without I do not exist" is to establish the connection between "I want this life" and "I exist." In *This Life* (2019), he develops the thought that my existence as a person is rooted in my commitment to, namely, this life. *I* am indistinguishable from what *I do*, and since no action takes place in a social vacuum, I am indistinguishable from the people with whom I spend my life together and the society in which I live. As a continuation of the project launched in *Radical Atheism*, to read the religious vocabulary from within and show that its conceptual apparatus has root in mortal life, he now introduces the concept of *secular faith*. Secular faith is inextricable from spiritual freedom, which is as close to a definition of the human as we can find in Hägglund's writings.

It is clear from the beginning that "secular faith has nothing to do with religious revelation or mystical intuition." On the contrary, Hägglund (2019) argues that it "is inherent in the structure of a normative commitment. I must keep faith with my commitment as normative—as something to which I am bound—since it lives only in and through me" (p. 197). I will never reach safe ground nor be able to *settle down*, but I am bound to a constant struggle of withholding my bond to the world and the other. "*As long as you keep secular faith, you can be defeated by loss* […] Such vulnerability is the condition for any form of responsiveness to—and responsibility for—what happens to the one you love." (p. 134). This faith is thus not a question of delegating responsibility to a higher deity but the condition whereby things acquire value in the first place; "I call it secular *faith*, since the object of devotion does not exist independently of those who believe in its importance and who keep it alive through their fidelity" (p. 7).

Having faith in another human being though actualizes some peculiar issues that make it different from having faith in the world. A partner relationship is a form of a love relationship, according to some, the prototype of all love relationships. Both Lear and Hägglund relate their discussion of love and faith to Marcel Proust's *Á la recherche du temps perdu*. For Lear (1990), the narrator's constant ruminations about whether Albertine loves him or not serve only as an archetypal model for endless neurotic questioning. What this questioning hides, Lear suggests, is the more primordial question of whether he, the narrator, actually has the ability and will to love another person. Hägglund argues the more obvious, namely that there is nowhere to

hide from the notorious uncertainty whether one is loved back or not. In other words, it is a question of faith; "Even in the most intimate relation, you have to believe in something that is never certain—namely that the other person loves you" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 72). In a Kierkegaardian move, Hägglund argues that part of what it is to love is to believe in the love of the other. There is a "necessary uncertainty" that comes together with and serves both to determine the "existential commitment" and drive the "motivational force," (p. 129) making up the complex of secular faith.

Does this constant risk of failure and betrayal require that we take necessary precautions and always commit to a more waterproof back-up plan if things would not go as planned? According to Hägglund, the answer is negative. Marrying is, indeed, "not a religious devotion to a timeless eternity" but a paradigmatic example of a "secular devotion to living in time". "We" establish "us," and this promise is only "eternal in the secular sense" (p. 131). It is not eternal because it will live on forever or cannot be threatened by internal or external forces, but because it requires *wholeheartedness*.[32] What will happen upon making the vows is a question that is up to the couple to respond to:

> In making the life-defining commitment of marriage, I acknowledge that *who I am* and *what matters to me* is defined by my love for you. By the same token, who I am and what matters to me is dependent on what happens to us, exposed to a future that exceeds my control. (p. 134)

We are now approaching the core of *This Life*; namely, that who I am will be determined by my commitment and, accordingly, my actions. Committing myself to a shared life in partnerhood will affect what I do with my time and thereby alter who I am. Consequently, losing this life sphere through my partner's death will alter who I am. That we die a little with every person known to us who leave this world behind is testified to by Hägglund (2019) in his reading of Kierkegaard:

> [The self] in Kierkegaard's existential sense—is defined by *what* we are committed to as well as *how* we sustain those commitments. This is why our self can live in more than a biological sense, but also why it can "die" before our biological death. If you fail to sustain a life-defining commitment—or have to give it up because it has become

[32] See Alain Badiou's *In Praise of Love* (2012) for a similar reading of the "eternity" of love.

> unsustainable—you suffer existential death of your self, even though your life continues. (p. 131)

What does it mean to "suffer existential death?" While "social death" is frequently discussed within the field of thanatology (Králova, 2015), "existential death" is rarely discussed. In Hägglund's sense, it refers to the loss of binding, the lack of capacity to claim responsibility for the commitments that, in the final end, make me who I am. To fully appreciate this line of thought, we need to outline the notion of "existential identity" that is a key feature of spiritual freedom.

* * *

Hägglund introduces his notion of spiritual freedom in the second part of *This Life*, beginning with delineating it toward natural freedom. While the forms of freedom governing the animal world might comprise "normative-based behavior" and "purposive activity that can become very much advanced," it lacks the "ability to ask which imperatives to follow in light of our ends, as well as the ability to call into question, challenge, and transform our ends themselves" (p. 175). What we do and how we do it determines who we are, and that we are free in a spiritual sense of calling ourselves into question is the precondition for this.

Two misunderstandings should be rejected from the beginning. This form of freedom does not mean that individuals are free-floating subjects distanced from the society and social world we are part of. Indeed, the bulk of the second part of *This Life* consist of a rereading of Marx and Hegel in light of finitude, and already before that, Hägglund notes that "*how* we change our self-understanding, therefore, depends on the social practices and institutions that shape the ability to lead our lives" (p. 176). As we have seen throughout this chapter, the world that we are part of is a historical world that is always already there, and no society has, until this day, managed to produce ready-made adults. While spiritual freedom undoubtedly figures as an ideal form of human existence in Hägglund's perspective, not all societies—and certainly not capitalist ones, make this grasping of our finite time a real (*Wirklich*) possibility. In and through my spiritual freedom (or lack thereof), then, I will always testify to the world in which I became who I am and the people that populated this world.

How I testify is, on the other hand, a question that (ideally at least) increasingly becomes my concern. The first trait of spiritual freedom is that the purposes of life are treated as normative rather than as natural.

> As a spiritual being, I am acting not simply for the sake of preserving my life or the life of my species but for the sake of *who I take myself to be*. Who I take myself to be is a practical identity because it requires that I keep faith with a commitment. (p. 187)

Survival *per se* never defined a human life. We live in a *certain* way because *how* we live matters to us and there are, indeed, situations where dying is preferable to survival. Accordingly, instead of just "*living* my life I am also *leading* my life" (p. 188). My objectives, goals, and aspirations are always plentiful, and so are, accordingly, my different *practical identities*, and life demands a constant negotiation of the often incompatible respective demands of these identities. During the time of writing this dissertation, this makes up an important practical identity of mine since this is what I devote much of my time to. This does not exclude my identity as a father, brother, husband, friend, and sportsman, but since my time is always limited, it demands that I decide about how to prioritize my time; how to *lead my life*. Hägglund (2019) refers to this necessary nexus of all practical identities as my *existential identity*.

> A person's existential identity consists of prioritizing her practical identities and responding to conflicts between their respective demands. There must be a principle of unity […] that renders my practical identities intelligible as *mine* and gives them an order of priority as *my life*. Without a principle of unity, I could not even experience a conflict or a contradiction between two of my practical identities, since I would not be able to understand that both practical identities are *mine*. (p. 188)

I *am* an attempt to balance the various different commitments that make up my life. How this is done differs from life to life, but every person has a sense of consistency that runs through the various occupations and commitments that she undertakes. This is what Hägglund refers to as an existential identity, which cannot be entirely identical with the sum of one's practical identities. On the other hand, my existential identity is nothing without my practical identities. When losing a person with whom I shared a life, a large and very important practical identity will die, but without an existential identity, this could not be an issue for *me*.

We can understand what it means to suffer a loss of a practical identity through the second trait of spiritual freedom that Hägglund identifies, that is, the ability to have a negative self-relation. In opposition to Kristine Korsgaard (1996), who holds that failures to live up to practical identities amount to the

person being "dead or perhaps worse than dead" (p. 102), Hägglund (2019) holds that "being a failed person is still being a person" (p. 190). He is not arguing that there are objective criteria for how life ought to be carried out, and failure of doing so would somehow make one into a "failed person." Even though "betraying my integrity may in some cases be a fate worse than death, it is *not* the same as death" (p.190). I can never exclude the possibility that I would fail in all the aspirations mentioned above. In my case, it is never excluded that I will fail to be the good-enough parent that I aspire to be, nor that I will manage to submit a dissertation that lives up to the standard of myself and others. "When I experience the pain of failing to be myself," Hägglund writes, it is "*because I am still alive and trying to lead my life*" (p. 190). And I can only fail at what I do for as long as these commitments mean something, and they can only mean *something* for *someone*.

The final trait in Hägglund's definition of spiritual freedom is the ability to ask myself what to do with my time "since what I do with my time is what I do with my life" (p. 191). On the one hand, I have a surplus of time since it is not given a priori what I should do with it. On the other hand, this will always be too short, death will always come too early, and in between these constituents, we find human existence. According to Hägglund, the possibility of tragic loss is built into the very logic of life: holding that both your life and my life is too short is part of us being spiritual free beings. The anxiety that colors existence from the start springs from the fact that death might come at any moment and that it is not given how this time should be spent and together with whom.

> This same precarious dynamic holds for all life-defining commitments. Because it is not given what we should do or who we should be, there is always a question of with whom and with what we should keep faith. These questions— "Who should I be?" "Whom should I love" "With what should I keep faith?"—concern our spiritual freedom. (p. 198)

Time and what I do with it only matter in so far as it might end, in so far as it is structurally uncertain for how long it will go on and what it might bring. This question, of how I should lead my life, to whom and what I should devote it is, Hägglund argues, "fundamentally a question of valuing" (p. 219):

> To value something, I have to be prepared to give it at least a fraction of my time. This is why finite lifetime is the originary measure of value. The more I value something, the more of my lifetime I am willing to spend on it. If someone or something is invaluable to me, I may even be willing to give up my life—all my lifetime—for its sake. (p. 220)

Reading the quotation above might give the impression of a quantitively measured concept of valuing; for example, the more time spent, the higher the value. Hägglund immediately disregards this reading with reference to a love relationship, which "does not become more valuable merely because we spend many years working on it." Rather, "in the realm of freedom, the value of our relationship is a matter of our commitment to one another and the life we share." (p. 224). While the value of the other and our relationship requires time, there is no casual relation between the time given and the value of it. What is important is that when we give our time, we put ourselves *at stake*. With reference to Marx's concept of composing (*komponieren*), Hägglund writes that "*who* we are is inseparable from *what* we do and *how* we do it."[33] The question of who I am can only be answered with reference to the life I lead. *This is it*, one ought to say—pointing at the hours, weeks, and years spent doing whatever it is one does. This is my life.

In his reading of Karl-Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, Hägglund (2019) identifies the credo of these series of books to be to "focus the gaze" (*at feste blikket*) and relate this to the notion of "owning one's life." To own one's life does not mean that one is sovereign and independent of others.

> On the contrary, to own your life is to expose yourself. Only someone who owns his life—only someone who makes his life depend on what he does and what he loves—can have the experience of it being taken away from him. (p. 94).

We come to own our lives by focusing our gaze. Life becomes "ours" when we bind ourselves to the other, which according to Hägglund, is the key to any notions of responsibility and ethics. "Only someone who is committed—only someone who is bound by something other than herself—can be responsible. Only someone who is committed can care. And only someone who is finite can be committed" (p, 170). Knausgaard's text is thus read as a "secular confession" since it seeks to counter nihilism through a whole-hearted commitment to finite life in all its forms. This confession is ethical in the sense that it makes it indisputably clear that *life means something* and that we have to attach ourselves to it "because without attachment there is no meaning: nothing to care for and no one who binds you to the world" (p. 96).

What should be clear by now is how, for Hägglund, "my very life is at stake in my finite relations" (Hägglund, p. 141). By virtue of spiritual freedom, "I am a person and not merely a living being" (p. 187). Being a

[33] Through these formulations, Hägglund comes close to Heidegger (2008), writing: "In that with which we concern ourselves environmentally the Others are encountered as what they are; they *are* what they do [sie *sind* das, was sie betreiben]" (p. 163).

person then is dependent on the life I lead and the relations that make up this life. In this way, Hägglund offers an additional contribution to rudiments of a social ontology of grief that I have identified in Butler, Lear, and Heidegger.

2.8 Being Us

The question of *what* a human being is cannot be answered without asking what it *means* to be a human being. Any account of who we are needs to be firmly immersed in the lives that we live. In other words, what it *is* to be is not *something* in the world that can be studied objectively, let alone described sufficiently in a third-person perspective. The human being is always *someone*, existing in time, immersed in a world of others. With a point of departure in psychoanalytical, existential-phenomenological, and deconstructive theory, and grief as an underlying referent, this chapter has developed a socio-ontological framework through a dialectics between relationality and finitude that could be schematized roughly in the following manner:

1. My existence is non-voluntary; I am born into a historical reality and given life before I have the mental capacities to will and desire.

2. Personhood is worldly and relational; I become a person through a process of libidinal investment (psychoanalysis), intentional directedness (phenomenology), or chronolibidinal binding (deconstruction), and reciprocal love relationships with the people who care for me.

3. Becoming a person amount to a gradual increase in responsibility for my existence; while dependent on social and political circumstances, the course of my life is an open question.

4. Who I am is indistinguishable from what I do with my time, and I become who I am by orchestrating the different commitments of my life in a certain manner.

5. All the commitments and relations that define me are finite and can be lost at any moment, and without this constant risk of failure and loss, the concept of value would evaporate.

While this line of thought has grown out successively over the previous three years, where I have been primarily occupied with grief, it does not seem to be not bound to partner bereavement as such. On the background of this existential structure, an almost limitless number of phenomena could be analyzed. That also means that it is little informative when it comes to understanding the life of partnerhood in general and the loss of a life partner in particular. They do, on the other hand, provide solid ground for why relationality and finitude are the coordinates for any human life, and accordingly, the sphere within which we should locate the predicaments of any type of loss. In other words, the field is now set for an empirical investigation of love (Chapter 3), death (Chapter 4), and grief (Chapter 5).

Chapter 3: Love

”It is good to rely upon others, because no one can bear this life alone.”

— Friedrich Hölderlin

How can we understand the life of partnerhood? What *is* partnerhood? First of all, partnerhood often implies living together.[34] As life partners, we share a life in some way. This chapter aims to investigate how this life can be understood in light of the bereaved. The often-repeated saying that it remains difficult to know what one has for as long as it is present is hereby turned into a methodological tool. The distance from this kind of life, a distance that the bereaved is experiencing continually, might enlighten us about some of the most significant aspects of this way of living and indirectly explain why this way of living remains widespread worldwide. In light of the previous chapter, my aim is not to argue that the nuclear family is a “natural” way of living that answers to the existential conditions to a larger extent than other life forms. The existential structure outlined above should be broad enough to encompass most forms of relational life. The ways whereby we might orchestrate our lives are numerous, and partnerhood is one of them. Again, I do not wish to put forward a normative argument *in favor* of partnerhood but merely investigate its existential relevance in order to understand grief.

It would be a fair suspicion that an account of partnerhood with a point of departure in loss and grief is inhibited by two severe limitations. First, one might suspect that the indisputably tragic outlook would exclude the bulks of positivity and joy that partnerhood comprises. The suspicion would be that the tormented grieving individual would be unable to see through the tears; he or she would be blinded by sadness. While I think that the boundary situation of grief does make up a *solemn* stance that confronts us with questions of death and finitude, I hope to show that this does not exclude positivity. A different line of suspicion would be that the perspective of the bereaved individual is one of idealization. That we ought not to speak badly of the dead (*De mortuis nihil nisi bonum*) is a saying as old as time, and in this light, we might expect that these interviews would bring nothing but fairy tales. Writing this *after* having conducted the three rounds of interviews, it does not seem to be the case. While profound testaments of love, gratitude,

[34] Without this being a specified inclusion criterion, all participants in this study had lived under the same roof.

and great respect for partners lost often figure, I am often struck by the uncensored and seemingly authentic accounts of a former life that was everything but eternal sunshine.

"Every durable marriage is based on fear," Charles Avery notes in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea.* Love, we must learn, is a weapon in the struggle *against* the world that humanity has fought for time eternal, a *response* to an uncanny universe in which we are nothing but strangers. While we might turn to each other, hoping to find solace, the underlying premise is that marriage is an act in *bad faith*. Alas, partnerhood would not be an *authentic* way of living together, and we would do better to grow up and face life in a different manner. Of course, given the inevitability of finitude, one might surely be inclined to think that fear of the grim reaper is very understandable and holding on to each other for as long as we can an equally reasonable response to the existential predicaments we are facing. And following the line of thought in the precious chapter, where love was seen as a key subjectivizing principle, inherent to the process of becoming a person; even a "cosmological principle" (Lear, 1990) that we always already find ourselves in, we could think of this as our natural habitat. While the philosophical machinery for handlining various forms of negativity is immense, contemporary philosophy often seems to have little to contribute on the subject of love (Marion, 2003/2008). While Badiou (2012) argues that "love is in crisis" due to a contemporary society unwilling to take the risks involved, the question of whether there was a time in history with a frictionless—let alone "natural"—relationship to love seems worthy of posing. Love, one might argue, is paradigmatic for the crisis humanity is facing simply by being *us*; this is where we are most at stake and with nowhere to hide (Sköld & Roald, 2020).

In the already mentioned introduction to *Love and Its Place in Nature* (1990), Lear notes that the awkwardness that comes with any discussion of love might be "a symptom that we are treading in intellectually threatening territory" (p. 28). Lear points out that whenever someone speaks of love in the psychoanalytic community, there is a tendency to ask, "But what about aggression?" In the case of partnerhood or marriage, the question that often seems to arise if the subject is brought on the table in a seemingly uncritical light is divorce. It is undoubtedly correct that a large portion of married couples divorce. In Denmark, roughly 50% of all marriages face this destiny, and while the number globally is slightly smaller, around 40-50% of the world's couples divorce. The implicit assumption with raising this issue seems to be that it would be an argument *against* partnerhood generally and the institution of marriage specifically. This presumption overlooks that many of the people behind these statistics hurry to find a new partner and engage in

another relationship. Following Merriam-Webster's definition of a partner as "a person with whom one shares an intimate relationship: one member of a couple", around 65% of the adult Danish population live their lives in this way (Statistics Denmark, 2021), and the question we are confronting here is *why*? Given that (1) partnerhood, like many other human phenomena, cannot be *exhaustively* explained by evolutionary models aiming for the prolongation of our species and (2) a wide variety of culturally available ways of being together are less stigmatized today than at any other time in history, why is it that such a significant share of the world's population engages in partnerhood? My inquiry in this chapter is fueled by a suspicion that evolutionary theory, attachment theory, and discourse theory fail to capture the core of partnerhood. I suspect that *who we are* is at stake here, and accordingly, we need a socio-ontology of partnerhood.

I will begin in section 3.1 with a discussion of the exclusiveness of love and, accordingly, the irreplaceability that we encounter as bereaved. This will bring us to a more fundamental question of otherness and the distinction between self and other. Section 3.2 contains a lengthy discussion of the gaze from three different angles: how the gaze of the other functions as an emancipator, an important aspect of a life witness, and provides an arena for imperfection. Section 3.3 on we-ness scrutinizes what defines the "we" of partnerhood and answers by outlining distinct but interrelated themes of safety/comfort, care, decision-making, and joy. In 3.4, I analyze further the particulars of everyday life and outlines how partnerhood is "made up" of shared activities, sleeping, eating, and talking together. Section 3.5 on home turns to the meaning of sharing a domestic setting, of having and sharing a home, before concluding in 3.6 by conceptualizing what it might mean to grow old together. All in all, I hope that this chapter will provide a comprehensive view of partnerhood, of what it might mean to share life with another person.

3.1 The One

"*But I need Oscar, I need Oscar to be here,*" Nina says after having confronted herself with the experience of being "*alone every night*." "*Suddenly, there is no one you can turn to whenever you need,*" she says, continuing: "*and it's not the same to call you mother or friend… You cannot replace what has been lost.*" Despite the fact that others—her mother and friends in this case—are of great value, they are not Oscar. And at this point, during our first interview, she wants *him*. No one else. Although this study only accidentally has focused

on the bereaved's social environment, it is undoubtedly hard work to be close to a bereaved person. Being supportive to the bereaved person is to be constantly reminded that one is not the right one; that one is not him or her who is dead. Qualifying this irreducible singularity that is a hallmark of our relational life will be an important feature of the argument why grief is not merely a psychological process that can be worked through, reaching some kind of final resolution. There seem to be no resolution because, as Nina puts it, *"You cannot replace what has been lost.*"

On several levels, this is obviously false. Other people still carry immense value, and their support is still greatly appreciated. The important issue, which still makes Nina's statement canonical, is that these others will remain, namely, *others*. Their potential functional similarity does not imply that one takes the place of the other. How can we understand this irreplaceability? Brinkmann (2018a) argues that grief exhibits the singularity of personhood and that articulating the ontological aspects of bereavement is, therefore, necessary. By focusing on the psychological consequences that the loss has for the bereaved person, grief research has overshadowed the otherness of the other.

> Grief is not just about the fact that *I lose someone*, but also about the more fundamental fact that *someone does no longer exist*. One may say that I do not grieve my loss, as if the death of the other were reducible to my response in bereavement. Rather, I grieve the fact that the other has perished. (Brinkmann, 2018a, p. 182)

"I grieve the fact that the other has perished." And this other cannot be replaced. Referring to what Mammen and Mironenko (2015) refer to as "the sense for the concrete," Brinkmann understands this along the lines of *numerical identity*.[35] Despite the fact that two people would be identical, "molecule-by-molecule," they would have had, Brinkmann (2018a) argues, "a different trajectory through time and space" (p. 182), and thus, *be* different. When Nina wants Oscar and no one else, she wants her Oscar, the Oscar who was part of *their life*.

In this perspective, grief is not about *me*. Grief, like love, "takes us out of ourselves, freeing ourselves from excessive self-concern and narcissism" (Jollimore, 2011, p. 149). In the often-quoted words of Iris Murdoch (1997), love is "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (p. 215). Love is the driving force not only to unite and extinguish all differences but to demarcate and acknowledge the very

[35] In Sköld & Brinkmann (Accepted/In press), this line of thought is developed further.

existence of the other. From a psychological perspective, one might object and say that grief is always also about me since, without a bereaved, there would be no grief. The point is, though, that grief *concerns* the other, and the question that we need to ask is what it means to relate to the other.

Within contemporary philosophy, "the other" has received an almost mystical status, which has led Bernhard Waldenfels (2011), among others, to talk about a "divinization of the other" (p. 4). When speaking of the other, reference is often made to Levinas and his notion of the face.[36] In *Totality and Infinity* (1961/1991), Levinas argues that we encounter the other not as a presence but as a fleeing absence, a trace sensed through the encounter with *the face*. The other is concealed, and the face indicates an infinite otherness that is hidden beneath the appearance. On this background, Levinas argues that the other is "beyond being," that the meeting is pre-ontological in the sense that the other comes into being throughout this inherently ethical encounter. What the face exhibits is a call for responsibility, and in this way, Levinas speaks of ethics as "first philosophy."

Derrida discusses Levinas's notion of the other in *Violence and Metaphysics* (2001a) arguing that since the other is always encountered as a body *and* through language, he or she will always, to a certain extent, be reduced to "the same as I." "A necessity due to the finitude of meaning: the other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I" (p. 159). Levinas's critique of Husserl's reduction of the other to "an alter ego," which is reiterated in Brinkmann's (2018) critique of Fuchs's (2018) and Ratcliffe's (2017) phenomenological accounts of grief, overlooks that there never was any "pure otherness." Recognition and responsibility come to the fore only after a certain reduction, after I have perceived the other as "someone like me." Throughout this turn against the other, which always involves language, this other is no longer "wholly other" (*tout autre*) (Derrida, 1999/2008). He or she is *my* other, and only insofar as we are alike can I allow the other to be different, to "stand in herself" (*staae ene*), to borrow Kierkegaard's definition of "the greatest benefaction" (*den højeste Velgjerning*) in *Works of Love* (2009b, p. 255) In that particular book, this discussion is framed in relation to romantic and neighbor love. Neighbor love can be seen as one way of conceptualizing love for the other's alterity and are, according to Kierkegaard, still a necessary criterium if love is not to be reduced to self-love.

[36] Brinkmann (2018a) also does this when writing that "we must therefore not reduce the other to my representation of him or her—and this includes the other in his or her absence after death. The reality of the other simply surpasses any image I may form of him or her (cf. iconoclasm). This, in a nutshell, is Lévinas' great contribution to phenomenology" (p. 182).

Despite the "duty" to love the *other*, I think that it is safe to say—also within the Kierkegaardian corpus, that "non-appraisive love remains foreign to human nature" (Singers, 2009c, p. 369). In relating to the other human being, we do so from *a certain perspective*, and as I will argue further on, this is not the exclusion of, but the precondition for a loving gaze. According to Derrida, this minimal violence that is uprooted through my turn toward the other is likewise necessary "because if one does not uproot the silent origin from itself violently, if one decides not to speak, then the worst violence will silently cohabit the *idea* of peace […] One never escapes the *economy of war*" (2001ba p. 185). It seems equally necessary to acknowledge that love always encompasses an acceptance of the impossibility of reaching the other's core *and* the fact that there is always *someone* doing the loving. "The preoccupation with absolute otherness," Anthony Steinbock (2014) writes, is at risk of becoming a "fetish and expression of self-hatred" (p. 50), and love will always point in two directions, toward the other and toward myself. Perhaps what is most interesting, is not on which side of self and other that love it should be positioned, but how it problematizes this very distinction.

* * *

Judith testifies to the bodily aspects of relational singularity when describing her and Jacob's silver wedding anniversary. Their friends had arranged a game in which she, with her eyes covered, was given the task of recognizing her husband among several similar-looking men. She could feel their arms, but that was it. "*I was never in doubt,*" she says. This sequence is part of another story concerning her new relationship with Samuel:

> *When I feel his [Samuels's] arms, I sometimes think, "Hmm, no, it's not quite it. It's weird, but it's not!" It's that feeling you know: argghhhh, right? And Samuel has a nice pair of arms as well, so that's not the problem. It's just not the same.*

It's just not the same. "One cannot love generally; when we love, we love some particular persons rather than others" (Jollimore, 2011, p. 171). In Judith's case, being confronted with someone else, Samuel, brings to the fore that comparisons are out of the question. Here he is, Samuel, but he remains an other. In circumstances of great intimacy and close bodily contact, this experience is deeply perplexing. Judith sometimes feels ashamed. She tells me, "*It's not Samuel's fault*." Rightly, Samuel can certainly not help that he is not Jacob. He just *is not* Jacob, and there is nothing anyone can do to change this fact. Any partner who comes *after* another will have to live with the fact

that the person one enters a relationship with has belonged to someone else. There is no way of eradicating this, the sedimentation of the lost objects that make up our relational history. The one I love became this person through relationships with others, no matter how short and seemingly insignificant they have been. I this light, learning to know another person is always to learn to know a series of others, *peopled* by others as we all are. Tanya is very much aware of the complications that this might create concerning future relationships:

> *I do not expect to live alone for the rest of my life, but whoever it is that I might end up sharing my life with will have to accept that there is a history behind, a history that carries great importance. And that history will mean different things on different occasions, but it will always be there.*

In Derrida's perspective, this amounts to another aspect of the necessary violence at the heart of every relation. By loving you, I do choose to devote the limited time and attention that I have and hereby overlook all the others.[37] Monogamy rests on this exclusiveness, committing oneself to one among the many. Importantly, there are never enough *reasons* for this love (Frankfurt, 2004). Was I to compare you to all the others, with reference to any given criteria, others might prove to be a far better choice. But this does not at all change the fact that I do not love them. The beloved is, writes Roland Barthes (1977/2002), "unclassifiable, of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality" (p. 34). Bestowal, the ascribing of infinite value to another person, can help us comprehend this without thereby reducing the enigma of this process. We do not choose to fall in or begin to love, *it happens,* and suddenly we find ourselves trying to take the consequences of a life that always exceeds our initial preferences and plans.

In the previous chapter, the fact that we enter the world without a prior agreement regarding where, when, and with whom played an important part in the delineations of an existential structure of life that is not exempt from contingency. Even though I noted that growing up amounts to an increased share of control and responsibility since the process of becoming a person is an inherently normative matter, this does not seem to alter "the limitlessly

[37] In his reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843/1983) in *The Gift of Death* (1999/2008), Derrida put it in the following manner: "As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, command, love or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is to say by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I put to death, I betray and lie, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mont Moriah for that" (p. 69).

accidental character of all that happens" (Jaspers, 1970, p. 187), and the fact that the other enters the scene with an often incomparable intensity. Many writers (Alberoni, 1979/1983 Badiou, 2012; Barthes, 2002; Horvat, 2015) have accentuated the revolutionary aspects of love, the *falling*. There is a before and after the encounter with the person we love, and between these two different time zones is an abyss. I am not the same as I was before the meeting, and the anxiety associated with any love can be seen in the light that my ontological security is not given (May 1969). "My very life is at stake in my finite relations" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 141), and the next section will deal with the gaze and how being at stake is related to being with being seen, and, conversely, not being seen.

3.2 The Gaze

During my first interview with Nina, I ask her if she still loved Oscar, her deceased husband. Can one even love the dead? If so, how is that love different, if at all, from the love of the living? It takes Nina a while to comprehend the question, and she returns to it repeatedly in the course of our interviews. During this first interview, I am asking her to describe the love they had when Oscar was still alive:

> *N: It is difficult. I think that it has a lot to do with the comfort that he gave to me. He was very mild, and I liked the way he looked at me.*
> *A: How did he look at you?*
> *N: That's a good question… In his eyes, I could do anything I wanted to. Anything! "If you want to do it, then do it, Nina!"*[38]

Who Nina *was* and, indeed, *is*, has everything to do with her possibilities for action. These possibilities, she now tells me, were partly determined by how Oscar saw her. In a way, his gaze was constitutive for who she was. Like the rest of us, Nina is not encountered as a finished human being who can be observed neutrally from an objective point of view. "That's just how she is like" might be a valid description of a person, drawing on my experience and our relational history. But that does not change the fact that we are "never finished" (O'Byrne, 2010, p. 8) and that "subjectivity is a never-ending task" (Lear, 2006, p. 42). The other as a possibility is always *more*—more than herself and certainly more than what I can comprehend.

[38] In quotations from the interviews that involve dialogue, I refer to the interviewees' utterances by the by their first letter. "A" refers to my utterances.

During the first round of interviews, it became increasingly clear that what was "missing" after their partner's death was not only the other's mere existence nor the role the other played in my life but the other's gaze and what this gaze did to the interviewees. They missed being seen. This section will present a reading of the loving gaze as both an epistemologically and morally privileged phenomenon (Jollimore, 2011). I will address the issues touched on above in the quote from Nina, that is, how we are set free by the other's gaze. Further, I will exhibit how the gaze of the other functions as stabilizing for who we are. While having possibility is, in Kierkegaard's (1980a) viewpoint, the only "saving remedy" from despair, we are never mere possibility. With a sense of coherence and persistency over time, being *someone* is secured by one's life witnesses. Thus, the other's gaze opens up for a deeper understanding of otherness and relationality alike.

Setting Free

> The love of a person is an opening to the person as given in his or her uniqueness. In loving as in trusting, I am immediately beyond myself without trying to go outside of myself. Loving is the process of living in the radiance that we call the person. Loving can be characterized as letting the other become such that he or she "can" realize him- or herself. This can be understood as an openness to possibilities that are not given outside of that loving and that lie in the direction of the becoming-being of the person. In this way, *the person is revealed in and through the movement of loving* [Emphasis added] (Steinbock, 2014, p. 227)

What does it mean to realize or become oneself? Following the interpersonal logic through which we become persons, encountered in Chapter 2, it will never refer to being independent and self-sufficient. In a psychoanalytical, phenomenological, and deconstructive perspective, any atomistic notion of the self would be a misconceived notion of what it means to be a person. Partnerhood is often accused of limiting our freedom. Because I am obliged to this partner, I *cannot* do this or that—my range of action is not as broad as it could be without this partner. The discrepancy between the fact that "individual freedom" has played an enormous role in most notions of the good life for generations and the fact that partnerhood is still the most common way of living among adults worldwide seem somewhat peculiar in this perspective. Rather than concluding that we, for whatever reason, are inclined to lives that are unfree, we should question what freedom means in this context and investigate more thoroughly how it relates to partnerhood.

Asking Mary about what she saw as the most important aspect of her relationship with Conrad, she immediately answers:

> *Absolutely and without any doubt the fact that we managed to set each other free. There were no boundaries in the sense that we ought to live up to this or that criteria. It was freedom! I cannot find any other word.*

Their marriage had been countered by Conrad's increasing alcohol problem, and accordingly, certainly not been without great sacrifices on Mary's account. Throughout the years, she has struggled to convince her children that what she had together with her Conrad was based on a choice that she had made; it was *her* choice. Talking about their economic problems that were not unrelated to Conrad's excessive drinking, she says that *"when my girls made me aware of it, I had to tell them that this is my life; it's not your life. I have chosen Conrad, which means that I will have to live through these things. And so, I did."* A relationship that from the outside easily could be viewed as one much burdened is still described along the lines of freedom.

Sometimes Mary asks herself whether she should have been more intrusive and played a more active role in keeping Conrad from drinking. Like most bereaved persons, she asks herself if she was "good enough," whether she actually has been the person she aspired to be. In this context, it seems clear to her that the demarcation line safeguarding who she and Conrad were as a couple made her hesitant to go further in this regard. Even though that decision can be discussed after Conrad's death, there will only be *one* perspective from *within* that relationship, and that perspective is Mary's. This perspective will be substantially different from that of others, say, of her children or, for that sake, me as an interviewer trying to understand what was going on. The possibilities that Conrad brought into her life "are not given outside of that loving" (Steinbock, 2014, p. 227). Mary was *revealed* in and through their relationship and the gaze that Conrad provided. The discussion about what would be in Mary's best interest to do or not to do takes place at a different level since *being Mary* is partly determined by her possibilities for action, accordingly, her being together with and sharing life with Conrad. The levels of being and action are necessarily intertwined. The point here is to point out that to understand why she has acted in a particular manner, we need to consider the incommensurability of her relationship with Conrad. As we shall see in Chapter 5, this has a significant impact on the meaning of grief and forms some fundamental limitations on the extent of how the experience of bereavement can be shared.

* * *

Returning to Nina now, beginning with the statement of being able to do "everything" while being in a relationship with Oscar and her corresponding incapability of "*doing anything*" when we meet for the first interview. *"It's a struggle, every day; the most basic things seem outright impossible… It's, you know… it's an immense emptiness. My whole frame of reference is blown into thin air.*" Nina misses being the "star" she was in the eyes of Oscar:

> *N: I miss being the one… or I miss the fact that I was a star in his eyes. To have someone who simply thinks that one basically is good and that he liked it. That he liked who I was despite how I was. It is a great sense of comfort, and I think that one becomes stronger knowing that someone is by your side. I miss that.*
> *A: What did it do to you, having that safety?*
> *N: It gave me serenity and comfort, and it made me feel less alone. To have someone that held your back no matter what and that we were always two about everything.*

What it means to have a safe haven in the other will be explored further in the next section. Here, we shall focus on the star metaphor and the other as a provider of possibilities. Tanya seems to confirm this when she talks about how an old friend told her that *"he simply made you into a better Tanya."* Throughout our exposition into Heidegger's and Jasper's understanding of existence in the first chapter, it became irredeemably clear that part of *who I am* is *who I might become*. As a human being, I am never finished. The question we are exploring here is how the other in general and the gaze of the other in particular function as the very fuel of this process of becoming.

Being seen in the way that Mary, Nina, and Tanya testify to is not merely being seen as this particular person with a certain set of attributes. That recognition is also part of the picture, but to understand the temporal aspects of partnerhood, we need to explain how this process of becoming is deeply intertwined with the gaze of the other. In this light, the other's gaze provides the arena where I can become something that I am not. It should immediately be noted that it requires a great amount of trust to give and receive this freedom. By giving it, I am confronted with the risk of the other becoming someone who I do not know, in the worst case, someone who chooses to lead a life that does not include me. By receiving it, I make myself vulnerable because the very fundamentals of who I am relies on the other, an other who is mortal and might die or betray me at any moment.

In several important ways, this structure answers to Heidegger's form of solicitude that is referred to as *leaping ahead*. Instead of taking the other's life burdens on myself, I clear the way for the other to become something different. Knowing well that I cannot live the other's life, that his or her

existence will remain estranged from my point of view, I step back by stepping forward and step forward by stepping back. "Freedom is tied to dependence," Jaspers writes in his elucidation of the meaning of existential communication (p. 219). In a sentence that even more strongly captures the paradoxical logic hereof, Anthony Steinbock (2014) points out that "I found myself trusting when my freedom is realized as being bound to another" (p. 201). Despite the fact that both Jaspers and Heidegger enunciates the *Eigentlich* and individualizing aspects of truthfulness, the core of existential communication lies in that this "struggle" can only be won in company with loving others. While Heidegger seldom speaks of love, Jaspers does indeed make a great deal out of describing the struggle for truth as one passing through love:

> The consonance of belonging together—incomprehensible in the world—makes us feel something unconditional which is henceforth a premise of communication, and without which its loving struggle of inexorable truthfulness would not be possible. (Jaspers, 1971, p. 64)

In one single move, existential communication makes both solitude and belongingness possible; in "the secret of the two, so that the most intimate friends in the eyes of the public may be the ones looked in the fiercest battle for Existenz, in a match which both jointly win or lose" (p. 60). This solitary struggle for becoming myself is, Jaspers writes, "waged on the level of complete equality" (p. 60), and I can only win myself for as long as the other wins him- or herself.

Partnerhood in contemporary Denmark is at least based on ideals of equality. There are still inequalities between the sexes when it comes to salaries and the amount of housework carried out, and there are certainly proponents of new liberal feminism who do not perceive equality in this sense an ideal to which we should aspire. That said, the ideal that both partners have a professional identity outside the sphere of the household is widespread. Theresa relates this aspect to her former relationship with Daniel:

> *I think that it has to do with providing a sense of acceptance and space, space to be more than the two of us. We used to talk a lot about this because you are so much more than… I am a lot more than his wife; someone's friend, someone's boss, someone's anything, and you should be allowed to be that.*

Theresa views her former relationship with Daniel as including more than their dyadic sphere. Being a professional and a friend is not a negation that

contravenes her relationship with Daniel. Contrarily, the space provided by him made these domains possible to a greater degree. Upon Daniel's death, Theresa stopped working for a period, and when we meet for the last interview, she has chosen a different carrier path without the 50-hour workweeks that she used to have. When I ask Theresa if, and in that case, how she has changed throughout the time since Daniel's death, she responds by pointing out the differences in her way of being a friend: "*I have become boring as hell… It could also be my age, but I used to be the one dancing on the tables. That doesn't happen any longer.*" Theresa is, of course, marked by grief, and dancing on the tables might seem excluded, for this sole reason. But the point that I would like to make here is that her way of being a friend and freedom to commit herself to friendships (for example, dancing on the tables) was seen as intimately connected with her relationship with Daniel. She became a better friend because of him.

The Life Witness

While the last section investigated the aspect of the loving gaze corresponding to an opening up of possibilities, the present focuses on the aspect that sees what is already there. Human being exists "factually" (Heidegger, 2008); *that* and *who* we are is not a supreme decision of ours. We are born into a world "that is already old" (O'Byrne, 2010, p. 5), become the ones we are *through* primordial others, and subsequent close relations inevitably confront us with this relational luggage. While it is tempting to think of every relationship as a fresh start, we are often far too soon confronted with the fact that many basic tendencies in our way of being seem to follows us wherever we go. While life, on the one hand, is never finished and open to a natal abyss of possibility, it likewise consists in learning to live with the traits and peculiarities of oneself that seldom or never change. A close relationship such as the one to a life partner partly consists in learning to live with the other, and that the prospects of him or her changing are rather small.

While that is part of the picture, the fact remains that we not only aspire to be loved *despite* our faults but likewise *because* of who we are. In his book, *Love's Vision* (2011), Troy Jollimore writes that:

> To love someone is to place her at the center of our world. For to be valued in this way, to be installed at the center of a lover's universe, is to have one's reality and individuality truly and fully acknowledged. Only the lover, after all, looks closely, carefully, and generously enough to truly recognize the beloved in all her individuality. The great

> horror of not being loved is that one ceases to matter, that the mental and emotional events that fill one's days are not really events at all, for they happen only in one's own mind and not in any part of the outside world. To put the matter starkly, it is almost as if the unloved person does not exist at all. (p. 89).

Sating that "the unloved person does not exist at all" is, indeed, to "put the matter starkly." But if we perceive this statement in light of the reading of Freud, Lear and Hägglund above, it should not come as a surprise. We concluded that love, in a very broad sense, could be seen as a condition of possibility for there to be any persons at all. As far as I am, I have been loved, and as far as I am, I love. In this light, the mere existence of an unloved person is a contradiction in terms. What is becoming of increasing importance when applied to partnerhood is that this existence is always a mutual process of becoming. In this light, the notion of *a life witness* becomes increasingly important. A life witness is a person who witnesses my life. Parents and siblings are often referred to as life witnesses since they have been there from the beginning, and family bonds often persist across different periods in one's life, whereas many friendships often last for a certain time and then dissolve.

In love, merging and individuation exist in an ongoing dialectic, where they presuppose rather than exclude each other. I can only become part of a greater "we" if "I" am someone, and "I" can only become someone as part of a "we." Before we can engage in the aspects of *merging* that likewise comprises an important aspect of partnerhood, the acknowledgment of individuality seems necessary; that is, what it means to have "one's reality and individuality truly and fully acknowledged." One side of acknowledging this individuality is an attempt to acknowledge the alterity of the other. Partnerhood is, in every case, *two* people living together. What becomes increasingly obvious throughout the years spent together is that this gulf will never be finally overcome, that I will never fully "know" the other. There is a part of her that eludes my grasp and understanding. On the one hand, loving consists in an acceptance of this gap, and on the other, in a revolt against it. While I am responsible for setting the other free in the sense of leaping ahead, love is also an urge to know and, which should not be underestimated, to *have*. Much politically incorrect, we speak of "my partner." and willingly admit to being "yours," and the question is what this property-rights discourse can tell us. To what extent do we "own" each other in close relationships?

Having a life witness can be seen as part of the answer. I am yours because I am seen by you, not only as a possibility for becoming but as being the person *who I am* in the sense of *having been*.

> *Of course, I miss having someone to talk to. The daily contact. The person, who knows the history of my life, you know. Someone you do not have to begin with Adam and Eve every time.* (Felicia)

Encountering new people and introducing myself presupposes, always and no matter how intuitively this comes about, that I have a ready-made story of *who I am*. Encountering a stranger begins, as Derrida and Hägglund affirm, with the minimal set of knowledge that this other is mortal, and one of us will die before the other. I do not know much else, and the process of getting to know someone is potentially infinite. While this unknowingness or, indeed, otherness is often thrilling and drives much of our relational cravings, it is likewise demanding, and repose is very much needed. What Felicia testifies to is the gift of having someone who can sense, often without words, what is going on, why that is, and how this person *ought* to act and react in this peculiar situation. When Tanya gets home from a busy day at work, Fred is not first and foremost a person who acknowledges her infinite otherness, but one who knows exactly what to do, and what is just as important, what *not* to do:

> *You know, I was used to—when getting home from work… Every once in a while, when everything was a mess, then he knew exactly what to do, what to say, and when not to say anything at all. "Let's get yourself together," mentally, right. "We'll put you back into one piece again." That's what he would do. I am surprised how much that means.*

In this perspective, a life partner is someone equipped with both the skills *and* the right to "*put you back into one piece again.*" This *right* is earned not only through formal vows, such as they are given when marrying, but through the days and nights spent together. The currency of love is time, since time, in the end, is all that we have. The *ability* to do so is acquired through experience and knowledge of the other as a person (e.g., "*not having to begin with Adam and Eve*"). The non-verbal aspects hereof that Tanya testifies to are worth considering further. In the situation she refers to, she does not want to talk. Neither does she need someone curiously asking how she feels or what she needs. Tanya wants someone who *just knows* how she feels and what she needs. In other circumstances and particularly in other relationships, this would most likely be transgressing intimate personal borders, but in this case, the fact that someone else has this ability *and* right functions to sustain a sense of personal coherence.

An existential understanding of *falling apart* does not need to be placed on the psychotic spectrum. Instead, it might point to the fact that the question of

who I am is always the question of who I am in the eyes of the other. I know myself through your eyes, and losing a pair of eyes that have seen me for decades necessarily *calls me into question* (Ingerslev, 2018). While the socio-ontological meaning of this painful questioning will be investigated further in Chapter 5, I will now be focusing on the time that went before, the fact that for something to fall apart, it needs to be constructed. A life witness, we noticed, is someone who has seen me throughout the years. The act of seeing is also to witness the impact of my many relational sedimentations, seeing the people that made me into who I am today. Sarah:

> *S: It is difficult. Except for the fact that there was an enormous love, it likewise included this sense of belonging, an understanding and acceptance of each other. And it also had something to do with our familiarity with each other's lives and families. I know that some people talk about life witnesses, and I think it's related to that. If I think about my relationship with Kristoffer, setting all the other issues aside, one of the most difficult issues is that I have been part of his life for so long. Now, when he is no longer here, I don't know who will help me remember this. I don't stay in touch with very many in his family, which makes it hard. What I want to say is related to remembering—how things were when the kids were young, when they were born, and he also remembered my mother. My youngest daughter cannot remember my mother at all, and my oldest just barely. That means something.*
> *A: So, we are talking about a person who has seen not only yourself and everything that you shared but also all the others?*
> *S: Yes, all the others! And having someone who understands things, someone one could talk to and who understands what it means. And everything that lies behind—like when you say it, it's not only the contents of the words but everything that they mean. One can feel the resonance; you are talking into something, someone who knows me through and through. Better than anyone else will ever know me. I think that my mother might have known me like that, but not in the same way as Kristoffer.*

There are other life witnesses in Sarah's life. And there might even, someday, be a new life partner. The future is open not to the extent that anything can happen but things that cannot be imagined or foreseen *will* happen. If one would picture Sarah meeting a new partner and establishing another love relationship, it will under no circumstances *undo* what she had together with Kristoffer. The life that they have lived has inscribed itself in Sarah in a way that makes her indistinguishable from that life. Kristoffer and what they had together remains part of her. Conversely, she remains part of him, and this is how we can begin to understand what "losing part of oneself" could mean.

* * *

When asked about the trust that she said she experienced together with Henrik, Anne mentions time as its most constitutive aspect:

> *Anne: I think it is, partly time. Time is the general feature, and you have done things together. You have seen each other acting for a longer and longer period of time, and at some point, you begin to count on the other… "Now, things are in place," so to say.*
> *A: I see. Do you grow together?*
> *Anne: Yes, with regard to habits and stuff. You know, you understand each other. You can walk down a street, look at things, and you will know exactly what the other person is going to notice… It's strange. This feature becomes more and more evident, and maybe that's why people don't talk so much when they have been together for many years. They can be silent in a restaurant because they know what the other person is going to say (laughing)*
> *A: (laughing) So they don't have to speak?*
> *Anne: Of course, there will be some things, but all that small talk, that's gone! And the middle-talk also, gone! Only the important issues remain.*

By now, we begin to approach aspects of partnerhood that are out of tune with dominant societal imperatives and perhaps also why grief itself can be seen as a "protest against the symbolic order" (Comay, 2018, p. 260). Being bereaved in contemporary Denmark is to be confronted with the assumption that it is "good to talk." After the abandonment of static phase-, task- and stage models of bereavement, the common knowledge of *what to do* when one is in grief is limited to the conviction that putting words on grief and sharing one's feelings is a step in the right direction. The therapeutization of grief that comes as a side effect of the ongoing diagnostization seem to proffer from this conviction (Lund, 2020). Even though psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists are not necessarily expected to be the solution to the suffering of grief, they are often well-willing recipients of all the words that need to be spoken for grief to heal (Walter, 1999, pp. 154-168).

In a broader sense, talking could be said to be part and parcel of much relationality as well. If a couple relationship is not functioning, part of the often-suggested solution is improved *communication* between the partners. Couples therapy often explicitly aims at making the two partners speak more freely as to avoid all unnecessary misunderstandings. Talking is, as we shall see in the following sections of we-ness and everyday life, a vital part of partnerhood, and there is no need to deny the importance of narratives with regard to how we see and understand ourselves. But silence is, as the quotation

from Anne testifies to, an equally important part of being and living together. Silence speaks its own language, and my point here is that this language is mediated and conveyed by the gaze.

While personal change and development are in many cases vital for a well-functioning relationship, there are limits to the intensity of this development. In important ways, we remain the same throughout the years. Walking down the street, as Anne describes, would most likely have made Henrik look in a similar direction as he did last year. Going to restaurants, he will order similar food, and when exposed to challenges in life, he would display well-known reactions. There is a vigilant knowledge of this meticulous behavioral repertoire that is known to the life partner alone. How one reasons, takes decisions, becomes hesitant, afraid, angry, and joyful will be known to the partner alone based on the hours, days, and years we have spent together. Even though this habitual aspect of partnerhood is sometimes pictured as the very archetype of existential boredom, losing it immediately places it in a much different light.

Witnessing takes place in a first-person perspective, and there are limits to the degree to which I can share and put words on this. The other, then, *is* not mine; the other *becomes* mine throughout the time we share. These years become, what Hägglund (2019), with reference to Proust, calls "embodied time" (*temps encorporé*) (p. 112); they become *me*.[39] In a striking passage of *My Struggle*, quoted by Hägglund (2019), Karl-Ove Knausgaard, looking himself in the mirror while being, as always, sleepless and existentially jetlagged, asks himself, "What has *engraved* itself in my face?" (p. 111). This is, we might suspect, the same question that every bereaved life partner will ask him- or herself. And the answer to what has engraved itself in my face is the other and the life spent together. This life is never a finished entity but inscribed in me as a trace to understand and carry onward. Unspeakable then and unspeakable now, there are limits to the degree to which I can put words on the experience of sharing a life. It takes place at the level beneath my skin. At the core of my being, we will find the other, and being bereaved amounts to responding to this engravement; to accept that it will not go away, the other will always be part of me and the opposite.

[39] "Time *is* the being of the self," Denise Riley writes in *Time Lived Without Its Flow* (2019, p. 73), and in the second part of *The Life of the Mind* (1981) Arendt writes that "man is not just temporal; he *is* Time" (p. 42).

The Place for the Imperfect

At the beginning of this section, we encountered the other's gaze as a source of possibility and, subsequently, as a source of necessity through the position of the life witness. In this final part, we will encounter the other in a way that will strike one as seemingly less positive, namely, as the place for the unperfect. The notion of the unperfect presupposes, needless to say, some kind of ideal of the perfect. Partnerhood is not exempt from the human struggle for perfection, and one might even argue that the ability to stage a perfect partnership has become of increased importance in late modern society (Illouz, 2012). One should be careful with sweeping generalizations about previous generations' way of living, but it would not be uncontroversial to point out that our time is characterized by a large amount of free choice when it comes to how couples in the West spend live their lives. The newly-married couple cannot lean back on permanent roles but need to create and shape their way of living together on a background of preferences, expectations, and personal backgrounds. This is the endeavor, then, that is often seen as resulting in a struggle for perfection and a lack of acceptance concerning the opposite.

In a similar vein, sociologists have argued that we have entered a so-called post-romantic era in which love relationships have become what Anthony Giddens (1992) call "pure", referring to how they no longer seem to rely and depend on factors outside the relationship itself. Couples remain together for as long as the premises whereupon they entered it can be lived up to, and otherwise, move on through the infinite chain of serial monogamy. On this account, we are not bound to each other by anything more holy than the satisfaction of our needs. Positing partnerhood as a place where forbearance reigns and where we do not constantly have to live up to external standards might question this analysis's credibility. The account of partnerhood as a place for the unperfect developed here can be further understood by Heidegger's necessarily twofold understanding of Being-with and Hägglund's argument that it is, indeed, the unperfect life that we are always committed to and struggle to maintain.

> *We could spend the whole day fighting like cat and dog, but one should behave properly when saying goodnight. You never know whether you are going to wake up again.* (Jack)

The quotation from Jack might be read as an advice in a lifestyle magazine on how to maneuver in the difficult world of partnerhood. But since he speaks from the perspective of the bereaved, it means something different. In Chapter

4, I will discuss the degree of death awareness immanent to a shared life; in this context, I will focus on the shift of mood that Jack refers to. Jack suggests that partnerhood demands a constant return to baseline since it is very difficult to remain in a constant conflictual state with someone who you live with and, in this case, sleep beside. Comparing her relationship with Jacob, her former husband with whom she shared a home, and her new partner, with whom she does not live together, Judith points out that:

> *Living apart does not mean that it is not a good relationship; it is just different. Living together is different because you become immersed in another human being. For good and for bad, here, everything comes as good. But things aren't always just good! It is also the part where "You are crossing the line now, baby!" that is important.*

Judith speaks of a life where "*things aren't always good;*" in Hägglund's (2019) words—still related to his reading of Knausgaard—a life where we see "joy giving way to tedium, loving care compromised by indifference or frustration, and the sense of wonder lost in dreading habit" (p. 110). As we have seen, Hägglund's entire argument hinges on this impossibility of perfection. The perfect would in fact not be perfect since as an entity that was exempt from negativity and finitude cannot *be* in the first place. Just *Radical Atheism* (2008) works its way to the formulation of "infinite finitude", we might speak of *perfect imperfection*. The perfect only comes as imperfect. In our finite lives, failure always lies, as Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1956) says of nothingness, "coiled in the heart of being—like a worm (p. 21), and partnerhood is no exception.

The quotation from Judith should be read in the context of Jacob having been unfaithful at one point during their relationship. He worked in the military and was stationed in a foreign country where he had met another woman. This had caused a temporary crisis in their relationship where they had lived apart for some time before getting back together. While she keeps returning to this event, indicating its grave importance for her and their former relationship, she likewise points out that it *could* in fact be handled without the relationship falling apart:

> *I think that the core in the relationship that me and my husband managed to build—which is also a close friendship, was to understand and accept that any human being is both good and bad. And we do make mistakes. And when it comes down to unfaithfulness, it can be respected and accepted if you have lived many years together.*

Despite what any prior idealizations might tell us, the other will always turn out to be imperfect. "For an ordinary human being, perceptions of reality will inevitably break in at some point and so will constantly threaten to disrupt whatever idealized visions one might be trying to maintain" (Jollimore, 2011, p. 55). This crack in everything is shown with a profound contrast in my interviews with Carl. He and Susan have been married for 49 years, and he keeps describing them as "one." "*We have done everything together,*" he frequently repeats throughout the interviews, eager to make me understand the vital role Susan has played in his life and his inability to cope with the current situation. Carl describes a relationship colored by respect and a deep friendship. Against this background, he also returns to a story shared with me at all three interviews:

> *You know, I might have been difficult every once in a while. It cannot be different. I have a memory of the time where she got so angry with me—she threw a cup! Not after me, but still… You can still see the mark over there on the molding.*

Throwing a cup might seem innocent to the point of insignificance. From the perspective of Carl and Susan's relationship, it was not. He describes it as one of the few violent arguments they had throughout the half-century that they spent together. Carl, who is himself testifying to the fact that "*it cannot be different,*" still sees the mark on the molding, which makes him remember that things were not all good.

* * *

The point that I wish to make now is that partnerhood might be seen as sheltering this imperfectness. In a time of social media where the Goffmanian backstage is nowhere to be found, and the field of critical happiness studies (Bruckner, 2011; Cederström & Spicer 2015; Davies, 2016; Sköld & Brinkmann, 2020), has established itself in contrast to ceaseless demands to show a happy face, partnerhood might be seen as one of the last residues, where imperfection is still a viable option. Importantly, this acceptance goes both ways. In Nina's words, "*It wasn't only one way, it was also the other. I mean that there was someone who forgave your own flaws, right? It goes both ways, and that is what makes a good relationship. That you contain each other*." Not having this fountain of tolerance obviously makes it harder to live with one's flaws, harder to live with oneself.

Where does this leave us with regard to our understanding of love? That it is "blind" and oblivious of faults, which from an "objective" point of

view would make us run away before long? Actually, the opposite can be argued; from a loving perspective, these faults vanish. They become part of the one person that I love. Throughout this gaze, the *totality* of this person is acknowledged and loved. This is why the loving gaze can be seen as a through and through moral phenomena. Love is seeing the other in "the best possible light" (Jollimore, 2011, p. 47). In the words of Margaret Olivia Little (1995), "Transcending our affect and occupying a dispassionate epistemic stance would make us blind to some of the most important truths there are, namely, moral truths" (p. 130). There is no view from nowhere in the domain of love, and the daily life with a partner carries an implicit imperative to *focus* one's attention. There is always a possibility of seeing one's partner in the worst possible light, and considering the intimacy that borders on nakedness, characterizing partnerhood, there would always be much to come after. But one can also, and the prolongation of the relationship probably presupposes this, focus on the sides of the other that are *good*. Importantly, this moral gaze does not just uncover an already existing part of reality and neglect another but contributes to constituting the other person as *a certain kind of* person. Without being seen in this way, we become a riddle unto ourselves to an even greater extent than before.

Before moving on, I will round up this section by emphasizing how Heidegger's analysis of how the two extremes of solicitude can fruitfully be applied to the issue of the gaze. Heidegger (2008) begins to defines solicitude broadly as covering all the different ways of relating to the other:

> Being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not "mattering" to one another—these are possible ways of solicitude. And it is precisely these last-named deficient and Indifferent modes that characterize everyday, average Being-with-one-another. (p. 158)

Our everyday Being-with-one-another is characterized, Heidegger argues, by modes of being that are "deficient and indifferent." That is, *leaping in* for the other—reducing the other by taking over his or her projects is a valid portrayal for most of the time we spend together. Many a reading of Heidegger has emphasized its individualizing traits; since *das Man* allows for nothing but an inauthentic mode of being, a resolute struggle for an authentic existence is mine and only mine. This would be a reading oblivious to the fact that Heidegger makes Being-with into an existential governed by solicitude. This "everyday Being-with-one-another maintains itself between the two extremes of positive solicitude—that which leaps in and dominates, and that which leaps forth and liberates. It brings numerous mixed forms to maturity" (p.

159). Heidegger immediately makes the remark that a further (ontic) description and classification of these forms "would take us beyond the limits of this investigation" (p. 159). His errand is not, we thus learn, to provide a phenomenological description of certain *types* of relationality, as is my objective in this chapter. But he does make it clear that any such relationality takes place "between" the positions of leaping ahead and leaping in.

Despite this much nuanced point, I would argue in favor of a clear ethical urge in Heidegger's thinking to see the other as more than a product of my identification, of treating the other *as the other,* of "leaping ahead" and liberate (*vorspringend-befreienden*). As seen in the first section of this chapter, partnerhood can function as an arena for intensified freedom. Through an analysis of the gaze as a morally pertinent phenomenon, I continued to approach this visual aspect of shared life. Through this lens, the other is not only seen as an endless possibility but as a person with a relational history that is defining for who he or she is. Sharing a life with another person means having a life witness that testifies—over time and through his or her mere existence, to who I am; that make me into who I am. In the last section, I have—drawing on Heidegger's analysis of solicitude, shown that most of this relationality takes place in a more or less deficient mode. Importantly, and contrasting with predominant ideals of a good partnership, this leaves room for the imperfections that make up a large part of our existence.

3.3 We-ness

Love moves in two directions. While one movement aspires to merging and symbiosis, the other aims at separation and individuation. In section 3.2, we have grappled with how our gaze and way of seeing the other contribute to the constitution of personhood and establish love as a deeply ethical phenomenon. During this discussion, we have primarily remained on the level where two separate individuals see each other and how their processes of becoming were intertwined. In this current section on we-ness, I will begin to investigate how the specific type of intersubjectivity that partnerhood comprises distinguishes an ontological sphere of its own, in short, how the "we" comes to be. While grief confronts us with the question of who I am and who the other was, it likewise awakens questions about who or what "we" were. What defined "us?"

Much of the empirical material in this section has emerged from the first exploratory interview and questions asked in the last interview about the most important features of partnerhood. Answers to this question often comprise variations of "being two" and "sharing a life." Given the ontological

permeability of the subject identified in the previous chapter, it seems likely to think of partnerhood as a relation with a natal potential of creating something new. In the subsequent section, I will investigate the everyday life and the domestic settings wherein partnerhood takes place. Before that, the notion of we-ness will be investigated with a point of departure in dependency, common decision-making, safety, care, and joy. In this way, I will argue that we-ness should be perceived as a separate ontological domain extending far beyond to the sum of two persons and provide a phenomenological exploration of what this "we" is, that is: how it is lived.

Safety and Comfort

In between the lines of Chapter 2, I detected human life as a continuous *struggle*. Despite being born into a world that offers some possibilities and excludes others, it is not given how this life should be cultivated. I am responsible for an existence that I have not chosen and for the inescapable traces of people I might wish never had crossed my way. While becoming a person in a world of others makes me bound to them, I am likewise called upon to lead a life that is ultimately my own. The friction between the call from others and an existence that remains *Eigen* (my very own) cannot be surpassed once and for all but is confronted throughout life in various ways, a never-ending and difficult struggle, indeed. It remains *My struggle*, to paraphrase Knausgaard once more, and referring to every page of this series of books, the arena for this prolonged struggle is a life permeated by others. As we have learned from Heidegger, Derrida, and Hägglund, this struggle is not only bound to end; it ends continually. We fade out of life throughout the very process of fading into it, and everything and everyone that we become attached to are relentlessly lost. While the existential tradition with Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers do acknowledge the significance of others, their role is often reduced to a tool for self-becoming. The whole point of being together, it often seems, is to become more "me." The existential sheltering that takes place in these relationships is instrumentalized for me to dare risking myself at the outposts of existence, a land where the resolute existential hero is fundamentally alone.

During discussions of the culturally specific aspects of relationality, Western individualized cohabiting is often contrasted with Eastern forms of communal living. The Other of the east (Said, 1978) is assumed to share great parts of their livelihood. Conversely, it is assumed that the post-war Western world has gone through an ongoing process of individualization, separating our destinies from our neighbors. Lear's (1990) interrelated questions,

encountered in the last chapter, are whether this and similar descriptions of Western society overlooks the actual meaning of being an individual, and accordingly, whether this account of the West is fundamentally flawed, whether we, in fact, have "an individualistic society with no individuals" (p. 19). I have argued recurrently that relationality is an existential feature of life and that any subject, Western or Eastern, is always already filled up with others. In this light, the nuclear family cannot be viewed as two or more atoms flying around each other but as an interwoven system of love and meaning. If one removes one of the parts from this nexus, the others will change accordingly. It is a premise for this study that any answer to the question of what it means to be an individual need to be embedded in a certain life, and for the participants in this study, partnerhood provided the base for this life. The question asked, then, is what counts as the most important feature, the very core of partnerhood?

> *Anne: Trusting each other. You know… someone who is there. That is the most important. Someone who is there no matter what. And someone that you trust to be there and to be who they usually are. You know, that things will not just "come up," and everything is turned upside down. I think that's the most important… It goes very deep… I can't really find the word for it.*
> *A: Unconditionality?*
> *Anne: Yes, yes! The reaction comes unconditionally; that's it.*

One of the primary problems with modernity, Charles Taylor argues in *Ethics of Authenticity* (1992) is that we have lost everything worth dying for. The modern man has lost the higher causes, and this, Taylor argues, is part of our misery. As we shall see in Chapter 4, being a bereaved life partner often implies cursing the fact that I *cannot* die in place of the other. The problem, in this case, is not a lack of will but a lack of possibility to relocate one death for another. In the quote above, Anne expresses a longing for *unconditionality* that she had experienced in the life with Henrik—"someone who is there no matter what."

How should we understand this unconditionality? As Kierkegaard makes indisputably clear in *Fear and Trembling* (1983), the conflict between the universality of the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, on the one hand, and the absolute responsibility encountered by "That Single Individual" (*hin Enkelte*), cannot be overcome. *Someone* always needs to be sacrificed—and the unconditionality of ethics is, to a certain extent, intrinsically violent and leaves no room for any "good conscience" (Derrida, 2008; Critchley, 2014). The question is worth pursuing if part of what distinguishes partnerhood from many other relations might actually be a willingness to die for the other,

derived from an acknowledgment that the life of one's partner is more important than one's own.

My suggestion in the following will be is that this unconditionality depends on the temporality and the content of this relation. Accordingly, we will must speaking of a "conditional unconditionality", valid only from one of the partners' perspectives and valid only within the sphere of shared life. *"I miss having someone that I can count upon always being there for me. No matter if I am right or wrong, I would know that he would have my back covered,"* Theresa tells me. Following the analysis in the earlier section of the gaze, this should not make us conclude that love is blind, but rather that moral truths require a loving gaze. A loving gaze not only sees the other in the best possible light but *unsees* her faults and limitations. In Theresa's quote above, what is *unseen* is the fact that in any third-person perspective, she might not be "worthy of" the support she needed. From the perspective of Daniel, though, she was supported because *she was Theresa*, not because of what she had done or not done. This exclusiveness cannot be pushed *in absurdum* since all love is at least partly appraisive (Singer, 2009c), that is, partly based on the other's character and actions. The point that I wish to make here is that these appraisive features—a product of the days and years spent together—are not unrelated to the unconditionality that is derived from the sphere of partnerhood. Simon touches on the relationship between unconditionality and time in the following passage from our third interview:

> *S: I think that the core of partnerhood is to have a person that you trust unconditionally. I have never experienced that with other people. I know that some people refer to themselves as "blood brothers" in close friendships, but I have never experienced anything like what I had together with Edith.*
> *A: Not with Monica [his new girlfriend]?*
> *I: Well, sort of, but it's not something that comes about during one year's time. Me and Edith had lived an entire life together where we had formed each other, and we knew, in principle, everything about each other. I guess there are some parts you always keep to yourself, but we were soul mates in a way, very, very close sense. Also, being there for one another, help and support one another. I experienced that during the time she was ill, you just did what you had to do. I would never have done that for anyone else. At least not in that way.*

While Simon could not imagine doing anything alike for anyone else, there was never a question of whether he would do it for Edith. What he and several others of the participants who likewise had partners dying of prolonged diseases do talk about is their everyday life during illness and the exhaustion

it brought. Simon, Anne, Rebecca, and Alicia describe immense exhaustion following the deaths of their partners. They likewise testify to being blind to the demands while their partners were still alive and needed support. *"There is hardly anyone else who is going to do it,"* as Rebecca puts it. Except for Anne, who was retired at the time that the disease began, the three others have either taken a considerable time off work during the disease, changed jobs following their loss, or started to work part-time. Accompanying a dying person at the close distance that a partnerhood implies is exhausting, and the world you return to afterward will not be the same. One changes throughout this experience, and they often express having troubles readjusting to what used to be their life. The most important reason for this difficulty, I would like to suggest, is that this life is different from what it used to be. Life without the partner providing unconditional support takes place within a new set of existential coordinates. It will require time to get a hold of it, and it remains an open question whether it will ever succeed. That is what grief is partly about.

Having someone you can trust, someone who, in Tanya's words, "*is always just there,*" is a fundamental feature of the duality that partnerhood comprises. A partner is *just there*; without question, this person is expected to cover one's back if that would be necessary. In this light, partnerhood can be seen as a major source of ontological security. When describing the boundary situation, Jaspers (1970) speaks of "a wall we run into" (p. 178). In grief, "one finds oneself fallen" (Butler, 2006, p. 21), and one always raises to a different world. The rug that one was standing on is no longer there, and one is standing on bare ground. One of the primary practical identities (Hägglund, 2019) that a life partner has carried is excluded from the existential repertoire, and her existential identity shivers accordingly. The people I have interviewed seem to be in the middle of the demanding process of "rebuilding the ship on the open sea," the ship which is their life. There *is* an afterward, but it is an afterward that is radically different from the life they had lived until now. It will be a life requiring care, but a life without the care that their former partners were the source of.

Care

In the previous subsection, I have investigated ontological security as one of the hallmarks of we-hood. The sense of being "home safe" in a relationship does not come flying out of thin air but requires time spent together and trust built up during a considerable amount of time. Care is always care for

someone, and in the frame of partnerhood, this someone is one's partner. While care can be understood broadly as the practical engagement with the other that makes this ontological security possible, it still requires empirical elucidation. The importance given to the aspect of care in my interviews calls for a deeper understanding of *what it means to care for another person*. That is, what is care?

The first thing we should note is that care is not synonymous with love. When Rebecca speaks about her partner's disease, this difference comes to the fore:

> *R: I guess… I was drained during his disease. I don't know how many titles I had during that time.*
> *A: And that did something to the love you had?*
> *R: Yes. It became… You know, that love was made into care. Taking care of stuff, you know.*

The erotic aspects of a couple relationship suffer from periods of severe illness. The intimacy that an erotic relationship opens up is, in Alicia's words *"incomparable—you can't find this anywhere else."* While one's life partner is often the only or at least primary sex partner for as long as this relationship lasts, erotic aspects will not be given any greater weight in this dissertation. A different focus during the interviews might have given a different picture, and the fact that few of my informants have mentioned these aspects does not imply that issues related to sex are unimportant. I will simply note here that this side is generally seen as a vital part of a couple relationship that makes it into more and qualitatively different than a care relation and that this is heavily affected by disease.

The relationship to a life partner is often relatively equal. A partnership is comprised of two adults who lead separate lives and are capable of acting on their respective behalf. Deathly sick people who are physically and mentally impaired to an extent at which they cannot take care of themselves often lack this form of agency. In a welfare state such as Denmark, health care services are generally good and available to all. Despite this fact, many partners take upon themselves part of the burden of caring for their sick and dying partner since this will make it possible for them to stay at home and sustain a life that at least resembles the one they used to have. Being the one who drives back and forth to the hospital, keeping track of treatment details and related issues also falls upon the life partner. While this situation is extreme, it is based on and nourished by the trust and sense of safety described as a hallmark of partnerhood in the previous subsection.

Among Edith's last words, Simon tells me, was the question, *"Who will help you put lotion on your back when I am no longer here?"* This question, which in and of itself might sound overprotective, carries massive existential weight. At this point, Edith has realized that the tumors keep returning, and there is no longer any hope for survival. Edith is beginning to realize that she is going to die, and she did, aged 53. From the last 30 years, Simon has been part of her life. They have raised two daughters who are now in the process of leaving the nest and creating a life of their own. Compared with Simon, who has attended closely to Edith's disease for several years and could see what was coming on an everyday basis, the children were shocked by her death and struggled hard with getting lives back on track.

Helping out with putting lotion on Simon's back was one of the things that Edith helped him with, and the realization that no one would be there to do that actualizes her impending death. It makes her realize that she will soon no longer be around while the world mercilessly continues. Simon will most likely still be there; his back might still need lotion, and who, if anyone, will help him with that? The thought might have crossed her mind—since Simon wasn't older, that there might be other women. "Will someone else take my place?" she might have wondered. What that means and which questions are actualized hereby will be dealt with further in Chapter 5. For now, let's stay with the notion of care, which Simon defines as the core of partnerhood: *"You take care of each other, that's it. I don't even know what to add."*

This care is far from a full-fledged example of a Heideggerian *leaping ahead*. Care is based on the knowledge of the other's need and what I judge to be best for him or her. Not only times of sickness but everyday life in a partnership is based on *leaping in* for the other. In this way, the care at stake in a couple relationship necessarily comprises a sense of dependency. If there is any notion that is banned, not only from contemporary discourse but likewise from the existential canon, it is dependency. In Chapter 2, we saw how Butler's notion over "given-over-ness" cannot be adequately captured by dependency since being given over refers to be pre-ontologically in the hands of the other. Still, dependency is a significant concept in the frame of two adults sharing a life together. Being dependent is hard to acknowledge and difficult to grasp for as long as one is immersed in this kind of relation. By being dependent, one begins to rely on the other, which becomes part of one's habitual and embodied existence. Part of what it means to be dependent is to be unaware of this fact.

In his new relationship with Monica, Simon notes that this sense of dependency increases as time passes:

> *S: I can feel that this sense of dependency is becoming stronger and stronger.*
> *A: Yes. Would you say that the word dependency is a good or a bad thing?*
> *S: It's positive dependency. There are so many situations where you need to be two.*
> *A: So, one cannot be totally independent if one is to have good reasons for staying together?*
> *S: No, oh well – then you would have a "professional marriage." Some people stay together for the sake of the children and live otherwise separate lives. I have never been in such a relationship, and I couldn't stand it either. No, you must mean something to the other, and I would use the word "dependency" without hesitations. It is necessary to receive the oxygen that another person provides.*

"You must mean something for the other." You must be *at stake*. Partnerhood brings me here because who I am depends on this commitment and the life that we share. In book 4 of his *Confessions*, Augustine testifies to the impossibility of living on without his friend, with whom, Hägglund's (2019) reading of this passage suggests, "he shared the very substance of his being," and how the loss of the friend would cause Augustine to become "separated from himself" (p. 83). The lines following the death of his friend are worth quoting in length:

> My heart was darkened over with sorrow, and whatever I looked at was death. My own country was a torment to me, my own home was a strange unhappiness. All those things that we had done and said together became, now that he was gone, sheer torture to me. My eyes looked for him everywhere and could not find him. And as to the place where we used to meet, I hated all of them for not containing him; nor were they able to say to me now, "Look, he will soon come," as they used to when he was alive and away from me. I had become a great riddle to myself, and I used to ask my soul why it was sad and why it disquieted me so sorely. And my soul did not know what to answer. If I said, "Trust in God," it very rightly did not obey me because the man whom I had lost, my dearest friend, was more real and better than the fantastic god in whom my soul was asked to trust. (Augustine, as cited in Hägglund, 2019, p. 84).

That religious longings *actually* are longings for worldly life is central for Hägglund's argument, both in *Radial Atheism* (2008) and *This Life* (2019), We are bound to earth and mortal existence, which the death of others forces us to fathom. As bereaved*, I want him*, nothing else. Importantly for the

present discussion of care, there is, according to Hägglund (2019), "nothing [that] can *prove* that being together is the best thing we can do with our lives; we have to *believe* that it is an act on the basis of that faith. This is the existential commitment of our love" (p. 76). We recall the narrator in Proust's *Reherche* who endlessly searches his mind for the answer to whether he really loves Albertine, and Lear's (1990) suggestion that this testifies more to his limited ability to love (that is, to believe in the love of the other) than to any strange feature of "lovability" that Albertine was assumed to carry. Dedicating a life to being two—sharing life with a partner—might be a "normal" thing to do that will not make people raise eyebrows in any part of the world. This, I argue, does not make it existentially innocent. Since this life form is time-consuming in an almost totalitarian manner, providing the background for most other endeavors, it is an existential decision of the highest rank and not necessarily an act of bad faith.

* * *

Iris, who has been home caring for Peter for very many years, makes an extraordinary case among the participants in this study. For ten years, she has lived a life in which Peter was the node that everything circled around. When friends used to ask her how a given day or vacation had been, she would immediately answer: "*Peter has had a great day.*" How she felt always came afterward.

> *During his time of illness, I always saw his needs first. He was getting all the attention. And… in this process, I might have disappeared a little. The project now is to find myself again, somehow. Yes, find myself.* (Iris)

Finding oneself after giving oneself to another person for one decade is hard labor. Iris's decision to dedicate such a large portion of her life to her handicapped husband has often been questioned. Her former husband had once told her that "*she was wasting her life*," a description that she couldn't recognize at all. *"I think that I have been lucky to have this opportunity,*" she tells me. She insists that it was her sovereign decision to stay home with Peter. At his funeral, she likewise felt the urge to deliver a speech that was not soaked in tears but instead provided a testimony to everything that had been joyful in their life. The value of the time spent caring cannot be quantified in the final end, and it remains impossible for anyone to see the meaning of Iris's commitment to Peter. Accordingly, what should be respected is her decision to do so, which seems to be done on behalf of unconditional love for Peter.

What is important to point out in this particular context is that the dependency governing Iris and Peter's relationship is described as mutual. *"I used to refer to us as Siamese twins because I was just as dependent upon him as he was upon me."* Since Peter was unable to speak, bound to his wheelchair, and had severe cognitive disabilities, the communication between them took place almost exclusively through eye contact. Peter could not do things on his own initiative. If Iris would tell him to grab her hand, he would do it, but without encouragement, he would not. With the eyes, though, things were different. *"If he were to write or do something, I had to tell him what to do. But that which came from his eyes, that came spontaneously."* Except for a couple of hours every week, Iris and Peter had spent the 10 years leading up to his death together. Throughout this time, they had developed a language spoken almost exclusively through eye contact. When asked what she missed about Peter, she says, without any hesitation, *"His eyes."* She has one picture from a trip to their favorite place by a lake where one of their mutual friends had managed to capture these eyes in a photograph. This photograph, she tells me, is the most valuable thing that she will ever own.

> *A: Have you experienced this in other relationships?*
> *I: Not as strongly as with Peter. It was unique—very unique. Because it was… in a way, it was more than love—something beyond. It is almost like a feeling that is larger than love, being so close and have this relation governed by the eyes. I don't even think that we had this contact back in the days when we were madly in love. I don't know if you know what I mean, but it was larger.*

Listening to Iris, it becomes increasingly clear that I do *not* know what she means. I am allowed to see the mentioned picture of Peter, which doesn't remedy this lack of understanding. What Iris is trying to communicate is a medium of care that evolved throughout many years, and "love," she says, does not adequately express the meaning of this relationship. It was "beyond," beyond the words she will ever find for it, and beyond my attempts to imagine what their life must have been like. I think it becomes clear throughout the interviews that who Iris was cannot be distinguished from who she became in Peter's eyes. Now, Peter's eyes have been closed for one last time, and Iris struggles throughout the time of this study to find out what life is about now.

Decision Making

From an existential perspective, sharing a life does not just happen. We do not just *live* this life; we *lead* it, and we do so on a background on a wide range of motivations, agreements, compromises, dreams, and hopes. While none of us has decided to enter the world before actually doing so, nor even thought that falling in love with a particular person would be a clever idea, *leading* a life can be seen as one long process of decision-making. One of the moments where the lack of we-ness becomes evident is when the bereaved life partner has to make a decision they otherwise would have taken together with their partner. Standing alone with these choices often creates an overwhelming sense of responsibility. Of course, there are numerous domains such as one's profession, friendships, and various activities that do not involve the partner. Still, the other is often *on one's mind*, and when it comes to the major decisions in life regarding livelihood, children, and how life as a whole is organized and lived, it is clear that being in a partnerhood means making common decisions. "We" do things; "we" decide things.

"*I think that all these challenges I have gone through the last year have been hard to tackle without Kristoffer. He has always been around to support me,*" Sarah says. In our first interview, she repeatedly describes the two of them as "*a team*." They had their different roles but shared a life, and now, "*everything has changed*":

> *S: And still, I am here—I haven't moved out. I still do the same things that I have always done… But I miss Kristoffer in all of it… So, I think that the greatest change has been—I don't know… I'm not isolated because I have plenty of people around, but I think the most important change is that I need to figure out how to be me.*
> *A: I don't think that is very strange since you have lived together for so long.*
> *S: But it comes as a surprise to me! I managed to put words on it just before—it comes as a surprise that I was so much part of "a team." Because I was! I had never thought of that before. He would do one thing, and I would do something else.*

Afterward, after Kristoffer's death, there is not an option *not* to think about it. Since "*everything has changed,*" Sarah is confronted daily with Kristoffer not being there. She particularly relates the difficulties to the issue of raising children. In countries such as Denmark, where prevention is widespread and uncontroversial, having children is, to a certain degree, a decision that couples often make. Due to its life-transforming significance, it is easy to argue that it is one of *the* most significant decisions that one will ever make and seldom

makes it alone. The vast majority of all children are born in families with two parents who have taken a mutual decision of "having them." From that moment on, thousands and thousands of decisions are made on their behalf, and while these change in character and form, parents and care persons keep making or help to make decisions for their children up to adulthood. Exactly how these decisions are made varies from family to family, but following the interviewees here, it seems evident that they were often *common* decisions.

Losing a life partner implies standing alone with the responsibility to care for children who used to be *ours* and provide the care, help, and guidance called for at their particular age. These children function as inescapable reminders of the person with whom I used to share my life while at the same time actualizing the solitude of my current situation. Nina expresses doubt about whether their son is still *their* son, "*or if he suddenly has become* "*mine*"?" Are they *our* children? The question of whether they still are presupposes that they *have been our children* at some point, and that is what interests us here. *If* children are part of the picture, they are not accidental to the core of partnerhood—not because it answers to an essential prerequisite, but since it inevitably will restructure life to a degree incomparable to many other changes in life. Judith denotes this when comparing how she and Jacob "grew together" throughout their many years together and her new relationship with Samuel.

> *I think that is radically different because what you build together is the fact that you have children. You grew into something, and I think that might happen with Samuel, but we're not going to grow into raising children.*

"You grew into something," Judith says. You grew into a sense of being two, of being us. In this case, *we* are because *they* (the children) *are*. And, in most cases, they are because we *decided* that being parents was something that we wanted.

* * *

We act because we want to achieve some kind of change in the world. Clinically depressed people seldom have the capability to act because they lack the will to do anything. The world of the depressed person is a foreclosed world without possibilities (Ratcliffe, 2017; Frantzen, 2019). The *thought* of doing something might be possible, but since everything is pointless anyhow, the motivations for going through with it are few. "No matter what happens, it will not improve the situation," the depressed often think. When I visit Anne

for the second interview, I ask her if, and in that case, how she has changed since Henrik's death. She mentions that she sees herself as more vulnerable and "*less focused."*

> *I am less focused. Before, I was focused on Henrik and his illness. I'm trying to find things that might interest me, listen to the radio, and so on, and I am pretty good at distracting myself in that way. But when it comes down to the core, to what is important… I don't know… Henrik was important. But now, I cannot find anything of real importance.*

Anne expresses what many participants will testify to, a stubborn attachment to life and an ongoing attempt to find it important. In her splendid reading of the temporality of bereavement, Riley (2019) describes this struggle in the following way.

> Admittingly, something still goes on; you walk about, you sleep a bit, you do your best to work, you get older. Yet, in essence, you have stopped. You're held in crystalline suspension. Your impression of your own interiority has utterly drained away, and you are pure skin stretched out over vacancy. You abide. (p. 67).

"To abide" is defined by Merriam-Webster as a transitive verb along the lines of "to bear patiently" and as an intransitive as "to remain stable or fixed in a state."[40] Being bereaved, in the way Anne describes it, neatly captures both of these meanings. Upon Henrik's death, life is reduced to a matter of bearing patiently: "*I have troubles getting myself to do things… I do not have the urge of doing anything really*". One of the privileges of being two, she notes, "*is that you do not have to take every initiative by yourself. You have someone to share the burden of a decision, at least in some cases*." In this light, partnerhood becomes both the drive for action and the necessary sheltering if things go wrong. Importantly, this does not make it into an anonymous *das Man*. It is not the point from nowhere, where "everyone is the other, and no one is himself" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 124). Having *one* other person who constitutes an important brick in the coordinates for life is not the same as being absorbed in an anonymous mass. One could argue the opposite, following the interpersonal logic laid out in the section on the gaze. We-ness is not extinction but an intensification of selfhood. I am more myself when together with you. Not having you here any longer, accordingly, makes me less myself. The very notion of "individuality" then seems to carry within

[40] I am myself time, a time that "perdures" and that neither "flows by" nor "changes," Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002, p. 445).

itself the notion of "dividuality" (Douglas, 2017). Douglas Douglas's incentive to pursue the theme of dividuality, which he localizes both in various anthropological sources and the writings of Gilles Deleuze, is to "depict a flow of phenomena out of a person and into other and into the surrounding world at large" (p. 76). He is interested in how "we become them, they become us," and the crucial question his text can be read as posing is, given this interwinedness, what happens to "me" when "you" die? The social ontology developed throughout this dissertation is partly an answer to that question.

Joy

Grief is a serious matter. The understanding of partnerhood outlined so far is equally serious, and the reader might certainly wonder what happened to all the light and joy that is part of being together. When Nina has put her son to bed, a sense of loneliness comes sneaking in. At the time of our third interview, Nina has met a new partner, and they are in the process of moving in together:

> *N: Loneliness—it is terrible! Being in a relation means that you are not lonely. And that is a hot topic today, loneliness, I mean. But it's not just about finding someone for the sake of not being lonely… It provides safety not to be lonely in one's everyday life. All the little things, you are two while cooking and so on. When Martin was put to bed, it used to be like: "What to do now? I might as well do the laundry or whatever." Now, it's like, "Laundry? Hell no, that's for tomorrow." Instead, we'll watch a movie, open a bottle of wine. You know, it's more fun when doing it together. Having someone close, both physically but also in the sense of a soul mate. You laugh and have your intern jokes. It gives safety to be that close to another person.*
> *A: It sounds like you created a world for two?*
> *N: Yes, exactly. We stand stronger together because we have the ability to raise each other up… You create a little world, and within that sphere, you can enjoy life. You are less dependent on others.*

Nina hereby makes it clear that for her, a partner is the key to grasping and enjoying life. Without a partner, she could spend her life doing laundry. The assumption that a point of departure in the bereaved's solemn perspective would give us an opportunity to reach the rock bottom of partnerhood by focusing on "what really matters" might hereby need to be nuanced. That life is serious business and death is the utmost reminder of this should not overshadow the fact that partnerhood, while one is standing in the midst of it, can be rather enjoyable. Sharing life is much fun, and in an attempt to bridge

the discussion of we-ness with the following on everyday life, I will investigate the aspects of joy.

In *In Praise of Love* (2012) Alain Badiou defines love as "communism for two." Through love, Badiou argues, we can experience the world from the perspective of the dyad (the "Two scene"). This perspective is not the perspective of unity and symbiosis, but one of difference. For Badiou, this dual perspective opens up an experience of truth that is not possible from the perspective of the one. Importantly, this truth is a construction that is not exhausted by the meeting's immediacy but is built up through shared life. Our life, *we*, are not destined to be, but in and through our being together, destiny comes sneaking in upon us, and Badiou's (2012) important question is the following:

> How can something that was basically unpredictable and seemed tied to the unpredictable vagaries of existence nevertheless become the entire meaning of two lives that have met, paired off, that will engage in the extended experience of the constant (re-)birth of the world via a meditation of the difference in their gazes? (p. 41)

In my view, this qualifies as a so-called "good question." In the quote from Anne in the previous section, we heard that she could perhaps distract herself by listening to the radio but that she missed *being content*. What Badiou refers to as a "truth construction" amounts to a twoness wherein I am at home—at home with myself because I am at home with the other. The world of two-ness seems partly sheltered from the unbearable demands of the superego, and I am allowed to be, or rather, can allow myself to be, at peace and perhaps even happy. Without a partner, this becomes increasingly difficult. In Sarah's words:

> *The joy is gone. I can be happy in the moment, but… I'll go to an exhibition, play, or a movie with my friends, and that's ok. But that, what to call it, durational happiness—that is entirely gone! "I don't want to do that!" "Why should I do that?" And that makes me sad. I'll be happy again, but I'm not there yet.*

Felicia adds that she lacks "*the immediate warmth*." The "*joy and appetite for life*" that she used to experience when being together with George is gone. In our last interview, she even relates this with the core of partnerhood, which she speaks of as:

> *The feeling of community, being together focused on a mission and a life that you approach in a similar manner… The knowledge of someone*

> *who is always there and wishes you the best. And someone who provides the source of the joy of being alive.*

A life partner then is not only someone who sets me free and lets me stand in myself, provides a sense of security, and cares for me. A life partner is also a source of joy in life, and the suffering of bereavement cannot be distinguished from the shortage of lightness and joyfulness. While there might be joyful moments, any state of happiness is no longer part of the picture. Neither are the hopes and longing for what might come: "*I don't look forward to anything any longer*," Sarah says. When happiness is discussed, both philosophically and within the field of happiness studies, a distinction is often made between a durational sense of happiness or wellbeing, on the one hand, and an ecstatic moment of happiness, on the other (Seligman, 2002; OECD, 2013). While the former lies outside the control of the subject and "happen" in our meeting with the world or the other (Sköld, 2020d), the more permanent aspects of "a good life" are assumed to be partly within our range of control. Relations are often pointed out to be a primary source of this kind of well-being, and even though it is worth questioning this instrumental view on love, there is no need to deny the existential importance of everyday life. Perhaps even the most important part of what it means to be a couple—two people who have, in Badiou's terms, taken the event that could not be foreseen and transformed this into a shared life, is to be found in the daily activities that we often take for granted. While this section has outlined important aspects of we-ness—safety, care, mutual decision-making, and joy—the next section will ask how this is assimilated into everyday life.

3.4 Everyday life

In a striking formulation that carries both Aristotelian, Heideggerian, and Hägglundian connotations, Theresa tells me that the very "*substance*" of her relationship with Daniel, was "*all the hours and days spent together*." The substance of a relationship, we learn, is not an entity but *time spent together*. Everyday life is often described as time just passing by. Without investment and engagement, it is assumed that everyday life *goes on*. From the perspective of the bereaved, this time and this life does *not go on* and take on a different meaning. Everyday life is the life we live every day; it is "everywhere, and we live through it like fish proverbially live in the water" (Brinkmann, 2012, p. 17). For the participants in this study, many aspects of this life was made up of the myriad things they shared with their partner. Having lost this possibility of togetherness, this becomes all the more clear;

"we" are no more, and trying to adjust, once more, to a new form of everyday life will confront the bereaved person with innumerable questions of how to live.

In Heidegger's existential analytic, the question of who we are is enclosed by what we do together in this world: "In that with which we concern ourselves environmentally the Others are encountered as what they are; *they are what they do* [sie *sind* das, was sie betreiben]" (Heidegger, p. 163); "Dasein finds itself proximally in what it does…" (p. 155). *We are what we do*. Hägglund's notions of secular faith attest, in a similar vein, to the fact that our being is indistinguishable from our possibilities and ways of conducting our life. By choosing to dedicate my time to certain things in life, I give the time that, in the final end, is all that I have. "Who I am, then, depends on what I actually do, as well as on how my actions and perceptions are recognized by others" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 353). We are *at stake* in our finite commitments to a degree that:

> We cannot even try to be anyone or do anything without putting ourselves at stake—*pouring ourselves forth, emptying ourselves out* [Emphasis added]—in the activities to which we are committed and which may demand a profound transformation of who we take ourselves to be. This finitude is both the promise and the peril of spiritual life. (p. 368)

The ferocious connotations of this language should make it ineludibly clear that in Hägglund's perspective, there is no human being outside the realm of temporal actions. And to quote Theresa once more, our substance is "*all the hours and days spent together*." We are what we do, and the bereaved partners that I have interviewed have indeed done many things together with their partners. In this light, we might suggest that they have become part of each other and that losing part of oneself would then be understood in light of losing the possibilities for performing the many actions that made up a mutual and shared life.

Even though there is no "natural way for us to us to be" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 177), there is no way to be that is not inherently related to someone else. We come to be through the others who are already here, and the lives that we lead between birth and death are lived together with others. The particular life in a couple relationship is not destined for any of us. It is a way of life that is based on two persons' attempt at living together. In Jaspers's (1970) words, "The common course of our existence in time means our everyday life," which also means that "each moment, and each objectivity of [our] existence, might also be an existential phenomenon." (p. 122). We are

at stake every day and in this section, I will provide an analysis of the microcosmos of this every day in a shared world. In the first subsection, I will explore the dimension of mutual acting. Afterward, I will investigate the meaning of sharing bed, meals, and conversations daily.

Doing Things Together

Earlier, we identified mutual decision-making as an aspect of partnerhood that made it increasingly hard to *do anything* as bereaved. The urge to act vanished through the death of the person I used to share this with. "*I'm still in grief because I miss Conrad so incredibly much. Because we had so many things together*," Mary begins our first interview. When I ask her and the other participants to describe these "things" they did together, a sense of strangeness often arises, like the question did not make sense. "*It's mostly, you know, everyday things. When we hanged around the house, on the couch or in the kitchen*" (Theresa); "*We were close, always. And that's probably why you think about it so much—everyday life is so different*" (Jack).

Everyday life can be described as the arena where partnerhood *happens*. There might also be moments of illusive joy, but since that is seldom the normal course of things, partnerhood mostly take place in the unspectacular setting of everyday life. It is evident that this aspect of "hanging out" was inherently meaningful and constitutes a major aspect of the longing that the participants experience. Spending time together without any particular expectations is certainly a well-known feature of other relationships as well. Raising small children implies an almost endless stream of shared monotonous time and adolescence, especially, has this feature of undemanding "hanging out." In adult relationships, though, partnerhood is distinctive in this regard. Given that the partners live together, the relationship comprises an existential habitual base. While they often leave this domain to act and commit themselves to activities in the outside world and to relationships with others, and further, that the border between these spheres is not clear-cut in that my partnership often functions as an integral part of what I do otherwise and the relations that I have with others, this relationship does often seem to *come first*, in several different meanings.

Being deeply habitual in this way, partnerhood does not require extensive planning ahead. "*If I wouldn't do anything else, we were together*," as Jack puts it. This does not need to be understood as a symbiotic clinging on one another but a sincere devotion of one's time. Following the overarching line of thought in this dissertation, this likewise implies that partnerhood, for the people living this way, is an arena of subjectification. We

might have colleagues we work closely with, friends with whom we spend much time, but following Jack's logic above, if he was not with them or by himself, he was with Cathrine. While this time also includes planned activities, the interviewees express a deep sense of longing after the partner in the role of a person with whom one could "just be." "*This is entirely different. We had both a close friendship and a marriage. And we did things together*" (Jack). Losing someone with whom one shared "everything" is not necessarily a loss more painful than others, but it comprises a loss that can be felt on a more constant basis *all the time*. One of the places where we are particularly vulnerable for the pains in life is in relation to sleep and (the inability to) rest. I have earlier identified, negatively, the possibility of sleeping through the sudden realization that the other is still alive.

> Death awareness is not only a positing of mine or the other's inevitable destiny but an appreciation that it did not happen—yet. Phenomenologically, it is conceivable that the shifts between worrying and anxiety on the one hand and gratitude on the other, take place in sudden glimpses. Sleeplessness, the inability to let go of the world for the night, can in one strike be overcome when one notices that the person lying next to you or in the neighboring rooms, is still breathing. When the long-awaited text-message shows up on the screen, we realize that he or she is still alive, one more day. (Sköld, 2020b, p. 12)

Falling asleep is a tremendous existential task. We spend our days grappling with life, committing ourselves to a multitude of tasks and objectives that require our focus, and it will be well-known to anyone how demanding that might be. Being awake presupposes trying to cope with and, to a certain degree, control one's environment. Going to bed and falling asleep, granted that it succeeds, amounts to letting go of all this. In a time where modern technology and social media make empty spaces left for free-floating thought almost non-existent, this time has received even greater importance. Even though smartphones can easily be brought to bed and emails checked in the middle of the night, it is harder to hide horizontally. Following the classical analysis on anxiety in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre, this is where we are confronted with the nakedness, bareness, and nothingness of existence. This is where we realize that none of this had to be, that my very existence is contingent and my future open, that I might never wake up again and the other might die at any moment.

Sleeping Together

Sleeping is one of the most intimate things that we do together. In bed, the "felt sense of the concrete other" with his or her particular "atmospheric presence," as a conglomerate of olfactory, visual, and tactical senses come to the fore (Køster, 2021). Sharing a bed with someone for the first time is a genuinely weird experience since there is very little familiarity with the other's embodied way of being. I do not know her way of moving around in bed, her way of breathing, and her smells are not yet part of my habitual repertoire. After 50 years of partnerhood, though, things take on a much different meaning. Not only have I become accustomed to the other's way of being, I have followed him or her through the gradual transformation that growing older implies. The person I am now lying beside is the same person he or she was 10, 30, or 50 years ago. And still, everything has changed. Every cell in this body has been replaced numerous times, and the life we share most likely looks somewhat different.

Carl and Susan have lived together for 49 years, a life countered by habits. He tells me that they had their different tasks and places, and there was never any question of who would be doing what. Once, after not having neither the will nor the courage to visit the summerhouse during the first year after Susan's death, being afraid of the emptiness that all the memories would provoke, he goes together with his daughter and her family. Upon leaving, Carl is doing the vacuuming "*like he always does*." While he is on to that, his daughter is doing the dishes "*like Susan always did*." That was too much; he could not stand the look of "*the wrong person*" standing in that place. No matter how much he loved his daughter, she was not Susan, and he had to go outside to get some air. About their everyday life at home, Carl tells me:

> *Susan always sat over on the couch when we read the newspaper, and I sat in that chair over there. Now, when I sit there in the evening, I can feel that something wrenches within me like something is wrong. And every once in a while, we used to watch a movie—luckily, we often agreed on* what to watch. *But not always; I couldn't stand crime shows, so then I'd go somewhere else. And then, of course, when going to bed after having been lying on the left side for 50 years, holding Susan's hand before going to sleep... That's bad*.

During the three interviews, Carl keeps returning to this aspect of going to sleep and the difficulties that it causes every night. "*I don't know how to do it myself,*" he tells me, looking drained and exhausted the first time that we meet. At this point, he has recently read a lifestyle magazine that suddenly comes to his mind during the interview. In this magazine, some "*lifestyle expert*"

suggests that partners should shift sides in bed to avoid "triviality." This does not convince Carl: "*It is all the trivial things that make it work!*" he tells me.

* * *

For Rebecca, it makes no sense that Erik should die. In sharp contrast to the principles of post-traumatic growth, Rebecca sees grief as going one way and one way only—downward. When we meet for the last interview, I ask her if she has learned anything from the past two years; the time passed since Eric fell sick?

> *Not really… Some people say that they perceive life in a totally different manner, but I don't know. I don't really think that I have experienced any personal growth or become any different… I have, on the other hand, realized that it is actually pretty good when most days look the same, and… I guess that is what makes it so hard to lose someone. Seeing how everyone else has that everyday life which they tell themselves that they are tired of and that they would rather like to go out and become self-realized or whatever. Actually, it is new to me as well that everyday life carries such an immense value. There is nothing that presses you harder than not having an everyday life that you can count on.*

A major feature of living somewhere is leaving and returning home, and these moments are vital in understanding the domestic meaning of grief. A similar rhythm can be found in going to bed in the evening and getting up again in the morning. This rhythm is one of the most fundamental things in life. Despite chaotic days where few things can be counted on, everyone, at some point, needs to sleep. We have encountered the difficulties of going and falling to sleep without one's partner. And on waking up, the few seconds it takes to get a grasp of oneself and the world are often described along the lines of a recurring disappointment, Like Riley (2019), wondering after the funeral is over: "After all this ritual and effort, he *still* hasn't come home. What more does he want?" (p. 21), the bereaved will forced grasp anew every day that she is not here.

Carl, who had been paid a visit by the minister a few weeks before my first interview, was not at all convinced when he was told that it might be that the Lord needed Susan for some reason that was more important than his: "*He's pretty damn stupid then because there is no one who needs Susan more than I do*!". After he is done expressing his heartfelt opinion about the church, the following conversation takes place.

> *A: It sounds like the world that you are experiencing is nothing like the way it should be.*
> *C: Yes!*
> *A: Susan should still be here, is that correct?*
> *C: Yes, I have mornings when I will sit up in bed, there is nothing in the calendar, and I don't know what to do!*"

Carl has been a busy professional his entire life and always had "things in the calendar." After their retirement, he and Susan lived an active life—together. "*If only Susan was here… The only thing that gets me up is the damn dog*". Pangs of grief not only hit on entering the bed and leaving the world behind for the night but likewise when awakening and realizing that this world is one without the person with whom one shared his life. In the daytime, this becomes particularly noticeable in relation to meals, which we shall now turn to in the next section.

Sharing Meals

Waking up every morning functions as an inescapable reminder of me being alive and the partner not. One might pray to all the gods that one will never wake up again and still open the eyes the next morning. Just like being alive comprises sleep, it demands some sort of eating. Even shortly after the death of a loved one, the body requires some form of nourishment. If someone ever doubted whether eating was something that we did for reasons other than securing our survival, testimonies from bereaved life partners will prove this once and for all. In Chapter 2, we developed a notion of subjectivity that is inherently worldly. We become ourselves in and through a world, and from this perspective, eating is a "process of substantially, materially, and this literally incorporating the world" (Rosa, 2019, p. 57). The food and drink that we consume, Rosa writes in his analysis of our bodily relationship to the world,

> is not simply some invisible, circulating fuel for our body, but rather forms the very material from which we are built. Though we may not always be conscious of it, as corporal beings, we are obviously "made of world" and furthermore must constantly regenerate ourselves by "ingesting world." (p. 57).

This relationship comes to the fore, Rosa convincingly argues, in the pathological cases of various eating disorders, where anorexia is viewed as a

"loss of world" and bulimia as a pathological acceleration of this ingestion process (p. 59).

The world of the bereaved is a world in profound transformation. It is no longer "our world," and this forces me to renegotiate my relationship to it on various levels. With regard to eating, it means that one will have to begin to eat alone (or at the very least, without one's life partner). One cannot share a meal with a dead person; eating is for the ones still living, and the people we share meals with are seldom randomly chosen. Even though colleagues are not our choice, there is often some rationale for why we are having lunch together, and the friends that I share meals and drinks with are *my* friends—for a reason. In Denmark, the vast majority of all meals are consumed at home, and that means that a life partner will often be the person with whom one shares an almost infinite number of meals. Even though the routines and habits surrounding meals differ from family to family, it is a liable expectation that families eat together in the normal course of things. In the following quotation, Nina places the meaning of shared meals in the larger context of living a shared life:

> *N: It's really about the everyday fuzz, totally basic everyday things. We were two about doing the garden work, to figure out what we would have for dinner. I've been having severe troubles with meals because they used to be Oscar's. Oscar could make the most boring meal to a party, to the most joyful event. So, I've had some issues with eating because I've thought of it like something we had to do in order to survive. That was not the point when Oscar was here; then it was about get-together and the enjoyment. And he put a great price on us having something tasty—every day if possible! Then one could go and look forward to that all day. He found quite a lot of enjoyment in doing the little things, and now, they are long gone. So, it's about the little things that you did together. You know, that feeling of not being alone. To hang around and talk about the little things and the big things […] We always had an ongoing conversation about one thing or another. Also, when we were at work, we would be like: "We also need to check up on that," and then he kept sending messages throughout the day. We had a common language. That's how we were.*
> *A: A language that only the two of you could understand?*
> *N: Yes, his sister always said that when we talked, "Normal people couldn't even begin to understand what you are saying"—it was so esoteric. Often, I knew what he meant before he was finished talking, and then I would just answer.*

Nina's situation is poignant because of her son, Martin, who was only one year old at the time of Oscar's death. The meals that she refers to are meals

that comprise an important feature of raising children. In his classic analysis in *The Civilizing Process* (1939/1994), Norbert Elias suggests that eating with a knife and fork is paramount for the disengagement from the immediate relation to nature. Elias suggests that other people holding knives in close and friendly company even provides an extra dimension of ontological security. When his father dies, Nina's son, Martin, is in the middle of the process of figuring out the most basic things about the world, such as walking and eating by himself. He is more intensively than ever in the process of becoming a person, and that process does not stop because of his father's death. Nina says that she had no other purpose in life during the first year following Oscar's death than being there for Martin and providing a world as coherent and meaningful as possible. At meals, she is confronted with the silence and absence that Oscar left behind—the joyfulness he provided is nowhere to be found. At the same time, she struggles with how to communicate this loss to Martin. She notices that he does not really know what went before; "*He does not understand the pain and suffering that I have gone through*." She imagines that he has vague memories of his father but cannot know to what extent they are mediated by pictures and her stories. Martin does not know what he is missing, but she does. In this sense, she is alienated from her son, which is both a great relief and genuinely absurd. She *is* his world, and during meals, she is the one responsible for creating an environment that encourages living. Any parent will know that the struggles taking place around the dinner table are compact with meaning, care, love, anxiety, and at times, desperation. And any child will intuitively know how effective it is to pick a food fight—actually, a child's only source of power outside the toilet can be reduced to eating/non-eating. If Oscar would have been here, Nina imagines, the world would have tasted better—for both her and Martin. Luckily, Martin is a well-functioning child and contributes more and more to the meals himself. When his language skills develop and he begins to tell stories from kindergarten or ask the questions that make her appreciate the beauty of having a child's perspective on this cruel world, she smiles and blesses the fact that he is here. "*I love our son; that's all that I have left of him,*" Nina responds when I ask her if she still loves Oscar.

* * *

Several of the participants in all three groups talk about how the rhythm of grief is tied to the meals that one still needs to eat. "*It's fucking ridiculous to cook for yourself!*", as Tanya puts it. She is one of the participants who has solved the problem by eating more at work and skipping the cooking at home. Simon, who has always loved to cook, likewise notes that "*it makes no sense*

to cook for yourself. If I had someone to share it with, I would love to do it." What they seem to imply is that everything connected to their meals that were above and beyond nourishment disappeared along with their dead partner. There is no reason to eat any longer, and for some, it is even a moral question. How can I allow myself enjoyment of any kind when the person I used to share this with is no longer here?

Carl often used to drink a glass of red wine with Susan. Both as an everyday treat and on the weekends, they shared this experience that was "*not only drinking a glass of wine.*" There was more to this, he tells me: "*We didn't say cheers out loud, but we would look each other in the eyes, and we would always think of one another.*" During all our three interviews, Carl returns to the red wine. One night that he spent together with his cousin, she told him to go home, open a bottle of red wine, drink a glass, and send her a text message saying "cheers." "*And so, I did, but that was hardly any success, so that is the only time that I have done so. Because Susan was missing!*". Carl has a good friend who likewise lost his wife some years ago. Like many informants, Carl is familiar with the phase, stage, and task models that picture bereavement as a delineated and successive process. His friend has provided him with a version of this succession that Carl finds more realistic than the others. "*The first six months are called "it's a lie".*" During this time, he could not even begin to grasp the fact that Susan was dead. The following six months is the time, according to Carl and his friend, when you begin gradually to accept that it *did* happen, that she is no longer here. "*Is that how you experience it?"* I ask him. *"Yes, and then comes the second year. And that's when you begin to move on, not "live," but move on. And that is far from as positive as living. Existing is passive, and living is active.*" Carl exists, but he is not living. In gastronomical terms, he drinks water but not wine.

Food and drink can provide us with an almost unparalleled sense of belonging in the world. In Rosa's *Resonance* (2019)—a book with the overarching mission of developing a "sociology of the good life," we can find a conceptual apparatus for understanding Carl's issues with the wine. While generations of critical theorists have pinpointed the various forms of alienation that prevent a flourishing life, few have given any positive accounts of what a non-alienated life would amount to. *Resonance*, according to Rosa, is the key in this endeavor. Resonance makes up "alienation's other," "a mode of relating to the world in which the subject feels touched, moved, or addressed by the people, places, objects, etc. he or she encounters." (Rosa, 2017, p. 449). While resonance opens up to the world, it likewise requires an affirmative stance, a response on the side of the subject. Resonance takes place in a dual movement of being affected and responding affirmably. The smell of cooking and a richly set table can create "a gift from a benevolent,

nourishing, sustaining earth […] while a meager cold meal all but inevitably generates the physical sensation of a harsh, dismissive world" (2019, p. 62). When invited to a "richly set table," it is almost impossible not to respond in an affirmative and lively manner. What the testimonies from bereaved partners indicate, though, is that you can cook them heaven without enabling the affirmative response that lies at the heart of a resonant relationship with the world.

One of Rosa's fundamental claims is that economic welfare is a necessary but not (as assumed in many Marxist accounts) a sufficient condition for securing a good life. Rosa makes this clear in his gastronomical analysis where he imagines a "wealthy executive or business consultant when he comes home late at night, only to find that all he has in the kitchen is half-stale bread and a flat cola" (p. 62). No money in the world can provide one with a resonant relationship with the world; Rosa seems to want to point out. On the other hand, a wine shared with someone you are fond of has this ability. Rosa delineates drinking a "good glass of wine" explicitly as being "downright overloaded with cultural expectations of resonance" (p. 62). The assumption, which we find a striking example of in Carl and his reluctance to drink and enjoy a glass of wine without Susan, is that "our relationship to our body, the world, and society will thereby be so transformed that resonance will become palpable, the wine connecting us with history, art, love, friendship, our biography, etc." (p. 62). Drinking wine is a paradigmatic example of how food and drink function as more than survival; how they mediate our relationship to the world at large and the ones we love in particular. In all three interviews, Carl mentions that he looks forward to the day "*when he can drink a glass of red wine, and say 'Cheers Susan!'*" Indistinguishable from these gastronomical aspects of loss are conversations, and in the next subsection in this endeavor into everyday life, this is where we will be moving.

The Conversation Partner

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that partnerhood mainly consists of everyday life. Instead of degrading its existential status, I have likewise suggested that it is one of the most existentially poignant arenas for people living this way since this is what they do with the vast majority of their finite time. No decision is more important than how the baseline of life is negotiated, and for a great number of people throughout the world, this takes place within the confines of partnerhood. As a last resort in our attempt to delineate this

everyday life and provide an understanding of its pulse and rhythm, I will pinpoint the role of having someone to talk to, a conversation partner.

Echoing this existential structure, the type of talking that is often referred to is far from dead serious: "*You miss the daily back and forth, the daily conversations. Not necessarily about serious stuff, but the regular everyday talk around the kitchen table*," Felicia tells me during our first interview. In the second interview, she even tells me that she misses George "*more as a good friend and conversation partner than as a spouse*." In obvious ways, this is connected to our analysis of the gaze in general and the life witness in particular. Having someone "who just knows" and understands things before I have uttered a word is of immense value. Try to imagine the tremendous obstacle to explaining one's issues in life for new people every day. Sharing life with another person will necessarily make one familiar with the life that she is living. Following the general line of thought in Chapter 2, where the life one leads is seen as constitutive for our personhood, being familiar with someone's life is being familiar with her. The opposite obviously follows, namely that knowing a person will always amount to having some kind of knowledge about the life this person lives.

In principle, every day is full of experiences. Things always happen. Life never stops, despite the fact that grief might make one urgently wish for that to happen. Despite its limitations, language is our means for making sense of some of it. While our inner dialogues are ongoing, most people want to talk to someone else, and within the sphere of partnerhood, this will often be one's partner. One situation where this need arises in my interviewees is when one of the partners returns from work. For the oldest group that had reached retirement age, returning home from work might not be a current issue, but it had, at some point during their life, and the general feature of *returning* is still highly recognizable. In Goffmanian (2008) terms, upon returning home, we are transporting ourselves from the frontstage to the backstage of life's domains. Different regulations and normativities govern these, and the very shift from one to another often creates an urge to put into words what happened in the other sphere. When partners encounter friends or colleagues, they often give a brief update on the situation at home, especially if something important is going on, and opposite, upon returning home, they tell the stories from the world outside. It is evident that many participants miss the receiver of these stories. To illustrate, I will quote Simon at length here:

> *I miss the little things. You know, the stupid boss or the irritating colleague. A child who I am tired of [Simon works in a preschool stetting] or any stupid little thing that you will come home from work and talk about; "Today this and that happened, and that was a piece of*

> *shit" or whatever you say. You know, those things that mean something but are not important enough for you to call a friend or sibling and talk about. You don't call them in order to enlighten them about what the boss said today. That's something you tell your partner. In some situations, you need to unload or receive some pity even though it's not a big issue. That's actually what I miss the most, having someone you can chat with. When it comes to the big events in life, there are usually other people as well, or it's ok to call your sister if you need to talk about it. It's the little things that you miss a partner for. For things that are almost insignificant. All the fuzz, which… All the fuzz, which is life. The crumbles*.

Life is made up of "*fuzz*" (*fnuller*); "*crumbles*" that viewed independently might strike us as futile, but from the perspective of life as a whole, carry immense importance. This, on the other hand, is seldom something that catches our attention. A couple of days away from the routinized way of being at home, even away from one's partner, can be a relief. But a constant and never-ending absence of this possibility is more painful. In *Solitary Confinement—Social Death and Its Afterlife* (2013), Lisa Guenther has provided an analysis of the effects of solitary confinement on the deepest layers of personhood, inspired by, among other sources, Levinas's account of ontological solitude and Merleau-Ponty's critical phenomenology of behavior. Drawing on interviews with current and former prisoners, Gunther (2013) argues that isolating people should be seen as an attack on the deepest layers of personhood and leads to what she calls social death. "To be socially dead is to be deprived of the network of social relations, particularly kinship relations, that would otherwise support, protect, and give meaning to one's precarious life as an individual" (p. xxi). Long-term isolated imprisonment causes sensory structures and cognitive resources to evaporate, and gradually, the prisoner's being-in-the-world begins to fragment, which leads to *depersonalization*. Apart from an anonymous voice hidden behind white walls, there is no one to respond to, and neither am I accountable for another. "What meaning can accountability have in a 23½ hour lockdown, when there is no one available to whom one may give an account of oneself?" (p. 222) Gunther asks with reference to Butler (2005), arguing that this form of penalty serves all other functions than promoting responsibility, which is the official impetus.

One would certainly be correct in objecting that it is quite the gap between isolated prisoners and bereaved life partners, but sometimes one needs to visit the extreme to understand the general. Despite obvious differences, the implications of her basic line of argument—that radical changes in our interpersonal and material world will restructure personhood,

can still be valid. Common ground can perhaps be found in the present global situation, during which the vast majority of this dissertation has been written. COVID-19 has radically affected our ways of moving around in the world and interacting with others, thereby restricting our sense of being a person, if only to a minimal degree. This light version of solitary confinement that many of us share should be enough to remind us about the inescapable suffering of being isolated from the world entirely. In short, we need someone to talk with to hold ourselves together, and returning to my informants now; this is what they lack.

An important aspect distinguishing bereaved life partners from prisoners in solitary confinement is that they usually do have someone *else* to talk to. Simon indicated in the quote above that he could call his sister, but because the "*fuzz*" he likes to talk about would probably be perceived as irrelevant from her perspective, he hesitates to do so. Nina touches on the same point when she says that:

> *Suddenly, the person that you could discuss everything with is not there any longer. It's just not the same talking to your mother or friends. They can never replace what has been lost, and it's not like they are around every day anyhow.*

A life partner, on the other hand, *is* around every day. And every day, one is allowed to express what, in the final end, is oneself. We *express ourselves*, and we do so in relation to others. This said, our life partner should not be seen as a reservoir for our everyday load. "*We spoke about everything between heaven and earth,*" Judith says. Both Simon and Jack saw in their lost partner a source of guidance and motivation to get things done, one where you not only received comfort and understanding but likewise "*a kick in the but*," as Jack puts it. Without this guidance, he could do anything, and if there is one lesion regarding freedom that can be learned from the bereaved situation, it is that total freedom is a demanding enterprise. In the next section on issues related to the domestic setting, we will discuss, among other issues, the perplexing freedom of not having to return home, of having no one that awaits me. While this section on everyday life has investigated the temporal aspects of partnerhood; *how* it happens, the next section will provide a closer understanding of the spatial aspects, *where* it happens.

3.5 Home

"We can tell whether we are happy by the sound of the wind," Adorno writes in one of the most beautiful lines in *Minima Moralia* (1951/2006) The wind "warns the unhappy man of the fragility of his house, hounding him from shallow sleep and violent dreams." For the happy man, on the other hand, "it is the song of his protectedness: its furious howling concedes that it has power over him no longer" (p. 49). Despite their different outlooks, both men *live* somewhere. "The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on earth, is *buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as mortal. It means to dwell," Heidegger writes in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1954/1971, p. 349). The existential-ontological meaning of dwelling is touched on already in *Being and Time*, in the discussion of Being-in. "In," Heidegger notes, "is derived from "*innan*," —"to reside", *habitare*, to dwell [sich auf halten]" (p.79), and he continues:

> The expression '*bin*' is connected with '*bei*' and so '*ich bin*' ['I am'] means in its turn "I reside" or "dwell alongside" the world, as that which is familiar to me in such and such a way. "Being" [Sein] as the infinitive of "*ich bin*" (that is to say, when it is understood as an *existentiale*), signifies "to reside alongside…", "to be familiar with…". "*Being-in" is this the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein, which has Being-in-the-world as its essential state.*" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 80)

To be in the world, in the way that Dasein exists, means to dwell, to be *in* the world; out among the things, our lives *take place*. In Heidegger's sense, living does not refer to having a house with four walls and a roof but points to how our way of being human is intimately connected to a place and how this place becomes indistinguishable from who we are. No matter if we sleep on cardboard in different locations every night, spend our entire lives as a nomad, or live in a suburban house, we *live* somewhere. Humans can hardly be anywhere for more than a couple of minutes before they begin to accustom themselves to the environment. The place where one spends the night, which could be seen as the common-sense definition of a home, is, with very few (but important) exceptions, the same place as last night.

In Kirsten Jacobsen's article *A developed nature: a phenomenological account of the experience of home* (2009), we find an account of being-at-home, inspired by Merleau-Ponty and Steinbock, that acknowledges the givenness with which our first home became our primordial world and likewise, how the remnants from this *arche*-home, will color every other habitual space. Even though babies are seldom born at home today, after

a couple of days or so, infancy takes place within the confines of a home. The cradle is our "first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard, 2014, p. 27), though our first home is very seldom our last. Growing up means growing out of this home and beginning to live a life of one's own. When and how this happens varies immensely between cultures, but few people spend their entire lives in the same household. This means that our being-at-home in adult age is not something given; a home is something that one need to create, in Jacobsen's (2019) terminology, part of our "developed nature" (p. 373). What Heidegger and the existential tradition has made indisputably clear is that existence is uncanny (*Unheimlich*); we do not *simply belong* to or in the world, and for adults, any being-at-home comes *after* this basic existential alienation. Anxiety provides us with existential insights otherwise precluded; our existence, essentially Being-towards-death, amounts to being thrown into a world on borrowed time. This is the background for our *making* ourselves at home in the world, an endeavor that will never be home-safe and always fragile. In Jacobsen's (2009) words, "We are responsible for making our home, for making ourselves at home, and this is something we must learn how to do, and that we learn to do with and through other persons. *Home is an accomplishment* [Emphasis added] (p. 362). My suggestion here is that the intersubjective aspect of being-at-home, its *shared-ness,* can be fruitfully developed with a point of departure in testimonies from people who have gone from living together to living alone.

A Shared Home

"*He is here, in the house that is ours. We bought this house 16, no, 17 years ago, and this is where we have had everything, right? This is our entire life. So, in that sense, he will always be here,*" Theresa tells me. Daniel is still there, in the house that has been the surroundings of their lives for 17 years, and from which she is reluctant to move for that very reason. The question remains, though, whether the house has now become "hers" or if it is still "theirs." To what extent does the absent presence with which Daniel is still around qualify him as an owner of the house? "I *think that it is all about making the house mine,*" Clara says. At this point, at our second interview, she has plowed her way through room after room to claim ownership over it. The very need for doing so points to how the domestic setting of theirs has been shared. It used to be *their* home. Teresa tells me that the togetherness that was mediated through the house was not dependent on the details or quality of the house itself. "*I've always felt that the most important feature of a home is the people you are with. I've never cared about whether we lived in*

a huge luxury house, a camper, or an apartment on the fourth floor." The places that we belong to are populated by the people we love: they manifest the fragile borders between self, other, and world. The life partner is dispersed out into the material world we call home, and both relating to and living in this space is an uncanny and spectral activity taking place in the blurry borderland between life and death. Before we can appreciate the meaning of this aspect of grief, we need to provide a more comprehensive account of what it means to live together and how this togetherness comes to be.

How, then, is a home created or developed? How do we grow to feel at home at a certain place? One answer could be found in the verb used to denote being at home, namely "living." We *live* somewhere, and where we live, we usually feel at home. Home is where life takes place. Obviously, life also takes place outside the sphere that one calls home, for some more than others, but the fact remains that everyone *lives* somewhere. Home, T.S. Elliot writes in *Four Quartets* (1941/1943), "is where one starts from" (p. 43). On a similar note, Alfred Schutz, in his essay on the *Homecomer* (1976) writes that "the home is starting-point as well as the terminus. It is the null point of the system of coordinates which we ascribe to the world in order to find our bearings in it" (p. 107). As Schutz points out here, home is both the starting and end point. It is the beginning as well as the end. Home is where one begins in the morning and returns in the evening. All our actions in the world are done against a latent background knowledge of having a home to return to. We do not detach from home just because we are not physically there. There is a "generative momentum of a homeworld [that] works through us even when we ostensibly leave it" (Steinbock, 1995, as cited in Jacobsen, 2009, p. 268). Knowing that the person who used to await me and who would call if I were late is no longer there brings an aura of sadness, not just over the time spent at home, but existence as a whole. There is no longer any place where I am truly welcome. In Levinas's analysis of home in *Totality and Infinity* (1991) we find a reference to this notion of hospitality:

> To exist henceforth means to dwell. To dwell is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of a being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome. (p. 156)

That home is where we are welcomed can be testified to by imagining not being welcome in one's home, which would probably amount to being homeless. Home is where we belong, and we can only belong for as long as

we are welcomed. The Woman (with capital W) play an important role in Levinas's analysis, but if we abstract from this gendered issue for a second and simply observe that for the participants in this study, home was populated by someone else. Even though single households are increasing according to some statistics, most people will at some point during their life share a home with another person and be familiar with the intimacy that it implies. Living together makes it very hard to be someone that you are not. One cannot be frontstage on backstage all the time.

Gaston Bachelard (2014) describes one's home as "the nest of mankind." With reference to a line from Adolpho Shedrow's poem *Berceau sans promesses,* and in line with the quote from Adorno that began this section, "I dream of a nest in which the trees repulsed death," he sees our home as a place providing life "in complete confidence" that "knows nothing of the hostility of the world" (p. 123). In Chapter 2, I referred to Butler arguing that precariousness is synonymous with birth and that this does not lessen the significance of all the lives that are *not* taken care of properly since this must be seen as a deformed kind of care, a precariousness not recognized as such. In this case, it is worth pointing out that all the people experiencing home as a frightening place, far from any "complete confidence," could be seen as a deformation of the existential need of belonging somewhere. In her discussion of the universality of being-at-home, Jacobsen (2009) correspondingly points out that it is not necessary "to say that we all have or have had an unproblematic experience of being-at-home or that we would define the particular character of our homes in the same way" (p. 357). Still, she does "wish to maintain that there is a fundamental human experience of home that, although it may find different expressions, is a *human* experience" (p. 357). This universality should be understood, though, in relation to our "'developed nature' […] and thus a nature always open to be developed anew" (p. 373). Who we are is a question of what we do, and that we live somewhere is a vital part of that life.

Leaving and Returning

When speaking together for the first time, Clara is devastated. She lost Michael a few months before the interview and for her, "*there is no future*." She is crying for the major part of the interview, and through her tears, she says that "*it is first and foremost the fact that there is no one that comes home.*" The sentence is uttered in the middle of descriptions of her work life, and at this point, I had not yet understood the profound meaning of sharing a home, so I did not pursue it further at this point. She tells me that she and

Michael, who traveled often in his work, had always called each other every day. On Tuesdays, when she worked late, he would always call her, asking where she was. She begins to laugh when telling me that "*he never figured that one out, even my colleagues would laugh about it.*" Clara misses the expectation and awaiting when Michael was coming home. Fridays were always their night together, where they would eat out or order takeaway. At this point, since his death, she fears Fridays like the devil. She would like to—and had done so until a couple of weeks before our interview—"*hide beneath a blanket and never come out again.*" She also misses Michael's phone calls when she was working late. Knowing that she could spend all the time in the world at her job or doing whatever without anyone caring is sheer torture. Clara longs to miss someone that was coming home and to be missed by someone when she was out.

Even though the loss of a life partner colors existence as such—pointing to grief as causing a more fundamental alteration of one's "mood", leaving and returning are times when "pangs of grief" (Parkes, 1972) still hit with paramount intensity. Rebecca, who also travels a lot, mentions that "*coming home after being away for a week, well knowing that 'it's great to be back with someone that you have missed'—that is all gone.*" Earlier in the interview, she mentions that when she goes away for a week, "*it's been so long, so I almost believe that he will be there when I return.*" The intercorporal aspects of her relationship with Eric are actualized when not being constantly confronted with his absence. Going away on her trips makes her body forget that he is no longer there, awaiting her when she gets home.

The lamp, Bachelard (2014) writes, "is the symbol of prolonged waiting" (p. 54). Someone leaving a light on, a note, or simply the fact that someone has been home during my absence—something that always will make *some* mark on this environment—is no longer a part of life. The home will look exactly the same as it did when I left it; no one has moved a pillow, made a mess in the kitchen, and no one awaits me. In Jack's words:

> *It's empty, if I am allowed to say that. It's empty to come home. That's where I feel it the most. When coming home from tennis or having visited some friends, you come home, and it is quiet as in the tomb. Then you can go to bed, sit down and read the paper, or whatever. It's empty here, and that gives me, every time, a feeling of longing, which is difficult.*

In Jack's world, the house is quiet as a tomb. The house has become partly a tomb, where he is confronted daily with the fact that his wife is dead. He tells

me about how he sometimes finds things in cupboards and other random places—things he has not seen since Catherine died. These things have not yet been transpired into the world without Catherine; they still belong to their common world, and that, he says, "*strikes one as lightning.*"[41] Jack also describes the random feeling of contingency upon returning home. There is no one to talk to, no one who requires or provides attention, so he can do anything and sit anywhere. It did not take him long to realize that going to bed early was a bad idea; that is where all the thoughts came sneaking up upon him, which now means that he stays up until late.

Upon leaving the house, our confidence and willpower are not unrelated to the security that comes with having a home to return to. No matter how this day will turn out, no matter how badly I will fail, no matter how hostile the world will show itself, I have somewhere to return. Tanya, an incarnation of an independent and professional career person, describes her and Fred's relationship as "teenage-like" since they would write text messages to each other after getting safely to work every morning. "*In one way or another, I really appreciated this… knowing that if I did not arrive, he would react.*" Every once in a while, when she arrives at work or is on her way home from somewhere, she still picks up the phone in order to write a text message, suddenly realizing: "*That's right, we don't do that any longer.*" Fred is dead and the dead, in Kierkegaard's words, "is a silent man." Even though remnants and traces of the other fill the world in general and our homes in particular, dead people do not respond to text messages.

3.6 Growing Old Together

We began this chapter with a discussion of how grief is pervaded by a longing for "the one"—a singular and irreplaceable loved life partner. A grief-stricken viewpoint, I argued, could inform our understanding of what was at stake in this type of relationship. Successively, I have delineated the life of partnerhood as one of sharing time and space. Being a life partner amounts to being seen by the other in a way that both opens and closes possibilities, establishing a strong sense of "we" and share an everyday life with everything that this comprises. Being a life partner also often means living together and

[41] Richardson (2014) provides an excellent analysis of the emergent memory objects through which bereaved life partners sustain a continued bond with their deceased partner. With reference to Jenkins (2004), she argues that since shared life is always "embodied in material practices in the sexual, domestic and economic practices of cohabitation" (p. 64), the loss of a person with whom one was at home, spread like rings on the water in this close intercorporeal environment.

sharing what we call a home. All this life is essentially temporal, and while the phenomenological and deconstructive tradition comprises multitudes of accounts of the first-person experience of time, few have investigated what shared time is and asked how it is possible in the first place. A socio-ontological perspective on subjectivity that seeks to show how we become part of each other must ask itself how time, and not only space, is shared. If "I am time" and "I am an other," this time must be *our time*. How is it, then, that we *share time*?

Following the death of her child, Riley (2019) looks back upon the time that they had together and observes that "you had aged in tandem with it" (p. 82). The loss of her child became the end of that tandem-like time, and she is left "in crystalline suspension." The question of how internal time consciousness can be seen as permeable, how we partake in each other's temporal experience, is a question that haunts Schutz's works. He does not suggest that my stream of consciousness coincides with that of another person, "which is the same as saying that I should have to be the other person" (Schutz, 1967, p. 99). The phenomenon that Schutz likes to draw attention to is how first-person experiencing, which requires distance and reflection to be understood, is grasped more directly by the other. "By merely "looking", I can grasp even those of your experiences which you have not yet noticed and which are for you still pre-phenomenal and undifferentiated" (p. 102). In the common tongue, others often understand me far better than I do myself. Schutz writes:

> In the living intentionality of this experience, I "understand" you without necessarily paying any attention to the acts of understanding themselves. This is because, since I live in the same world as you, I live in the acts of understanding you. You and your subjective experiences are not only "accessible" to me, that is, open to my interpretation, but are taken for granted by me together with your experience and personal characteristics. (p. 140)

On my analysis in this chapter, my claim would be that a life partner can be seen as the source of this type of deep understanding and the corresponding experience of belonging that it encompasses. By now, it should likewise be clear that individuality and we-ness are the opposite of mutually excluding. It is by giving myself to the other that I become who I am. I am yours, and you are mine. *We are*. And for as long as we are, we are in time, and we "are growing older together" (Schutz, 1967, p. 103). At the time of death of one of the partners, this mutual aging stops. We are no more. For the deceased, the realm of experience is extinguished, and for the surviving, there is no one

around to be *with*. Grief ultimately points to one person being alive, one person being dead, and the task of reckoning with this that falls on the one still living. In the second part of this dissertation, I will be reckoning with questions related to death and grief explicitly.

Part II: Finitude

In one of the introductory pages of *This Life*, Hägglund remarks that "to be finite means primarily two things: to be dependent on others and to live in a relation to death" (p. 4). Chapter 2 of this dissertation has explored what it means to be dependent and given over to others in general—how our lives begin and revive in a world of others, and how we become who we are through interactions with them. This socio-ontological understanding of the human being hinges on finitude since our dealings with others are always vulnerable, grievable, and precarious. In this way, finitude and relationality are necessarily and dialectically intertwined. In Chapter 3, I have provided a detailed analysis of partnerhood in light of this existential structure, aiming to localize and describe the nature of this way of living. Through a discussion of the irreplaceability of the one, the gaze, the meaning of we-ness, a shared everyday life, and finally a shared home, I have provided an account of what it means to share a life with another person. Hence, we are now equipped with a socio-ontological understanding of subjectivity and an account of the existentiality of partnerhood.

Halfway into a dissertation of grief, one might wonder what happened to that subject? Although it has not been analyzed specifically, I hope that the reader will have appreciated how the discussion so far has been grief-stricken in the sense of being told from the perspective of the bereaved. If I am correct in arguing that relationality and finitude exist in a dialectical relationship, there will be no sound way of treating one without the other, and the shift toward finitude in this second part will be a gradual one. We are still missing one cornerstone in the construction that will make us appreciate the full meaning of grief in Chapter 5, an analysis of what it means to live in relation to death. While finitude in the broad sense testifies to our dependence on others, the temporal limits of our lives are demarcated by death, which is the theme of Chapter 4. Here, my aim is to understand what it means to be mortal in general and how the death of a life partner affects one's relation to mortality specifically. Chapter 5 turns to grief specifically and outlines the social ontology of grief in light of the previous chapters.

Chapter 4: Death

"All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever present perils of life."

—Herman Melville

In what ways can grief inform our understanding of what it means to be mortal? "What do we know of death? What is death?" (Levinas, 2000, p. 11). That grief ultimately points to the fathomless mystery, or, in Levinas's words, "the scandal" of death tends to be forgotten in contemporary grief research, and the question of whether this is one of the consequences related to the individualization and psychologization of grief is worth posing. Grief, I would argue, encompasses one of the most profound experiences of human suffering not exempt from periods of hopelessness and even despair. Finding means of expression for these aspects can be difficult when our vocabularies of suffering are reduced to medical and psychiatric discourses (Brinkmann, 2014). The ongoing implementation of Prolonged Grief Disorder likewise calls for counter-discourses, and in this light, the present chapter focuses on what it means to be mortal and live in relation to death.

I begin section 4.1 by investigating the inevitability of death—the fact that death happens and the boundary situation in which the bereaved person will find herself. Section 4.2 outline the resoluteness of Jaspers and Kierkegaard's confrontational dealings with death. Section 4.3 exhibits our immediate reaction to someone dying—how far "understanding" and "acceptance" go, and approaches a phenomenology of the death bed. After this, I embark on a wide-ranging and primarily theoretically oriented discussion of death from a psychoanalytical, deconstructive, and existential-phenomenological perspective. Section 4.4 begins in Heidegger's notion of Being-with the dead and develops Derrida's hauntology in this light, guided by Schutz and Ruin. Sections 4.5 and 4.6 take a psychoanalytical perspective on death, investigating how the nature of the unconscious affects our possibilities of relating to negativity in general and mortality specifically. Section 4.7 examines deconstruction in a similar light, beginning in Derrida's writings on the aporia and ending in Hägglund's chronolibidinal reading of Freud. Section 4.8 makes up the empirical bulk of this chapter and deals explicitly with the question of death awareness. I develop a notion of *intergenerational death*

awareness, arguing that the imperative mark that the death of one's life partner makes upon the bereaved partner is mediated through common children (or significant others). In short, death awareness is mediated and acquires its bearing through the eyes of the ones still living. This chapter ends with a discussion of burial in section 4.9. Every culture known to man has had rituals surrounding death and dealing with the corpses, making burial an almost supreme existential universal. What can burial teach us about who we are?—and what can death teach us about being human?

4.1 The Inevitability of Death

"*It happened. Oscar died,*" Nina tells me. *Oscar is dead*. In and of itself, this three-word sentence opens up the enigma of how we share mortal life with each other. As grief-stricken, we ask ourselves who the other (Oscar) was, what it means to be (is), and not be (dead). "*Do you think differently about death, your own as well as others, following the loss of your life partner*?" is the question asked in different versions throughout my interview study? That is, does the death of someone else, in this case, one's life partner, alter their way of relating to finitude? A difficult question indeed. Every discourse on death is, from the very outset, inherently flawed. "It is well known that if there is one word that remains absolutely unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word 'death'" (Derrida, 1993, p. 22). Still, "there is death. And whatever is matters," as Lewis (1961, p. 68) puts it, something that every bereaved person knows all too well. Not only in times of a raging global pandemic but every day in every corner of the world, for reasons more or less necessary, people leave this world behind. They die. If there is such a thing as necessity, death could be the paradigmatic example. There are no black swans in the case of mortality.

No matter one's beliefs in an afterlife, we all have to grapple with the fact that existence, as we know it, *this life*, will have to end. Death, Hägglund (2019) argues, is necessary because, without this contrast, life would be something very different.

> My death is therefore the necessary horizon of my life. In spatial terms, the horizon is a condition of possibility for anything to be possible at all […]. The horizon of my death does not provide an *answer* to the question of what I ought to do with my life but renders intelligible how the *question* can matter to me. (pp. 200; 202)

In the summary of Chapter 2, I argued that human life is non-voluntary and vulnerable. The world that I am given over to is historical and relational. The process of becoming a person is inherently ethical, and my being is indistinguishable from what I do with my time. These four principles depend on the fifth principle, that all commitments are finite and can be lost at any moment. The driving force of life is the negativity inscribed at the heart of being, and the source of that force springs from death.

There was a time when I was not, and there will be a time when I am no more. Life always takes place between two abysses of nothingness, and what happens in between is always determined by a before *and* an after. I was given life, without any previous contract, amid all matters, as part of an unfolding historical process. Grasping this life as *mine*, *leading* this life is indistinguishable from the dawning realization that it is finite. It matters what I do with my time because my time is finite, and I am responsible for owning this life. To own one's life, as Hägglund and Butler have shown, always involves admitting to a dependency and given-over-ness that admits to others as an inherent part of who I am. My life is "my life" only for as long as it also belongs to someone else, and the taken-for-granted assumption that dying is something we do alone should perhaps be questioned. For as long as "we" are, would it not be reasonable to ask whether, to a certain extent, "we" die, and accordingly, how the loss of one person will pulsate like poisonous waves through the layers of relationality that environ every one of us? If we all are in this together, could it be that the price that we have to pay for never being alone is to admit that we partly diminish with every person who leaves this world behind?

"Death is a problem for the living. Dead people have no problems," Norbert Elias famously writes in *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1985/2010, p. 3), well aware that is far from a universal given. As Philippe Ariès has shown in his momentous *The Hour of Our Death* (1977/2008), widespread beliefs in an afterlife meant that death was, indeed, seen as a problem for the dead during a considerable amount of time in human history. It was the success of their prolonged journey that was the central issue and object of our prayers. Upon a secular note, though, death *is* a problem for the living, and most of all, the bereaved.

Taking one step back from this discussion of how religious faith and culture determine our notion of death and dying, it is worth questioning whether the very endeavor of formulating death as a problem might be misleading. Both "problem" or "project" suggests that there is a possible solution, that there would be an adequate, natural, or in any way "better" way of dealing with death (Derrida, 1993). And is there not, behind the complaints

that we live in a time incapable of handling suffering and negativity, a partly solution-based fantasy of a "golden age when every member of society faced death and loss with equanimity" (Walter, 2017, p. 3), a time when death was not a problem—when we had figured out a way of relating to finitude in "the proper way."

If our time is characterized by a diminished ability to face up to life's inherent difficulties, accepting the irremediable havoc of death would seem close to impossible. In a time of endless possibility, the impossible itself has become impossible. In both Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's writings of death, there is a shimmer of the possibility that has provided the existential tradition with rocket fuel of resoluteness and earnestness to keep this fantasy alive; a fantasy that has found its way into positive psychology as well as various branches of grief research (Sköld, 2020a). Deeply inspired by this tradition, one of the fundamental assumptions I had when approaching the interviews was that the experience of grief would result in an increased degree of death awareness. I thought that the participants would be more reflective in relation to death and dying following their loss. Accordingly, I asked them about this issue and was surprised when acknowledging that the way that they perceived death following the death of their life partner was often far from Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's accounts. To understand the background for these prior assumptions and the testimonies that sprung out as a response to these, I will begin to provide an account of how death has been understood in the existential tradition.

4.2 Confronting Death

In the existential tradition, it is a widely held assumption that dying the death of the other makes the paradigm of impossibility. I might sacrifice my entire life, both in the sense of giving every waking minute to another or in the sense of dying as part of saving her life. We could even commit suicide together with someone else without making our respective deaths collide. None of this changes the fact that, as Derrida puts it in *The Gift of Death* (2008):

> I know on absolute grounds and in an absolutely certain manner that I will never deliver the other from his death […] If something radically impossible is to be conceived of—and everything derives its sense from this impossibility—it is indeed dying for the other in the sense of dying in place of the other. (p. 43–44)

At the start of the second interview with the informants, I ask each of them how they are doing. In what often sounds like a brief descriptive statement, many of them tell me that, for the very least, they were still alive. "*I guess… we're still here*" (Teresa), "*We cannot stop, we're still here*" (Sarah), "*The short answer is that I am still here*" (Rebecca). Despite the fact that they might long for the stoppage of time, life goes on, and grief ultimately points to someone being alive and someone else being dead. And being dead, Alicia imagines, must be a piece of cake compared to the torments that she is going through at the moment. Speaking of how she, for the sake of her son, whom she imagines will perceive her way of grieving as an ideal, *has to* pull herself together and give the impression that life is still worth living, expresses how switching places would not be such a bad idea:

> *I have thought of it—numerous times. You know, the only aspect of anger that I have been in touch with in relation to Edward is: My god, I would like to switch places! Many times, you know, I would much rather have been lying three meters underground. Then he could have managed this fucking life. I would have traded without a second of doubt, any time! I've often thought that would be easy—being dead; I'm the one dealing with all the bullshit.*

Between these lines, we find the impossibility of doing the trading that Alicia talks about. A hermeneutically suspicious interpreter would suspect that her "*without a doubt*" would come along less easily if trading was, in fact, an option. As things are, it is *her* heart that is still pumping and her eyes that open to the world every morning—to yet another day without Edward. It is their partners, Daniel, Kristoffer, Eric, and Edward, who are dead. Theresa, Sarah, Rebecca, and Alicia are not.

If we are to believe Kierkegaard's account in *At the Graveside*, visiting the graves of their deceased husbands will be painful; they will encounter feelings of longing and an urge to see them again.[42] But all of this, Kierkegaard also says, remains on the level of "mood" (*Stemming*). There runs a non-compromising anti-romantic thread throughout Kierkegaard's writings that comes to the fore, not only in *Works of Love* but equally in this treatise, that could be aptly described as a "phenomenology of the graveside."

No matter our psychological state of mind, visiting the graveyard will function as an inescapable reminder that we are still here, alive, and in Kierkegaard's perspective, being alive always was a demanding endeavor. In

[42] We will encounter this question empirically in the section on burial at the end of this chapter.

Works of Love, being bound to another to the extent that her death makes one give up on love immediately places one in the category of despair. Romantic beliefs of finding home and sheltering in another human being constitute the lie that sheds an encounter with God, an encounter for "That Single Individual" (*hin Enkelte*) alone. Even though we have lost what we loved the most, we *ought* to continue to love because, from a Christian perspective, what we ultimately love in another human being, are the traces of God, our neighbor. Importantly, for Kierkegaard (2009b), this ongoing love is indistinguishable from grief:

> I do not have the right to harden myself against the pains of life, for I ought to sorrow; but neither have I the right to despair, for I *ought* to sorrow; furthermore, neither do I have the right to stop sorrowing, for I *ought* to sorrow. So it is also with love. You have no right to harden yourself against this emotion, for you *ought* to love; just as little do you have the right to misuse this emotion in you, of you *ought* to love. You ought to preserve the love, and you ought to preserve yourself and in and by preserving yourself to preserve the love. (p. 57)

All these "oughts" can be summarized by saying that the bereaved will find herself in a situation where she ought to live, and this becomes clear when visiting the graveyard. This is where we learn, according to Kierkegaard (2009a), with utmost clarity, that we are still alive, "this very day":

> If it is certain that death exists, which it is; if it is certain that with death's decision all is over; if it is certain that death itself never becomes involved in giving any explanation—well, then it is a matter of understanding oneself, and the earnest understanding is that if death is night then life is day, that if no work can be done at night then work can be done during the day; and the terse but impelling cry of earnestness, like death's terse cry, is: This very day. (p. 83)

Upon Kierkegaard's account, we will leave the cemetery gates and return to the world of the living, with one thing echoing in our minds: "This very day!" The life that I was given is still mine to behold, and since death never offers any explanations, the only option is to grasp life in all its chaos and uncertainty.

While according to the legend, *Memento Mori* was whispered by a slave in the ears of a Roman general, pointing to how they eventually would share a similar destiny, Kierkegaard directly opposes any "democratic" account of death. The indisputable fact that we are all dying does not make it any less singular: "The person who views death in this way is in a grudged

condition with regard to his spiritual life, he weakens his consciousness so it cannot endure the earnest impression of the inexplicable, so he cannot in earnestness submit to the impression but then also repressed the enigmatic (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 93). We should never forget that to be oneself in Kierkegaard's sense, is to be a creation in God's image. We are always *more* than ourselves and the very foundation of our being we owe to God. Confronting death is confronting the enigmatic, is confronting God. In a discussion of suicide, Critchley (1997) notes a similar tendency, albeit without any necessary reference to God. In suicide, "There is an attempt to abolish both the mystery of the future and the mystery of death" (p. 70). When committing suicide, we are advancing human agency in an area where the notion of agency itself is made obsolete. Death has no *noema* that our intentional act can aim toward; "the one thing thought cannot grasp is its own non-existence" (Bauman, 1992, p. 41). In short, death is a paradigmatic boundary situation, and for Jaspers, it plays a vital role in his analysis of Existenz.

* * *

After noticing that all life is situationally bounded, "since existing, means to be in situations," Jaspers (1970) defines boundary situations as part and parcel of a life filled with struggle and suffering:

> That I am always in situations; that I cannot live without struggling and suffering; that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die—these are what I call boundary situations. They *never change*, except in appearance. There is no way to survey them in existence, no way to see behind them. *They are like a wall we run into, a wall on which we founder* [emphasis added]. We cannot modify them; all that we can do is to make them lucid, but without explaining or deducing them from something else. They go with existence itself. […] Boundary situations will either fail to strike it or brush its unelucidated existence into a dull, helplessly musing stupor. (p. 178–179)

Confronting boundary situations is confronting the limitations of human agency; as such, it is an exemplary experience of finitude. Here, we "run into a wall" and "founder." The question of transcendence lies immanent in this situation; the question of whether we will remain fallen or rise again in the never-ending process of becoming that is the life of Existenz. Jaspers continues to notice that "this conquest of my own being occurs in absolute solitude" (p. 179) and that "the crucial boundary situation is my death" (p. 195). Death should not be understood objectively as a "fact of existence" but

existentially as a source of irreversibility that permeates existence. Death is always the death of someone—myself or the other, and it cannot be talked about in general terms. In confronting the mortality of the other, an unbridgeable gap opens. Jaspers's (1970) description of the farewell at the death bed is worth quoting at length while keeping Kierkegaard's visit to the graveyard in mind:

> The death of the closest, most beloved persons we used to communicate with is the deepest incision in phenomenal life. We stay alone when we must leave them alone at the last moment when we cannot follow. Nothing is reversible; it is the end for all time. The dying cannot be addressed anymore; everyone dies alone. The loneliness at the point of death seems total, for the dying as well as for the one left behind. The phenomenon of being together as long as there is consciousness, this sorrow of parting, is the last, helpless expression of communication." (p. 194).

Being together, Jaspers says, presupposes two realms of consciousness, two sources of intentionality, and any notion of continuing bonds will have to grapple with the question of *how* this relationality lasts following the death of one part. And *that* question carries within itself the question of the ontological status of the deceased.

Jaspers admits, *pace* Kierkegaard, that the experience of losing a person that we have loved will (and should) cause despair: "If I do not retain some sense of despair at the loss of those I loved most, I lose my Existenz as surely as one whom despair engulfs […] *Despair is the font from which we draw the assurance of being*" [emphasis added] (p. 199). That symptoms of despair are symptoms of the prominence of the person I lost does not change the fact that death, understood existentially, remains *my very own*. And confronting my death should be seen as a "*challenge*, rather, to live and to test my life in view of death" (p. 195). Courageously confronting death "is an attitude that lets me view death as an indefinite opportunity to be myself" (p. 199). From a Jasperian perspective, being myself is always to be at risk of suffering and despair, and when death comes, it will not be as a completion but a termination. We cannot abolish the scandal of death through a discourse of its so-called necessity; death remains a humiliation, but likewise, a humiliation we could not do without.

4.3 *As I lay Dying*

There is no doubt as to whether death in Jaspers and Kierkegaard's perspective, first and foremost, is my own and that the death of the other remains of a different quality, discharged of much existential weight. Phenomenological writings of death and dying, are full of first-person accounts of anticipating the bitter end, often haunted by anxiety. But few, if any, have provided a phenomenological investigation of what happens when the other person dies. If Kierkegaard formulated a phenomenology of the graveyard, I would like to suggest that Heidegger makes an important exception in this case and at least formulates the framework for what we might call a phenomenology of the deathbed.

Most of us have been there, and almost all of us will sit next to a person on the threshold of drawing their last breath. In the hours and days that follow, we will often stay by the corpse to say farewell. One last time. The atmosphere surrounding a dead person is incomparable and extremely difficult to verbalize. Within grief research, these accounts are almost non-existent, and one is referred to literary sources. Riley (2019) notes that the corpse no longer refers to anywhere or anyone:

> You see how the edge of the living world gives onto burning whiteness. This edge is clean as a strip of guillotined celluloid film. First came the intact negative full of blackened life in shaded patches, then abruptly, this milkiness. This candid whiteness, where a life stopped. Nothing 'poetic', not the white radiance of eternity – but sheer non-being, which is brilliantly plain. (p. 22)

The light-sweaty and gradually more yellowish skin of the dead person no longer calls for touch; it often seems repulsive and is cold as the grave. In her account of depression in *Black Sun—Melancholia and Depression* (1987/1992), Julia Kristeva notes that the aloofness of the severely depressed person paves its way into the bones. While that seems to be an adequate description of the lifelessness that clinically depressed people sometimes demonstrate, the corpse's coldness is of another world, a non-world; we are encountering a temperature that is not to be found anywhere on the scale of the living. If otherness ever meant anything, sitting beside a corpse is an experience of otherness *par excellence*.

Phenomenological interviewing begins with attaining vivid descriptions of first-person experiences. At our first interview, I ask Clara to provide an ampler description of going to the "six-hour room" for corpses

(*sekstimersstuen*). She had mentioned this at the beginning of the interview as part of a story about the circumstances of her husband's death.

> *It was so weird at the six-hour room because they are lying there with a rope around their arms. And it's… Because… I knew he was dead; I knew that he wasn't with us any longer, but it still felt unreal – with that rope and everything.*

The six-hour room relates to medical legislation requiring corpses to be placed in a special room for six hours after death has been confirmed, and the rope came into use after some tragic episodes of people being buried alive in the 19th century. Clara talks rapidly and jumps from one subject to another during this first interview. Since it is the first one of the study, I'm both nervous and insecure in my role as an interviewer, and therefore, reluctant to intervene. I still consider this topic interesting and cannot let go of it, so after some time, I ask her, "*May I return to the time when you went to the six-hour room? How did you experience that? Could you tell me something about how you felt at that point*?" Clara tries to answer, talking about the different circumstances until she suddenly says, crying slowly, "*I cannot tell you what I thought or felt at that point. I just remember the unpleasantness, right? […] It was a violent experience to be there*." In the second interview, she recalls this episode and particular question as one that she could not respond to. Despite my frequent guarantees that I was merely interested in the interviewee's experiences and that the content of these answers was interesting in any respect, Clara saw herself as responsible for providing useful information for my study. She was regretful about not having been able to live up to this. This one question was simply on the wrong side of possible accounts, and it was impossible to provide a more detailed description.

* * *

In an apparent lack of both scientific and first-person accounts of what actually goes on when witnessing the death of another, Heidegger's detailed description in §47 of *Being and Time* can carry us forward to a more comprehensive understanding of this most uncanny experience. For Heidegger, this uncanniness stems from the fact that, while the corpse is no longer a Dasein as Being-in-the-world, it is neither something merely present-at-hand. We treat the corpse with care and respect since they are "Dasein-having-been." "In the dying of the Other, we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as the change-over of an entity

qua Dasein's kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-Dasein" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 281).

Witnessing the other person dying is witnessing the *Mysterium Tremendum* of one person going from life to death. One *passes* away, and this passing is what we are trying to get some kind of grip on. It is possible to see a child be born, which likewise qualifies as a tremendously enigmatic event. The first breath of the child is breathtaking in and of itself, but that does not alter the fact that the child has been alive in the womb for quite some time. We are there at the moment of birth, but it is still a birth of someone *on its way*. When someone dies, we stand beside and witness the passing from life to death. Alicia refers to birth in her account of being at the death bed:

> *I am incredibly thankful for having the opportunity of being there when he died. I think that it has been… It's almost like attending a birth where… Birth gives life. Saying farewell is just as strong and loving and caring and warm—at least to me. To assist him in letting go, it's almost like getting the baby out during the contractions, right.*

Together with many others, Alicia sees her role in the process of Edward's dying as vital. Carl, whose wife was seemingly unconscious during her last days, tells me that "*I was there when she died, and I am certain that she knew that I was*." When I ask him why he thinks that he tells me that he had felt Susan squeezing his hand before she died:

> *I took her hand and said, "Squeeze my hand, please." I felt it like she knew I was there, and we knew each other so well. After having known each other for so long, it can easily be said to be a farewell. But it was more than that; I felt it like she knew I was there. Since we have always done everything together, she also wanted to leave while I was present.*

In line with the importance ascribed to being present at the death of their partners, others experience anger and remorse over being absent. Rebecca, who had carried an immense responsibility during Eric's disease, was tired to the point of exhaustion and had gone home to sleep one evening. During that same that night, Eric died at the hospital. Immediately after, she did not think about it but "*is being increasingly troubled*" by not having been present at his death. Why does it seem to be so important to be there? In Heidegger's account, there is more to this than a transition from something alive to something lifeless. The passage from life to death is not a clean-cut either/or, but a domain that remains an open question, and more importantly, in a dissertation on grief, an ethical calling to the one's still alive:

> This something [the corpse] which is just-present-at-hand-and-no-more is 'more' than a lifeless material Thing. In it we encounter something *unalive* [Unlebendiges] which has lost its life. […] The 'deceased' [Der "Vestorbene"] as distinct from the dead person [dem Gestorbenen], has been torn away from those who have 'remained behind' [den "Hinterbliebenen"], and is an object of 'concern' in the ways of funeral rites, interment, and the cult of graves. And that is so because the deceased, in his kind of Being, is 'still more' than just an item of equipment, environmentally ready-to-hand, about which one can be concerned. In tarrying alongside him in their mourning and commemoration, those who have remained behind *are with him*, in a mode of respectful solicitude." (Heidegger, 2008, p. 282)

While Heidegger's esoteric terminology has been subject to much criticism, the term "unalive" (*Unlebendiges*) does speak to his privilege in this context. The corpse is not alive, but neither is it dead matter.[43] It is *supposed* to be alive, but it is not; it is *unalive*. In the following passage, Heidegger notes that this being alongside and Being-with the dead deserves attention in its own right. While this line of thought is not further developed in *Being and Time*, it becomes a key passage for an understanding of Derrida's notion of hauntology and Ruin's extended social ontology, which I turn to in the following section. Heidegger writes:

> In such Being-with the dead [dem Toten], the deceased *himself* is no longer factually 'there'. However, when we speak of "Being-with", we always have in view Being with one another in the same world. The deceased has abandoned our '*world*' and left it behind. But *in terms of that world* [Aus ihr her] those who remain can still *be with him*. (Heidegger, s. 282).

In mourning and commemoration, we are *with the dead* in a way that blurs the border between the living and the dead. In relation to grief, this question hinges on how this Being-with is possible, how it is lived, and how it remains both similar and different from the Being-with that occurs among the living. We must stumble and ask, with Kierkegaard (2009a): "But is there no difference between life and death?" (p. 81). The question that we need to ask is: What does it mean to be *with* the dead?

[43] On a similar, yet radically different note, Paul Ricoeur, in *Oneself as Another* (1990/1992) writes about the human fetus: "It is difficult not to ask what sorts of being they are, whether they are neither things nor persons" (p. 270).

4.4 Being with the Dead

The endeavor carried out in Chapters 2 and 3, the attempt to ground human relationality in a socio-ontological perspective by arguing that our lives are intertwined, is one thing. It is a different and more difficult task to ground this Being-with in a form of sociality that includes the dead and not yet born (Ruin, 2018, p. 81). Yet, this exactly what the theory of continuing bonds set out to do, "recognizing how bonds formed in the past can inform our present and our future" (Klass et al, 1996, p. 17). The dead, it is argued, are not stored passively on the selves of history but play an active role in the lives we live. In a recent publication (Klass & Steffen, 2018), it is likewise suggested that correlated ontological questions would demand further attention from this perspective. And no wonder, one might say. After all, we are dealing with the "being" of the dead, which seems to be at best difficult and at worst a contradiction in terms. My suggestion here is that Heidegger's phenomenology of the deathbed can inform us further in this regard.

According to Ruin (2018), what Heidegger is indicating in the quotation above is not merely "a marginal phenomenon on the fringe of authentic finite existence," but the very opening to "the space of historicity and of the historical as a social ontological, and thus also as a *haunto-logical* problem of how humans are with those *having-been*" (p. 5). The socio-ontological character of historicity that Ruin refers to inevitably transcends the border between the living and the dead. The "social fabric" of which we are made comprises traces of the ones that have left this world behind and, viewed from the natal side, the ones who will wander this earth one day. We become who we are in an ongoing and never-ending dialogue with our predecessors, contemporaries and successors (Schutz, 1967, pp. 207-214). Living on, or rather *with* after the loss of a life partner means engaging not only in an intrapsychic dialogue but also in a historical, material, and embodied Being-with.

In the perspective of the living, Ruin (2018) reminds us,

> The dead are pitiable, always weaker than the living whose blood their shadows need in order to be heard. But from the perspective of the dead and the dying, the living are just short, flickering lights waiting to take their place among them in the temporality of having-been (p. 14).

We all experience moments when life stands still: looking up at the night sky, into the eyes of a new-born child, or standing perplexed the second after being inches from getting run over and killed by a car, moments where we fleetingly grasp that being us is being "short flickering lights," "a speck of dust on the

scale of geological time" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 3). Before we know it, it will be our turn to join the rank of the dead.

But let us linger a while at a deathbed. After all, we are still here, and grief remains an issue for the living. In the perspective outlined by Heidegger and Ruin, grief is not primarily about a "me" grieving a "you." And perhaps what we experience at the deathbed of a loved one is not a distanced phenomenon of utmost solitude in the way that Jaspers describe it. And Kierkegaard's jubilatory exit from the graveyard: "This very day" might not be the most accurate descriptions of our relation to the dead and dying. Perhaps it is about time to revise the saying that we are born among others but depart alone. Perhaps finitude is better conceived of as shared and dying a communal process. Perhaps the utmost distinction between life and death needs to be rethought, and grief can provide us with the key to doing just that.

In *Specters of Marx* (2006) Derrida begins and ends in *Hamlet*. Time, we are reminded of on the first page, "is out of joint." And on the last, we are addressed as scholars and encouraged to at least try to find a language for the many ways in which the dead haunt the world of the living: "Thou are a scholar; speak to it, Horatio" (p. 221). The hauntological structure of history should be seen in light of the relentless spacing and impossibility of any presence that we identified in Chapter 2. For Derrida (2006), this opening installs a sense of responsibility at the heart of historicity. While it is given *that* we cannot inhibit a social reality not permeated by the ranks of the dead, *how* we answer to that predicament is a question concomitant with the opening of an ethico-ontological horizon:

> Without this *non-contemporarily with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither? (p. xvii)

This hauntology (p. 10) or spectrology (p. 132) then implies that no form of inheritance is thinkable without "a call to responsibility" (p. 114). Humans become who they are in and through an obligation to answer to the ones who are no longer here, without whom there would be no world, and because of whom there is a world of never-ending conflict and war. But then again, who is to be held responsible for what? In *Tragedy—The Greeks and Us* (2020), Critchley offers a tragic reading of human nature, deeply rooted in fate: "The overwhelming experience of tragedy is a disorientation expressed in one

bewildered and frequently asked question: What shall I do?" (p. 4). Fate becomes relevant in this perspective since, *no matter* what we do, things go wrong, and tragedy continues to haunt us. And perhaps a dissertation on grief needs to raise, once more, Ann Carson's questions from *Grief Lessons* (2008): "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief" (p. 17).

* * *

If part of what it means to be human is to navigate this spectral meadow, and grief is inherent to that endeavor, it is not only compatible with human flourishing but a straight-forward expression hereof. Ruin and Derrida's important move is to place grief amid an equally ontological, sociological, historical, and archeological nexus, insisting that the key for an ethical understanding of ontology depends on this very project:

> The continued challenge is to think and act in a nonreactive and non-reactionary way to this condition. In doing so, we have to continue to respond to these questions: How far do we carry the dead, and when do we cease to carry them? What monument do we create for the dead, and which of their monuments do we allow to perish or even destroy? Through what means and technologies and through which artifacts do we seek to continue to live? Where do we draw the border between our dead and the dead of the others, and to what consequence? The different responses given to such questions will structure the material and intellectual landscape of the living, not only in terms of their archives, memorials, and graveyards but also in their rituals and means of learning and ultimately in the shaping of their political communities. (Ruin, 2018, p. 199)

In a time where statues with colonial, racist, and sexist history are heavily debated, these words will seem perfectly understandable. The always ongoing discussion of who we are is indistinguishable from who we wish to become, and the question of whether this cause is better served by keeping or demolishing these statues often seems urgent. Grief is ethical through and through because life is ethical through and through. And life is ethical through and through because there are no ready-made answers to the questions that Ruin poses. Every person and every community will need to ask themselves and reckon with the questions of how they seek to continue to live. What is important here is not the inevitable tensions between these levels but the fact that they are asked within historical boundaries defined by what went before. *My life* is a dialogue with a world that points to everything that came before

me and, which we are becoming increasingly aware of, a future that is never given. In debates on climate change and the ecological crisis, much dissatisfaction is expressed regarding the inability to take proper action. While this is a relevant political concern, it tends to overshadow the fact that many of us seem actually and genuinely to care. It *matters* to us that future generations will have the possibility to live meaningful lives, and we are becoming increasingly willing to make sacrifices within the one life that we have been given for this to happen. I mention this example to indicate that our obligations are not only *necropolitical* but likewise *natalpolitical*, an aspect that is mentioned but not explored further in Ruin's book. Grief is one of the situations where mortality and natality will strike at once. One form of life has come to an end, and another will begin. How that is dealt with is the subject for the next chapter. But first, we must linger a while in the valley of the shadow and ask how death is understood.

4.5 Understanding Death

Philosophy defines itself, from Plato, over Augustin and Thomas Aquinas, to Heidegger, Derrida, and Hägglund, as an art of dying, as a *Melethe Thanatou,* or an *Ars Morendi.* Learning how to die the proper death seems to be indistinguishable from the love and struggle for truth. Whereas for Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers, death is first and foremost my own, Derrida and Ruin opens up to an understanding of finitude as inherently shared: "We do not overcome the finitude of death; we share it, as we share it with the life to which we give birth and for which we too will belong with those having-been." (Ruin, 2018, p. 14). Grief is one occasion where we are forced to learn "the art of learning how to live with the dead and to share the earth with those who have been" (p. 14). Ruin's discussions of grief are often filtered through the destiny of the "necropolitical heroine," Antigone, and her struggle for the right to bury her brother, Polyneices, despite Kreon's prohibitions against doing so. In other words, her right to care for the dead. The many readings of Sophocles' *Antigone* (Hegel, 1807/1979; Butler, 2000; Sjöholm, 2004), and the insistence with which the story prevails speaks both to the richness of this text and the timelessness of questions that it raises.

Now, the hauntological dramas that Ruin places on the battlefield of human history are equivalently played at the death beds of every person who leaves this world. The work of mourning, which for Hegel (1979) is paramount to the work of spirit as the continuous struggle between suppression and resurrection in the space opened up between the two paradigmatic deaths of the West, the killing of Socrates and the crucifixion of

Christ (Malabou, 2001; Comay, 2011), also takes place at the death bed when Simon, Judith, and Rebecca are bidding their last farewell, and on the living room floor when they deal with the belongings of their loved ones. What to keep and what not to keep? How to deal with everything that has been left behind? What and how to remember and what and how forget?

The memory of a loved one will be, for a considerable amount of time, blended with the pain of losing and the unanswered questions that any bereaved person will be left with. During the first round of interviews, several informants gave voice to feelings of being detached from reality, of *not* being able to comprehend what had happened:

> *I have named the first year: "It's a lie." It's a lie that Susan no longer sits at the couch reading the paper. Of course, I knew very well that it's not the case, but that's how I felt during the first six months.* (Carl)

While Carl has been having trouble getting it straight that Susan, whom he has spent three-quarters of his life with, is no longer around, he is testifying to a dawning sense of realization throughout these interviews. When I ask Alicia about when and how she began to understand what had happened, she remains quiet for some time before saying,

> *I think that the best answer I have is that it happens all the time. I cannot tell you that it happened then and there. It was not when the casket was brought down in the ground, nor was it when I saw the corpse. No, it comes gradually.*

In Kübler-Ross's (1970) cycle of death/grief, the first stage of *denial* is characterized by avoidance, confusion, shock, and fear. While this model is probably far from universally representative, criticisms have often focused on the later stages of resolution or acceptance. The line between modern and postmodern conceptions of grief is often drawn between frameworks operating with a final end to the process and others that emphasize a more dynamic, circular, and never-ending process (Stroebe et al., 1992; Valentine, 2008). While denial is often seen as belonging to the first outdated models, these interviews should make us cautious of eradicating it. Following the understanding of relationality outlined so far, it would indeed be surprising if one, overnight, would "accept" that the person that one shared a life with was gone. If my reading is anywhere near correct, grief changes who we are. But it does so, not because a trigger in our brain is turned on or off, but because our lives changes. And life takes time.

* * *

In many ways, death remains the "ultimate humiliation of human reason" and marks the limit of any understanding. The reasons why death cannot be grasped have shifted from Epicurus and Kant, to Levinas and Blanchot. The dawning realization that Alicia pointed to above can be understood from a psychoanalytical perspective, a clear-cut example of *Nachträglichkeit*; "it happens all the time". According to Freud, no event is understood or even experienced immediately but makes up a dynamic entity that acquires its psychical significance and reality in light of other events in our continued life. While Freud focuses explicitly on traumas and their prolonged effects on our mental functioning, we might note that with regard to losing a life partner, it is through the confrontations with various aspects of the lifeworld hitherto shared that death becomes real, that death *take place*. To what extent this takes place and with which pace is a contingent question. What Joan Didion (2006) has named "the year of magical thinking" could often be seen as an indispensable way of dealing with the loss. Sometimes, our minds need to be protected, and, as Walter (2017) note, with reference to a study of Holocaust survivors' adjustment to post-war life, "repression can be a highly effective defense mechanism" (p. 28).

> *You know, the deep grief that I had when you came the first time, and the time after—I can… handle it now. In the beginning, I could not enter our bedroom without wanting to die. I don't experience that today.* (Mary)

Shortly after uttering this, Mary suggests that we see the bedroom together—maybe to prove her point, that she was no longer afraid of entering it, maybe because it remains difficult to say everything in words. The digital recorder stays on the table while we go see the bedroom. Mary has, like several of the participants, had the double bed replaced by a single size. The empty space beside her had screamed too loud, made the absence far too present (Fuchs, 2018).

Iris has taken more long-term action, and when I come for the third time, she is still sleeping on the traveling-bed, that she installed in the living room. The bedroom is still forbidden territory, and I ask her if she thinks that she will ever enter the room again:

> *I: Yes, because the traveling-bed is not that great (laughs)*
> *A: So, if I would come visit one more time, you might have moved into the bedroom?*
> *I: Some things take time, you know.*

While the task we set ourselves upon the death of others is to acknowledge the fundamental difference between us and them and ultimately face up to the fact that the other is dead, things always turn out to be more difficult. *"Some things take time, you know."* One important reason is that continued existence always carries traces of the other, and that she remains present through a being-in-the-world that was inherently shared. Being dead does not amount to being absent from the world of the living, despite, as Ruin writes, they will always need the blood of the living "in order to be heard." For as long as that bedroom is there, it is *our* bedroom, for as long as those children are alive, they are *our* children, and for as long as *I* am, I will be sedimentation of the life that *we* have lived. After being "struck by the force of so much being with the dead," Riley (2019) asks herself what "finally" being dead would actually amount to and link it to forgetting: "Perhaps only through forgetting the dead could it become possible to allow them to become dead. To finally be dead" (p. 52). On a similar note, Kathleen Higgins (2013) notes that "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" (p. 172). While Nietzsche (1967, p. 58) identifies the chronic inability to forget and let go of the past as one source of our modern misery, the question still remains open, what we would be without our memories?

C.S. Lewis (1961) is less optimistic about the role of remembering:

> What pitiable cant to say: 'She will live forever in my memory!' *Live*? That is exactly what she won't do. You might as well think like the old Egyptians that you can keep the dead by embalming them. Will nothing persuade us that they are gone? What's left? A corpse, a memory, and (in some versions) a ghost. All mockeries or horrors. Three more ways of spelling the word *dead*. It was H. I loved. As if I wanted to fall in love with my memory of her, an image in my own mind. It would be a sort of incest. (p. 19)

At the surface of it, it might seem like he's contradicting Riley and Higgins on every point and that we accordingly would be stranded with two radically different notions of the relation between memory and living-on. Considering the two forms of relationality encountered in Chapter 2, where we are both set free and bounded by the other, a more generous reading is possible. On the one hand, the other that I will never know entirely, who forever eludes my grasp, is no longer here. She is more absent than ever, her otherness more intensely felt, the first-person perspective in which I was seen and loved for reasons I never understood is gone. Furthermore, the very possibilities of leading the life that we shared are lost forever. On the other hand, the mark that she has left on who I am, and our world, is everywhere to be found. I am

still her to a certain extent, and the answer to Knausgaard's question about "what has engraved itself in my face" is always the other. She is here, in every vein of my body, and any intentions of losing this grip entirely are flawed time and time again. Grief is partly a question of taming this ghost, of "learning to live with ghosts" (Derrida, 2006, pp. xvi-xvii).[44]

4.6 Being immortal

A chapter on death will inescapably be a whirlwind of mysteries. We will always be dancing around the fire, and for as long as I am concerned, it could be no other way. So far, I have offered a reading of Jaspers and Kierkegaard's enunciating death as, first and foremost, my own. While this is along the lines of the common readings of Heidegger's death analysis, I have subsequently shown that our being with the dead complicates this question and opens up to a socio-ontological understanding of historicity that necessarily blurs these borders. In this section, dealing with death from a psychoanalytical perspective, difficulties of a different kind will arise. A close reading of Freud's thinking on death will pave the way for Hägglund and Derrida in the following sections. After that, we will, finally, be ready to take on the question of death awareness and how it is related to grief.

In Chapter 2, we saw how the utmost reasons for the inability to let go are the melancholic structures that ground the subject. The flipside of the fact that I inevitably lose part of myself through the other's death is that I sustain part of the other in and through my way of being, blurring any clear-cut border between mourning and melancholia. The question that arises from Freud's early text on mourning is not how to draw the magical line between successful and unsuccessful mourning, but the question of *who I am*. The death of a beloved confronts us with the mystery of relational life and the myriad questions that have been necessarily silenced during our time together, questions too close to ever be posed.

"The unconscious does not believe in its own death; it acts as though it were immortal," Freud notes in *Reflections on War and Death* (1915/1918, p. 62). We are, Freud suggests, not only unwilling to acknowledge that time will come to an end but structurally prohibited from doing so. The reasons why this bad faith is inescapable can be found in the constitution of the unconscious. It is well known, and often portrayed as an archetypal example

[44] See also Loewald (1980, Chapter 15), Lear (2018, Chapter 11), and Chapter 5 in this dissertation.

of the speculative character of psychoanalysis, that Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1922) formulates the death drive as "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (p. 36). At the bottom of psychic life lies a blind and inexorable force that aspires to nothing but the removal of all tension, which is to say life itself. "*The goal for all life is death*," Freud (1922, p. 47) writes, and despite knowing nothing about this, we are heading headlong toward where we came from, life being nothing but a "detour." It is important to point out that this death drive is unconscious, and the "unconscious mental processes are in themselves 'timeless'" (p. 32). For Freud, this first of all means that unconscious events are not "arranged chronologically; time alters nothing in them, nor can the idea of time be applied to them" (p. 32). There is not a before and after, and what happened 50 years ago is often more present than what happened yesterday. Second, the lack of time implies that the unconscious processes are exempt from negativity; "we never discover a 'no' in the unconscious" he writes in *Negation* (1925, p. 239), and thirdly, laws of contradiction do not apply on an unconscious level. Someone could, to take a relevant example, be both dead and alive at the same time. Freud (1918) writes:

> What we call our unconscious, those deepest layers in our psyche which consist of impulses, recognizes no negative or any form of denial and resolves all contradictions, so that it does not acknowledge its own death, to which we can give only a negative content" (p. 62).

What are we to do with this? Does not this entire dissertation rest upon the assumption that mortality is one of the cornerstones of human life, and one of the few things that we can be certain of is that we are dying. Is Freud not formulating yet another version of Epicurus's often-quoted saying, "that for as long as I am, death is not, and when death is, I am not"? The *Carpe Diem* attitude surrounding this statement has been the target of much of the existential movement, and according to Jaspers (1970), nothing but a sophisticated form of death denial. Referring to the Epicureans specifically, he writes that "they seem to look death in the eye, but in effect, they make me only more oblivious of its essence. They ignore that there are things to be finished, that I am not through, that I still have to make amends" (p. 197). Death is a task here and now, unbeknownst, our inability to imagine, understand, or comprehend it.

What Freud problematizes is the assumption that "anything deeper than superficial conscious lip service paid to the intellectual acceptance of the truth that 'all men are mortal'" (Johnston, 2014, p. 218) would be possible and have any real effect on our lives. The "knowledge" that we have of the

realities of dying is shallow, to say the least. And taking a step back from the resolute discourse pervading many readings of death, we might wonder this is not a convincing reading. Do we *really* believe in death? We become ourselves in a world that is compact with meaning. There is no hiding place for all the significance surrounding us; we grew up to live and cannot do otherwise. Death, on the other hand, cannot be imagined and is the very incarnation of meaninglessness. Upon this reading, life is *not* fueled by utmost finitude but by a sober belief that it will *continue*. We all live as though we were immortal, and the stories we tell ourselves about how the whole endeavor might end at any moment remain existential bedtime stories that serve only to remind ourselves of being alive. Going to bed in the evening, we picture the day that is to come upon awakening, and life, in general, might be seen as a long stream of dreams and hopes for the future. Since, for Freud, jokes often carry more truth than any scientific discourse ever will, it might, for epistemological reasons at least, be suited to refer to one of them here. During our last interview, Sarah mentions a saying that her aunt often told:

> *I remember that my aunt often told my uncle that "if one of us die before the other, I'll move to Spain!" (laughs). No, seriously, that's how I thought it was—for some reason, I thought, like everyone else, that we would both be alive forever.* [45]

Upon the death of Kristoffer, this belief can no longer be withheld. The fundamental assumption of immortality that pervaded their life is gone: "*Saying that this happens to other people doesn't work any longer. That's long gone*". Asking Nina whether she sees herself as more vulnerable upon the loss of her partner, she likewise compares her experience with that of others, relating it to immorality:

> *What I sometimes miss is that feeling of immortality, you know. Sometimes, people, the lucky ones, they lack this perspective. So, I think that it's a very relevant question that you are asking. I have surely become more vulnerable because I have seen what I have. And that pain will always live within me. And it will be awakened from time to time.*

Severe grief excludes us from the exclusive club of immortals. Freud is well aware of the fact that illusions of immortality are hard to sustain at the deathbed but solves this problem by suggesting that this is where beliefs in an

[45] To my great excitement, I realize (after writing these lines) that Freud tells a regionally different (This time, there is a widower who is moving to Paris), but essentially similar joke on the final pages of *Reflections on War and Death* (1918, p. 67).

afterlife kick in. Speaking of "the primitive man" witnessing the death of the other, Freud (1918) writes that "his whole being must have revolted" since he was forced to accept that "everyone of these loves ones was a part of his own beloved self" (p. 52). Religious beliefs arise, according to Freud, from an unwillingness to let go of the other and the part of oneself that belonged to him or her. Even more peculiarly, Freud suggests that the often-evil character of these demons has its origin in the ambivalence of the earlier relationship. The superego, then, is a product of death denial. Admittingly, this form of denial does not presuppose a religious framework. From a more secular perspective, Robert Hertz writes in *Death and the Right Hand* (2004) that "we cannot bring ourselves to consider the deceased as dead straight away: he is too much part of our substance" (p. 82).

Sarah and Nina still miss the innocence that characterized existence before their respective loss. Life in "bad faith" would every day be better than the disenchanted suffering of bereavement. The category of "the lucky ones" that Nina mentions is worth pursuing further. Even though the world wherein their losses have taken place is a world where a great number of people die every day, and they are part of the club of mortals encompassing all of us, there is a feeling of isolation often expressed. When grief is voiced in public, it is often claimed that a greater common awareness of finitude and the mark it leaves on people would contribute to a more inclusive and tolerant community. Indeed, the research center that frames this dissertation has as one of its explicit goals to investigate "how it is possible to accept and make room for grief in a time when people avoid relating to death and instead seek to eliminate all types of distress" (The Culture of Grief, p. 3). Several of the informants have signed up for the study since it is seen as a channel to make the voice of the bereaved heard in a time where they feel invisible: "*Do we have a grief culture in Denmark*?" Nina asks and answers the question herself: "*I don't know if that is the case. I don't think there is any room for me in this world. Yes, we have some rituals. But after the burial, you're on your own.*"

Being on your own is demanding, especially if you are accustomed to having a "rock," which is the term she often uses when referring to Oscar. Seen as a boundary situation, grief amounts to running head-forward into a wall or having the carpet dragged away from underneath one's feet. "One finds oneself fallen" (Butler, 2016, p. 22), and it is the process of rising again that many a bereaved person today imagines would be easier in a more grief-friendly cultural climate. How then, we might legitimately ask, would this world, society, or culture be configured? Sociologists like Ernest Becker and Robert Hertz have famously argued that the primary purpose of culture is to keep death at the doorstep. In this light, any death-friendly society would be a one incapable of fulfilling one of its basic functions. Still, could we not

imagine a relation between an affirmation of life on the one hand, and an acceptance or at least tolerance for the fact that death hits us all in various ways on the other? And is there not an important difference between *constitutively expecting immortality* and *momentarily forgetting about mortality*? Freud (1918) voices similar questions at the end of the text that was written explicitly in response to the new magnitudes of death that the first world war had brought about. His war, our pandemic, and my interviewees' grief all have, in their various ways, made us acutely aware of the fact that death will continue to haunt us, and Freud does seem inclined to admit that repression is not the only and certainly not the best solution given these circumstances. There is, despite unconscious resistance for acknowledging so, there might be a more "honest" option, and this honesty, he says, might contribute to making life more "bearable." Since "to bear life remains, after all, the first duty of the living" (p. 71), one could argue that within a psychoanalytical perspective as well we *ought* to face up to a finite reality. Reformulating an older maxim on the last lines, Freud concludes by: "If you wish life, prepare for death" *(Si vis vitam, para mortem*). The important question still remains: how is that preparation carried out?

4.7 The Aporetic

So far, we have encountered death from an existential-phenomenological and psychoanalytic perspective. Before turning to the empirical investigation of death awareness, I will outline a deconstructive approach to death, drawing primarily on Hägglund and Derrida. In many ways, this will nuance the eclectic toolbox since they both position themselves in opposition to the already mentioned strands, Derrida in relation to Heidegger, and Hägglund in relation to Freud.

Being-towards-death is Heidegger's attempt to think the existence of Dasein as a whole and death become the possibility *par excellence* of this endeavor; "Death exemplarity guides the existential analysis," as Derrida (1993, p. 63) puts it. Being-towards-death does not denote the end of Dasein but refers to "is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 289). Being-towards-death is a way of life. The question that Derrida explores in *Aporias* (1993) is how Heidegger's fundamental ontological project of formulating the question of being anew hinges on the death analysis generally and the distinctions between proper dying (*Sterben*),

perishing (*Verenden*), and demising (*Ableben*) in particular.[46] While it is generally accepted that Being-towards-death plays an important role in Heidegger's existential analytic, Derrida (1993) pushes the point even further, arguing that if "the rigor of these distinctions was compromised […] the entire project of Dasein, in its essential conceptuality, would be, if not discredited, granted another status than the one generally attributed to it" (pp. 31-32). Being-towards-death is the key to Heidegger's philosophical endeavor in *Being and Time*, and an uncontaminated proper dying (*Sterben*) is, therefore, crucial.

The question that Derrida poses is how death has been used to demarcate the difference between nature and culture, between the animal and the human, between self and other and between truth and non-truth. Heidegger's discourse of death repeats a philosophical enthrallment for "death as such" that in its pureness marks what is proper human and what is not. Derrida voices a skepticism—repeated by Critchley (1997)—about the possibility to "assume my finitude affirmatively as a source of meaning in the absence of God" (p. 24), that is, to see death as a source of authenticity and guidance with regard to how we ought to live and act. Within Kierkegaard's, Jaspers's, and Heidegger's perspectives, there is only a proper "I" following a confrontation with one's own death. I am touched by others, but death as such, *proper dying*, remains my very own:

> In *Being and Time*, the existential analysis does not want to know anything about the ghost [*revenant*] or about mourning. Everything that can be said about them, as interesting as it may sometimes sound, would certainly stem, in Heidegger's view, from derivative disciplines such as psychology or psychoanalysis, theology or metaphysics." (Derrida, 1993, p. 61)

In Ruin's reading, this is not entirely true. There remains a blurriness and openness to the other in Heidegger's text that Ruin seeks to expand as a more fundamental-ontological condition of Being-with the dead. But within Heidegger's analysis, death remains my very own, and the foundational status of Being-with does not seem to alter this fact. The core of Derrida's critique is a questioning of the thickness of Heidegger's notion of mineness (*Jemeiningkeit*). If I am never myself but always filled with others and traces from earlier relations, the question of what proper dying refers to becomes

[46] 'Demising' (*Ableben*) is described as an intermediate phenomenon between perishing and proper dying. Literally, it means "living out" one's life, to "leave life" or "walk away from life". While Dasein never perishes, it demises, but "only for as long as it is dying" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 291) that is, proper dying.

more puzzling. According to Derrida, Heidegger's analysis is contaminated by the fundamental difference that lies at the heart of any self, the fact that I am always more than myself. "I" am always marked by an exteriority or otherness that forever eludes my grasp:

> If *Jemeiningkeit*, that of Dasein or that of the ego […] is constituted in its ipseity in terms of an originary mourning, then this self-relation welcomes or supposes the other within its being-itself as different from itself. And reciprocally: the relation to the other (in itself outside myself, outside myself in myself) will never be distinguishable from a bereaved apprehension. *The relevance of the question of knowing whether it is from one's own proper death or from the other's death that the relation to death or the certitude of death is instituted is thus limited from the start* [Emphasis added] (Derrida, 1993, p. 61).

A constitutive otherness at the heart of the self excludes any relation to myself *as* myself, and equally, my death as a delineated project that can be resolutely tackled. An anticipatory mourning is the condition of possibility for all experience, including the egoity of the ego, and in this perspective, any notion of "my death" becomes an *aporia*.

Derrida (1993) distinguishes an aporia from a project or problem that presupposes a delimitated task or solution that can be solved. In the case of an aporia, the very formulation of the problem is excluded; it denotes a "non-passage" where we are "singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable of even sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the interiority of a secret" (p. 12). Death is the very paradigm of an aporia, a place where our dependency, given-over-ness, and lack of omnipotence becomes evident. In confronting death, we do not know, and there is no way of affirming it in a proper, resolute, authentic, or *Eigentlich* manner. For as long as we do know, Derrida notes that "the death of the other, this death of the other in "me," is fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm "my death," with all the consequences one can draw from this" (p. 76).

* * *

The aporia of death remains, in Levinas's words, "a pure question mark", a question that cannot be formulated, and still, we must, somehow, answer to it. In Hägglund's (2019) words:

> The point is *not* that we should embrace pain, loss, and death […] If we embraced pain we would not suffer, if we embraced loss we would not

> mourn, and if we embraced death we would not be anxious about our lives. Far from advocating such invulnerability, a secular reconciliation with finitude acknowledges that *we must be vulnerable*—we must be marked by the suffering of pain, the mourning of loss, the anxiety before death—in order to lead our lives and care about one another (p. 369).

Living requires that we love, care and act despite the fact that *everything* we love, care for, and aspire to achieve can be lost at any moment, and ultimately that whatever we hold onto only means something for as long as it cannot be kept forever. Hägglund's first important point, which is worth reconsidering, is that embracing finitude does not mean embracing pain, loss, and death. Following Derridas's analysis which he remains deeply indebted to, death gives us nothing to embrace other than the mystery of life itself. It is because this knowledge of our death remains elusive that we need art and literature. "We may *know* that we are going to die, but the role of art is to make us *feel* what that means and thereby intensify the commitment to our life" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 107). Literature can "make us feel" what death means, in Freud's words, make us a little more honest, which, in and of itself, is a condition for responsibility.

Hägglund's second important point is that if we were *not* scared and worried about losing what we hold dear, it would lose its significance. Attachment theoretical understandings of love and grief (Field et al., 1999; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008) argue that our internal working models of significant people during our childhood mark and define our ways of relating to others throughout life. Securely attached individuals often manage to find a functional balance between the avoidant or the anxious forms, which are both viewed as insecure. With regard to grief, the point is often that securely attached individuals are better equipped with the proper tools for getting through a grief process in a good way. While numerous empirical studies have shown the utility of this theory, and it seems reasonable to assume that overly avoiding or anxious ways of relating to others will hamper life, it is worth asking where we draw the line here and if we would be better off viewing anxiousness as an unavoidable feature of relationality. If we are blessed with people who love us and whom we love back, what else is there to do than to hold on with everything we got? And knowing that every hour is one less of a life that only heads in one direction, how can this attachment be anything but anxious? On Hägglund's note, it is not the degree of anxiousness that is the real threat but *indifference*. Indifference in and of itself marks the negation of life that is defined by care: "The only way to be truly indifferent to survival is to be dead, which is to say that it is impossible for a living being to be

indifferent to survival" (Hägglund, 2012, p. 14). For as long as there is life, it will be relational and finite, and for as long as they are the coordinates within which we live, we cannot be indifferent, and therefore, neither can we avoid anxiousness.

* * *

In Chapter 3, I argued that partnerhood could be fruitfully understood from an existential perspective. Any couple relationship, however "normal" on all socioeconomic and demographic parameters, is an existential drama and deserves to be treated as one. Shared time remains finite: "We can only be married until death do us part, leaving one of us to mourn the other," and "the resolution of marriage is not a religious devotion to a timeless eternity but a secular devotion to living in time" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 131-132). What Hägglund refers to as "the risk of despair" (p.141) that attachment theories would classify as insecure attachment patterns are built into this "life-defining commitment." We become who we are by giving ourselves to others, and partnerhood is one way of giving ourselves to another, "pouring ourselves forth, emptying ourselves out" (p. 368). All of these commitments are at risk of falling apart; for internal causes, betrayal or dullness leading to separation or divorce, or for external reasons, death being the ultimate example. The participants in this study have lost their partners, and death no longer remains a risk but an undeniable and often extremely painful fact.

Hägglund's explicit grappling with the mourning takes place in *Dying for Time* (2012), specifically in relation to Freud and Lacan. The basic line of thought of Hägglund's chronolibidinal argument, as my reading in Chapter 2 has made clear, is that it is not the evanescent lack of fulfillment that drives the chain of desire but the chronolibidinal binding to what is innately finite. We do not desire the ultimate, immortal or safeguarded, but the vulnerable, fragile, and mortal. Nothing was ever-present to begin with; everything is marked by annihilation in and through the process of becoming. "Indeed, attachment to a temporal being means that every affirmation is inhibited by negation from the start, and even the most active embrace of life cannot be immune from the reactive mourning of death" (Hägglund, 2012, p. 111). Hägglund continues in the direction toward mourning, on a similar strain:

> For the same reason, the condition of chronolibido is inextricable from the condition of *survival* […]. To survive is necessary to be haunted by mourning, both in relation to what has been lost in the past and what will be lost in the future. The *actual* experience of mourning is preceded by the *possible* mourning that is at work from the first moment of

> experience, since everything that may be experienced is temporal and will be lost (p. 113).

Concerning Freud's remarks on the limits of death awareness sketched above, Hägglund notes, first of all, that even though the unconscious does not follow linear time, it is still subject to some kind of succession. The deferral and delays of *Nachträglchkeit* illustrate, in Hägglund's (2012) perspective, the fact that "experience of the event is always given *too late* (in relation to what is no longer) and *too soon* (in relation to what is not yet)" (p. 114). The structure of *Nachträglichkeit* is thereby still an example of how the succession of time is the premise for anything to happen at all. If the unconscious would be exempt from this *succession* of time, "nothing would happen in it, and nothing would happen because of it" (p. 114).

Second, and even more important for our purposes, Hägglund distinguishes between immortality and survival. While we do not, and cannot, desire immortality, we do desire more of this life; we desire *survival*— or, as he preferably refers it in *This Life*, *living on*. The fact that it seems plausible to argue that our inability to picture or imagine death is fundamentally limited does not imply that the truth of our innermost longings is tied to immortal life:

> Contrary to Freud's tacit assumption, the sense of mortality does not depend on the ability to imagine or experience oneself *as dead*. On the contrary, the sense of mortality—the sense of oneself as mortal—is characterized by the exposure to a disappearance that exceeds one's grasp and can only be experienced in relation to an other, or in relation to oneself as an other. It is indeed impossible to experience one's own death, since in order to do so one could not be dead. The only death one can experience is rather the death of an other whom survives" (pp. 114-115).

4.8 Death Awareness

For the participants who lost their partners suddenly and without preceding illness, everything before death was just like normal. Daniel, Teresa's husband, was killed at an accident at the construction site where he was working:

> *My husband worked the nights shift, and he leaves for work one Thursday evening. He loved his motorcycle. I said farewell, went back into the house, and after 10 minutes, I went outside for a smoke. He was still there—on his phone. But then he left and headed north. I said, "See*

> *you tomorrow." He was supposed to bring breakfast on his way home since our son turned 15 the day after. Before I go to bed, I watched TV and checked the news on my phone. I read about an accident and send a text message to Daniel in order to make sure that he is all right and ask if he could call and leave a message. I go to bed, and after about 15 minutes, the police knock on my door.*

The 15th birthday of their son was the first one without Daniel, who had died immediately following the accident the night before. Theresa describes the first 14 days as being in chock: "*You don't understand what happened*." While this understanding gradually arises through the days, months, and years that she eventually has lived without Daniel, there are still moments when it seems too overwhelming to take in:

> *Sometimes, when I am driving or sit out on the balcony, I think for myself: "Fuck, it happened. He is no longer here". From one day to the next, he is gone. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck [whispers].*

During our second interview, I ask Therese if there was something that she regrets never having said to Daniel since his death came so suddenly. She says no, and continues:

> *I was good at telling him that I loved him and that I appreciated having him in my life […] We had such a good day, the day he died. We were rebuilding the balcony and had been to the retailer in the afternoon. At some point, I remember that we held hands, and, in many ways, I recall it as a great day. It was strange… Without saying anything, I waved at him when he left. I always did that, like this [Theresa shows me her way of waving]. It was my way of saying that I loved him, and I still do it when I pass the graveyard.*

What if Teresa had known that Daniel was going to die? Can one prepare for death? Is it even possible to anticipate that the person that one lives with is going to pass, and how does it affect the life that remains? In the first part of this chapter, we have paved our way through several different ways of relating to death. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the so-called knowledge that we have of death is shallow. In "a remarkable achievement, a triumph of will over reason," we live as if we were not going to die, as Zygmunt Bauman (1992, p. 17) puts it in his reading of Freud. Confronted with a terminal prognosis of advanced cancer, will we know better? Will one be able, as Freud still hoped for, and the existential tradition has insisted on, to live a more responsible and honest life in light of this knowledge? Since this study's

participants are themselves *not* dying, the replies provided to Critchley's question, "Can I say 'I can' with respect to death?" will be on behalf of their partners and in relation to their continued attempts to live a life. This will still inspire digging into whether, and if so, how, the confrontation with death has altered their existential outlook, made them more selfish, kind, robust, careless, neurotic, or loving. In what condition does one rise from the fall that the death of the other comprises? Can one even—as the proponents of post-traumatic growth have argued—find oneself better suited to grasp life, or is the psychology of death nothing but a psychology of bitterness and decay?

The testimonies provided here give credit to all three perspectives introduced so far, strengthen the point made already in the first chapter, that this will be no competition in explanatory power. Approaching questions concerning death and grief demands all the resources one can find. In the land of relationality and finitude, psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology, and deconstruction, despite their important differences, contribute to significant insights. To use the toolbox metaphor applied within pragmatic reasoning, it would be outright stupid to attempt to build a house using only a hammer if there is a wide variety of other tools available (Brinkmann, 2012). One might be prone to admit that any encounter with these subjects borders on sheer hubris and that any endeavor into this field is "bold" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). This boldness, on the other hand, serves to qualify the theoretical eclecticism that hopefully will guide us toward a more comprehensive account of what it means to live in the light of death. With this in mind, we turn to the informants who have lived with a sick partner and their attempt to come to terms with and live with death on the horizon.

Preparing for Death

> *I never looked at him and said, "You are going to die." That's not what happened. We kept struggling because it couldn't be right that it wasn't going to work. That's how we thought of it. When we talked about it, we remained hopeful.* (Nina)

The struggle metaphor that Nina uses to describe her and Oscar's way of dealing with his cancer has been described by many to characterize the field of cancer treatment (Ehrenreich, 2010; Cederström, & Spicer, 2015). The growing tumor(s) are portrayed as enemies that should be "defeated" with a combination of standardized (laser- and chemo-) treatment, changes in lifestyles, alternative treatment, and positive thinking. "*We were in this together,*" she says. Nina's description might be seen as an example of death-

denial, potentially explained by an incurable belief in survival that makes it impossible to picture death. For Nina and Oscar, imagining a life without the other was out of the question; it was *their* life, and without him, "nothing happened," to quote Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Native American Crow tribe, on which Lear bases his analysis of hope in *Radical Hope* (2006).

From Nina's perspective, "after Oscar," nothing would happen because the conditions of possibilities for the life that she had lived for the last many years, and equally important, the future that she as a 31-year-old pictures for herself, was no longer anything but a "future without future" (Frantzen, 2019). Digging deeper into the meaning of the chief's statement, Lear (2006) claims that it is not about the psychological explanation ("it was for them, *as* though nothing happened"). If that was the case, Lear writes, "if he is talking about the Crow people becoming depressed, we can understand him in a minute and move on" (p. 4). Rather, the statement should be understood ontologically. The colonization of the tribe's land and the killing of the buffalo led to the eradication of a way of life that was the soil where Crow subjectivity grew. Lear continues:

> This isn't just about who tells the story […] For the problem goes deeper than competing narratives. The issue is that the Crow have lost the concepts with which they would construct a narrative. This is a *real* loss, not just one described from a certain point of view. *It is the real loss of a point of view* (p. 32).

What Nina imagines and indeed responds to upon Oscar's death points in a similar direction. While it was no longer possible to be a Crow since the life they had lived until this point was no longer possible, neither was it possible to *be* "Nina" since the relational arena where that was possible disappeared with Oscar.

> *It was all thrown up in the air. And it was difficult, I completely lost… Who am I? I was part of this family, and we had a plan. This was how it was supposed to be. For the rest of our days. And now it suddenly isn't like that. What now? What now?* (Nina)

It is, of course, *also* a question of her psychological reaction, but more importantly, an attempt to navigate in a shattered world. For as long as who we are is a question of the lives that we live—something that Lear's analysis places a heavy emphasis on—the loss of a life partner encompasses a partial loss of self. The point of view that she has lost is *their* point of view, a point of view that cannot be distinguished from who Nina was.

* * *

There are other reasons why preparing for death and the time after death seems to be challenging. While Felicia wanted to prepare for what was coming—how to deal with the children from George's earlier marriage, their house, and everything else—George did not want to talk about it:

> *A: Is there anything that you wished to say to George before he passed away?*
> *I: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, I wish that we could have talked more, especially about the more important things. About his views on the kids life when he was gone. But I could not really take the initiative to that conversation myself, since he was so burdened […] Like I said, it was not easy to place these demands upon him when he struggled to stay alive.*

While George was burdened by his disease up to his death, Felicia has been burdened by an overwhelming responsibility for the children that she refers to in this quote.

> *I think that my own grief might have been forgotten in the middle of all this. There were too many demands from others. It wasn't until half a year ago when I began to see myself in the mirror and thought that I had to begin dealing with my own stuff.*

While loneliness haunts us all on different occasions, it does so in radically different ways. In Elias's perspective, "The loneliness of the dying" is on the one hand seen as a serious but contingent problem, a symptom of the time when he was writing:

> "We find here, in an extreme form, one of the more general problems of our day—our inability to give dying people the help and affection they are most in need of when parting from other human beings, just because another death is a reminder of our own" (Elias, 2010, p. 10).

When it comes to the role of language, he likewise notices that reverence is a need of the living, not the dead. "It is the living who demand reverence for the dead, and they have their reasons. These include their fear of death and the dead: but they often also serve as means of enhancing the power of the living" (p. 32). The existentialist notion of dying alone is, from Elias's perspective, a symptom of a society in which individualization and self-

awareness are taken to extremes.[47] Meaning is an inherently social phenomenon, and "if you have lived alone, you die alone" (p. 59).

In an interesting passage that points in a slightly different direction, Elias discusses the role of language, and notes—partly against his analysis in the rest of the book—that language, which is for the living, is gradually being abandoned by the dying person for reasons perfectly understandable. Fading out of life is equally fading out of language. In Elias's account, the dawning realization that death is inescapable begins to make language itself superfluous. In books and movies, "the last words" are often ascribed great importance; it is here, now or never, that we "sum up ourselves" (Marion, 2008). Reading *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (Critchley, 2009), one is easily convinced that the key to entire systems of thought can be found in the last words of the dying. How many analyses have not been made upon Ivan Ilyich's regrets in Tolstoy's novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and what quarrels didn't Ludwig Wittgenstein's last words, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life," create for his biographers, given the earlier impression of a life in chronic unhappiness. That said, one can certainly ask oneself what to say and reach no immediate conclusion. What to say? What words could summarize anything, and what words could convey what one felt upon taking the last breath? How to say farewell one last time?

In a popular book with the spectacular title, *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning—How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter* (2018), Margareta Magnusson advises how to prepare oneself as well as one's closest relatives for the dawning end. While the practical content of the book falls outside of my interests here, the premise that the dying person is not exempt from the moral sphere but needs to take responsibility until the bitter end is interesting. This would equally illustrate Aries's major point in *The Hour of our Death* (2008) that a shift in focus from the departed to the bereaved has taken place during the secularization of the previous century. While the burden was previously placed on the shoulders of the bereaved to pray and hope for a safe journey through an assumed afterlife, we might ask to what extent the dead and dying today are held responsible for the welfare of the ones left behind. In the previous section on Being-with the dead, I pointed out that the way in which we continue to live with the memories and traces of our lost ones is a paradigmatically ethical question. Or, more

[47] One is reminded about Adorno's canonical statements in *Negative Dialectics* (1966/1992). The "death metaphysics" that he ascribes not only to Heidegger but to Kierkegaard and Jaspers alike is referred to as "society's impotent solace for the fact that social change has robbed men of what was once said to make death bearable to them (p. 369). *Angst*, he writes earlier on, "that supposed "existential," is the claustrophobia of a systematized society" (p. 24).

correctly, *that* we respond, affirm, and carry the other into the future is not *a* question; it is *my* question, in Derrida's words, "the most singular" question thinkable. My interview material does not allow any first-person accounts from the dying themselves, and interesting as that would be, we are referred to the bereaved's testimonies. So again, how to prepare and who is responsible for what?

> *At one point, I said to Michael that I needed to know whether we talked about these things. Because, when people asked, "Are you talking about Michael's disease?", "Are you talking about how things are going?" I always said "yes." But I was suddenly in doubt, so I had to ask him, "Are we talking about it?" because I keep telling people that we do. And, yes, he said that we did.* (Clara)

As stated before, it is not my task to judge whether this was, indeed, the case. What is clear, though, is that, for Clara and her surroundings, it was judged to be an urgent task to talk about how things were going. Generally, two trajectories can be identified when it comes to the content of these conversations between the two partners. On the one hand, there is an urge to sustain the status quo and continue to live on "as normal." One of the major reasons why this group seems willing to make such great sacrifices during their life partner's illnesses is that they can continue to live at home. On the other hand, a change in focus and what seems to be an intensification of the conversations can be identified. Alicia and Edward, both outgoing people who took an active part in their local community and were both politically active as well, had always "discussed everything":

> *It was and probably is a cliché: Edward did not talk about work at the end. He did in the beginning; then he was planning for this and that. But you know what: the world goes like this [illustrates with her hands how something becomes more narrow]. And you know what, when it comes down to what really matters, it's love. Love for one's partner, children, friends, or whoever.*

Explicitly on the role of language, Alicia had earlier in the interview remarked that:

> *I: It's very small, very narrow. We're used to discuss everything, and then, at the end, the world of a dying person becomes this small, and it did for me as well. So, at the end, the last day and the last hours, well, it was nonverbal, a gentle touch, that's it. For us at least.*
> *A: Had he lost the ability to speak?*

I: No, he just didn't want to say anything.

Despite the silence, Alicia remarks that this experience was "*very close, as close as you can possibly get to another human being, except perhaps the one you give birth to."* Even though "we experience the finitude of our lives in very many ways" (O'Byrne, 2010, p. 60), we do so, I argue, most intensely in relation to others. Viewing birth as the paradigm of relationality and death as one of solitude would be a hastened conclusion. While fading out of life also encompasses accepting that others are to stay, these others often remain *with* the dying "in a mode of respectful solicitude" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 282). *Letting the other* go is an ethical and existential task that will run like a razor blade through our hearts and souls, leaving nowhere to hide. In the next section, we will explore, more in-depth, the effect that the death of the other has on the lives of the bereaved.

Clinging to Life

"*Do you think of the future?*" I ask Anne at our last interview.

> *No, actually, I don't think of the future at all. I think about getting through what I'm standing in right now.*

If this was said in the course of the first interview, I might have suspected that when time passed, Anne would begin to think more intensely about when and how her own death might come. That is, death awareness would be linked to the other in the first "phases" and then gradually become more self-focused. While that might be seen as a reasonable assumption, it does not seem to be the case. First, most of the participants' primary concern, as Anne testifies to in the quotation above, is life, not death. Second, for as long as they consider death, it is from the perspective of the ones still living. Simon perfectly illustrates these two points in the following quotations:

> *I am not worried about my own death at all. I'm perfectly fine with the fact that it will happen at some point. I don't fear death.*

> *No, I don't think about my own death very often; I really don't. But I have considered making some kind of folder for the kids, so they would know what to do. I remember when Edith's mother died a couple of years ago, also from cancer. Oh my god, there were no limits to all the things that suddenly came out of the closet—ghosts and God knows what. If you have the possibility, I think that you should clean up your*

> *own mess before you die. Or at least make it possible for others to do that.*

While Simon does not "*fear death*," he is thoughtful concerning his children, in case this would happen. Even though spectrality is an unavoidable aspect of the intergenerational order, it is a contingent question to what degree these ghosts are allowed to roar among the living. Simon's children are young adults and struggling hard with the death of their mother. While he thinks about his grief as something that has been going on for all the time that Edith was sick, it had come more like a shock to them.

> *I think that I have been bereaved for a long, long time because I knew what was going on. Even though I was hoping and hoping, I knew in which direction this was heading. So, I have thought a lot about what the world would be like afterward. In that way, I was much further ahead than they were.*

As a life partner, there is nowhere to hide from a partner's disease. It was Simon who began to work part-time to care for Edith, drive her back and forth to treatment, and when she had decided to end regular cancer-treatment and "go alternative," he was the one who "*spent hours cleaning up in the kitchen after she had made yet another miracle-juice*." Their children, on their doorsteps to adulthood, had recently moved out of home and were sheltered from the everyday life of cancer. On a similar note, Alicia sees that her role as the closest person also meant that she knew what was happening to Edward, while their surroundings had trouble facing up to it. In a striking passage from our last interview, she emphasizes both the loneliness and the clear-sightedness of the life partner:

> *You can't really, at least I couldn't prepare myself for the fact that he was going to die. Even if I knew it and had a really difficult time with that, everyone I meet would come up with 20 stories of successful cancer treatment. And that's correct; many people do get cured today, blah blah blah… But that's just hard to listen to; it was like I was responsible for not demolishing their hope, and had to listen patiently to their fairytales: "It's going to be all right," "The treatments are so advanced today;" "Someone, please shoot me! He was fucking dying!" It was nothing but a question of time. He couldn't even walk any longer, and people couldn't face that.*

Edward lived with his cancer for five months before he died. When Alicia looked back on this experience, it was not something that made her more prone to think about death.

> *Alicia: I think that if you can become that sick by the time you are 59, and then die a few months afterward… Really, we don't know how much time we have, so, now: what do I wish to spend my life doing? What is important to me?*
> *A: Does that mean you think more about your own death?*
> *Alicia: No, I don't think about my own death. I think about my life.*

This last line is repeated again and again in the interview material. The fragility of life that comes to the fore in grief does not seem to cause explicit considerations of one's own death. Mary points in the same direction, simultaneously remarking that the "life" that one is thrown back upon is not a solitary affair just because one's life partner is dead. Life is always a life made up of others:

> *No, I don't think about death. I think about all the people I still have left and all the experiences that are still possible…*

Apart from one, all informants in this study had children, either together with their deceased life partner or from earlier relationships. These children are, the most important people in the lives of my informants. In considering the nature of grief and our way of dealing with death, children equally carry immense significance. As a bereaved life partner and co-parent, what finitude means is first and foremost seen through the lenses of one's children. Again, I would argue that this structure of being thrown back to the world of the living upon grief is a general feature of mortal and relational life. The fact that children are the predominant figures in parents' lives does not make this structure oblivious for people without children. No matter who has passed away, there is always some other that one is given over to upon this loss. To illustrate this point, I will consider the case of Rebecca, the only participant without children, before formulating a notion of intergenerational finitude in the following section.

The Friend

The fact that Rebecca does not have children and that her new friend turns out to be the most important person in her life following Eric's death does not alter the fact that that she, like all of us, are children and, as such, dependent and given over. In her most recent work, *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), Butler puts it as follows:

> We all start by being given over—a situation both passive and animating. That's what happens when a child is born: someone gives the child over to someone else. We are, from the start, handled against our will in part because the will is in the process of being formed […] Our enduring dependency of social and economic forms of support for life itself is not something we grow out of—it is not a dependency that converts into independence in time. When there is nothing to depend upon, when social structures fail or are withdrawn, then life itself falters or fails: life becomes precarious. (p. 49–50)

When I ask Rebecca whether and how she thinks of her own death, she stays silent for more than a minute before she speaks.

> *R: I think… I'm afraid of getting sick. And I'm afraid of reaching a state where I no longer care about whether I'm alive or not. It's the way in which I would die, if I would be ill and if someone would be there for me, that I think of.*
> *A: Are you worried about dying alone?*
> *R: Yes, I don't really have much family. My parents are old, and I don't know for how long they will continue to live. When they're gone, I'm the only one left, and that is a difficult thought. Because: who would be there for me?*

Following Rebecca in this chapter on death, we might add to the earlier analysis on partnerhood that having a life partner functions as a more or less effective vaccine against the fear of dying alone. Of course, anyone might die at any moment—the important thing is that if Eric is no longer alive, and the way Rebecca is now picturing and anticipates her death—along the lines of prolonged sickness and the suffering that it might entail, he would not be there to support her. When I meet Rebecca for the last interview, her mother has passed away. For a short time, this ripped open some of the wounds from Eric's death. But it did not take a psychologist to see that it was a different Rebecca that I encountered this last time. While the two first interviews with her had been tormenting, with a Rebecca that seemingly did not care about

whether she was dead or alive and the air in the room was left full of despair after the interview, things are different this time. Two and a half year after the death of her partner, the world is beginning to regain its color and contour, despite her mother's death:

> *R: The last month, I've been doing all right. I have not been underneath that blanket of misery when I have woken up, nor have I spent the entire day binge-watching sit-coms just to keep my mind occupied.*
> *A: It sounds like things have been a little easier the last month?*
> *R: Yes.*
> *A: Do you have any idea why that change has taken place?*
> *R: I have a friend who is a nurse and is off work several times a week, and we've begun to go for a long walk once a week, 25 kilometers or something like that. And that's pretty wild because last year at this point—if I would have gone to the fitness center, I would have had to stay in bed for two days afterward.*

Rebecca continues, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the entirety of our last interview focuses on her new friendship, the relief and joy that this has brought to her life. No matter what I ask about, the answer seems related to her friend, and on a personal note, this interview is recalled as the most relieving experience of this entire study. Being an interviewer, trained as a psychologist, demands that you refrain from trying to help in the way that this therapy-like situation invites you to. The informants had signed a contract where it was made explicit that these were research-focused interviews and not psychotherapy. That does not change the fact that many of the participants hoped they might experience a form of catharsis, nor did it diminish my hope that this would be a good and perhaps even helpful experience for them to talk with me. But it was their experience of grief that played center-court, and my primary mission was not to help them in a way that a psychologist would normally aim to do.

Rebecca had been in various treatments, both individual and group therapy. Her general practitioner had diagnosed her with depression, wanting her to take anti-depressive medication as well. Her encounter with the psychiatric system, however, was far from successful:

> *He kept talking about my drinking habits for about 15 minutes while looking into a computer screen, almost offended by the fact that I didn't say, "Yes, please give me those pills." I became angry with him for not showing the least sympathy for the fact that my husband was dead. It wasn't like those pills were going to bring him back… So, I was like: that psychiatric system is not for me.*

Her psychologist had failed in a similar manner. Commenting on what participating in the study had done to her, she responds indirectly while at the same time expressing her view of the treatment she was given here:

> *It's been far better than seeing my psychologist, and I no longer see her, by the way. She said the weirdest of things. Three months after Eric was dead, where I'm complaining about being lonely and the lack of support shown by my friends, she tells me not to become bitter. "Bitter!!! Screw you!" Now, I'm getting angry again because that really hurt; three months after me losing my husband, and she tells me not to get bitter. That is something one can say after five years or whatever if people have gone totally off the hook.*

Many critical arguments have been made against the six-months timeframe included in the diagnostic criteria for PGD (Wakefield, 2012). Hopefully, not every psychologist will begin to caution against bitterness immediately following a loved one's death. Still, many a psychologist will find him- or herself in the position of being asked to provide help for the suffering experienced during the first year of bereavement. Independent of therapeutic orientation, the quality of the therapeutic alliance, and all the other factors that shape the outcome of a psychotherapeutic process, the one thing that bereaved people ask for and dream about, that their lost ones would come back to life, will remain impossible. In Rebecca's words, "*It wasn't like those pills were going to bring him back*." Shortly after saying this, she suggests, mostly to herself: "*Maybe I need to see a priest*," but immediately acknowledges: "*That seems kind of weird because I am an atheist*." Priests in Denmark still play an important role when it comes to providing support and solace for bereaved people. Seeing a priest is often experienced as nondemanding, as a place where misery and hopelessness are allowed and not necessarily "worked with" or medicalized. There is indeed an open question, and perhaps also, a rightful concern as to what implication the new grief diagnosis will have when it comes to who people seeking help and support during a time of bereavement.

* * *

Returning to Rebecca, it was clear that her grasp of life evident in the third interview had everything to do with her new friend. The worrying about dying alone was less predominant, and even though the friend would be working abroad for half a year, she felt like life was worth living again. Rebecca does not fear death; being an atheist was not just a label she randomly put on herself. Eric had nothing but contempt for everything related to religion, and

Rebecca held steadfast to this non-belief. She did not, as do many others (despite being "non-believers"), believe that she would see him again "somehow." What she did fear was the time before death. In line with the earlier testimonies about how the immediate effect of losing a life partner was not contemplation about one's own death, but an attempt to maneuver the life one still had, Anne says:

> *I don't fear death, and I sincerely do not think that Henrik did that either. But the fear of the time before death—sickness or whatever comes—that's the worst part.*

Felicia, witnessing George's painful struggle with his cancer, can even experience gratitude over the fact that death came and put an end to all that.

> *The only thing that I really think of regarding death is… that he has achieved peace with himself. That's how… I think of death from his perspective.*

An atheist discourse would take issue with at least two points in this quotation. First of all, there is no peace in death. There is no war either, just nothingness, sheer non-being. Second, and connected to the first, there is no peace because there is no "he;" any notion of personhood presupposes the only world that we know. "He" or "she" is the only conceivable notion here, "from this perspective." "I want this life; without it I do not exist," as Jaspers (1970, p. 29) put it. While this is in line with the basic line of thought developed in this dissertation, it would miss the point of Felicia's statement. "His perspective" is the perspective of George, who was sick with cancer and could no longer lead the life he used to. It was George, aged 69, whom Felicia earlier had described as the "handy kind of guy," who did not like to talk about his feelings but could build a summerhouse in the course of a summer. George loved his garden and the land that surrounded their house. To make it possible for him to see all of that on a daily basis, Felicia had cleaned out the office on the second floor and installed the sickbed there. Due to pains in the stomach, George had to sit up and sleep (one is reminded about medieval paintings, where this is customary due to fear of dying when sleeping horizontally). George passed away in September, so during the summertime, when darkness hardly came, he would see the world that he would soon no longer be part of whenever he opened his eyes. George was by no means content with this; he was disappointed. "*He did not want to die. He told me that, again and again*." George died at a hospice specialized in providing better death experiences for terminally ill people. For George, this changed very little. While Felicia

experienced it as a relief, since all the practicalities would be handled by someone else, she did not dare to sleep anywhere else than on the couch beside him: "*He was so afraid of dying, I couldn't just leave him there*!"

The peace that Felicia imagines does not have to imply anything more than the absence of the physical and psychical pain that George experienced during his last year in life. While being a close relative to someone with severe depression often leads one to wish and hope for a change and contribute actively to provide this, being close to a person who does not want to die is more perplexing. There is no way, as Heidegger and Derrida have pointed out more than once, to take over the death of the other. It was George's death, which didn't leave Felicia unaffected. His pain was and is her pain since she is still alive, trying to get a hold of life again. As we have seen, a great part of this—a part so great that, in her words, "*there has hardly been any place to my own grief*"— amounts to dealing with the children that George left behind.

Intergenerational Death Awareness

Being a parent and being bereaved have at least one thing in common; it never means the same thing at two different points in time. As soon as one has grown accustomed to and "mastered" the gentle art of parenting, the child is no longer the child he or she used to be, and one has to make further adjustments. Henry Frankfurt has even classified this relation, and not romantic love between two adults, as the purest of all love relations. Frankfurt (2004) notes that "not only are *my children* important to me for their own sakes, there is the additional fact that *loving my children* is important to me for its own sake" (p. 51). As a parent, there is no way out of this love relation; one does not divorce from one's children, and any final break will often be extremely painful. Furthermore, this love will be flexible above all reasonable limits. While relationships to partners and friends are based on us being the kind of persons we are, and a too radical change in either direction will cause havoc, children *should* change, and me being able to follow with a loving gaze is part and parcel of what it means to *be* a parent.

In the dual perspective of two parents, these are *our* children, "the outcome of our love," as it is sometimes said. If love, as Badiou (2012) has argued, is the perspective of the two, the gaze of one's parents is a puzzling phenomenon. As a child, I am simultaneously seen from the same *and* two radically different perspectives. They are *my* parent*s,* while still being *two* separate individuals. Figuring this out is the most determining task in the oedipal drama where the child's gradual realization of its separateness is concomitant with the process of accepting that one's parents are persons in

their own right, alive for reasons, and engaged in activities that stretch far beyond my existence, and finally, that there is no way they could protect me from all the evils of the world. An existential reading of the oedipal complex (Britton, 1998; Eriksson, 2017) will focus on how the child, in a facilitating or "good-enough" environment, is doing its first experiences of limitations and finitude. There is a limit to their love, for themselves, each other, and for me. They are, like all the others, persons far from perfection.

This understanding of the oedipal complex makes it into a never-ending task, and the death of one parent puts it to the test. The death of both parents will, depending on siblings and their age, make one into the oldest representative of a family, the one "next in line," so to say. This study does not take the child's perspective, and we are here left with testimonies from adults in the role of co-parents and the existential task that the transition to single parenting amounts to. Again, the principal question is if they are thinking differently of their own death, following the death of their partner:

> *Yes, and no. If I allowed myself to think of it, I would probably do so, since it would be a disaster, not because I am afraid of dying, but for my children, it would be a disaster.* (Clara)

Death awareness, in Clara's perspective, amounts to worrying. She worries on behalf of her children, aged 25, 20, and 17. Two of them still live at home when we begin the interviews, but when I visit the last time, they are on the doorstep to moving out. She tells me that "*the worst part of grief, and the part of life that has changed the most concerns the children—it is not having anyone to share all the worrying, the questions or the irritation with.*"

When Clara talks of grief, she shifts between using the expression "our grief" and "my grief." In one striking passage from her story about the funeral, she expresses this fluctuation:

> *We have lost him. I have lost him. My children have lost him. And then there is his mother. And my family, his sister, and nephew. It was overwhelming with everyone taking part in my grief. I had it like… what the fuck – everyone says that they are sorry, and yes, I know that's true. But they can still go home to their husband, or their wife, or whatever they have. It is us that have lost. There will surely be another coach, there will surely be another business partner, and another teacher, but there will never, ever, ever be a new father to my children.*

What Clara is describing here could be described as "the privileged grief" of a life partner. She pictures everyone else, relatively undisturbed, moving on with their life after their funeral, while her family's entire life-world has been

short-circuited. Michael can be replaced in the role of coach, business partner, or teacher, but not as a father. No matter if Clara would find another partner, that would not make this person into the father of her children. Their father is dead, and he is not, "*never, ever, ever,*" coming back.

* * *

While the worrying that we have encountered so far has been on the side of the parent, other participants notice increased worrying on behalf of their children as well. Alicia's son, who is not Edward's biological son, has become increasingly aware of her way of expressing herself when being around him:

> *I don't say, "I have this little spot in my eye." I would not say that without an explanation. It would just lead to a number of questions: "Have you seen the doctor?", "What did the doctor say?"*

Alicia's son lost his biological father years ago, "*which means that he knows all too well that we are going to die without knowing when*." She continues: "*It is the children that are in focus. Not my death. No. It is that fact that they would have to live with me dying. That means something*." Finitude, as Ruin (2018) pointed out, is not predominantly singularizing, but a condition that we share; "We do not overcome the finitude of death; we share it, as we share it with the life to which we give birth and for which we too will belong with those having-been" (Ruin, 2018, p. 14). If there is one pair of eyes that dismantle parents utmost finitude more than others, it is the eyes of their children. The death of a parent means the world their children, and its significance is mediated through the generation that follows.

When sitting at a lecture, Nina suddenly sees a suspicious-looking guy enter the room. "*He has no business in here*" is her first thought. In the time where terror bombings are often seen as the most serious threat to survival in the West, her first thought is that he will blow the building into pieces:

> *I thought: "Shit, he's got a bomb! I have to leave, now!" Because who will pick up Martin at kindergarten? Or what if he gets an allergic reaction, and they don't know what to do; it will take them like 20 minutes in an ambulance to get out here (sighs).*

The overwhelming sense of responsibility that becoming a parent enhances is often alleviated by the mutuality of partnerhood. The significance of having someone to share the responsibility for another life with is felt indirectly upon

the loss of this person. What Nina realizes when the suspicious-looking person enters is that if he blows the building, and her, into pieces, Martin would become an orphan. Since Martin is only two years old and knows very little about everything that is going on, Nina cannot share this worrying with him. Theresa, on the other hand, has written a testament together with her teenage children that makes it crystal clear who would be responsible for what in that situation:

> *When the kids asked for the hundred and third time what would happen if I died as well, we made a plan. Felix will adopt Caroline or be responsible for her. He is 18, and they will stay in the house, which has been paid off. Grandma can move in and help if she wants to. Yep. That's the plan. They needed to know in case something would happen.*

For Nina, things are more uncertain, and she is struggling with how to deal with this issue:

> *I think that this is really, really difficult. I've been thinking about writing it down, make some deals with people in case I would die. But people would think that I am crazy if I would ask, "Do you want Martin if I die?" That is a strange question to ask.*

Even though that might, indeed, be a strange question, Nina's worrying seems perfectly understandable. "*We were in this together,*" she says, referring to the family life they had created for themselves, and for as long as that was the case, random people in the auditorium would not cause fear of terror bombings. Adorno's classification of marriage as a "solidary struggle against death" might, after all, prove to be true. While few of us get married with the explicit goal of avoiding thoughts of death and dying, engaging in a couple relationship often embodies a multitude of life that will make us forget all about the grim reaper, at least temporarily. Nina "*misses that feeling of immortality*" that came along her life with Oscar. Now, she only thinks of her "*own death in relation to Martin. If that happens, there will be nobody left. I'm not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of leaving Martin all by himself.*"

4.9 Burial

> *The only thing I forgot was her hair. Back in the 40s, most fathers wanted their daughters to have long hair. So, the first time that Susan's hair was cut was at her confirmation. So, she had this braid. First, it was at her mother's. Which, by the way, is unreasonably unfair; Susan's mother died five years ago, and now Susan dies! Anyway, the braid was at her mother's when she passed, Susan couldn't get herself to throw it away in the garbage and so she brought it home. And now, all of a sudden, I found it! I knew that it was here somewhere, but I had forgotten all about it. And I thought: she needs to have this with her! Then she would be completed, I figured. So, I went over to the digger and asked if I could put it down there. "Sure," he said. "Just make sure that you dig deep." And so, I did. After that, I feel that she is gathered over there, and I can go talk to her.* (Carl)

As a young boy watching action movies, I recall being puzzled repeatedly over the stubborn insistence of gathering the dead bodies from the battlefield to bring them back to their homelands and families and provide a proper burial. What was the point, I wondered? They were already dead, and all the risks involved in the mission of bringing them home seemed, from my perspective, unwarranted. Why do we bury our dead?

To approach that question, we need to take one more visit to the graveyard. The grave stands as a temporal landmark, pointing backward toward a time and a life that once were but no longer are. Reading names and dates on graves makes us imagine what that particular life have been like. Judging from the shape of the stone, the name of the deceased, and the historical period where he and she have lived, we put ourselves in the place of the deceased. Throughout this solidarity with the dead, we likewise take it upon ourselves that this will be our destiny; we realize that before long, "we too will belong with those having-been" (Ruin, 2018, p. 14). And we might even hope, that belonging to those having-been will not entirely eradicate us from the world of the living, that our mark on the world and the people with whom we have shared our life will have been good, and that the traces we will leave behind will turn out to be seeds for future goodness.

The primary purpose of the second part of Hägglund's *This Life* is a Marxist-Hegelian reading of finite life and its socioeconomic implications. The materialism developed here—is one where we are led to recognize that "spiritual and material life as distinguishable and inseparable" (p. 359), and burial plays a vital role in this recognition. Following Sebastian Rödl (2007), Hägglund points out that a plausible materialistic understanding of subjectivity cannot be reduced to a set of material properties. For Rödl and

Hägglund, "the understanding of ourselves as material beings is built into our own first-person standpoint" (Hägglund, 2019, p. 195). Only self-conscious creatures can perceive themselves as being material entities because only self-conscious creatures can perceive themselves as finite. In a vulgar materialistic understanding, inner life is taken all too literally since "inside, we'll find nothing but tissues, gristle, bones, and blood" (Eriksson, 2020).[48] In the present context, we might point out that going to a funeral will make one acutely aware that this person was more than "tissues, gristle, bones, and blood." That "more" was the interrelated and relational life that this person had carried out, traces of which could be no more evident than at this occasion. What we likewise come to acknowledge at the funeral is that the future of the person who has died is a question that demands a response.

> We do not merely acquiesce to death as a natural event, but maintain our spiritual fidelity to the dead person. Rather than simply register that she *is* dead, we affirm that she *ought* to live on in our memory and that we *ought* to suffer the pain of mourning her death (Hägglund, 2019, pp. 358-359).

In Hägglund's perspective, mourning the ones we have lost in the very broad sense of reckoning with their death is intrinsic to spiritual life. We can think of Carl's finding the braid of his wife and his overwhelming feeling of being compelled to bury it together with her. Is Carl a modern Antigone in his felt urge to "complete" Susan by placing the last piece of hair in the grave? The society that Carl is a member of is one where we are, according to many, reluctant to talk about death and dying. As such, many bereaved people will see themselves in the role of Antigone, insisting not only upon giving their lost one's a proper burial but likewise their fair share of grief.

Despite these quarrels, the fact remains that "we live in a culture that continues to care for and bury the dead, through numerous and related practices that ultimately also involve historical writing" (Ruin, p. 165). If there is one thing that "humans do," it is to bury our dead. Since somewhere halfway through the history of *Homo Sapiens*, around 110,000 thousand years ago, indisputable traces of burial rites and cults of graves can be located . Long

[48] Eriksson's portrayal of the vulgar materialistic notion of "inner life" reminds us about Ernest Becker's (2014) description of the "self-conscious animal": "The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. *It means to know that one is food for worms*. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food?" (p. 107).

before any signs of language are found, this form of care for the dead began, and grief is one aspect of what it means to live in relation to the past. Historicity begins by the grave, and we become historical beings by inhabiting a world that "is already old". Jesus's encouragement in Luke 9.59-60, where he says to the disciple, who expresses his wish to go home to bury his father, before committing himself to the Lord: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God," has not been heard.[49] For Derrida (2006), burial does not prevent the specters and ghosts from returning, but it remains an ethical a priori that cannot be negotiated.

> One must constantly remember that the impossible ("to let the dead bury the dead") is, alas, always possible. One must constantly remember that this absolute evil […] can take place. One must constantly remember that it is even on the basis of the terrible possibility of this impossible that justice is desirable: *through* but also *beyond* right and law. (p. 220).

Even though we continue to bury our dead and pay our allegiance to them, it is not given that these practices will continue. Human beings have the capabilities, that Derrida refers to, of horror and absolute evil, and there are no guarantees that this practice will continue in the future. What is certain is that *our* sense of responsibility still owes much to the historicity that comes to the fore in burial. Even though the final answer to why this is done is forever out of sight, "the full existential and theoretical implications of which we are unlikely to ever fully fathom" (Ruin, 2018, p. 165), we continue to care for the dead, and it remains difficult and, indeed, dangerous to imagine a society where one does not. Follow Derrida in the *Différence*-seimar (1982), we can think the impossibility of ever fully appreciate the reasons for burial on the level of the impossibility of bridging being and knowing:

> There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without *nostalgia*, that is, outside of the myth of a purely maternal or paternal language, a lost native country of thought. On the contrary, we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance. (p. 27)

It might seem inappropriate to think of burials in terms of dancing, but it need not be. In his reading of Kierkegaard's *At a Graveside*, Edward Mooney (2011), speaking of the strangeness that this dance embodies, and relates it to

[49] Like all exegetical practices, this is a tedious reading.

what he calls "the human mystery." Importantly, in line with the broader line of argument here, this mystery is equally *mortal, relational, and moral*:

> The strangeness of dancing with the thought of death is like the moral mystery, the human mystery, that in seeing that my life matters, I see that yours does, seeing that your life matters, I see that mine does. Death brings us there (and love might, as well) […] A dance with death is the consummate embrace of the other, a life with the other, with the other who is other—and the other even to myself that I am. (p. 146)

For anyone who has ever attended a funeral, what Mooney points at, will be evident. Funerals exist, at the very least, because our lives matter. They matter to ourselves, they matter to others, and these two ways of mattering are deeply intertwined. The rites of burials, which show an impressive degree of variation, point to "a sense of *duty* toward the dead." They "articulate in their different ways what the family and the community feel that they *owe* to the dead, who can no longer carry and comport themselves" (Ruin, 2018, p. 60). We could not understand the weight of this imperative without a solidarity that crosses the border between the living and the dead. Burying the dead is *our* responsibility; it *cannot* be delegated to anyone, be that God or anyone else: "Only mortals, only the living who are not living gods can bury the dead" (Derrida, 2006, p. 220).

In a Danish context, one is buried even though there are no relatives or others arranging the funeral. Present at the funeral at these occasions, except for the priest, will be a representative from the commune. This situation could prove to be challenging in light of the socio-ontological line of thought developed here. Who are these people? Who have they touched, who do they *live on* in and through? Anyone? No one? While I certainly think that this question deserves and requires more attention than is possible in this context, these people have also been born into a world of others. Their lives and destinies have not been lived in solitude from the very beginning, even though they have ended in this way. For the interviewees in this study, burial has been a major affair, and their experiences will be in focus for the remainder of this chapter.

Burying One's Life Partner

When I visit Simon, he is well prepared. Every time I arrive in his apartment for an interview, he goes into the kitchen to get the piece of paper that he keeps on his fridge to write down things in between our interviews to discuss it the next time. For the second interview, he begins by telling me that he has met another woman and that a relationship is beginning to take form. But before we get to that, he needs to tell me about the funeral: "*For some reason, I forgot all about that last time,*" he says. "*I thought of writing it as prose and send it to you, but figured it would take several days, so I'd better wait (laughs)*." Generally, it was noticeable that very few of the participants talked about the funeral at the first interview while frequently mentioning it during the second and third rounds.

Simon tells me that he and his daughters were seated in the front row at the funeral when people began to arrive. His daughter then asks why he is not standing at the entrance door to welcome people. He goes to stand by the door, and it is clear from his way of telling the story that this diverged from the traditional way of conducting oneself at a funeral where Simon is from. "*I have been at funerals where family members welcomed at the door, but not that the person closest to the deceased did so.*" He says that it immediately became very emotional and that people afterward were both appreciative and critical. It also meant that the ceremony took a different shape afterwards and that some people left without personally extending their condolences to him.

Funerals are often publicly announced, which means that no one can know for sure how many will attend. Sometimes, the funeral agent asks people to sign up, but that does not make it a closed event. None of the informants participating in this study reported any dramatic events such as unwanted ex-partners or unheard-of children showing up. That, on the other hand, does not make it non-dramatic; in Clara's words, it was "*overwhelming*." In a church that only had seats for 100 people, 400 had shown up, and they had to arrange with screens outside of the church. "*Things went very fast,*" and people from near and far who had known Michael came to offer their condolences, sharing their stories of what he had meant to them, personally or professionally. To make her story heard, she decided to give a speech. From the section of the gaze in Chapter 3, we also recall that Iris, afraid that the funeral would become an all too serious affair with people looking back at their relationship as "*tragic,*" wanted to share some stories from their life "*with a blink in the eye.*" Peter had been chained to his wheelchair for the last ten years of his life and lived with severe cognitive handicaps. Still, "*it didn't have to be dead serious. We have lived a happy life*," she tells me.

In each and every one of these stories, it is clear that being a life partner means that one plays a special role at the funeral service. Discussing the care and support that they have received from their surroundings, the funeral often marks a change in the degree of attention and support they received from their surroundings. After the funeral, people would go home to "*their husband, their wife, or their whatever*." "*It is us that have lost the most*," as Clara puts it. Likewise, Simon views himself as "*the one closest to the deceased*." Within fields of qualitative studies that focus on vulnerable groups, it is sometimes discussed who is most worthy of sympathy and in the deepest need of having their voices heard. Within grief studies, this question hinges on what sort of loss is the most painful, losing a child, a partner, a parent, and the list continues. "Disenfranchised grief" (Doka, 1989; 1999; 2002) has received increased attention in the last decades, and with that, the losses that are seldom acknowledged as losses; same-sex partner in parts of the world where homosexuality is not socially accepted; colleagues, pets, etc. These struggles are necessary, and as argued in Chapter 2, the very the question of the human partly hinges on the question of what goes as a grievable life. On the other hand, the question of who is "worst off" tends to be self-defeating.[50] There are simply no established criteria for determining who is "worst off" when someone dies. And one could even argue that there is no possible way of even formulating these criteria. Any relation is only fully conceivable from within that relation, and any loss felt only on the background, a history that remains incomparable.

* * *

That said, the basic task that I have set myself in this dissertation is to understand the world of the bereaved life partner, and this calls for both generalizations and an attempt to live myself into this experience. Let's summarize this attempt so far before moving on to grief. In Chapter 3, I argued that partnerhood cannot be understood exhaustively in discursive or attachment theoretical terms and that seeing it in relation to some of the basic predicaments of human life could improve our understanding of its existential significance. Sharing a life with another person is not something that merely happens. While falling in love carries aspects of thrownness and radical contingency, the life that evolves over the years in a partnerhood, including the children that sometimes come as a vital part of this, is a way of *leading* one's life, not just living it. Being two and sharing an everyday life in a shared

[50] For an enlightening discussion of some of the dilemmas involved in representation of vulnerable groups, see Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

household distinguishes this relation from many others, and this, I will argue in the next and final chapter, is the key to an understanding of what it means to lose this particular person.

In this chapter, I have explored what mortality means from a psychoanalytical, deconstructive, and existential-phenomenological perspective. It has become evident that all these frameworks exhibit vital insights that are not mutually exclusive. Most importantly, they are theories that face up to the fact that death, while being forever out of reach and necessarily elusive of any final understanding, means something to the lives we lead. Death is a question for the living, and any life that is free in the sense that Hägglund understands as spiritual will have to grapple with this. The mystery of life is always already contaminated by the mystery of death. There are no eternal norms that will govern the effect that death will have on how we conduct our lives. Being alive will inevitably mean forgetting about death, and moments of love and care are extraordinary in their way of providing these perhaps necessary illusions. My interviews show, at least indirectly, that having another person in one's life, a person who is "always around," guards against death anxiety in a rather effective manner. Being part of a "we" is being part of something greater than myself, and despite the fragility of this "we"—that, for internal or external reasons, can fall apart at any moment—we become a little more durable when not alone.

Furthermore, I have sought to show that the question of whether it is my death or the death of the other that comes first is an impossible, aporic question. Since we are always already interlinked and given over to each other, any discourse of a self-sufficient subject that resolutely faces up to his or her finitude is a contradiction in terms. The testimonies from my informants indicate that their death achieves its meaning in the eyes of the others, most noteworthy, their children. My life matters because your life matters. Finitude, then, can be seen as a source of solidarity, and the notion that we die alone should be questioned. While it is undeniably true that death cannot be taken over by anyone else, the "I" that dies carries with it part and parcel of the relational network that surrounds the person. This network is not only an accidental feature of that life, but it's very substance. The role that any given person has played in the life of others has been a constituting feature of these lives. We *are* indistinguishable from what we do with our lives, and much of what we do is done with others. In this way, we become part of each other and losing anyone to whom one is bound in this way will encompass a partial loss of oneself. The extent to which I "die" with the other varies and depends on this relationship's quality and function. Losing a life partner is a type of loss that will color most of existence and demand a radical change in how one conducts one's life. The ship will have to be rebuilt without any opportunity

of stopping time. Importantly, the ship will have to be rebuilt with the other in mind. In the concluding discussion of burial, it became clear that human communities are built upon the aches of those who are no longer here. Our ways of Being-with the dead that, following Heidegger, Derrida, and Ruin, has served as a guiding thread in this chapter, become crystallized in the case of burial. For my informants, burial has likewise served as a reminder of their peculiar status as the one who was often closest to the deceased, with the responsibility of providing the story that one finds fitting and the frustration of being left alone after the burial.

Chapter 5: Grief

"I weep like my own children on the edge of my grave."

—Augustine

What is grief? Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that this question could fruitfully be situated in the intersection between relationality and finitude. In this way, grief points to how we share mortal life with each other. Grief, we might say, characterizes existence as a whole since everything that we value and love is finite and subject to loss. Upon this all-encompassing understanding of grief, life itself is a grieving endeavor since it basically amounts to how we learn to live with this transience. Learning to live is learning to grieve, and learning to grieve is learning to live. In this most general and inclusive form, grief is the heart of human life since we could not grasp our spatial, temporal, and relational existence without it.

As we all know, life takes many forms, and some periods are certainly more pervaded by grief than others. Losing to death someone we are related to intensifies the experience of vulnerability and the fragility of life. *How* we grieve depends on the nature of the loss, whether the person was someone we loved, admired, respected, despised, or hated. On this still general level, then, negative relationships do not exclude grief since we still need to reckon with the fact that he or she has died. Upon this understanding, grief points to a general responsiveness to other people's vulnerability and the fact that their existence has touched our lives in various ways.

This chapter springs from the assumption that even though both these notions can teach us untold volumes on what it means to be human, they do not inform us about *how* grief is experienced. The social ontology of grief that is developed throughout this chapter takes place in the space between relationality and finitude that I have opened up throughout the earlier chapters *and* testimonies from the lived experience of losing a life partner. The magnitudes and intensity of finitude that the loss of a loved one confronts us with cannot be sufficiently explained by referring to grief on the general levels mentioned above. Grief is *lived*; losing significant others changes our lives, and accordingly, grief changes who we are.

The first section, 5.1, paves the ground for the general socio-ontological argument laid out in the chapter. The first part on suicide focuses on how the asymmetrical foundation of grief, one person being dead and another being

alive, inevitably awakens questions of why and how one should live. The following offers a theoretical grounding for how "losing part of oneself" can be understood, and investigates empirically in what ways grief calls us into question before I summarize the section by drawing on Lear's notion of ontological vulnerability. Section 5.2 focuses on the normativity of bereavement. Why is it that we *should* grieve? How is it that we *learn* to grieve, and how does the bereaved life partner experience this normativity? I end the section with a discussion of the art of remembering as one arena where these questions come to the fore. Section 5.3 on solitude focuses on grief in relation to the social surroundings of my participants. How do social expectations affect their grief, willingness, and ability to put words on and share their sorrows? How does the bereaved life partner relate to other people's grief, and how do these relations change following their loss?

Grief ultimately alters one's being-in-the-world, and the remaining sections focus on the spatial and temporal aspects of grief, respectively. In 5.4, the bodily aspects of loss are touched upon with a special focus on crying, and the many dilemmas related to dealing with the belongings of the deceased. Section 5.5 lays out the temporality of bereavement as characterized by a distinct before and after, a fluctuating nature, and sudden pangs of grief. Section 5.6 focuses on the futural aspects specifically. While the future that the participants are facing is seldom one that they expected, *some* sense of possibility remains integral to living on. I conclude the chapter in section 5.7 with a note on destiny, where the loss of a life partner is placed in the perspective of a life as a whole. Deepfelt gratitude and ways of accepting the loss are often concomitant with a hardened way of confronting reality.

5.1 A Social Ontology of Grief

Suicide

Grief, Nina tells me, is:

> *N: [A] condition where you're not really present in this world. The world of all the others. It's an everyday struggle, and everything is a challenge. Even things that you have always done without giving them a second thought. It's a… It's a heaviness inside the body.*
> *A: How do you experience that heaviness?*
> *N: Suddenly, I freeze. I just stop. And if I could choose, I would lie down underneath a blanket. Maybe not anymore, but in the beginning, that's what I would have done. Everyday things have suddenly slipped out of hand. The world has become incredibly empty. Your whole frame of reference is blown into pieces.*

In the first book of *My Struggle* that begins with a longer section on death, Knausgaard notices that corpses are always kept on the ground floor, or preferably underground. There is, Knausgaard suggests, something fundamentally wrong about keeping dead people above ground level, a mortuary on the fifth floor an impossible idea. Grief and death pull one downwards. We have encountered movements in the same direction several times already, of not wanting to get up in the morning, hiding underneath a blanket, and even of rather wanting to be dead. *Falling* is a prevalent metaphor in both Butler's account of grief and Jaspers's description of the boundary situation. This falling is, needless to say, of another kind than the one we encounter when falling in love, even though overwhelming and uncontrollable aspects might overlap. The *falling* in grief is related to death, specifically the death of the other, that has become, as Becker puts it, food for worms. The other is down there, buried horizontally, and perhaps the reluctance to standing up that many a bereaved person testifies to is part of the yearning of wanting to be together with the deceased. Walking is for the living, and upon a recent loss of a loved one, it is not always clear which side one would like to be on:

> *Anne: I am no longer liable to anyone. There are no longer any obligations. I think.*
> *A: You think?*
> *Anne: I think… It's about whether you are alive for your own sake or feeling responsible toward others. And I don't think that the children need me. I don't think that it*

> *would cause them any greater distress if I, for example, committed suicide.*

What Anne seem to be saying is that her liability was mediated through Henrik; it was *their* life, and that life is no longer. Is there anyone, she wonders, who cares whether she is alive? That is the question she now asks herself. The children she refers to are from Henrik's earlier marriage, and her relation to them has become distant after his death. She plays no major role in their life, and as if Henrik's death wasn't enough, the one friend that she feels close to dies shortly before the second interview. The world has become a lonely place. Instead of classifying Anne's thoughts that border on suicidal as melancholic, depressed, or somewhere on the scale of "prolonged" or "complicated" grief, they should be taken seriously as an understandable response to a life that moves in a direction that she could not have imagined in the worst of nightmares. When I drive away from Anne's house after the first interview, I am shocked. She has struck me as a very intelligent and honest woman, and I recall thinking that she is the closest to (my picture of) Virginia Woolf that I have ever meet. Before long, Woolf's suicide comes to my mind, and I wonder if Anne will still be alive by the time of our second interview. "I owe all the happiness of my life to you," Woolf wrote in the letter left for her husband, Leonard, before heading in the direction of the river. Given Anne's life story and the role Henrik seems to have played in it, the idea that she would be of a similar opinion strikes me as very likely. When she tells me about her friend's death at the second interview, these concerns increased.

Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* launches three major questions that the preceding hundred years of grief research have not managed to address. First, as the title of the paper points to, Freud tries to distinguish grief from melancholia or depression. Second, if there is such a thing as a "normal," "healthy," or "adaptive" grief process, what would such a thing amount to? Thirdly, which points forward toward later development of his own later theoretical development, why does grief hurt so much? I certainly do not wish to suggest that the entire branch of grief research has failed its assigned mission. Rather the opposite, it seems impossible to give a final answer to all these questions. While depression, from a superficial viewpoint, can arise without a notable cause, grief is always tied to a loss of some sort. Freud (2005) points out that "mourning is commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal, and so on" (p. 203). In the case of mourning, we have more explanatory power since we can point not only to *who* or *what*

we have lost, but also "*what* it is about that person that [one] has lost" (p. 205) that mattered to us.

As we have seen, in the case of melancholia and depression, the clinical picture is more complex, and one cannot always directly identify the cause. Until the fifth version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases (DSM-5), there has been a "bereavement exclusion criteria" that has excluded a severe depression diagnosis if the patient had experienced a significant loss within the previous two months. This has been removed in the fifth version, and "Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder" (PCBD) is included Other Specified Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders (F43.8).[51] ICD-11 already includes Prolonged Grief Disorder, and even though the implementation in a Danish context has "gone awry" (Lund, Accepted/In press), it can be seen as the hitherto most ambitious attempt to respond to at least two of Freud's questions unambiguously, that is, to draw the line where enough is enough and provide an explanation for the pain; "make a map of sorrow".

A major argument preceding the implementation of the diagnosis has been that clinicians' possibilities for providing adequate help for people in grief would benefit from this specialization. The clinical picture of prolonged or complicated grief is different from that of depression and should, accordingly, be treated differently. The time limit of six months has been the most heavily debated and controversial aspect of the diagnostic criteria of PGD (Wakefield, 2012). Even though it has been far from my concern to judge whether the informants would qualify for this diagnosis and no measurements have been applied that could prove this, I would be inclined to say that many of them would. Some of them, including Anne, would also classify for moderate or perhaps even severe depression. For many, it was not until the last interview that they were beginning to get a grip of life again, that is, around two years after their loss.

* * *

The psychiatric ward is often the last resort for people in need of acute help, and here, suicidal thoughts are treated with great seriousness. While clinical psychologists who knew their clients can be more tolerant and understanding, treating thoughts of ending life as an understandable reaction to life circumstances that are extremely difficult to deal with, mental hospitals treat

[51] According to Pies (2014], this was "one of the most contentious decisions the DSM-5 work groups made—and, by some lights, the most controversial decision by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) since homosexuality was removed from the list of psychiatric disorders in 1973" (p. 19).

them as a first-case emergency, often resulting in hospitalization without permission to leave the ward. What is the link between grief and suicide? Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is perhaps the most evident example of how this link plays an important part in the literary canon of the West. If, as Charles Taylor (1991) has suggested, love makes us appreciate the life of the other more than our own, and this other is dying or already dead, isn't it a question worth posing, why on earth would I sustain my own life? If the reasons for getting up in the morning and the meaning of many of my activities are related to another, how can I go on without her? Obligations to the dead and the living often converge, and at times, it would seem like we could do no better than to join the rank of the dead and sooner than later.

The question of suicide, Albert Camus famously notes in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), is *the* primary philosophical question. Before any interest in the nature of the world or the categories of reason becomes relevant, we need to provide reasons for being alive. Being the "soul-like" animal we are, means, among other things, to imagine the possibility of not being born and even the ability to curse this very day (Eriksson, 2017). Within the existential tradition, there appears to be fair agreement that these reasons are not given a priori but as a question of how we live our lives. That is an endeavor easier said than done, and the challenges we might face can make it difficult to convince ourselves of going on. Most of us will be familiar with these kinds of thoughts; they come and go. The rationale of suicide is often provided through accounts saying that the world would be a better place without us. Or, as Anne says in the above quotation, there are no people left who need me. Suicide letters, Critchley (2015) writes in his book on the subject, often express, like Woolf's, an ambivalent combination of self-hate and profound love for an other.

Philosophers less prone to accept suicide as a solution to life's problems often argue that because we cannot possibly know what the future might bring, it can never become a rational decision to end one's life. Even though the present state of affairs leaves everything to wish for, tomorrow is a new day, and destiny is something that can only be written retrospectively. Lear's (2006) account of radical hope points in a similar direction, acknowledging that possibilists of a goodness transcending what the moment offers can and should always be hoped for. Critchley (1997) provides a more somber argument, saying that since death, if nothing like a mental state, carries no intentional content, we cannot want or aspire to death. Desire is always and necessarily tied to this world. Since all acts are related to one form of desire, suicide is an impossible act; we are trespassing human territory. "True pessimists do not kill themselves," Critchley (2015, p. 72) writes with reference to Emile Cioran (1973/2013). Far from the psychiatric paranoia, the best treatment of suicidal thoughts would be somber: "When people come to

me saying they want to kill themselves, I tell them, "What's your rush? You can kill yourself anytime you like. So, calm down. Suicide is a positive act" And they do calm down" (Cioran, 2013, as cited in Critchley, 2015, p. 72). Critchley continues this upbuilding guide in the following paragraph, worth quoting at length:

> Why not calm down and enjoy the world's melancholy spectacle that spreads out so capaciously and delightfully before us? Why not linger a while in the face of what Nietzsche calls "strict, hard factuality"? Why not try and turn ourselves inside out, away from the finally hateful inward suffering, and outwards and upwards towards others, not in the name of some right or duty, but out of love? Each of us has the power to kill ourselves, but why not choose instead to give oneself to another or other in an act of love, that is, to give what one does not have and to receive that over which one has no power? Why not attempt a minimal conversion away from the self-aversion that lacerates and paralyzes us towards another possible version of ourselves?" (p. 74)

The problem—like there was only one!—can perhaps again be found in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1967), where we learn that "man would rather will *nothingness* than not *will*" (p. 163). The internalization of bad conscience that lies at the heart of inner life has clear similarities with Freudian melancholia. Given that most bereaved people do not kill themselves, the challenge is the following according to Freud (2005):

> To each individual memory and situation of expectation that shows the libido to be connected to the lost object, reality delivers its verdict that the object no longer exists, and the ego, presented with the question, so to speak, of whether it wishes to share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of narcissistic satisfactions that it derives from being alive to loosen its bonds with the object that has been destroyed. (Freud, p. 215)

"To be or not to be" is the question any time, any day, but for the bereaved, it becomes paramount. Grief amounts, as we have touched upon in Chapter 4, and Freud comments upon here, to an *ongoing* realization that the other is no longer alive. Even though many readings of Freud's text have made libido detachment an relatively easy and finite task, Freud himself, in his discussion of melancholia—which we recall is later seen as a subjectivizing process "of total significance," was well aware that the "unconscious (thing) representation of the object […] consists of countless individual impressions (or their unconscious traces)" (p. 215). A life spent together as life partners has glued the other to almost all of lives spheres, and "the withdrawal of the

libido cannot be a matter of a moment, but must certainly, as in mourning, be a long drawn-out and gradual process" (p. 215). Given that the differences between melancholia and grief are ones of degree and they overlap in several important senses, we can picture Kirsten Dunst in the character of Justine at the very end of Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) wading through the swamp, slowly downwards, in the direction of deterioration, dragging every trace of life that she encounters with her. Grief also means paving through this swamp, realizing again and again that the other is no longer around and that the life we used to live is no longer an option.

Figure 1: Melancholia[52]

[52] von Trier, L. (2011). *Melancholia*. Denmark: Zentropa.

Losing Part of Oneself

> *I am myself, and I have no quarrels with regard to whether I am Sarah or not, but I have always been part of "Kristoffer and Sarah" […] He was my other half. And I think—the way I had it in the beginning, and still do, was that I had lost half of me. One half of me had been ripped off.*

Sarah frequently returns to this picture of being incomplete and torn apart. In our third interview, speaking of how difficult she finds social situations following Kristoffer's death, she tells me:

> *I am shrunken. It's very difficult for me to say this, but it's like they [referring to other people in general and her colleagues in particular] can only see a tiny part of me. There is so much they cannot see because he is no longer around.*

Sarah does not feel like a *whole* human being, and when encountering her new colleges after shifting jobs, she finds it difficult to give an account of herself since they are unfamiliar with her story. With the first quotation, we are back to where we started, to the violent metaphors of being torn apart and losing part of oneself through the other's death. In more or less similar ways, this line of thought, of being shattered at the core, is expressed by many of the participants. In our second interview, Judith speaks of it as a "hole." Whatever happens in life, "*make a mark*," she tells me, and continues, "*Even though it is uncertain to what extent I will go on being bereaved, there will always be a hole.*" Grief is ontological; it "creates a "rift in being" and overthrow the hitherto familiar order of existence" (Fuchs, 2018, p. 44). Even though Judith will recover psychologically and be able to lead a flourishing life again, "*there will always be a hole.*" How can we understand these accounts? In this section, I will prepare my socio-ontological understanding of grief by recapping the relation between relationality and finitude from a psychoanalytical, deconstructive, and existential-phenomenological perspective.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, becoming a subject is an inherently interpersonal affair. The ego-ideal and the super-ego, which are the Freudian terms for the world and others that surround the child, are pre-ontological structures from the perspective of the ego. The ego comes to be in relation to these others, and an important part of this process is internalization, taking the world around me inwards, making it part of my psychic apparatus. There is more than a difference of degree between the influence of infantile relations and later relational life since the former will have paved the ground and

heavily influenced the latter. But *all* relations will affect personhood as such and fluctuate the coordinates of who I am. The other, which in much psychoanalytical terminology goes as the love object, never finds a fixed place in the interpersonal nexus, which is me, but immediately begin to re-refigure this same environment. My beloved becomes part of my inner psychic reality, and there is, literally, nowhere to hide.

There is an otherness at the core of the self, which psychoanalysis has termed the unconscious. Freud's central claim, that the otherwise frictional psychoanalytical community most likely would agree upon, is that consciousness is not the central actor of our mental life. The material which the unconscious realm is made of comprises not only archaic remnants but traces from other people one has encountered throughout life, and the analytical cure often amounts to an interpersonal mapping, trying to reach a deeper understanding of who I am and why this is, a question that cannot be distinguished from asking who the other was (Sköld, 2020c). If the psychoanalytic couch acquires its particularity by intensifying transference, it too will not be a hiding place from the world but a first-order staging of this relational luggage.

Grief and loss play an imperative role within psychoanalysis since the ego's development and growth are driven hereby. Grief is something we learned in childhood, an internal ingredient in the process where I develop as a self through the acceptance of separateness and finitude (Lear, 2018; Eriksson, 2017). Later losses will necessarily actualize this primary loss, and if there is, as Philips (1997) has suggested, "an idealization of mourning" (p. 155) within psychoanalysis it is for good reasons. Life is a continuous process of mourning that is not only compatible with but a presupposition for living a flourishing life. "Count no man happy until he has mourned" Lear (2018) puts it, with a gloomy reference to Aristotle. We need to learn how to mourn, which means that we have to learn how to cope with a self that will fall apart during the course of one's life, again and again.

One of the most vivid defenders of the importance of mourning in a psychoanalytic setting is Judith Butler, and in a striking passage, she approaches the consequences of a its social ontology:

> It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. *On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well* [Emphasis added]. (Butler 2016, p. 22)

Upon the loss of a loved one, we become *inscrutable* to ourselves. From a psychoanalytical perspective, losing part of oneself is due to a porous self made up of others. That "I" suddenly go "missing as well" does not imply that variations of this I can be born anew, and new relationships formed. But it does imply an ontological vulnerability that installs the task of mourning as one of the fundamentals of human life.

* * *

On a deconstructive note, loss is equally inscribed in everything that we care for and love. Grief is anticipatory in the most fundamental sense since, following the differential logic developed by Derrida and Hägglund, everything that is carries its own annihilation as an integral part of its being. Without this negativity and temporal relentlessness, an entity identical to itself would not carry the opening toward anything else and could not exist in time. The move to the existential level and the calling to claim one's life as one's own is driven by this impossible repose. For as long as I am time, what I do with it will be constitutive for who I am. Through my actions, *I* am poured out—"engraved" into the world. Conversely, this world is engraved in me, in particular the others with whom I engage and share my time. When possibilities for a certain action or relations are annihilated, the self does not go unaffected. In his discussion of Proust, Hägglund (2012) approaches this relationship between a change of heart and a change of self, pointing out that:

> When Marcel loves someone, he fears not only external factors (e.g., that the beloved may betray him) but also his own internal ability to have a change of heart. To cease to love someone is for Marcel not simply an alteration within a self that persists as the same: it is to become *another self* whose life depends on the death of the former self. (p. 27)

Even though we have an persisting first-person perspective, existential identity and unconscious traces from an evanescent childhood that follow us throughout life, who we are depends on what we do with our time. Often or at least ideally, what we do with our time is attuned with our heart's direction. It is hard to formulate any notion of a good life that does not comprise love understood in the broadest possible meaning as a creative movement outwards. In Crichtley's (2015) words, despite or perhaps because the *cul-de-sac* of any question related to the meaning of life, it is "here [that] one can

help oneself out of one's solitude, shift that wedge-shaped core of darkness that is the self, and reach out and up toward the other… in love" (p. 76).

This is not the place to discuss the question of whether philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is a goal worthy of itself. But in all three perspectives that run throughout this dissertation, a good life is indistinguishable from a reflective stand. Work and love, Freud's answer to what it is all about, should perhaps even be stretched to the point of collapsing into each other. In my view, grief work is an excellent term that does not point to any final resolution but to the task of relating to existence as something given and finite but necessarily unfinished—a task the bereaved person finds him- or herself in with increased intensity. In a discussion on the shift in Freud's thinking on grief and melancholia that I pursued an extended discussion of in Chapter 2, and with explicit reference to Butler's continued work on this subject, Hägglund (2012) notes that:

> "To sever the bond to a significant other is not merely to relinquish something external but *to relinquish oneself*—to betray what one has been and to become someone who is irreducibly altered—which accounts for the intensification of pain and the internal conflict in the experience of mourning. By the same token, there can never be a self who emerges "free and uninhibited" from the process of mourning, since there is always a memory and anticipation of loss with which one has to reckon. Indeed, no matter how much one may seek to "kill off" the past, one may always be haunted by it in ways that exceed one's control and find oneself overtaken by it when one least expects it" (p. 119-120).

Living on is always living on in the ashes of what has been lost. The ambivalence arising from the fact that living on is always a form of betrayal, of myself and the other, will be of great concern in the latter part of this chapter, as will the hauntological aspects of bereavement. Just as there is no way to escape the loss of self that losing a life partner amounts to, there is no safe-guarded way into a life distinct from that self. Upon a deconstructive note, then—given that one has been committed to another and given one's time and life to this person, there will inevitably be a loss of self—as well as a continued challenge to live with the traces of this life.

* * *

Although some very important differences regarding temporality can be exhibited between existential phenomenology and deconstruction, the uncertainty and importance given to the future are pivotal for both. The

existential-phenomenological understanding of the ways humans are in the world, be it Kierkegaard's Self, Heidegger's Dasein or Jaspers's Existenz, is stretched out in time. The future is inscribed as part of my being, which for Heidegger, means that the negativity of death cannot be delimited to the end of life. Since *I am* my projected future, the loss of a partner with whom I share life will equally alter who I am. We have already seen many, and in this chapter, there will be many more instances of how the bereaved life partner finds herself in a different world. Since who I am is indistinguishable from this world, I am likewise bound to change.

The lived experience of bereavement takes place in between the merciless continuation of time and the ostensible feeling that time has changed. "Nothing has changed, and yet it all has. And you yourself will not be the same" (Riley, 2019, p. 76). Tramping through the mud of grief is, as mentioned already, often tantamount to being pulled down toward the timeless non-existence of the underworld. Not going in that direction and living on will, therefore, not happen automatically. No life is lived without intention, will and desire, which, in part, is what makes the condition of grief so extremely difficult at times. When everything one aspires to is being together with someone who is dead, it is difficult to find hope. "*I don't want anything else,*" Nina says, after describing how everything following Oscar's death is "*thrown up into the air.*" What life will be possible for Nina and all the others? Will they go down, prosper in a way never imaginable, find their way back to ways of living that were them long ago, or find a different partner? How can any of this be possible, given the state of hopelessness and despair that often color their world? How can anything good ever happen again?

I notice a dawning sense of future during the course of the one and a half years that I conduct these interviews. When I see them for the last interview, things do look brighter than they did in the first round. Even though they seem interminably marked and will never be the same, in all of the meanings given to this expression identified here, there will be life. And they will most likely be struggling to navigate this life as best as they can. There are innumerable other selves, which means that there are innumerable other ways of living. That the historical, generational, and economic predicaments that surround our lives make these possibilities far from endless does not alter the fact that there are no predetermined coordinates for how life will continue.

"Losing something of oneself is arguably the most prevalent metaphor in people's accounts of grief. And if the analysis above is valid, we should actually take this metaphor very seriously, perhaps even quite literally", Brinkmann (2018a, p. 8) writes in his account of the general psychological implications of the human capacity for grief. On the

background of the reading outlined here, I think that Brinkmann is correct in that the loss of self is immanent to grief, and the remaining part of this chapter will seek to provide an argument for why the cautious "perhaps" in the second sentence could be left out. The statement *is* to be taken "quite literally."

Being Called into Question

In both the second and third interviews, I have received credit from Clara for asking questions that she could not foresee and that made her think. While she knows "*everything that her psychologist is going to say before he says it*," my questions come as less foreseeable. We can find a notable exception from this rule in our first interview, that is, a question that she says is "easy to answer." I asked in what ways her life has changed since Michael's death:

> *That's an easy one. I am primarily preoccupied with the question of whom I am now. And that's not because I have been Michael's wife and nothing else. But the fact remains: we've been together for 18 years. So that's… I can't remember being all by myself. Michael has always been part of my life."*

It might be objected that it is factually wrong that Michael "*has always been part of her life*" since she was obviously "someone" before he came into the picture in her early thirties. But that would, I think, miss the point in what Clara is actually saying here. Whom Clara is now, aged 48, is the Clara who shares her life with Michael. That is, what for Clara passes as "her life" includes Michael. Whom she was before and whom she will become afterward is someone else. At this point, she tells me, "*There is no future*." This is also factually wrong—given that Clara's despair is not endless, and she continues to live—which she does, there will be a future, but this future will be of a different kind. When I visit her for the second interview, she speaks about "*beginning to redefine who she is*." Again, she remarks that "*it's not only because I've been Michael's wife, but in some situations, I have. So, I have lost part of myself; I think that everyone does that. I cannot imagine otherwise.*"

"*It cannot imagine otherwise*." Losing part of oneself is an integral part of losing someone we love. It is clear that Clara does not want to be positioned in the category of widows, which she, like many others, associates with a group of women who have lost every opportunity to continue a meaningful existence after the loss of their husbands. Indeed, considering the critique that the first wave of qualitative studies of partner bereavement has

received, for being bound, not only to a certain gender, but likewise to a homogenous socioeconomic group in the Anglo-Saxon world (Walter, 1999), and the appeals to conduct contemporary studies of partner bereavement that take present sociohistorical conditions into account (Sköld, 2020a), this study operates in an environment where the great majority of women in all included generations have been working and grew up with expectations of conducting an independent life. Still, the questions of the validity of the category of "widow" keep occupying Clara because if she is neither Clara nor a widow. Who is she, then?

> *How do I say… What should I say… Should I say "my children" or "our children"? Should I say, "my house" or "our house"? […] It becomes evident when I am to present myself to strangers: I have just become part of a history that I have not freely chosen. I remember thinking about it after the last time you were here—I don't know if you said anything but: who am I now?*

In the last interview, her youngest daughter has moved out since the last time, and she continues expressing these doubts:

> *I think it is extremely annoying, saying that "I live alone in [her town] together with a dog" because we still have three children. But at the same time, I can see that it sounds strange to say that "I live alone, and we have three children…" Every other time I say, "our house" and every other time I say, "my house." It doesn't come out natural at all. And I think about it every time. When Michael was alive, I could have said, "I have three children" without having to say, "we have three children." Now, "we" and "I" are different.*

It might sound like the whole confusion is a question of terminology, and that a given encyclopedia could provide the answer to her questions, whether or not "she is still married," whether the children are "hers" or "theirs," and so on. Unsurprisingly, I do not think that these questions can be settled that easily. In fact, I think that Clara is encountering some of the great enigmas in life, where the line between herself and the other is drawn, how she is part of a history that she cannot undo, and how to deal with a life that inexorably goes on. She is still here, but nothing remains the same. In Lydia Davis's (2007) words: "Is he, once he is dead, still "he", and if so, for how long is he still "he"?" (as cited in Riley, 2019, p. 61) The confusion surrounding the basic referential syntax that governs the rank of the dead backfires on the living: who are they and who are we?

* * *

In her work on grief, Line Ingerslev (2018) develops the notion of "being called into question", drawing on Steinbock's (2014) notion of "vocational experiences". Vocational experiences are introduced by Steinbock in his discussion of guilt, one of the moral emotions that comprise the subject of the book with the same title (2014). Moral emotions "are essentially interpersonal or that arise essentially in an interpersonal nexus" (p. 12) and include pride, shame, guilt, repentance, hope, despair, trust, loving, and humility. For Steinbock, vocational experiences refer to situations in which one does not know how to go on but must do so. They are described in unreflective terms, not as a contemplative withdrawal from the world, but as a mode of "being-plagued while having to go on." Ingerslev's (2018) reading focuses on vocational experience in relation to grief:

> To speak of a vocational experience points to the painful experience of not knowing how to go on. First of all, the experience has a responsive structure, that is, it is experienced as a demand. What *calls* is the death of the other, we might say: I myself am called into question by this death; why must I live on without you, why must I live at all, how can I go on? […] Being called into question by the death of the other is a matter of being called by death oneself; *how can I not not-die with you*? [Emphasis added]. (p. 350)

The death of the other calls me into question from a place elsewhere. The death of the other constitutes a question of why and how I could go on, and this calling is not, Ingerslev (2018) argues, answered sufficiently through narrative means:

> Rather, your life with the deceased as a joint embodied practice, a shared life form has now been cut open such that your own life will have the quality of a dead echo or even a sort of phantom limb, as the joint practice of "what we would typically do" is now incapable of moving, is now stuck in this timeless time (p. 354).

There is, and I will develop this extensively in the following sections of this chapter, no final end to this process: "unlike a process that ends with the check being written, the cake being baked, grief as an on-going activity might not come with a clear ending to it" (p. 355). Before the process of grief has even begun, I am called into question. "*At the moment, there is no way for me to understand that I will be alive again someday,*" Carl tells me during our first interview. We recall that Carl makes a distinction between "living" and

"existing." Existing merely happens; he wakes up in the morning but without the slightest idea of why this is. Life does not happen just by itself; it requires will and reasons for living. For Carl, Susan *was* that reason and had been so during almost 50 years: "*She lived and breathed for us*." Returning to Augustin's *Confessions*, we read – with references to both Horace and Ovid, about the friend as being "half of my soul"—"for I felt that my soul and his soul were "one soul in two bodies": and therefore was my life a horror to me, because I could not live halved" (p. 23). Susan was—pushing the cliché way beyond the limits of truth and back again—Carl's second half. She was not his second half in the sense that her person somehow made up the *telos* for every endeavor of his life, but the world that they had shared for half a century was the arena where he could be "Carl." That arena is now gone, and not only is there no place for him in the world, *there is no world*. While talking about his feelings and ways of coping with the situation might provide a relief, it will not and cannot rebuild that world. Grief amounts to the loss of possibilities for living the life he held so dear, and there are no "checks being written."

After This, Nothing Happened

One of the great inspirations for taking "losing part of oneself" as seriously as I have aspired to do in this dissertation is Lear's reading of Plenty Coup's utterance "After this, nothing happened" in *Radical Hope* (2006). With a point of departure in these four words, Lear orchestrates a profound discussion of how a culture survives the extinction of the conditions of possibilities of its subsistence. Lear (2006) hereby moves from the level of cultural specificity of Crow culture to "a vulnerability that we all share simply in virtue of being human." (p. 8). We are *all* Crow Native Americans in the sense that who we are is threatened by political, cultural, and relational changes in the world that will shatter who we are. To be a Crow subject is only possible given certain circumstances, and my point of introducing this line of thought here is that being Carl, Judith, and Nina was only possible within the sphere of we-hood now lost:

> To be a Crow subject one had to fulfill these conditions, but one also needed to constitute oneself as a person for whom living up to the relevant ideals constituted who one was. This was more than a mere psychological matter of "identifying" oneself in a particular way. It required a steadfast commitment stretching over much of one's life to

> organize life in relation to those ideals […] Subjectivity, so understood, is a never-ending task. (Lear, 2006, p. 43)

In short: one had to *do something* to be a Crow, and when those actions (Buffalo hunting and a highly specialized type of clan-based warfare) could no longer be performed, being a Crow was no longer possible. It is the structure of this argument that I attempt to apply on partnerhood well aware that it is a different issue to lose a culture than to lose a life partner. When one of the partners is dead, all the actions that made up the life of partnerhood are erupted from within. For example, one of the primary purposes of eating was spending time with the person who was one's partner, and upon the death of this person, eating makes no sense. For the Crow, who lived their lives for other purposes, Lear writes in extravagant Heideggerian fashion, "every meal was in effect the cooking-of-a-meal-so-that-those-who-ate-it-would-be-healthy-to-hunt-and-fight" (p. 40). We are the lives that we live, and while the differences between being Crow Native Americans living by the Missouri River and a widower in suburban Copenhagen can hardly be exaggerated, the vulnerability at the heart of both life forms is similar. They are, rephrasing Alphonso Lingis' (1994), the *grieving* "community of those who have nothing in common".

It is important to point out that this vulnerability depends on tensions and resistance. The death of a competing clan, which immediately would strike one as good news, given that they would have fewer enemies to worry about—equally affects the being of the Crows. While these clans were "enemies in real life," they still were "ontologically on the same side," Lear writes. Even though most of their actions aimed at trying killing each other, they still depended on each other for their sustenance. If one were looking for empirical evidence for the notion that Freud puts out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that life never was a matter of minimizing resistance, here is one. Resistance and struggle are inherent to any human life—in their absence, nothing matters. The vast majority of my informants have testified to how aspects of partnerhood that were not immediately "positive" are deeply missed as well.[53] While we often choose our battles and thereby avoid others, there is always *some* battle going on, and without this enduring challenge, the ways in which I am *at stake* are changed entirely. There is no longer an other in relation to *and* with whom I can define myself through my actions. In Ratcliffe's (2017) words:

[53] See section 3.2: "The gaze", in particular, "The place for the unperfect".

> The deceased was not simply a worldly entity that one cared deeply about (and continues to care deeply about) but also a condition of intelligibility for a world that was once taken for granted, for a system of significant possibilities that were once integral to the experienced environment. (p. 7)

The world we inhabit is comprised of others, and while "a singular experience of grief is focused on the loss of a particular person," Ratcliffe (2017) points out how it likewise "amounts to a profound change in how one experiences and relates to the world as a whole" (p. 7). I will develop the reading of *Radical Hope* in later sections, focusing on its futural dimensions. At this point, it will suffice to conclude that the world of the bereaved life partner and the world of the Crow are shattered worlds. How we can be psychological enemies and ontological friends can also help us understand how the loss of someone with whom the relationship was primarily negative often will affect one to a surprising degree. We do not always choose the people with whom we belong, and their death will not be without consequences for the lives that we live.

In a time where the consequences of a dawning planetary crisis are becoming increasingly difficult to deny, and a global pandemic has made life a total mess for almost all of us, ontological insecurity is hardly news for anyone. However, for the bereaved life partner, the everyday life that still goes on for many of us despite the mentioned challenges is equally distorted. The suffering of the bereaved partner is not the extermination of an entire culture, but it is the end of one form of life, a form of life that—like all forms of life, are interconnected with the basic existential predicaments of what it means to be human. "The whole earth can suffer no greater torment than a single soul," Wittgenstein writes in *Culture and Value* (1984, p. 46). Every human being is a world to him- or herself, and suffering difficult to quantify. A way of being is opened up, *cleared*, by all of us. From this perspective, the loss of one person amounts to the end of the world (Jollimore, 2011). "*The world has become incredibly empty. Your whole frame of reference is blown into pieces,*" Nina tells us in the introductory quote in this chapter. Grief puts us at a distance, makes us feel "notbelonging to the world, of detachment and even of derealisation: Everyday life seems empty, hollow and unreal; this reality is no longer one's own" (Fuchs, 2018, p. 6). The intertwinement of self, world and other comes to the fore in grief; reality is no longer one's own because one is no longer the same without the other. One has lost part of oneself.

5.2 The Normativity of Grief

Within solution-based psychotherapy, "the miracle question" plays an important role. To open up the horizon of hopelessness, the therapist asks the client to imagine a morning when she wakes up, and all of a sudden, problems are gone. Like dust in the wind, whatever is seen as the source of misery has vanished from planet earth, and the future lies ahead, full of possibilities. The proponents of this method do not believe in magic, that is, that the problems are factually gone, but sees the approach as a tool for creating a less inhibited space of imagination where a different life without these problems could be seen as possible, and thereby enhance the process of finding the means of reaching this goal.

I mention this here because, when I see my informants for the second interview, I ask them, if they had the choice of waking up the next morning to a world without grief, would they choose to do so? While the 15 participants generally provide diverse and individual answers to the questions I ask, they seem to agree on this one. Every one of them responded with a "No," and the core message of these responses can be encapsulated by Sarah, saying:

> *No, I wouldn't. I think that grief is a way of holding him—honoring him. Honoring what we've had together.*

From Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, we remember that we "ought to grieve," and the question of where this "ought" comes from is given a secular response in the last part of Sarah's reply. The ought arises, partly at least, on the background of a shared life and the time spent together. Given all that "we" no longer exists, some kind of response is called for. For as long as one does not believe in an afterlife where personhood continues, which has become increasingly difficult in the present context—given the worldly and interpersonal premises for subjectivity that are outlined in Chapter 2—the other will not be aware of this response. "For it would be unfaithful to delude oneself into believing that the other living *in us* is living *in himself*: because he lives *in us* and between us and because we live this or that in his memory, in memory of him" (Derrida, 1989, p. 22). Even though one cannot exclude that aspect entirely, this response should not be seen as a moralistic and/or narcissistic show-off for others. That bereaved persons are aware of and affected by the sociocultural normativities surrounding their lives does not exclude other forms of normativity.[54] In this section, I intend to show how a

[54] See Sköld & Brinkmann (Accepted/In Press) for an extended analysis of the *oughtness* of grief in an ontological, existential and sociocultural perspective.

social ontology of grief is necessarily ethical. Who we are is always a question of what we do, and how we respond to the death of the other is pivotal for whom we become.

Grief as a Moral Virtue

Given that the borders between us are blurry, given that I am another, "failing others is also failing Myself" (Steinbock, 2014, p. 128). Losing a person who one has loved without any form of reckoning would be failing the other that I am. How to respond then? Simon formulates this question in the following way:

> *S: That's the kind of thing that I have thought about. Should one engage in one's grief or try to get away from it?*
> *A: Mmm…*
> *S: Because there are ways to cultivate one's grief.*
> *A: How do you mean?*
> *S: Well, I can think about her and be sad. You can aim for it, you know. Read all the letters, do things that I know will affect me. But, I could also go to the cinema and see a comedy, do something totally different, at least for a while. I think that's what I will try to figure out when going to the counseling group. To what degree should one "hang on" to grief? Should one try and loosen its grip? Grief is certainly no pleasant condition, you know.*

If there is one thing that I have learned from this work, it is that grief is not a pleasant condition. The "raw grief" (*rå sorg*) that many of the participants speak about (or, more correctly, try to put words on) is an uprooting of one's soul, a way of being *against* the world. And we recall Freud's quarrels in *Mourning and Melancholia* of explaining grief in terms of libidinal economy alone. "It is curious," Freud (2005) writes, why the commands of reality to let go of the lost object "should be so extraordinary painful" (p. 205). The questions that many a bereaved person has asked him- or herself are, in Alicia's words: "*Will this ever end? When does it end? How much room is this supposed to take? Is it normal, being lamented like this? Do other people experience this*?"

It would not be unfair to describe Lear's overreaching attempt as an attempt to work out a moral psychology based on Greek thinking and psychoanalytical theory, a moral psychology that presupposes that human beings can "ground a conception of what it is for us to live well by giving a nuanced psychological account of who we are" (Lear, 2018, p. 18). This, for

Lear, is the most important lesson learned from Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the psychoanalytical endeavor of achieving a less conflictual relation between the different parts of the mind. Learning to live well requires coming to terms with who we are, a task at the heart of both philosophy and psychoanalysis. With explicit reference to Kierkegaard, Lear notes that ""to become human" and "to learn what it means to be human" are two ways of naming the same activity of the psyche" (p. 29). In short, we become who we are by trying to work out who we are, and for Lear, there are no doubts about the stakes of this mission:

> Are we to continue to be creatures who take responsibility for shaping who we are via a self-conscious grasp of who we might become? Or is the category of the *human* to be emptied out—evacuated with the struggles with meaning and value that, over the past several thousand years, we have come to see as constituting the distinctively human mind? […] It is a contingent question whether the human mind, as we have come to know it, will continue to exist (p. 26).

Why is this relevant for an ethical understanding of grief? In *Radical Hope* (2006), Lear pinpoints that courage is a paradigmatic virtue "because it is an excellent way of coping with, responding to, and manifesting a basic fact about us: that we are finite erotic creatures" (p. 119). With *finite*, Lear's refer to a lack of omnipotence; We are neither all-knowing nor all-powerful, and an underlying (ontological) vulnerability makes us defenseless against the flow of time that often comes to alter the very conditions of our lives. That we are erotic creatures is necessarily related to these finite predicaments; "in our finite condition of lack, we reach out to the world in yearning, longing, admiration, and desire for that which (however mistakenly) we take to be valuable, beautiful, and good" (p. 120). In the terminology of this dissertation, virtuous activity takes place somewhere on the span between relationality and finitude. We reach out because we "are born in the world longingly" (p. 123).

Courage is not a virtue frozen in time and part of what it means to be courageous is to "face up to reality" in radically new ways. Since the psychological structure of the Crow Native Americans was deeply embedded in the way of life they had carried out for multiple generations, facing up to a new reality meant undergoing a transformation of self. Letting go of the former self, which Hägglund (2012) identifies as an intrinsic part of being in time, is part and parcel of being courageous. This does not mean that the former self is forever abandoned and will not continue to mark one's continued life in many ways. But it does mean that the very conditions that shape one's reality are prone to change, and being courageous, in Lear's

terms, implies that these changes are to be confronted and not repressed. Against this background, Lear argues that courage, first of all, implies being a vulnerable risk-taker since life itself is at constant risk of falling apart. "That is, a courageous person has the psychological resources to face the risks with dignity and to make good judgments in the light of them" (p. 123). Second, being courageous implies an acceptance of the fact that these risks not only include external risks but "include *loss of concepts*," and "in such circumstances, courage would have to include the ability to live well with the risk of conceptual loss" (p. 123). That is, the loss of what goes as a good and meaningful life might be altered. Overnight, what used to be my life and my world are at risk of being undone. When one's life partner is no longer around, everything changes, and being courageous in this situation implies "facing up" to these circumstances; taking it upon myself that this happened to me. *I* need to do the mourning, and part of that is to acknowledge that the "I" will have to change. Grieving, for Kierkegaard and Lear, is a precondition of avoiding hopelessness and despair, and the question then follows, how it is that we learn how to grieve?

Learning to Grieve

As relational and erotic creatures, Lear notes, "we're born into the world longingly." *What* we long for and desire, on the other hand, what denotes the "conditions for our desire" (Butler, 2006 p. 123), is a contingent question, originally answered by our care persons, and subsequently, by the social world in which we are immersed. "Part of the sustenance our parenting figures will give us is the concepts with which we can at least begin to understand what we are longing *for*" (Lear, 2006, pp. 122-123). Lear is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that what we learn to appreciate as worth striving for is determined by the social environment that surrounds the ontogenetically most intense period of our lives. The people who care for us emerge in a socio-historical context, and what is understood as worthy of longing for is deeply embedded in that structure. While these people teach us to love, both through the love they provide and the channels and pathways to other kinds of love objects and activities that they guide us toward, the question of whether they also teach us to grieve is more puzzling. If grief can be seen as a virtuous activity, part of what passes as human excellence, how do we learn how to "do" it? Brinkmann (2020b) responds to this question, drawing on interviews with university students asked to recall their earliest memory of bereavement, with reference to the normativity guiding our emotional life generally. As has been suggested in earlier work (Brinkmann, 2016b; Kofod & Brinkmann,

2017), emotions do not stream from an inner and immediate consciousness but are broadly mediated through a normative social order. Brinkmann, 2016b) pushes this argument even further, arguing that "the very stuff of psychology is moral in and of itself." While other fields of study are morally relevant, psychology, as the study of "the study of persons' lives as *bios politikos* per se [ought to] take center stage in being a science of the normative in human life" (p. 14).

In the 11th chapter of *Wisdom Won from Illness* (2018), "Mourning and Moral Psychology," Lear pursues similar questions in a psychoanalytical light. As seen in Chapter 2, the work of mourning is in many respects identical to mental work generally. First of all, the mind is put to work through losses. Following our existential reading of the oedipal conflict, it is because the world turns out to be a place that is disappointing in so many respects that our mind are forced to develop. That human "happiness depends on psychic integration" has been well-known, Lear (2018) writes, "from the least the time of Plato." What psychoanalysis adds to this, which is of pivotal significance here, is "to show how such integration depends on passing successfully through mourning" (p. 201). At every stage of human development, Lear argues, with reference to Loewald (1980), there is mourning to be done. This also means that the developmental notions of mourning, whereby the self emerges and distinguishes itself from significant others and acquires a sense of self, becomes internally linked with the loss of a loved one later in life. The example in Lear's text is a son who has lost his father:

> When the father actually dies, and in mourning the son becomes more like him, this is a repetition and recreation of earlier internalizations at different developmental phases. No wonder the son has been able to mourn in this way: he has already had a lot of practice. It is mourning that prepares us to mourn (pp. 195-196).

"It is mourning that prepares us to mourn." Every later loss in life will repeat patterns and *memorializations* from the losses that lie on the ground of subjectivity. Since these internalizations are unconscious, it is always unknown exactly what has been lost. On the other hand, as I have tried to show in earlier sections, it is undeniable that something about myself has been "ripped off," to use Sarah's expression. Part of what it means to be a mourner, Lear writes,

> is to recognize, either explicitly or implicitly, that one is at the grief-stricken limits of one's understanding. We have not just lost a loved one—we are threatened with *being at a loss*: about what to do, what to feel, what to think. (p. 198)

Navigating this land forces us to rebuild the ship on the open sea. Lear understands this rebuilding project, following Freud, as one of internalization. The loss in the external world has stimulated a process of internalization whereby the other becomes part of my psychic apparatus. And this is where mourning becomes ethical.

While mourning puts the mind to work, there is no users manual to follow and the outcome remains uncertain. There is always a risk of "parental figures who can overwhelm us with guilt, or narcissistic figures that distort our sense of who we are and diminish the reality of others" (Lear, 2018, p. 201). Lear's major point is that the credit of the psychoanalytical clinical practice hinges on its potential to create a good mourning environment. For as long as we, with Aristotle, think of happiness in terms of a completed life, we should "count no man happy until he has mourned" (p. 201). Learning to mourn is part and parcel of leading a good and happy life insofar as there is no life without mourning. Mourning is one of the most vital psychological and developmental achievements since, without the capability to let go and imagine differently, nothing happens. "We need to mourn them because they need to die and we need to move on" (p. 201). It should be clear by now that mourning cannot be understood as forgetting and total annihilation, but a living *on* as a living *with* (Ingerslev, 2018). In the next section, we will continue the investigation of how these moral aspects are experienced and relate them further to impossible mourning (Derrida) and spiritual freedom (Hägglund).

Impossible Mourning

To grieve or not to grieve. That is the question with which we are reckoning. If grief determines our relations to the other and is part and parcel of an ethical life, is there a way of distinguishing successful from unsuccessful mourning? We recall that this is one of the primary tasks of grief research, at present culminating in the implementation of Prolonged Grief Disorder. But what if we consider this question on the premises of this thesis? Is there a way of doing it more or less successfully? How do bereaved persons' approach this question?

Given that all relations rest on ambivalent ground, that love cannot occur without hate, letting go will be as much of a two-edged sword as the life we had together. While Lear certainly is not blind to what he refers to as the "vistas of psychopathology" exhibited by psychoanalysis, his account of mourning remains remarkably positive. From a deconstructive perspective,

where any "good conscience" is a priori out of the question, and a minimal violence operates in every interpersonal encounter, integration appears to be more difficult. Before we encounter this ambivalence more thoroughly, we should ask to what extent grief is qualitatively loaded. Hägglund (2012) writes:

> To assume that this betrayal [not to grieve] by default is unethical is a fallacy, since there is no intrinsic value in being faithful to the other. There are innumerable situations where "mourning" the other consists in coming to terms with abuse inflicted by the other… The point is, however, that one has to *reckon* with it. (p. 120)

As someone who has been close to another, the point is not that I have to grieve in any particular manner, but that I have to "reckon with it." *How* one grieves or mourns is, as the following section will attempt to make clear, a question that can be answered only on behalf of a particular relationship. Still, *that* one grieves upon the death of another is an ethical demand. That is, one has to deal with the fact that this person is dead, and the part of life that we shared is altered and take this upon oneself. In this light, grief's predicaments have commonalities with the existential structure of love (Sköld & Roald, 2020). Something I cannot control happens (I fall in love/ The other dies), and I have to respond (Establish some form of relation/Grieve). This line of thought equally answers to the principles laid out at the end of Chapter 2. The givenness and contingency of our lives and the events they are made up of do not exclude our responsibility for them. When the other is dead, only one person can reasonably be held accountable for anything, and that someone is me.

"The deceased is a silent man" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 71) and any conversation held at the graveyard will immediately fall back upon oneself. The "answers" given to the many questions asked by the grave are always mediated by the version of the other that is filtered through me. The otherness that throughout life is sensible in moments of alienness and withdrawal reaches its climax after death has entered. From Derrida's perspective, the ethical aspects of grief are internally linked to an irreducible otherness and the necessity of reducing this, of making the other mine. In the space opened up in between the fact that I cannot, not ever, fully reach or understand the other, and the fact that any relation presupposes a minimal violence, a reduction to "the same", difficulties begin to emerge.

When the other is dead, impossibilities comes to the fore in several ways. First of all, one will have to reckon with the fundamental fact that the

other is no more and—suffice it to say—the qualitative difference in otherness that this implies. Second, one has to live on. For as long as one does not commit suicide, life forces us to "reckon with it." Derrida, who wrote excessively following the deaths of friends and colleagues, develops the notion of impossible mourning in *Memories for Paul de Man* (1989). As the title indicates, this question is intimately linked to the question of memory and how to remember the other:

> What, then, is *true mourning*? What can we make of it? […] The question is double: are we capable of doing it, do we have the *power* to do it? But also, do we have the *right*? Is it right to do so? Is it also the *duty* and movement of fidelity? (p. 31)

How do we live on in fidelity? Should we? If one is trying to give an affirmative answer to that question, one is also called to respond to how? Given that the other is dead and I cannot forget nor remember the other in him- or herself, how does one grieve? "*Somehow, I think that grief is a great thing*," Simon tells me, and he continues:

> *S: I'm not in a rush to get out of it. But I sometimes think of whether to ignore it or indulge in it. What do I want with it?*
> *A: And if you were to convince yourself to stay with the grief, how would you do that? How do you find a proper degree?*
> *S: Ehm… What do you mean?*
> *A: Why is it necessary to grieve?*
> *S: That's a good question. Because… It's easy to think that if you just didn't care, it would all be better. But no, to me, grief is a soul-like process in some way.*

We recall Simon's remark earlier that grief is far from a pleasant condition. Utilitarian notions of human action would find it difficult to account for *why* we should not turn away from the dead as fast as possible. Explaining grief evolutionary seem equally difficult; "being incapacitated by grief for an extended period of time is not compatible with survival of the species – mourners would soon get eaten by lions and their children starve" (Walter, 2017, p. 87).

Simon refers to grief as a "soul-like process," and it is clear from the other interviews that he is not overly religious. It is tempting to understand Simon's statement along the lines that he could not *not* grieve without experiencing it as dishonest, a form of violence toward the other and himself that grief is meant to hold at stake. Since Simon has begun dating other women

when I visit him for the second interview, he is considerate with regard to how other people react:

> *It's not for others to define—I can be bereaved and see another woman. Those two are not mutually exclusive, and grief doesn't go from A to B; from B and onward comes another woman and a life exempt from grief. The grief is here, all around. I can feel it right now talking to you.*

Our last interview that takes place shortly after Simon has experienced a short "breakdown," and he tells me that "*I've realized that the notion of grief as a temporary phenomenon doesn't exist*." The significance of Edith's death continues to affect him in the course of the first couple of years. On different occasions, many related to his daughters, it strikes anew, and "the art of grieving" can probably never be mastered once and for all but must, as life itself, be constantly relearned.

* * *

"*You learn to live with it. For now, I exist—living again is somewhere far ahead at the horizon,*" Carl tells me. You get accustomed to a world without the other. The days, weeks, months, and years without Susan slowly become part of his life world. For Carl, who is retired and often lacks reasons for getting up in the morning, life moves slowly. "Mourning slows things down" (Philips, 1997, p. 159). Every week though, he goes to pick up his grandchildren at school and kindergarten to spend the afternoon with them. Due to their growth and development, things change, and at the last interview, when they're in the middle of building a Lego-version of Hogwarts, the castle from Harry Potter, Carl glances at the project which occupies most of the living room floor, noticing that "*Susan has never seen Hogwarts*." Hogwarts is the exception in a material environment otherwise associated with Susan, an opening toward a future of which she is not part.

Immediately following Susan's death, the question of *how* and *why* to go on troubled Carl, and he expressed these thoughts and doubts to his daughter. She told him to forget all about that because her children needed a grandfather, and after that, thoughts of suicide have not appeared. Like many others, imperatives for living on are continued obligations to a social world, mediated by the memory of the deceased. "He or she would have wanted me to do this or that," I am often told.

> *I often think about… Because I know that he… I can hear him saying: "Nina, you're alive, and I am not. So, you need to live" (cries). And I*

> *think that he would not have wanted me to sink down on the couch because that wasn't him. He lived for as long as he was alive.*

For Nina, life itself becomes imperative and a way of honoring Oscar. While her picture of Oscar will always be *her* picture, most life partners will be in an epistemically privileged position when it comes to speaking on behalf of the other. And when common children are part of the picture, these claims seem to become even stronger.

Suicidal thoughts upon the death of the other are a key feature of Freudian melancholia. The superego is fueled with anger and resentment that one is incapable of expressing, and it is backfired against one's ego. The reasons lying behind this ambivalence are hard to generalize, but for every bereaved person, the fact that he or she died will be one reason to be angry. "He died," we say like it was some kind of action, something that could have been avoided, something that he could have chosen to do otherwise. Periods of anger have often been part of the standardized grief models that have attempted to normalize periods of hostile feelings toward the deceased. Even though one is very well aware that he or she is perfectly innocent and could not have chosen otherwise, in fact, probably wished for nothing but prolonged life, the fact remains that he is dead, and I'm here. Convinced that being dead demands no greater effort, "*I'm the one dealing with all the shit*," as Alicia eloquently puts it.

At our last interview, Sarah tells me about her routine visits to the grave, whereupon I ask her if she talks to Kristoffer on these occasions:

> *S: I don't have to because I already know what he would say. I don't even yell at him any longer like I used to.*
> *A: Where you mad at him?*
> *S: Yes, I was mad because he wasn't around any longer… We've built all this because we agreed that was a really good idea, right?*
> *A: I see. And it wasn't part of the deal that he would suddenly die?*
> *S: It most certainly wasn't part of the deal, and for quite some time, I think that he ran away from his responsibilities (laughs). But then again, who is to blame?*

Indeed, who is to blame? Being human, we have seen, sometimes implies cursing the day we were born. It "most certainly," to borrow Sara's expression, also means cursing the day the other died. Death, which Kierkegaard (2009a) denotes "indefinable;" "the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain" (p. 71), will happen. In a medical discourse, death is often treated as accidental, something that could have been avoided if only we would have done this or that. We do not just die but die

from this or that. Narrative accounts of grief (Davies & Nolem-Hoeksema, 2001; Gilles & Neimeyer, 2006) hinge on creating meaning and achieve narrative coherence amid chaos. In the struggle for this coherence, isolating this cause of death is viewed as pivotal. The question worth posing is how the so-called meaning of death could be anything but a non-question. "*I think that I have to accept that this will not make sense,*" Nina tells me. Referring to the cancer that struck Oscar at the end of his Twenties and short-circuited their life and shared future, she continues:

> *There cannot be some kind of meaning with everything that happens because this is totally meaningless. For someone to end like that. Not for him nor anyone else. It makes no sense. And I think that I have to accept that there are things that fall outside the categories of sense but happen anyway. There are things that cannot be controlled. And it will never make any sense that he couldn't be here with us, that he would have to go through this.*

Derrida places himself in between the affirmative view of mortality that can be found within the existential tradition and the impossibility of comprehending finitude on an unconscious level that we find in psychoanalysis. For Derrida, death marks the very limit of the sensible, where we are left in the greatest perplexity. The first lecture from *Memories for Paul de Man* (1989), "Mnemosyne", has been one of the most influential texts on grief that I have encountered throughout this project, and I am quoting at length:

> What does this mean? What do we mean by "in memory of" or, as we also say: "to the memory of"? For example, we reaffirm our fidelity to the departed friend by acting in a certain manner *in memory* of him, or by dedicating a speech to *his memory*. That time, we know our friend to be gone forever, irremediably absent, annulled to the point of knowing or receiving nothing himself of what takes place in his memory. In this terrible lucidity, in the light of this incinerating blaze where nothingness appears, we remain in *disbelief* itself. For never will we believe in either death or immortality; and we sustain the blaze of this terrible light through devotion, for it would be unfaithful to delude oneself into believing that the other living *in us* is living *in himself*: because he lives *in us* and between us and because we live this or that in his memory, in memory of him. This being "in us," the being "in us" of the other in bereaved memory, can be

> neither the so-called resurrection of the other *himself* (the other is dead and nothing can save him from this death, nor can anyone save us from it) nor the simple inclusion of a narcissistic fantasy in a subjectivity that is closed upon itself or even identical to itself. (p. 22)

Bereavement is perplexing to the point of exhaustion, and "we remain in disbelief itself." While it seems impossible to believe in the continued existence of the other "in himself," it seems equally impossible to acknowledge this spectral existence as a way of keeping the other alive ("the simple inclusion of a narcissistic fantasy"). Perhaps Heidegger's "undead" is the most suitable term for this diffuse form of existence. The important point that Derrida wishes to make, anyhow, is that there is no successful way out of this aporia. Grief is where we necessarily falter, where we "success fails" (p. 35). Importantly, this does not mean that the endeavor of grief is unwarranted. The opposite is true; it is because we will never fully succeed, and our minds will never be allowed to rest in peace that grief makes up an existential task of the highest rank.

* * *

As Hägglund (2019) also notes, this understanding of grief does not require an explicit affirmation of any sort. Finitude is constitutively embedded in every form of life, the memories from beyond the grave always already operative. That everything we do already is a testimony to the transitory nature of life does not change the overwhelming experience when the other's life comes to an end. In this situation, Derrida writes, we remain inconsolable:

> We weep precisely over what happens to us when everything is entrusted to the sole memory that is "in me" or "in us." But we must also recall, in another turn of memory, that the "within me" and the "within us" *do not* arise or appear *before* this terrible experience. Or at least not before its possibility, actually felt and inscribed in us, signed. The "within me" and the "within us" acquire their sense and their bearing only by carrying within themselves the death and the memory of the other; of an other who is greater than them, greater than what they or we can bear, carry, or comprehend, since we then lament being no more than "memory," "in memory." Which is another way of remaining inconsolable before the finitude of memory. We know, we knew, *we remember*—before the death of the loved one—that being-in-me or being-in-us is constituted out of the possibility of mourning. We are only ourselves from the perspective of this knowledge that is

> older than ourselves; and this is why I say that we begin by recalling this to ourselves: we come to ourselves through this memory of *possible* mourning. (Derrida, 1989, p. 34)

Grief, Derrida says, is always already there—we come to ourselves "in the bereaved allegory." Given that love is fueled by loss, it is worth asking if the opposite is likewise valid. In *Works of Love* (2009b) Kierkegaard suggests just that, making "the Work of Love in remembering One Dead" into the highest most *free*, *faithful* and *unselfish* kind of love (pp. 320–329). It is through our ways of relating to the dead that we put our love to test. The final proof that one's love was in fact a true expression of love is to be found in one's continued ability to love, that is, to sustain a movement outwards toward others and the world, and thereby avoid despair.

For Derrida, on the other hand, this moving on is never distinguishable from infidelity. Importantly, there is no way out of this infidelity since all living-on is ensigned with violence. This not only goes against the Kierkegaardian line of thought presented here but likewise psychoanalytic notions of mourning: "To mourn and not to mourn are two forms of fidelity and two forms of infidelity […] The psychoanalytic discourse, despite its subtly and necessity, does not go into this fatality, this necessity: the double constraint of mourning" (Derrida, 1992/1995, as cited in Hägglund, 2012, p. 120). Upon Hägglund's (2012) reading, incorporating the other will never be an expression of fidelity since it rests upon a denial of the other's death.

> Rather than promoting the "fidelity" of melancholia against the "infidelity of mourning, Derrida's logic of the double bind should lead one to articulate the constitutive violence of both mourning and melancholia, both the letting go and the incorporation of the other […] There can be no fidelity to the dead other without incorporation, but this fidelity is at the same time marked by infidelity, since it denies the death of the other. Conversely, to be faithful to the fact that the other is dead is to be unfaithful since it entails that one leaves the other behind. Fidelity is therefore a form of infidelity and infidelity a form of fidelity. (p. 122)

In grief, we are called to respond to the impossible, that is, death and the other. "If death teaches us anything at all," to use Derrida's expression, it is the fact that there will never be any "true" mourning. The truth of mourning is an otherness that can never be surpassed, an otherness that will be equally and necessarily reduced and ignored through our continued lives. In life, I never knew who the other was, and the doubt increases when death comes. Life is always "a life after, as inheritance, ancestry, legacy, and faith. All wounds are

not healed by time. Time itself is a wound within which life prevails" (Ruin, 2018, p. 201). Accordingly, navigating in the shadows of the diffuse imperatives of what has been can only succeed by failing.

The Art of Remembering

"*I'm afraid of losing his memory*," Judith tells me. "*I worry about that because I would like to have him with me. That's why the hats are still out there.*" When I arrive at the homes of the participants for the first interview, my eyes are eager, looking for signs and traces of their lost partners. And there are, indeed, innumerable signs indicating that this used to be a home for two. Often, I see paperwork laying around that I suspect has something to do with bureaucratic issues following the death of someone. In the quote from Judith, she refers to her reluctance to put Jacob's hats away and relates it to her fear of forgetting. Following Derrida, the dead are "entrusted to our memory," the ones we have lost only "exist" in and between us, and it is beyond all doubt that memory plays an important role in the lives of the interviewees. Memory is a vital ethical aspect of bereavement. As already indicated, mutual children serve as inescapable reminders of what used to be, and the shared domestic setting is flooded with signs from a shared life.

When I speak to Mary for the first time, she refers to the time immediately following the loss of Conrad as the "*period of deep grief*." I ask her how she would describe this "deep grief." She responds as follows:

> *M: "Well… It's the memories.*
> *A: They hurt?*
> *M: It's the memories from the time, where everything was like it was supposed to be. Memories from the time where we could lie beside each other. Where we talked. Everything, holidays, children, grandchildren, and so on.*

Right before in this interview, Mary had talked about her anger when visiting the grave, anger that came from the fact that "*he couldn't stop drinking… The anger and frustration over the fact that he didn't get older*." While being close to a person with alcohol problems undeniably makes a rough time, any relationship will have its less appealing sides. When I ask the interviewees' if there is anything about their partners that they *don't* miss, they often give me a weird look and think quietly for some time, like that question didn't really matter at the moment. Alicia's answer is typical in this regard: "W*ell, of course, there are. But that fades away*." In light of death, what used to be a

problem, partly fades away. In the perspective of the dead and dying, what used to cause arguments and relational havoc, doesn't matter any longer. This does not mean that all negative bias is overcome through death. For the informants who had gone through a long-term disease, the normative aspects of memory come to the fore in their struggles to remember the partner as healthy. Having stood by in year-long cancer treatments easily makes one forget the times "*when everything was like it was supposed to be*," to use Mary's words. For Felicia, this issue is especially poignant since George ended up being sick for a major part of their short relationship:

> *Things ended with George being sick for half the time we were together, and that's quite a lot. So, it ended with me being less of a spouse and more of a co-worker and actually playing the mother role. Because once in a while, he was a big child who went out to chop wood whenever there were troubles.*

The relationship with George did not end up like Felicia had imagined; their short time together was filled with financial problems, moving from house to house, and conflictual relations with George's former spouse. The love they shared was not unconditional, and she remains uncomfortable using the word. "*Love is such a big word. It's not like I'm afraid of the word. But our relationship wasn't unconditional. It gradually fell into pieces…*" George and Felicia had a rough start, and before they had gotten to a place where things were at peace, George died.

* * *

Rebecca had likewise stood by Eric's long-term cancer treatment and is struggling with similar memory issues:

> *I'm trying to think… I'm trying to think more about how he was before he got sick, but that's still difficult. If I don't think of the disease, I think of the time when we'd first met. The long period when things were just everyday life still feels a little distant.*

These testimonies would caution against making idealizations into a universal feature upon premature death. *Wanting* to remember what was good is not synonymous with neglecting everything that was not. But from the perspective where there will be no more, either good or bad, the old saying that we should not speak badly about the dead is beginning to make sense. As outlined in Chapter 3, a loving gaze *chooses* to see the other in the best possible light, which doesn't stop with death. On a similar note, Ingerslev

(2018) suggests that we replace the outworn term "grief work" with "love work" since what essentially goes on is a prolongation of that love. Learning to live with an absent other is not a question of incorporating the other but learning to live with the "pure question mark" that the other's death comprises:

> Importantly, there is a difference in accentuation here; as a work of love rather than a work of mourning, we focus on the relational aspect of grief and not on the internalized object of grief. It is not that the deceased other is becoming part of me, an animated part of me, but rather, I keep surviving the pure question mark of the experience of the dead other as an ongoing relational activity. This allow us to see how the deceased other remain part of our ongoing rehearsal of being alone, namely as a rehearsal in the company of a deceased other. Importantly, this is a work because it will be a struggle to rehearse this kind of love as a work of being alone; saluting, dedicating and evoking the absent other. (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 357)

The love work of grief is a work of otherness. From a deconstructive perspective, mourning is less a question of making the other part of me and more a question about living *beside* the other. Anne touches upon this difference in our first interview:

> *Anne: Since he died, I don't feel that I can see him. He is beside me.*
> *A: You feel that he is still by your side?*
> *Anne: Yes. Well, I can't see him anywhere—sometimes people say that "Yes, I can see him sitting in his chair." That's not how I experience it. But he is still here! Isn't it funny?*
> *A: Yes, it's a great way of describing it, that he is "with you."*
> *Anne: Yes, he is. But not as an object.*
> *A: No, would you say he is part of you?*
> *Anne: Well, I know some people say that as well.*
> *A: But for you?*
> *Anne: I guess that he is. After having lived together for several years, you become integrated with the other's way of being, thoughts, and essence. But still, I don't know…*
> *A: Maybe your way of describing it is somewhere in between the outside and the inside?*
> *Anne: Well, the supportive function or what I should call it, it's still there.*

The fact that Henrik is there, beside Anne, as a "supportive function" is not random nor an inescapable aspect of grief. Who our dead grew into becoming

hinges on our way of grieving and relating to the one we have lost. Us, the living, are responsible for the dead, making this an ethical situation of great importance. In and through this relating, which is an immanent feature of our relationality, we become who we are. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the impossibility of any final solution to this hauntological structure does not exclude but motivates our dealings with the dead. In the following section, we will dig deeper into the solitude and loneliness of bereavement. This section will also include a discussion on how, for good and for bad, the social world affects bereavement and a continued analysis of the prospects and limitations of language.

5.3 Solitude

"*Would you call me a bad person if I told you that I need to be alone and not care about others from time to time*?" Mary asks me at our second interview. The bereaved person is thrown out of the world, and Mary's question circles around whether it is not ok to linger there for a while. Loneliness is a major psycho-social problem; according to van der Berg (1972), it even qualifies as "the nucleus of psychiatry" (p. 105), often correlated to other mental problems such as depression and anxiety. The question that I wish to explore in this section is the existential and normative status of solitude, where and how the limit to loneliness is drawn, and how the social world is affected by the loss of a life partner.

"My sorrow is my baronial castle, which lies like an eagle's nest high up on the mountain peak among the clouds. No one can take it by storm", Kierkegaard (Victor Eremita) writes at the beginning of *Either-or* (1843/1987, p. 109). Grief, is described as a hiding place where one cannot be found. Thinking of Woolf and the "room of one's own," which was seen as a necessary presupposition for thinking and writing, we might wonder whether the same room is necessary for grieving? To answer the question of how one grieves on the border between self and other and what role language plays in this regard, we need a closer examination of the relationship between solitude, grief, and language.

Alicia, one of the participants who express the greatest dissatisfaction with the contemporary "grief culture" in Denmark, tells me that "*grief is something that leaves you on your own*." Importantly, this is due not only to the present societal inabilities of dealing with negativity but a feature that she relates to "*the core of grief*." "*The core is unshareable. The core—that's what I call it. The core leaves us on our own*." Even though grief is one of the few existential universals that every human being will have to deal with at some

point, it is equally something that we are left to deal with ourselves. Anne also sees the unshareability of grief as what is "*most transgressiv*e" about it. "*Even though there are people to share it with, it's very limited what you can say […] The core of grief cannot be shared*." Some would, perhaps correctly, point out that there are cultures where grief *is* shared with others to a greater extent, and the suffering it entails thereby alleviated. Even though that might be an true, it remains hard to imagine a language in which grief was properly expressed and a culture with a tensionless relation to death. In many ways, grief is where nothing compares, and we remain miles apart:

> *Grief cannot be compared. You cannot compare what you have lost. If you have lost a child, a life partner, or your parents, or a good friend—those things don't compare. And there is not one of them who is better or worse than the other; that's like mixing apples and pears. Even though you can speak about grief in general terms, our relations are so different that they cannot be compared.* (Clara)

Taken at face value, these testimonies question the very premises for this dissertation. Even though we are speaking of a loss of a similar kind, that is, of a life partner, experiences from 15 different losses remain speaking in 15 different languages. The only generalization we are warranted to make seem to be that grief cannot be generalized. The only thing we have in common is that we have nothing in common. In Ian Wilkinson's (2005) words, "Suffering is common to us all, yet can only be known uniquely as our own" (p. 17). My grief is my castle, a castle that no one can storm, a predicament that is both a blessing and a curse, a sign of unequaled love and tormenting pain. In light of the previous section on normativity, establishing a room where this grief can be cultivated becomes an inherently ethical question.

The double meaning of solitude, which on the one hand, gives connotations to reflection and spirituality, and on the other, loneliness and unwanted isolation, plays an important role in many of the accounts given by my informants. Returning to Anne, there has never been a symbiosis that eradicated solitude from the scene. Partnerhood, in her eyes, is an arena where the positive aspects of solitude can be cultivated, not its negation. After noting, as quoted above, that the core of grief cannot be shared, I ask her if the loneliness of grief is the most intense form of loneliness that she has experienced:

> *I don't know. It depends on the definition of grief. If you become divorced or something like that, there is a loneliness that is extremely strong. I mean if you depart from someone that you love. But that doesn't necessarily last very long (laughs). It's not loneliness in the*

> *eternal register. And that's the difference. That it is definitive in a way that we're not used to.*

Death is definitive; there is no coming back, and part of what it means to be bereaved is to confront this irreducibility, which we, in Anne's words, "*are not used to*." We are used to living in time and relate to temporal intervals on the scale of the living. When someone leaves the door, despite his or her age, we often have a vague expectation that this will not be the last time. The dawning realization that this *is* the bitter end is a quivering existential difficulty, which also amounts to adjusting oneself to the thought of being alone in a new way. In her own words, Anne was very much aware of the fact that she "*basically, always has been alone. And that is confirmed when the other dies. But still, you have been together. Two "alones" together. And now you're one alone without the other.*"

The literature sometimes makes a distinction between existential and interpersonal loneliness (Weiss, 1973; Tilburg, 2020). Interpersonal loneliness refers to a state in which others are manifestly absent, the fact that no one is around. Existential loneliness, on the other hand, refers to a deeper state of not being at home in the world. I have argued elsewhere (Sköld, 2020d) that if one perceives existential questions in an interpersonal light and interpersonal questions in an existential light, this distinction collapses. There is no interpersonal loneliness without existential features and the opposite. On the other hand, several of the participants makes a difference between being isolated (*ensom*) and alone (*alene*). Being alone is seen as unavoidable, whereas being isolated is not perceived as a suiting description, often with reference to the supporting social world they have around them. The participants in this study seldom perceive themselves as isolated, but each of them speaks of being alone in various ways.

Talking

Given the popularity of narrative and constructive frameworks for understanding grief and growing psychotherapeutic efforts of dealing with it in a specialized manner, the question of the relation between grief and language calls for a closer empirical investigation. The empirical picture from this study is blurry with complaints about a nonexistent grief culture and an apparent unwillingness to make room for the stories that one would like to tell, on the one hand, and an experienced uneasiness about implicit demands of sharing feelings on the other.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler notes—as mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, that "the one story that the "I" cannot tell, is the story of its own emergence" (p. 66). The limits of language are our infantile life, and our process of gradually becoming a member of the symbolic order. We have already heard several accounts pointing to how the core of grief is "unshareable." What does that mean? How can I experience, feel, and know something with all my heart and not be able to communicate this to others? Is it not often said that the very process of putting words on our difficult feelings provides a relieving cathartic effect—reestablishes the bond to the world that has been wounded and shattered?

The first problem is grammatical and revolves around the most rudimentary referential syntax. What does "James" even refer to after James's death? To whom am I referring when speaking about him or her? Is "he" still "he"? It would be, as Derrida (1989) points out, "unfaithful to delude oneself into believing that the other living *in us* is living *in himself"* (p. 22); there is no "him" apart from the one "living in us." This spectral "existence", despite its insistent nature, remains a very restricted form of life ("*Live*! That's exactly what she wouldn't do!" as Lewis puts it). The dead is no more, and still, we can speak their names. And we continue to do so; families keep telling the stories that function as their narrative glue, stories that have been told a hundred times and more, and for that very reason, always deserve to be told once more. This does not change the fact that speaking that name opens up an emptiness in a world that might be difficult to handle:

> *I've often encountered people where I noticed them thinking, "Oh no, that's her; she has lost her husband, and now we will have to hear about that." People express this very clearly, which of course, makes you talk of something else. That has made me… not angry, but sad every once in a while.* (Mary)

What is generally viewed as normal politeness (questions such as "How are you?" and "How is it going?") cannot, for the bereaved, be answered without great effort. Even though the norms of common discourse suggest that I respond effortlessly, saying: "fine" and then carry on, this is exactly what seems impossible for the bereaved. Mary is not fine. She imagines that conversations would begin without these annoying questions since she is not properly shielded from the suffering and ontological insecurity that pervades her life. The questions immediately become intimate. "*Couldn't one instead start talking about oneself, saying: "Listen, I've been doing this or that." That would be nice,*" she tells me. Simon even talks of himself and the position of the bereaved as "*leprous,*" and if he chooses to talk, he sees the entire social

environment at risk of becoming contaminated. This phenomenon has been so manifest that Simon has put it on his reminder note already the first time I visit:

> *S: One thing that I would like to talk to you about, or tell you about, is, well, I have a concept that is called leprosy, do you know that?*
> *A: In other circumstances, yes.*
> *S: In this case, leprosy means that people seem to be afraid of me.*
> *A: Okay.*
> *S: I am a walking disease that they need to keep away from. There are seemingly some ghosts rioting around here. Something about the Danish culture, an unwillingness to touch it. But I also think that the leprosy goes both ways."*

Ester Holte Kofod (2020) has developed the notion of "the grieving killjoy" based on interviews with bereaved parents. "There too I ended up ruining the good atmosphere, right?" as one of them gloomily says (p. 9). Melancholia remains an enemy of the state and the black bile of morning sickness needs to be exorcised; the sooner, the better. For Riley (2019), "the struggle to narrate becomes not only an unenticing prospect but structurally impossible" (p. 16), something that Clara would probably agree with after being stalked by well-meaning talkers:

> *One day, down in the supermarket, a guy I know grabbed me, looked me in the eyes, and said: "Clara, I'm not the kind of guy who just walks by. I would really like to talk" Really, I just felt like telling him, "You know what, today I wished you weren't that kind of guy.*

Further on in the interview, Clara tells me that "*the minister has called me three times or something like that, and I have not returned his calls*." I learn that not only acquaintances and ministers fail in the role of fellow speakers at this moment, but the psychologist as well. "*I very much doubt that the psychologist can give me another perspective on this*." The meaning of death will shift in the years to come, but there is no "perspective" that can make Michael's death any less substantial. "She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?" Lewis (1961, p. 15) asks in his treatise. The word "death" is hard to learn, and how someone can "be dead" at times impossible to grasp.

Privileged Grief

The world of the bereaved is a different world, hard to imagine even for the people being close to him or her. When Simon spoke about his leprosy above, he also mentioned that it works both ways; his way of looking at the world and others were equally altered. If one grants that, at some level, the bereaved has one wish and one wish only, to have the dead back to life, everything else and everyone else will be a disappointment. Augustine illustrates this with unprecedented clarity in his *Confessions*: "Everything was an object of horror, even light itself; all that was not he made me feel sick and was repulsive—except for groaning and tears. In them alone was there some slight relief" (p. 85). The merciless gravity of bereavement pulls one downward, makes one want to hide underneath a blanket, hidden away from the light of day. As long as my tears are everything there is, I am a little closer to him or her. Only in misery is a real comfort to be found. This should not be seen as an idealization of melancholia but an attempt to understand how the entire world, with all the richness and beauty, means nothing in the eyes of the bereaved. Understanding grief means taking it seriously; for someone who has lost their loved one, the light itself "was an object of horror". "There is no common measure adequate to persuade me that a personal mourning is less serious than a nuclear war" (Derrida, 2001, p. 71). The point with this obvious exaggeration is that there are no common measures to compare anything at all for the one who has lost. That everyone is dying, and grief will strike us all is a faint comfort. "Equal vulnerability does not imply radical substitutability" (Butler, 2016, p. xvii).

We recall from Kierkegaard's *At a Graveside* that if one cannot work at night, there is only day, and that is where work has to be done. This is where we should live. The problem, or one of the many problems, is that, in a line borrowed from Ernest Hemmingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926/2016) "it is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing" (p. 45). Several of the participants refer to how "*they are seen from the outside*" and how that perspective differs from their own. "*I wouldn't say that I've been able to move on quite yet. But if you asked my friends, I think that they would say: 'Jack, he is doing mighty fine*!'". Clara has a similar experience: "*If you look at me from the outside, in a helicopter perspective or asked others what they see, I think that they would say that things are going rather well*." In our last interview, one and a half years after Michael passed away, she tells me that she is often told, "*You are so strong, the way you're handling this is just amazing*." At times, though, she cannot hold herself back and answers, "*There is no way for you to see how I'm doing inside*." Many of the participants are bitterly aware of the fact that grief does

not promote human flourishing in the way that they become tolerant and pleasant to be around. When the grieving killjoy (Kofod, 2020) is at work, we can picture The Groke from Tove Jansson's Moomin books spreading nothing but frostiness and deterioration wherever it goes, despite the friendliest of intentions.

Figure 2: The Groke [Mårran][55]

The expression "moving on" that Jack talks about in the quote above raises at least as many questions as it answers, questions we shall grapple with further in sections 5.5 and 5.6. For Nina, it is clear that it doesn't mean moving back to some prior state:

> *It's because when one has seen what I have seen… That cannot be taken back. You can never undo it. It's part of me now. I don't know; it's hard to explain. People, they cannot understand my world right now. They*

[55] Jansson, T. M (1960) *Who Will Comfort Toffle?* [Vem ska trösta knyttet?]. Stockholm: Hugo Gebers förlag.

> *know my husband is dead, but they don't know what I have seen or what I have done. People don't think of that. So, I feel very different. And there is a huge loneliness because my peers have not lost their spouse.*

On a similar note, Judith tells me that "*there is no room for grief and that is a problem because there is grief*." There is grief, and that grief is experienced in a very special way for a life partner. As already mentioned, the question of which loss is to be perceived as most severe haunts grief research. Even though the fundamental premises guiding this dissertation, where every loss and grief is intimately bound to the form of life that was lost, deems this question largely uninteresting, the participants perceive their situation as bereaved partners as extraordinary, and our reading of partnerhood in Chapter 3 gives a certain credibility to this understanding. This is not synonymous with neglecting the many ways that other relations are equally privileged in other ways, a reading of the existential meaning of being a child to a lost parent, a parent to a dead child, or anything else, could legitimately argue their cases upon other peculiarities.

Support groups for bereaved people are common in larger parts of the Western world and arranged in very different forms. Some of them are general, where people in any kind of grief partake, and others focusing on a specific type of loss. Rebecca was one of my informants who ended up in the first kind, and she was far from pleased with the situation:

> *People sat there talking about how difficult it was to lose their mother, and now they wouldn't get a text message on their birthday any longer. "Ok…" I couldn't stand listening to them. "Yes, I feel sorry for you having lost your mother, but you still have your husband and your children, right?" That causes an internal struggle where I ask myself if I'm totally without empathy or what. And at the moment, I don't think that's the case. I simply don't have the willingness to be tolerable right now […] And I can't stand being in a support group with someone who has lost their little brother or mother. I know that no one is going to bring them back either. But this is the place where others might think: "You can just go out and find a new partner, or a new husband." Yeah, right. When you are bereaved, there is no way of seeing how on earth that would ever happen.*

Even though the observation that one "can just go out and find a new partner" might be perceived as cynical, it carries a grain of truth since life does not end here, and one could, indeed, argue that it is more irreversible to lose one's parent. This argument, though, presupposes a functional view on relationality, that the one I had lost could be replaced with someone equal to him or her.

The longer time one spends together, the more difficult this becomes. For Carl, who had spent the majority of his life with Susan, replacing her is out of the question:

> *At that moment, I told him [The minister] that in that case, he [God] is not very clever because there cannot be anyone, dead or alive, who is more in need of Susan than me. And I don't even believe in life after death […] So, coming in here, in my house and telling me that the Lord needed her someplace else, no, either I don't believe it because there is no life after death, or the Lord is far from all knowingly because, if he was, he would know that I need her more than him, no matter what he needs her for.*

Carl is far more serious than any first-semester philosophy student struggling with the differences between the cosmological and ontological proofs of God's existence would ever be. That said, he is well aware that he is far from the only grieving egoist around: "*I guess that other people experience this as well, but I'm still the one worse off (laughs). I guess we all think like that, being the kind of egoists that we are*." The world of the bereaved is a small world, and grief not univocally a source of solidarity.

Nina, who is 50 years younger than Carl, sees herself exempt from almost any kind of moral responsibilities: "*You have a license to do whatever you need to do, and not be considerate about others. "I should do this and that" No! My husband is dead, and I'll do anything I want to*". Many of these quarrels are experienced intensity at the funeral:

> *I remember the funeral, so many people showed up. An incredible amount of people. And I recall thinking: "I'm glad that you are here and all that.". But I also thought: "You'll be going home to yours. And I don't have mine to go home to. From now on, I'm alone.*

When I visit Nina for the last time, her ex-husband's grandfather had recently passed away, aged 92. "*That's how life is. If you are 92 years old and have lived a long and good life, you die. That makes sense because that's how life is. But life shouldn't be that you die at age 30, just after having begun to live and started a family*." From Nina's perspective, Oscar's death was simply *wrong*; it wasn't how *it's supposed to be*. How life is supposed to be is indeed a good question, and the reasons why a bereaved life partner should have any privileged position to define this are not obvious. We have learned from Carl that loss after 50 years of marriage does not necessarily imply gratitude and remote acceptance. Rather the opposite, Carl is having a fierce struggle with

God, destiny, and the minister who is summoned to respond to the havoc that Susan's death has created.

5.4 The Loss of a Common World

> Death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up in a both finite and infinite—mortally infinite—way. (Derrida, 2001a, p. 15)

Death, the death of anyone, is the end of the world. For as long as we are world-opening creatures and subjectivity is embodied, we have not only lost someone but a way of being-in-the-world. As a bereaved life partner, I will have to reckon with the fact that the life which used to be mine, the life that used to be ours, is, to use Derrida's term, in a mortally infinite way, impossible. Among the primary features of partnerhood identified in Chapter 3 were a deep-felt sense of we-ness; the intimacy that life as two encompasses and the sharing of a household. In this section, I will investigate the spatial aspects of losing a life partner, how this is felt, bodily and materially, and how being in the surroundings that used to be shared can both challenge and gratify the bereaved life partner. Dealing with the belongings should likewise be treated as a phenomenon integral to grief and actualizes many of the dilemmas and difficulties that we have touched upon until now.

The Body in Grief

In the article *The body in grief* (2019), Brinkmann notes that "the role of the body has been overlooked in much of the literature on grief and bereavement" (p. 1). With the notable exceptions (Gudmundsdottir, 2009; Ratcliffe, 2017; Fuchs, 2018; Køster, 2020; 2021), the relationship between grief and the body has primarily focused on grief as a risk factor for various somatic diseases. The way Brinkmann perceives this relationship, grief is not something that merely *happens* to the body, but the relationship ought to be understood "in the dynamics of impression and expression, cognition and communication" (p. 5). While Brinkmann accepts the incorporation hypothesis part of the way, noting that significant others become "parts of us as something we carry in our bodily attunement, so when we die, we experience it as a mutilation of the body-self" (p. 5), he insists that an equally important part of grief is how this

loss of self is expressed and communicated (the privileged phenomenon is crying) to others in various social contexts. One of the conclusions drawn from this is that grief work is not just about narratives but also "adjusting bodily comportment in a changed social world" (p. 11).

I have always wondered where do tears come from. To such an extent have I wondered that I have never seriously asked anyone that I suspected would give me a correct answer, googled it, nor in any other way tried to find out. At times, answers strike as unnecessarily violent, and some questions are best left unresolved. Tears, I have assumed, have their valid reasons. As Brinkmann (2019) makes clear, there is no *necessary* relation between crying and grief since "one can grieve without crying and cry without grieving" (p. 6). Despite these precautions, it would hardly be an exaggeration to claim that this is a dissertation drowning in tears. At times, my interviewees began to cry the second I started the digital recorder. Sometimes, they cried following a particular question, and if not, their stories often referred to an everyday life filled with tears. And even though tears are not some material incarnation of grief, it will be fair to say that bereavement often includes crying. Following the difficulties that we had in isolating a discourse for death in the previous chapter, it is tempting to see crying as something we do when running out of words. Indeed, it is one of the few means of communication that infants have access to before they acquire verbal skills, and perhaps tears come when we again run into the limit of the unsayable, when what several of my participants refers to as "raw grief," is tearing them apart. If "being ripped apart" goes as a suitable description of what happens when a loved one dies, there is a wound, an opening in the soul, that needs to be taken care of. Following Katz (1999, as cited in Brinkmann, 2017, p. 6), crying upon the loss of another could be described as "a kind of self-pitying self-regard, a way that one comforts oneself as if from the standpoint of another".

In Winnicottian (1958) terms, being alone is something one learns to master in the company of another. As the continuing bonds literature has made clear, the loneliness of the bereaved does not amount to a life *without* from the other. Following Derrida and Ruin, I have identified a form of Being-with the dead, which can be seen as a general structure of human life, where borders between the dead and the living are continually crossed. Fuchs (2018) refers to what he calls the "as-if existence"' of the other, thereby indicating the ambivalence between presence and absence as "the core feature of grief." While the other is gone, part of him or her remains. One of the primary ways in which this as-if presence manifest itself is through the formerly shared environment:

> Routes jointly taken, shared everyday routines, familiar noises and anticipated encounter all belong to the intercorporal memory which still harbors the deceased. This habitual memory manifests itself in involuntary bodily protentions – hearing the door at the time the partner used to come, expecting him to sit in his accustomed chair, to call on the phone when it is ringing, etc. – and projects his presence into the environment. (p. 53)

That the body reverberates with resonance despite the other's death does not make grief easier or less painful. This presence is deeply ambivalent and far from exclusively comforting. In being confronted with an environment that could be aptly described as a cacophony of absence and presence, the fact that the other is no more becomes even more evident. The fact that one can *sense* him or her paradoxically makes him or her even more distanced.

* * *

What is grief? Within the methodological literature, the difference between research questions and interview questions is taken rather seriously. One cannot expect informants to provide direct and well-formulated answers to the basic questions that one's research is aiming to respond to. To reach rock bottom, one needs to take the carefully planned way along interview questions that indirectly are meant to provide the empirical basis whereupon one's research questions can be answered. Sometimes though, detours need to be taken, and an interview study is, after all, comprised of conversations between two living persons. This one day, I cannot resist asking Judith what she thinks grief actually *is*:

> *Well, grief is that you lose someone who is not there any longer […] In the beginning, grief is physical—all you do is crying.*

Following Judith's statement, grief is a crying response to the fact that the other is no longer there. Grief begins with the non-existence of the other and is made up of tears. Despite various forms of internalizations, and irreplaceable traces of a love that might never die, Tanya also makes it clear that without the hug, the world is an empty place:

> *The hardest part is the lack of physical contact. When I ask myself, "What is it that you lack?" I always answer, "I need someone to hold me." "Isn't it ok that it's me?" my friends would ask. "No, it's not; I want him (cries).*

The hug, which Tanya would receive when returning from work, would, in her words, "*put her back into one piece*." Now, she refers to "*the physical grief, or whatever it's called,*" and, on several occasions, expresses how surprised she is by the magnitude of this bodily longing.

Asking Nina the same direct question, she remains quiet for about half a minute before saying that grief is "*a condition where you're not present in this world. […] It's a heaviness inside of the body."* In our second interview, she describes herself as more "*grounded*" and looks back on the year before with a small but relieving distance. "*Last year at this time, I couldn't even breathe properly. I couldn't. I couldn't breathe; it was all up here [pointing to her throat]. And I've had plenty of physical reactions.*" Nina continues to tell me about various infections, allergic reactions and that her thyroid gland suddenly stopped functioning properly. She is convinced that all of this is "*an expression of her mental state*," that "*what cannot fit inside of the head, ends up in the body*."

In his analysis of our bodily relationship to the world in the first part of *Resonance* (2019), Rosa identifies breathing as one of the primary but often overlooked phenomena on the border between self and world.

> Hence when our relationship to the world as a whole becomes precarious; when ontological certainties become uncertain, say because we suddenly find ourselves in mortal danger: or in those moments, already mentioned above, when the ground begins to move beneath our feet, we say that we are short of breath, or even left breathless. (p. 53)

The loss of a life partner amounts to one of the boundary situations where "the ground begins to move beneath our feet," and we find ourselves breathless. Breathing is perhaps the most discernable difference between the living and the dead, "however isolated, we're still breathing and ingesting and excreting nourishment" (p. 53). Even though Rosa moves in an Adornoian direction (anxiety as "the claustrophobia of a systematized society") and suggests that asthma could be perceived as a modern alignment of not being able to breathe in a non-resonant society, he acknowledges that breathing is not subject to our will. Our biological mechanisms make holding one's breath an almost impossible way of committing suicide since we tend to pass out long before our brains begin to take real injury. Our continued breathing is a sign that life continues despite the fact that we have run into a wall and the carpet has been pulled from underneath our feet. This continued flow of air stand in sharp contrast to a world that otherwise have fallen apart.

The Belongings

Another boundary that played an important role in the former analysis of cohabiting is the one between the domestic setting and the outside world. Parents returning to their home with their first newborn often experience great perplexity on the threshold to the home that is now a home for three. "Where do we put him?" they ask themselves in an aura of perplexity and exhilaration. It hardly takes more than a day before the little one is beginning to transpire into the environment and become part of it. Upon returning home after the death of a life partner, this process is reversed; "Where *is* he?" The person who has been an intrinsic part of this microcosmos that we call our homes is now gone. Since I have already provided an extensive analysis of the existential meaning of co-habiting in Chapter 3, I will now focus on this narrow form of being at home and dealings with the partner's belongings.

For a while, Alicia tried to make the house that she had shared with Edward into her "*own home*." It did not take long before she learned that nothing could be done without tearing up the wounds after his death. She had no other options, she tells me, but to move to an apartment where he was not present in a similar degree:

> *This is my home. This isn't our home […] I couldn't change a thing where we used to live. I would tell myself: "Now, I'm going to move this and put it there." [pretending to move something across the table with her hand] Oh, bloody hell! [moves it back]. Because I couldn't… If I would continue to live, all of that needed to go. Now, things are me, my energy, and all that. So, it needed to be painted over and done differently. Because things become sedimented. And then, it'll be "I feel sorry for Edward" every time I did something.*

Alicia speaks of being "*suffocated*" in an environment that was "theirs." Moving is a radical decision and far from everyone has the energy, will, or resources to do this. And moving does not free one from the responsibility of dealing with belongings and clothing.

Rebecca's husband, Eric, was fond of board games to the degree that he had two entire closets full of them. In the first interview, she says that "*it's Eric's stuff. I've been having all kinds of ideas about what to do with it, but nothing really happens.*" At the second interview, one of Eric's friends, who shared his interest has stopped by and picked up a couple of them "*The rest, I don't know what to do with. I guess that I will have to sell them at some point […] I think part of my problem is that I really don't know what to put in there after they are gone.*" At our third and last interview, "*Eric has gotten a little*

distant." Rebecca says that "*all those board games are still in there, but I no longer think of them because they are hidden away in the closets*."

Following the dwelling perspective that both Heidegger (1971; 2008) and Bachelard (2014) develop, the boundary between body and world is porous, and we might wonder if it is possible to think of the closets full of board games not only as symbols of Eric but *as* Eric. Richardson (2014) reads the bond that a bereaved life partner establishes with the person lost along metonymic lines. The "emergent memory objects" transcend the merely "symbolic meaning" these objects are given:

> A bond can connect a widow or widower with their spouse via something that stands for them, as in *metonymy*. Unlike a symbol, which represents a person or thing indirectly through a metaphoric association, a metonymic stands as if it *is* them. (p. 65)

When a loved one dies, what used to be merely stuff, things, accidental belongings that did not mean much comes to the forefront with great significance. In Stig Dagerman's novel, *A Burnt Child* (*Bränt barn*) (1948/2013), the father dances around with his deceased wife's favorite dress, an uncanny dance with death. The perplexity that Rebecca experiences is easy to understand and shared by many others. Richardson's major argument that the material remnants play a vital role in the establishment and nourishment of a continuing bond seems to make sense on several levels.

"*I can't get rid of all him at once. I still have some of his clothing, and if I'm cold, I'll wear one of his sweaters. My daughter also has one that she sleeps in*" (Theresa). Being bereaved is often described by the participants in meteorological terms as being cold. "*I can't remember much from the first couple of months, apart from that I was constantly freezing*" (Nina). Innumerable love songs circle around having someone who "keeps you warm." Some of them have probably been written in times and places when this made perfect sense, where sleeping next to someone could be a question of life and death. But that's not the point here. The point is that being alive requires a certain warmth, and a life partner is often seen as someone who provides just that. "*I put it on when nothing else helps,*" Theresa says.

"*Most of the time, she is present through her belongings*" (Simon). Simon, who is now living in a new relationship, has struggled with finding a proper way of dealing with the belongings after Edith. He is uncomfortable with the thought that his new girlfriend, Monica, should have to walk around in a world that was his and Edith's.

> *Something that's been really difficult, almost impossible, is to welcome Monica in here and into my summerhouse. It's taken quite a bit of housework and adjustments. I've bought new blankets and pillows. It should be like we started anew. The thing is that if we would have gotten divorced, the truck would have parked down there, and we would have said "that's mine" and "that's yours." Half of the books and half of whatever. Now it's all here. She took nothing with her when she left, and that's a little strange because now I constantly have to consider what Monica might perceive as intimidating.*

When she was alive, it would be close to absurd to suggest that Edith *was* her blanket. But after her death, stymied by the situation that Monica is now going to sleep in the same bed, this question is not so clear-cut. Simon seems rather assured that the blanket is personalized, marked by traces of Edith that make it impossible to think that Monica would sleep underneath it. "*Getting her into*" his house and summerhouse has required a substantial round of death-cleaning, partly by making "five-year boxes" together with his daughters. Everything that belonged to Edith that they didn't want to give or throw away was put in boxes and stored in the basement. The deal was that after five years had passed, they would open them again.

* * *

When I visit Carl for our second interview, he tells me about an equally uncanny and bewildering experience that had occurred a couple of weeks earlier. His grandchildren were visiting, and he had asked them if they wanted *aebleskiver* (Danish Christmas pastry). Carl knew there were some in the freezer but had forgotten about that it was Susan who had made them sometime before last Christmas. "*Oh my god, that was bad […] Of course, when holding the bag with aebleskiver, I would think of her, "she made these, her hands have been all over them." That's genuinely weird.*" The next time, when the bag was empty, Carl tells me that it went a little easier, still puzzled by the whole situation, though. For how long will these remnants of Susan's cooking that seems hard to distinguish from Susan herself last? Would Susan like the thought that her *aebleskiver* was eaten, or does she want them to remain frozen for as long as Carl is alive? Those are some of the questions that Carl is confronted with on opening the freezer one Sunday in December.

To conclude this section, we should consider an even more illustrative case in which speaking in metonymic terms will not be necessary. Tanya received the urn with Fred's ashes a couple of days after the funeral. Since then, she tells me at our first interview, "*It's been placed in my bedroom*."

After a trip to Japan, Tanya had learned that this was customary, and "*then [she] got extremely jealous*."

> *It means a lot to me that there is something that I can hold. I don't do it all that often that I used to, but he's still there. I think it's fantastic. Some people ask me if that's not a little weird. I tell them no; it's just an urn, get it!*

The plan is that, together with Fred's children from an earlier marriage, they will spread the ashes when spring comes. For a considerable amount of time, Tanya thought intensely about what to do about this. Even though the urn is sealed, she managed to open it enough to get a small amount of the ashes out, which she now keeps in a separate bowl. She is well aware that this practice is illegal in Denmark, but "*nobody is checking,*" and in the turmoil she has found herself in since Fred's death, she "*really don't care*."

Before moving on to the temporal aspect of bereavement, we should pause and summarize the chapter so far. In the intersection between relationality and finitude, the attempt is to develop a social ontology of grief. I began by outlining the theoretical underpinnings of the argument and a discussed what it means to lose part of oneself and being called into question. Then followed an investigation of the oughtness of bereavement, of how the bereaved life partner orients herself in the normative nexus of honoring, remembering, and living on. Since who we are is always a question of being with others in a world, the section on solitude outlined how these relationships change upon the loss of a life partner. Finally, in the recent section, I have described the material and bodily aspects of grief. Having thus covered many of the spatial aspects of grief, we are now moving on to its temporality.

5.5 The Temporality of Grief

> I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day. Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.
> —C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Despite Lewis's precautious statement, the way we tend to think of grief often echoes Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose." According to this law of identity, we can speak of grief as something that is not inherently intermittent; "a grief is a grief is a grief." It would be an understatement to claim that my empirical material speaks in a different direction. Firstly, grief is "beyond every numerical qualification, singular or plural" (Steinbock, 2007, p. 198); every grief is bound to a particular loss and can only be lived from within that sphere of relationality. Second, grief is temporal down to its bones. Grief does not throw one out of time, but it does alter one's temporal outlook in significant ways. Conducting a longitudinal study where the participants are interviewed on three different occasions provides rich opportunities to capture the dynamics and changes intrinsic to grief itself. The actual meaning of this fact did not strike me before I initiated the second round of interviews. By that time, at which I considered myself having a fairly good overview of the empirical material, I quickly learned that the participants were at a different place and that I had to do my best to follow. While they sometimes said that "nothing happens," many things had indeed happened, and their lives look considerably different. In this section, I will attempt to outline this time of grief.

"*Some things take time, you know*" (Iris). Grief takes time, and if there is one thing that psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology, and deconstruction have in common, it is a critique of time understood as a successive sequence of events; time understood as one "now" following the next on an infinite chain. Even though we have noticed that the timelessness of the Freudian unconscious is a difficult claim to defend, time is driven by a *nahcträglich* motor, making the event realize itself gradually over the course of time, and often in the least expected circumstance. From Husserl's analyses of inner time consciousness to Heidegger's account of temporality as ecstatic time, where past, future, and present collide, the phenomenological tradition likewise perceives experienced time as far distant compared to "vulgar" clock time. For Hägglund and Derrida, presence is a contradiction in terms and time, a relentless movement driven by an internal difference.

Another notable feature that these traditions share, despite the mentioned differences, is the impossibility of repose. Paraphrasing Hegel, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty at once, Riley (2019) writes that "time *is* the being of the self" (p. 73); "You are saturated with it" (p. 66). What does it mean that we *are* time? While this question obviously transcends the limits of this dissertation, it is clear from all three theoretical standpoints that subjectivity cannot be thought of as nontemporal. All features of life identified in Chapter 2: that the core of my existence is non-voluntary and vulnerable, that I am

thrown into a historical and relational reality, that becoming a person consists of a gradual increase in responsibility, that what I am is indistinguishable from what I do with my time, and that all these commitments and relations that define me are finite, all these features hinge on temporality. Understanding grief, which, after all, is what all this is aiming at, requires understanding the temporal meaning hereof.

In a striking sentence, Hägglund (2019) writes that "our time is all we have" (p. 369), and we recall how one of the important contributions that Schutz has made to phenomenology is to articulate how this time, which is all that we have, is *shared*. That our time consciousness is "inner" means little as long our "inner" life is populated by others, and the way I experience time passing is deeply intersubjective. Moments are co-created, the past and future *ours*. We have already investigated how remembering is becoming a both existentially and ethically demanding task for the bereaved life partner. In the next section, we will look more closely at the future, but before that, we shall focus on the time of grief itself, the flow of time, its standstills, disruptions, and at times even flow.

Before and After

When looking at the field of grief research, even including the stage, phase, and task models, there is no reason to believe that grief would be a never-changing "state" that could be isolated and given a substantial description. The mentioned models carried an internal dynamic where one stage or phase would, given that the grief process went as expected, follow the next. Already in the early Freud, we see how grief is movement; gradually, the libidinal bonds are released and re-cathected. Despite being skeptical of his narrative focus and conception of irony, Ingerslev (2018) credits Peter Goldie (2011) for providing an account of grief that is not an "event, a state, or feeling," but namely, a process experienced by the person in grief. We need, Ingerslev (2018) writes "an account that honors its *perdurance* of the phenomenon, its lasting over time" (p. 347). Grief *lasts*, and for Ingerslev, it lasts as an "open-ended rehearsal and questioning of oneself […] an ongoing activity might not come with a *clear* ending to it" (p. 355). By now, there should be no need to point out that this is not synonymous with endless suffering. But it does imply taking it seriously, that grief comprises "a fundamental division of time" (Fuchs, 2018, p. 8). There is a before and after the loss of the other.

The first phenomenon that strikes me when listening to my informants trying to get a hold of their experiences of the temporality of grief is the experience

of living at a different *pace* than others. When I speak to Theresa for the first time, seven months after her husband died, she tells me,

> *For us, it's like it happened yesterday. But for others, it's beginning to fade. Sometimes I feel a need to tell myself that it's ok to be sad still. For the rest of the world, it's a hundred years ago, right*?

When we speak for the last time, this gulf between how she experiences time compared to how she perceives others has not changed: "*Many people don't understand: "It's a hundred years ago," they tell me. No, it's not. It just happened! That's difficult*."

In the book *Enduring Time* (2017), Lisa Barrister offers an account of temporality that seeks to catch "temporal tropes that are linked together by an apparent lack of dynamism or movement: waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving, and remaining" (p. 13). Taking an explicit stand against Nietzschean, Deleuzeian, and Baradian philosophies of disruption and becoming, she attempts to stay close to "the experience of going on, with, and in time that will not unfold" (p. 5). When taking the lived experience as a point of departure, otherwise appealing theoretical constructions miss the point:

> I rarely feel like a teaming flux of vibrant matter, even if I can see that this is what I am. I feel slow, and stuck, and depressed quite a lot of the time […] I do not believe that anyone *lives* a philosophy of becoming (Barrister, 2017, p. 13).

The fact that we are in time, that we are nothing but time, does not make life into a Heraclitan river upon which we constantly paddle away. There are moments of standstill that are not a-temporal but, in the words of Riley (2019), "lived without its flow." Grief can be seen as a temporal standstill, where one stands with one foot in the land of the dead and one in the land of the living. "Time is experienced as timeless because in our grief we keep wanting to be with the dead, joining in their timeless time" (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 352). We are partly turned into ghosts and look at the ones still living as coming from a different planet. Torn between two worlds, we are strangers in both, and we do not belong anywhere.

Grief is an experience of being painfully aware of being locked in time, and at the same time, being unable to move along with it. The "dance with death" that Kierkegaard imagines is a difficult one, indeed. Grief, one could say with Barrister, is somewhere on the axis of "waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining." Despite the fact that "nothing happens" since the conditions of possibilities for living a certain life are demolished, things do happen—for

others, that is. But also, impossible things likewise take place, things that I would never have imagined could happen suddenly do. Grief is situated between two realms of possibilities, one belonging to the former world and one pointing ahead toward a life that keeps insisting on being lived. Torn between these two realms, possibilities are often veiled, or they keep slipping out of the hands of the bereaved person. Indeed, the fact that time *doesn't stop* is not at all jubilatory. Shortly after the loss, the bereaved might wish for nothing but the end of time.

Suicide is often explained with reference to hopelessness; "Nothing good can ever happen, and so I will kill myself." It might be worthwhile to pose the question of whether the opposite is just as plausible. What if the "more time" that Hägglund argues we always aspire to is not the brightest gift but, at times, the greatest horror? Perhaps what we flee from in suicides related to grief is not, as in depression, a "future without a future" (Frantzen, 2019) but a future with *too much future*, a future that offers only more of this, more of this life, which despair make us acutely incapable of getting a hold of, more time without the person that we want to be together with. In this light, it is not the lack of meaning that causes suicide but an excess of it.

* * *

R: There is a before and after.
A: Before and after Eric?
R: Yes, before and after death. (Rebecca)

We have heard testimonies pointing in this direction many times throughout this dissertation. "*Everything has changed*," "*Everything is thrown up into the air*." For several reasons, that is not true. Rebecca is still Rebecca. She wakes up in the morning, trying to finish the master's degree that was put on hold during Eric's disease, but ends up on the couch, binge-watching sitcoms all day, sleeping through the afternoons, lying awake at night. The world is at a distance, strange, and hard to get a grip on:

> *I can't see myself in that hamster wheel again. I don't know how to be in there any longer. It's like… (prolonged silence). I don't know how people do it. An everyday life seems to me like a griefless state where one is in control of everything, look forward to things to happen and appreciate life.*

The implications of a partner's death take time to fathom. Recurrently, the bereaved will learn and experience this loss daily; it happens every morning when she opens her eyes, and throughout the day, she will encounter it one hundred times and more. Over time, she will grow accustomed to the fact that this world is one without the other. Even though there are no guarantees that

this enduring feature will decrease the pain, Jack tells me at our second interview that he is now beginning to adjust to the situation:

> *I can feel that time has passed. It has almost been two years since she died, so I'm beginning to get used to the fact that no one is around when I get home. Nobody who wakes up beside me. Nobody to drink coffee and talk to in the mornings. And that's what I miss the most. That connection and sense of belonging.*

Theresa likewise says with tragic resentment that she cannot "*expect that the world will stop just because I'm sad*". There is without any doubt an experience of standstill, of not getting out of the way, and of "having partly died" when a life partner dies. But the world keeps insisting that one is very much alive; time mercilessly goes on. Upon Hägglund's (2012) reading, where our self is defined by our attachments to others and commitments that we are obliged to, this process of survival is inherently violent:

> The problem of desire here emerges as a problem of time. The life Marcel desires is temporal in its essence; he wants to keep *this* particular life and *these* particular emotions, so the prospect of replacing them with a different life or a different set of emotions is deemed to be unbearable. A future self with a new set of attachments would supposedly not mourn the loss of the former attachments. From the perspective of the self who is defined by these attachments, however, the prospect of another life without them is perceived as a threat rather than a consolation since it would obliterate the constitution of the present self. Thus, the succession from one self to another cannot be reduced to a peaceful alteration but is described by Marcel as a violent process, where the subsequent self is unfaithful to or even kills the preceding self. This violence is ultimately irreducible because it is intrinsic to the passage of time itself, which is "stripping off bits of us at every moment." (p. 28–29)

After the death of a loved one, he or she is no longer there, and my love is, as is often said, "homeless." The time that flows leave traces of darkness and absence in a world that seems accordingly gloomy. Grief takes place in this darkness simultaneously as formations of new selves are beginning to emerge. For as long as we are alive, we are always attached, connected, and immersed in others, making us permanently prone to loss. On the other hand, our existential identity bears us through these losses, making them *my* losses. We are, in Kierkegaard's words, "nailed to ourselves," and there is no way out. Life insists on being lived, and part of the pain of bereavement is being momentarily incapable of doing just that. The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; 2010) should be credited for

accentuating how the loss-oriented and a restoration-oriented processes are not mutually exclusive. I am simultaneously backward- and forward-looking, hopeless, and hopeful. On a more critical note, there is a tendency to renounce the blurriness and confusion that this double feature of grief encompasses and exaggerate the distinctiveness of the two tracks. In one of the few empirical studies that have put the two-track model to the test, Fasse & Zech (2016) argue that loss- and restoration-oriented processes are not easily distinguished. We live *one* life, and at times, our Being-with the dead is simultaneously a way of moving forward. At other times, forgetting all about them is a way of saluting them.

According to Hägglund, that "the true paradises are the paradises that one has lost" (*le vrais paradis sont les laradis qu'on a perdus*) should, therefore, be taken literally. It is because everything is fragile and can be lost that we love in the first place. In Proust's words: "We dream a great deal of paradise, or rather of numerous paradises, but they are all, long before we die, paradises lost, in which we would feel lost" (as cited in Hägglund, 2012, p. 30). When Hägglund continue to argue that "to cease to love someone is for Marcel not simply an alteration within a self that persists as the same: it is to become *another self* whose life depends on the death of the former self" (p. 27), the question whether and, in that case, how love survives at the death of the other, becomes imperative.

While *Works of Love* portrays this situation as the ultimate examination of one's fundamental ability to love, there is no doubt that the relation is fundamentally altered. The experience of belonging, of being a "we," is radically altered following the death of one of the partners. One no longer shares a common home, no longer shares memories from a common past, nor plans the future. Kierkegaard's account of love has indeed received substantial critique, one of the most noteworthy being Adorno's (1962/1999) claim that Kierkegaards doctrine of love "demands that love behave towards all men as if they were dead" (p. 441). And is it not, despite the spectral overlaps, something very different to love someone who is alive? When I ask Nina about whether she still love's Oscar, she becomes puzzled:

> *I've thought of that for a long, long time, so that was a really good question. And I still think about it. Whether I love him. And I do, I love him for who he was, but he is not here. There are some wild nuances here. I still ask myself if one can love someone who is dead. Because he is still here, in a way.*

When I visit her for the last interview, she is in a new relationship that, in several ways, reminiscent of the one with Oscar while still being "*something totally different*." This time, it is clear that time has past and a change of heart has occurred in Nina: "*I remember the first time where you asked if I still*

loved Oscar. I've thought of it a lot, and he is not here, so no. I think that helped, and I've found a good way."

The Times They Are A-Changin'

"*Have you changed following the death of your partner*?" An investigation of the relationship between grief and subjectivity needs to ask this question. And so, I have. Both directly and indirectly, I have attempted to follow and understand the various ways that my interviewees' have changed during the past two years. Granted that grief is a process, following its ups and downs could be seen as one of the most important features of a longitudinal study. While the next subsection focuses on the downs that hit one when least expected, we should here try to grasp the direction upward that colors the process of bereavement as a whole. If there is one generalization that I will allow myself to make, it would be that every one of my informants was better off and more at ease with life at the last interview than earlier. Grief can be seen as s slow and jerky road back to life. Since I previously had been prone to skepticism concerning overly optimistic accounts of "grief as a journey," this came somewhat surprisingly. The task of understanding the lives of my interviewees, for as long as the first round of interview was concerned, was primarily a task to understand agonizing suffering and a world that had fallen apart. Indeed, I had grown so accustomed to this focus that fitted perfectly with my various idiosyncratic frameworks that it struck me as a surprise when Clara tells me that "*there seems to be more light than darkness now.*" At our first interview, the reader might recall that she had answered my question about how she looked at the future by promptly responding: "*The future? I have none.*" The establishment of a future that, in the light of this dissertation, could be read as the establishment of possibilities for another life was beginning to emerge. When I remind her of her utterance one year ago, she begins to cry and tells me that she doesn't believe me. The self who was drowning in hopelessness has been slowly and gradually abandoned.

"*How are you*?" is usually the first question asked in the second and third interview, and the last time we meet, Carl notes that "*things are moving forward. I think you can sense that when you see me. It's very far from where I was the first time. At that point, I was devastated.*" Carl's existential scale runs between mere existing to living. At this point, he tells me that he is somewhere in between, not quite where he can allow himself to call it living, but he has moved away from the bare life of merely existing, described in exclusively passive terms. The ethical aspects of grief that are discussed above shift their meaning accordingly. The ongoing negotiation with the deceased

about how to live on tends to change in both intensity and content. The other, which is always *my* other, and after death, *nothing but my* other, calls me from a different place and with a different voice after having been dead for two years. Many of the participants are beginning to face the fact that their life continues, the world keeps spinning, they are going to survive this and, in some cases, look forward to another 50 years of life.

Nina speaks of being held down by grief for a long time and that "*the grip that I have been held in is beginning to loosen up. Just a little, but still….*" Rebecca also notices how the "*blanket of sadness that has been holding me down from the moment I woke up* is *beginning to fade*." These metaphors point to grief as a force that captivates and holds still and how time makes that imprisonment less painful. When struck with deep pain, it can be intimidating when people tell one that, in time, things will change, including how the world appears. Still, this might be what the future prompts us to accept—to hope for, and believe that goodness transcending the standstill that is now status quo is possible (Lear, 2006).

The answer to the question of how much agency the participants perceive themselves having differs. In some cases, like above, grief is described along the lines of a larger anonymous force that is beginning to loosen its grip. At other times, grief is configured as an enemy that one needs to fight with all available means. Despite the lack of future at the first interview, Clara says that "*we're going to make it, we'll get through it. I know we can because I have decided that's how it is.*" The normative power of her decision comes from the lives of her children, who, she says, "*have not deserved a life without parents.*" In an almost Kantian fashion, she *can* because she *ought* to. She ought to live on because her children need her to do so; their lives are the future that she did not have for quite some time.

The notion of "getting through it" has often been associated with the grief-work hypothesis (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Grief, critics claim, is not a war that one can win, not a work to be done. Instead, one learns to live with it and accept that this is not about "a cake being baked or check being written" (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 355). However that is, these metaphors are still very much at play among the interviewees. As a researcher, it is easy to lean back and postulate that grief is a never-ending existential task. As bereaved, it is extremely difficult to get through the day, and one often wishes for nothing but change, for things to get just a little easier. With tears in her eyes, Sarah tells me that, after a year, she had hoped to "*be able to notice a glimpse of happiness, but I can't.*" Sarah opens her eyes every morning to yet another day in grief and wonders for how long it might go on. Will it ever stop?

In one sense, grief lives a life of its own. We are *struck* by grief, find ourselves fallen, and can do nothing but accept how exposed we are. On the other hand, we need to deal with it, and grief will always play out in the region between what is given and what is done. Grief, Clara tells me, leave's one without a choice and she expresses the imperatives of grief in the following way:

> *Even though I hide underneath the blanket and refuse to do anything, I will have to get out of bed at some point. I have to be in it; I have to get through it, I have to, I have no choice to say: "No, I would not like that." Or, maybe I do, but that's not going to work. I need to move on, and I do not think that I have a choice. I don't have a choice of saying no to this. I need to do this. We all need to do this, we need to get through it, and it is fucking hard.*

Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to" is not a viable option in grief. Getting through it and moving on is a violent process of saying farewell to a life that was shared with this person and an attempt to navigate into something different. This aspect of abandonment and necessary betrayal is often missing in the literature of continuing bonds, which tend to overlook the ontological questions that this Being-with the dead encompasses and the discontinuity that an encounter with death undoubtedly involves. "*I have decided that this is not going to ruin the rest of my life,*" Clara tells me at the second interview, and the last time I visit, she attests to having "*moved on, not in the way that he's not part of our everyday life. I still miss him, but the grief is not as overwhelming."*

* * *

If death is the horizon that makes our lives worthwhile, the question of how much time we have left seems relevant, especially since my informants represent three different generations. We live in a time when people are living considerably longer, and the question of how modern welfare states deal with an agenting population is, in Scandinavian countries at least, being discussed with increased frequency. This qualitative study cannot provide any representative view on how this older group deals with aging without a life partner. Still, there are no broken-heart syndromes with a lethal outcome to report, and the informants who are 70 years old and above equally speaking in terms of "getting through" it and "moving on." Death is always for tomorrow or the day after.

> *It's still an enormous grief. But I constantly try telling myself that I need to get on with it. I'm turning 81 in a couple of months, so the horizon isn't endless. If I would sit down and do nothing, life would be over. And that's not good. So, in different ways, try to kick myself in the but and do something. I still play tennis, and luckily, I have family around.* (Jack)

Jack belongs to a generation of men for whom housework was not an issue they had to address. He tells me that he knows how to cook two dishes, but that's it. And when he says that he buys new underwear every week and throws the old ones away, I sincerely believe him. He laughs and tells me it was a joke, but that the truth, which he says that he is not proud of, is that his daughter-in-law picks up the laundry every once in a while and gets it done for him.

Jack "don't feel old," and he doesn't look like he is anywhere near the grave. But he is bewildered, and at times, this unlimited freedom becomes paralyzing:

> *J: Life is not the same any longer. It's not. Maybe it will be, I don't know. But… sometimes I feel like doing something totally crazy!*
> *A: Like going on a trip around the world?*
> *J: Yes, something like that. Or get drunk and do everything that one didn't do back in the days. Well, I have been drunk before, but you know (laughs). I'd like to throw myself into something wild just because. I have those thoughts, but they immediately fade out.*

Being bereaved is, in very many respects, being close to death. One is standing with one foot in the grave, having lost the part of oneself that belonged to the deceased and the life that was shared. That "time will heal all wounds" is, I have been informed by the participants over and over again, intimidating for both existential and ethical reasons. "All wounds are not healed by time" (Ruin, 2018, p. 201)—these wounds have become part of who they are. Meanwhile, life takes its course, and during the time of this study, children are born, other people die, some lose their jobs, move, and fall in love again. A myriad of things happens that, with utmost clarity, prove that they are still alive. He or she would have wanted me to live, they often tell themselves, and precisely what that life comprises is very difficult to foresee. In a reversed gift of love, where one gives what one does not have (Lacan) to oneself, they imagine how a partner who is no longer here would grant them everything but perpetual suffering.

Pangs of Grief

Inspired by Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* (2012), the phenomenology of body memory, and interviews with adults who have lost a parent at an early age, Køster (2020) argues that the grief does not primarily consist of "pangs of grief" but in a more overreaching and all-embracing change in one's attunement and mood. That grief is not reducible to a feeling that comes and goes but is better perceived as an altered being-in-the-world is very much in line with the perspectives that I have developed in this dissertation's first chapters. This, on the other hand, should not lead one to conclude that the process of grief is exempt from severe ups and downs and that grappling with these is a profound part of bereavement. Within the branch of grief research, these periods or moments are, as mentioned, often referred to as "pangs of grief" and refer to sudden, often unexpectable, and intense experiences of sadness and yearning (Parkes, 1998).

Following the hauntology of Derrida, where traces of the past are deemed to return when one least expects it, this seems highly reasonable. In a psychoanalytical light, it is equally expectable that later events will trigger repressed psychic material and that grief will strike when one least expects it. Following my informants for a year and a half gave ample opportunity to identify these pitfalls and even some patterns regarding when they seem to strike with greater force. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and other communal traditions are often mentioned when I ask about if, when, and how they are struck by grief. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the first round was filled with worrying regarding the upcoming Christmas holidays:

> *I'd say that the hardest thing[s] to deal with are Christmas, holidays, and the like. And the gold wedding. We were supposed to have our gold wedding this April […] At those days, things hit badly. And the grandchildren's confirmation—I would show up by myself, and all the others came as pairs.* (Jack)

These are situations where contrasts become viable; when their partners "should" have been here but aren't. Being a couple and sharing a life comprises doing things together, and the extent to which the social world of my informants was shaped by being in a monogamous couple relationship should not be underestimated. The discrepancy between the world one is in, that is, the world without the other, and the idealized world of all the others becomes intensified in these moments. "*In the beginning, I couldn't even look at others holding hands without going mad,*" Tanya tells me. Several studies of partner bereavement (Bennet & Bennet, 2000; Richardson, 2014) point out

how the ritualized duration of the year provides a frame through which both the painful and joyful parts of a continued bond are experienced. The shifting of the seasons offers the most concrete "eternal recurrence of the same;" the first cold wind of autumn always strikes one with an undeniable familiarity, as does the first snow and the break of spring. Richardson (2014) argues that the routines that often accompany these shifts, such as housework, decorations, and other traditions, "highlight the temporalities of intercorporeality, the tempo of embodied practice. Yet the actions described are also firmly embedded in space; indeed, the place that is 'home' can be seen to emerge via situated, temporal practices" (p. 74). The house, our "nest in the world" (Bachelard, 1961, p. 123), is both *alive* and filled with inescapable reminders of the life partner who used to live there. On several occasions, Jack describes how opening a drawer can overwhelm him with memories of Cathrine:

> *If I open a drawer, boom—all the memories flood in. "We bought that thing at that occasion," "Catherine loved that," and so on. The most commonplace things keep giving one small blows, or whatever you might call it.*

Olfactory aspects are often celebrated for their capacity to produce experiences of *déjà vu* and recall situations, people, and places. A lover's scent is left on shirts and pillows, and in romantic movies, often used as objects of recollection when he or she is no longer around. Immediately following the death of their partners, shirts would still carry their scents, but only for some time. "*The scent is all gone by now,*" Theresa notices with bitterness in her voice, speaking about the t-shirt, which still smelled of Daniel. In the present temporal perspective, it is worth noting that the effect these reminders have on the bereaved changes over time. Nina speaks about having become better at "*controlling her grief,*" and when I ask what that means, she refers to a recent episode at the hairdresser:

> *N: To be concrete, it is about crying. I feel that I can control it better now. The more I have talked about it, the better I can deal with it without drowning in tears every time. I'll go home and be sad afterward instead.*
> *A: So, it's not all as sudden any longer?*
> *N: It doesn't just come whenever I sit in a car, hear a song, or whatever. One example is that the song that was sung at Oscar's funeral […] I've had trouble hearing that ever since. As soon as I heard it, I couldn't stand it and had to leave. And then, yesterday, I sat at the hairdresser,*

> *and it was played on the radio. I couldn't turn it off nor run away, but to my own surprise, I thought: "It's ok," "it's ok," and it was ok.*

The realization that the song did not hurt in the way that it previously would have functioned as a welcome *memento vita*. Nina had gone from being pulled downwards and looking frightened and alienated at a future that was approaching without her consent to saying to herself, "*It's ok*" without lying. In the next section, we shall consider this futural aspect more closely.

5.6 The Future

When speaking of anxiety—which still remains one of the most privileged phenomena within the existential tradition, we tend to be speaking about the future. The past is easier; even though the impossibility of undoing it might appear tragic, we know—to a certain extent, what we are dealing with. The future, on the other hand, is unknown and often understood along the lines of an abyss that we, struck with anxiety, have to throw ourselves toward; its possibilities can be grasped only through *a leap* without any guarantees. In psychoanalysis, there are hardly any fresh starts, and the future will always be contaminated by the past. From our earliest infantile life to the most recent friendship, these events alter the way we perceive and experience whatever is happening onward. That said, the psychical apparatus is not cast in steel, and our ways of relating to the future and the others inhabiting it are not exempt from natal newness. Deconstruction places itself somewhere in between these stands, arguing that any present is always already past and futural. There is no "now" that has not already been inscribed as a trace and relentlessly pointing onward toward its "not yet." These traces are not stabile entities that can be recalled "as they are" but objects of uncertainty dependent on a fragile memory and, ultimately, the survival of myself and others.

"We are natal, generational beings," O'Byrne (2010) writes, "that is to say, we are generated by our parents; we become a generation in the company of our contemporaries; we are capable of generating, in time; we eventually pass away" (p. 7). To belong to a generation, Barrister (2017) writes in return, is to "share time." We are *in this together* in the strongest sense of that sentence. To share time not only means to be in it, present to ourselves but, with a Heideggerian twist, of being-toward-the-future. The deepest bonds humans tend to make are the ones that are directional and open—that aim toward what is not yet. A generation, is "not yet history"—defined by its lack of facticity; it is still unclear what it will become and along what lines it will be identified in the books of history.

Despite obvious differences between a generation and a family, I mention this because being part of the "we" that partnerhood encompasses is an equally natal endeavor. Much of what we are, we are *not yet*, and much of what it means to share life is to be projected toward a future. This future is short-circuited upon the loss of one of the partners, and the riddle that I am to myself becomes ever greater. In the following subsection, I will begin on a somber note, with accounts of the "future lost," the bitterness and sorrow over a life that suddenly turned 180 degrees and became something very different. After that, I will discuss how the early existential bewilderment hinges on a future that remains unforeseen and difficult to grasp. While these possibilities are not asked for, they open up new spheres of action and life. The questions surrounding a new love relationship often incarnates this futural dimension and are given a separate section.

Future Lost

Death changes things, and one of them is the future. "What presents itself differently when death cuts into our lives with certainty is the future" (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 455). The death of a loved one is the end of the world understood as one way of living, and for anything new to become possible, we need to grieve. Grief is necessary because without taking it upon ourselves that what we dreamed of and aspired to achieve meant something and that the loss of these possibilities is a real loss, it's hard to imagine how anything else could acquire meaning. While part of what this reckoning amounts to is trying to get a hold of life anew, it likewise means lingering and imagining, again and again, what could have been:

> Death is not a purpose, not a completion or fulfillment of anything, but rather the irrevocable loss of life. The point, however, is that nothing can be at stake in life—that no purpose can matter—without running the risk of death. Life can matter only in the light of death." (Hägglund, 2019, p. 181)

The life we could have had matters. There was a point of "us" being together; "we" did not accidentally end up as a couple. Of all the innumerable ways of living and the equally innumerable people they could have spent their lives with, the persons that I have interviewed had chosen someone, and this someone is now dead. When he or she is no longer around, what is lost is not only memories and an everyday life today, but tomorrow, next year, and potentially, the remainder of my life.

> *I miss… I miss the thought of everything that could have been. It's strange when you imagine that the whole of life was planned. And all of a sudden, everything is turned upside down. It's strange*." (Theresa)

In Chapter 4, we encountered several accounts of partnerhood as an existential armor against difficulties of life. Being two partly protects one from the contingency of tomorrow and even the inevitability of death since we-hood composes a source of intense meaning and thereby forgetting. When Theresa says that "*life was planned"*" she does not refer to a filled calendar that stretches over the next 50 years but to the expectations that were built up during 18 years of living together:

> *All the things that we had dreamed of doing when the kids moved away from home, when we got old, and those kinds of things. Now, I'm thinking: "Who the hell am I supposed to do that together with?" That might be an egoistic thought; I don't know.*

The fact that very little of what is planned for or dreamed about actually happens doesn't seem to alter the influence of dreams and fantasy. If partnerhood can guard against thoughts of death, it can equally guard one against an overdose of realism when it comes to the actual prospects of the future. The phantasmatic excitement of looking ahead is neither fully distinguishable from the real thing. There is no "real thing" without imagination. The lack of the future is, therefore, not exclusively a lack of actual experiences but of the shared process of dreaming and planning ahead. In a time where so-called "self-realization" promoted as the highest good, and the light of the socio-ontological line of thought developed here, it is interesting to ask what "us-realization" would mean. What does it mean to realize the kind of "us" that two life partners make up?

> *We knew each other so well. It was a great safety to know another person that well. Someone who constantly held one's back. Yes. And dreams. That's an important part of the love one shares, to have shared dreams.* (Jack)

To see that our range of possibilities is heavily dependent on the psychological state and existential situation in which we find ourselves does not require extensive experience of long-term love relationships. When things are going well and life smiles back at you, there are hardly any limits to what is possible. Spending a night with friends at a bar where the only two reasonable things

to do are drinking and talking will often result in grandiose plans seen in a vastly different light the morning after. In political analogies, the morning after the revolution is often where things begin to go wrong, and before we know it, things are back to normal. That the word "dreams" not exclusively refers to the unconscious maladies that go on when we are asleep but are being used on a conscious or pre-conscious level points toward the fact that the unlikelihood for these plans to ever happen matters less. It is the very act of looking ahead and imagining the two of us being together and doing something that matters, a *common thrown projection*.

> *Our relationship was the fundament. Yes. It was. It was the future! The future we were supposed to share together. We've built it and dreamed about it, and oh my God, we were good at making plans. Very little of it actually happens, but we were dreamers. We were going to do this and that… And all of that is now lost, yes… And with that, the meaning of life at that point also disappears.* (Nina)

Shortly after saying this at our second interview, Nina tells me, "*But now, well, I've regained the will to live, because Oscar would not want me to sit on the couch all day. "Why are you sitting there?" I imagine him asking me.*" She has reached the point, which at our first interview, she could only dream of. At this point, she refers back to her relationship with Oscar as a time where everything that she had dreamt of was fulfilled and that she,

> *is happy for having had seven years of that, and that our son came as a result of it. I guess it's some kind of survival instinct. […] I have to aim at becoming happy again […] I would like to be happy down to the bones*.

There is an interesting encounter between past and future in these quotations. Nina's past, described along the lines of happiness, functions as the base for her dreams of the future. Oscar is with her, not holding her back, but pushes her toward the range of possibilities that her future still is.

Rebecca's response to the question of how she would describe grief points in a similar direction, toward a future that is not only far from what she expected but is not very long:

> *Grief is emptiness and loneliness… not future anxiety but future insecurity. I feel alone, left behind, and empty to an extent that I don't care any longer. I have trouble thinking half a year ahead. Right now, I can only think a couple of weeks ahead.*

What used to be—if not happily ever after, but a long life together, is reduced to a couple of weeks. It takes another year before Rebecca is allowed to wake up in the morning without the fog of gloominess that pulls her down and makes her reluctant to leave the apartment. Perhaps the only thing we can say for sure about grief is the same that we can say about life itself; it takes time.

Possibilities

In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard—in the role of an existential botanist, portrays one form of despair after the other, making the most robust reader, literally, *sick unto death* after finishing the book. One of the impossibilities that cannot be resolved is the balance between necessity and possibility; while both are necessary, the "proper dose" seems to be beyond human prospects. This implies that despair is constantly luring, and life can be perceived as a never-ending attempt to avoid its pitfalls. Kierkegaard (1980a) writes:

> When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts; but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation. A possibility—then the person in despair breathes again, he revives again, for without possibility a person seems unable to breathe (p. 38–39).

Possibility is the flame of life, and without it, man, "seems unable to breath." But even though "possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing," we cannot live on possibility alone. A flame needs its firewood, and so they both are needed: "Nevertheless, possibility alone or necessity alone can no more be the condition for the breathing of prayer than oxygen alone or nitrogen alone can be that for breathing" (p. 40).

Kierkegaard does not discuss bereavement explicitly in this book, but if read in relation to *Works of Love*, published two years before, we might find a way that grief can be situated along the mentioned scale between necessity and possibility. On the one hand, grief can be seen as a confrontation with the necessity that death embodies. All life is destined to perish, and even though death tends to strike as chronically untimely, it needs to happen at some point; none of us can live forever. Still, "to bear life remains, after all, the first duty of the living," as Freud puts it. We need to endure, and further on in the book, Kierkegaard does mention suicide as the greatest of all sins. Despite the pain of grief and despite being stolen of all possibilities, we *ought* to live on. While often having nothing but contempt for people saying that "life *must* go on,"

the participants in this study are in the course of the one and a half years that this study goes on, gradually beginning to accept that even without their consent, life goes on. And they do their best to follow.

If we, to begin with, stay with a liberal definition of freedom, understood as the lack of external constraints, suddenly being without a life partner amounts to a veritable overdose of freedom. "*Now it's like everything can happen. Everything can happen now*," Nina tells me. We recall Jack's fantasies of "*doing something totally crazy*" as responses to this novel situation and in a similar vein, Alicia tells me that "*In the beginning, it was like: "Is this the time when I'm moving to Berlin—Amsterdam maybe? The world is open.*" As we have seen in Chapter 3, being constrained is far from being exclusively negative. In a Hegelian perspective, freedom rests on constraints and limitations, and the family is one example of this. Having someone who awaits me, someone who needs me, is not a burden but an intrinsic part of being someone—since I can only be "someone" for as long as I am recognized by others. Absolute freedom is, Hegel (1979) says, never far from absolute terror. But, returning to the Kierkegaardian (im)balances, the question of what kind of possibilities that I'm now confronting is a necessary albeit difficult question to ask.

"*I have some possibilities now. A freedom that I didn't have before*" (Simon). This utterance is partly motivated by the years of disease in which neither he nor Edith could live the life that they used to. Simon, who could sense that he was "*on his way down the road*" with increased alcohol consumption and an unhealthy lifestyle, sees the grasping of these possibilities as a necessity:

> *S: I became afraid of ending somewhere bad. I wasn't suicidal or anything, but I had the feeling that if I don't do something about this now, things would head too far in the wrong direction. I am almost 60 and am about to retire soon. Do I want to do that, or what do I want? I started to become indifferent.*
> *A: So, you were asking yourself these questions?*
> *S: Yes, and I think that I owe my children to stay alive. That's an important reason -because I am their father. Actually, that is reason enough, but I still would like to grow old in a good way.*

In Hägglund's reading of Knausgaard's "secular confession," indifference is not only one of the seven deadly sins; it's the greatest of them all because since, as Knausgaard writes: "it is the only one that sins against life" (as cited in Hägglund, 2019, p. 97). Indifference is a sin against life because life implicitly demands care and investment in survival. "If you fail to sustain a life-defining commitment—or have to give it up because it has become unsustainable—you suffer existential "death" of your self, even though your life continues" (p. 131). Importantly, being "existentially dead" does not mean

to "be dead," but rather failing to grasp one's life and commitments as one's own. For as long as we are alive, there is, in fact, no way of being indifferent to a life defined by attachments and care. The fear that Simon expresses above can be understood as a fear of suffering existential death, a fear of being in a state where he would be unable to "own his life."

When I ask Judith whether she has changed throughout the process of grief, she mentions that she "feels more free:"

> *I think that it circles around the fact that Jacob is dead. What we have had together is gone, and something new needs to be built. I keep asking myself how I like to live, and I have a freedom that I haven't had for many years since I've been married, right? A freedom to choose more of what is me.*

The freedom that Judith is talking about does not refer solely to her being able to do whatever with her time without taking her partner into account. She also notices how her way of conducting herself in other relations has changed: "*In relations, I've become more free*." Both Simon and Judith are in their late 50's with children who have begun their adult life. In families with children, this is often one where the way of living that has characterized family life for 20–30 years is radically altered. How couples deal with this transition is not the subject matter here; the point is rather that when one of the partners dies, it interferes with an on-going process of renegotiating two entangled lives. The future is not, as is the case in the group of 30s, seemingly never-ending, nor is it, as in the group of 70s, heading toward the end. Life is at its zenith, and the question of whether the future should be lived alone or shared with another life partner, despite being asked in all groups, is given extra weight for this group.

A New Partner

Nowhere are the ethical dilemmas internal to living on after the loss of a life partner more evident than in relation to the issues surrounding the prospect of finding a new partner. Monogamous relationships seldom allow intimate love relations with others, and at first, the very thought of entering into one of these with another person is transgressive. Judging from the interviews, it is also one of the areas where expectations from people around the bereaved person matter the most. In the eyes of others, it seems close to impossible to find the right timing between "moving on" and "being stuck in the past." If, when, and how this happens is likewise part of the conversation that is carried out with the deceased partner. In some cases, this issue had been touched upon before

death, where the partner had expressed his or her explicit approval of the fact that life moves on without them, and since life involves other people in ways that exceed our every attempt at control, he or she did not want to be a hindrance for that. Other times, in the cases where death came suddenly, for example, this issue had not been talked about. For Sarah, it is still an impossible thought the second time we meet: "*That part of life is over. And I'm not saying that I cannot get another partner. I just don't want to. After him, it's over.*"

For others, this changes along the way: "*I thought that was the last chapter in a way. And then suddenly, you're thrown back into life again. Like Wow—that can actually happen, it's not over! That came as a surprise… a good one*" (Nina). The intimate bond between the relationship that ended with death and the one following it is for Nina part of what intensifies the rousing feelings she is experiencing at the moment of our last interview:

> *I fell in love, head over heels. I didn't expect that. All those good, well-known feelings – they just hit you! And I think that because of the sharp contrast with what went before, it just feels very intense; the rug was pulled away under one's feet.*

The rug analogy that Jaspers uses to describe the boundary situation, which we have applied to death, is here applied to falling in love. After being paralyzed with grief, these feelings are "*most welcome… everything good can just come,*" Nina says.

Another way in which any new relation is lived in the shadow of the former is the worrying that having lost one life partner arouses. When Jonas, her new partner, left on his motorcycle after his last visit, Nina tells me that she is positive that this was the last time they saw each other. "*If one doesn't have anyone, there is nothing to lose.*" Having someone, on the other hand, means that there is everything to lose. For others, the very thought of the difficulties a new relationship would lead to contributes to rejecting these thoughts. Despite her earlier testimonies that this would never happen, Theresa tells me at our last interview that "*I do not wish to exclude the possibility. But given the expectations, I would have… No, it would be unreasonable*!". These expectations come from the experiences of what partnerhood can be, and when speaking of how a future relationship might be, this shadow plays a vital role:

> *I don't expect to be all by myself for the rest of my life. But whoever it is that comes afterward; he will have to live with the fact that I have a history. And that will imply different things on various occasions, but it will always be there. It's not like we've separated because we didn't*

> *like each other—he died! […] Poor guy—the one that is second, I mean.* (Tanya)

Accepting that what has been in the past will continue to affect the future gives us another empirical base for understanding the other's singularity and irreplaceability. "*I always think of her [Edith] in positive terms. I don't forget her just because I have another girlfriend, not at all*" (Simon). He tells me that he has learned this the hard way, having been "depressive" despite madly in love. "*At the very least, I've learned that getting a new girlfriend will solve no problems.*" Viewing relations in a functional perspective seem largely wrong-headed:

> *I'll never get a new man as a replacement for the other. No, I will get a new man because I would like to be with him, not to replace the other one. Edward was unique.* (Alicia)

5.7 A Note on Destiny

> *For all the risks involved, we make an effort to live with others; on occasion we aspire to intimacy; we try to understand the world; on occasion we try to express ourselves and create something; we aim toward living (what we take to be) a happy life.* (Lear, 2006, p. 120)

Death happens; it is real and touches our lives in various ways. The loss of one's life partner is beyond doubt a long and violent grappling with death. Through this loss, life becomes something quite different. All the years that one has shared with the other, the time surrounding the death of this person, and the new direction that life took afterward will be inscribed as essential features of what became *my life*. My interviewees will always be the ones who lost a life partner.

In the previous section, we have encountered some examples of how, in Lear's words, "for all the risks involved, we make an effort to live with others;" being faithful to the dead does not necessarily mean staying out of relationships with others, but finding a way to live on that is seen as responsible, sustainable, and meaningful in the perspective of *life as a whole*. Throughout the course of Chapter 4, the often-acclaimed radical distinction between life and death proved itself to be everything but waterproof. The sociality that surrounds and pervades us includes the dead and not yet born; in the most fundamental way, they are part of our lives. Before that, throughout Chapters 2 and 3, I developed a social ontology of existence in the light of grief and tried to show how the notion of losing part of oneself can be

understood. We are part of each other just as we are part of the world, and a person dying always takes with her a substantial part of this world. One way of understanding this loss is related to possibilities; "the part" of myself that is lost are the possibilities for living a certain life that necessarily involved the other. What is *not* lost are the possibilities for living a different life, and much of what grief after the loss of a life partner amounts to in an existential perspective is living a different life without despair. At this point, there should be no need to point out that this does not come along easily.

But it *does* come along, and that's where we are heading. While this loss becomes one of the major events that make up the coordinates for what became the lives of Judith, Carl, and Tanya, respectively, their lives continue. The slaughtering pain of the first weeks, months, or years becomes less prominent, and the space to feel, think, and act differently increases. In the end, grief becomes a question of relating to one's life as a whole, embracing both what is given outside my realm of agency and what I do to affect it.

In this light, grief becomes a question of fate. In everyday speech, this worn-out word often refers to an idea of some divinity or anonymous power in the universe that are acclaimed to shape our lives. This is, not surprisingly, not the meaning that I wish to develop here. In my perspective, fate, as well as grief, is tied to the five features of life identified in Chapter 2. Fate relates to a humble acceptance that giving any final ground to my existence is forever out of reach. There is no thrower of my thrownness, and the radical contingency behind my existence will not be altered. While things could always have been otherwise, her death was not the end of the world. Losing someone, paradoxically, makes one equally aware that the life we had shared did not have to be.

Gratitude

When I ask Anne if there is anything that she would have liked to say to Henrik before he died, she begins to cry and mentions that "*I think… I think that I would have liked to say thank you for life. I'm sure that he knew that, but maybe say it.*" We say thank you when someone has done something that he or she also could have chosen not to do, when someone made an effort or helped in various ways. This stretches from passing the salt at the dinner table to, as in the present case, giving one's life. Partnerhood encompasses deepfelt feelings of taken-for-grantedness. Since the other has "always been there" and perhaps even promised to do just that, this is what is expected. Death cuts this assumptive world into pieces, and as we have seen, difficulties with trusting

the world on any level are a widespread response. But it also makes one look back, perhaps even acknowledging the contingency of it all:

> *A: Do you ever think of how your life would have been if you hadn't met Henrik?*
> *Anne: Sometimes I do, and I think that's where I realized that I hadn't lost anything, I've been given something.*

There is no doubt that grief points to an irremediable loss, but in doing so, it equally points to the fact that there was something to lose. A friend of Tanya whom she hasn't seen for a long time tells her, "'*Look, Fred had you—he was your soulmate […] I've never had it like that,' she said. I didn't know what to say.*" "If we have lost," Butler writes in *Precarious Life* (2006), "then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire (p. 20). Tanya has not only struggled but, late in life, actually found someone that she was willing to share this life with. When her friend reminds her about that having a "soulmate" is not something that is written in the starts, her immunity to generalities and other people's experiences fades for a while. On a similar note, Judith tells me:

> *I've had him for 41 years. Compared to the picture over there [points at a family picture on the wall], I see a very sick and tired man. So, I'm trying to tell myself that "I couldn't ask for more." He needed peace, that's what it's about.*

What Judith seems to be saying is that she is not the center of the world and that there are no reasons why, in the larger perspective, *her* interests should be served. "The intention that man should be happy is not included in the scheme of Creation," as Freud puts it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929/1961, p. 15), and if that does occur, gratitude seem to be a suiting response. Instead, she notices that she has "*had him for 41 years*" and that this gift fuels her ability to let go. With reference to other losses, Mary equally says that "*I think that my grief decreases when I think of people losing their children.*" I do not wish to discuss how different aspects of these losses could be seen as more or less severe but merely notice that how we relate to our own grief is affected both by concrete others and the universe's anonymous forces alike.

Acceptance

The reader might now be getting the impression that we are heading in the direction of a final resolution of grief. Several of the canonical grief models do operate with some form of acceptance, and in the course of the previous sections, a sense of future and possibility has emerged. In Kübler-Ross's (1970) stage model, acceptance is even seen as the final stage on the way to resolved grief. Equally, narrative models that see meaning construction as vital for bereavement operate with understanding and acceptance as a necessary precondition. For as long as grief is intimately tied to death and death is beyond our attempts of thinking and understanding, the question of whether we can accept something that cannot be understood seems necessary to ask. Can one accept death and, if so, how? Anne, who admits "being rather fatalistic," reflects on this question in the following way:

> *Anne: I hadn't given it much thought—how I would react if Henrik suddenly died. I don't know if people do that; I guess some do… So, I've been surprised over how long it takes to reach a state of serenity. And I think that by now, I've reached something that seems like serenity.*
> *A: Maybe it's not that black and white.*
> *Anne: No.*
> *A: But I think that it seems like you are more at peace with things now compared to the first time I was here.*
> *Anne: I think that—after a while, you accede to it* [affinder sig med det] *in one way or another. I think it's the distance in time that makes the difference; you get used to it.*
> *A: Is acceding to it the same as accepting it?*
> *Anne: I guess… It's not like I don't know that he is dead and gone forever. And accepting is probably not the right word; you can't really struggle against death, can you? After a while, the thought: "God, I wish he was still here" vanishes; you come to learn that there is little point in resisting.*

Anne certainly has a point that the use of the term accepting seems to suggest that there was, in fact, an alternative, *not* to accept. In both the jargon of existential psychology, where the repression of death is seen as the "primary fount of psychopathology" (Yalom, 1980, p. 29) and Freudian metapsychology, where we are structurally unable to comprehend and accept finitude, this would indeed seem to be a possibility. As time passes, though, it becomes increasingly hard to resist the fact that the other is "*dead and gone*

forever." The world that was once shared is beginning to crumble, and new things happen.

For Anne, few things have happened, but one of them is the cat that, one day, showed up at her doorstep. When she tells me about it, I recall what I once learned when beginning to work as an advisor at the Danish lifeline, an anonymous phone line for people with acute suicidal thoughts. One thing we should not underestimate, we were told in the first class, was the importance of pets. Having a dog, cat, or whatever it might be would sometimes be the thread that held people back from killing themselves. To me, this functioned as an inescapable reminder that not only pets but *anything* that in one's idiosyncratic view would carry little or no meaning can be the difference between life and death. *That* something matters to us is something that unites us, while *what* it is that matters separates us on equal footing.

* * *

In my second interview with Nina, we discuss how a potential acceptance is related to the question of meaning. It seems reasonable to assume that meaning would be a premise for acceptance; that we can only accept something for as long as it will find its way into our conceptual and existential framework. Nina turns this around, saying, "*I think that I have to accept that this is not going to be meaningfu*l," and she continues:

> *I sincerely doubt that it is a meaning to everything because this is so far from anything meaningful. That anyone has to go through this, I mean. Neither he nor anyone else should have to go through this. It makes no sense at all. And I think that I will have to accept that some things never are going to make sense, but they still happen.*

For Nina, grief is a question of accepting the lack of omnipotence and a life marked by death. This acceptance does not presuppose a causally ordered world view where any event can be placed into a coherent picture. In short, "*it makes no sense at all*," which might be what grief calls us to accept.

No Bullshit

I'm not going to drink lousy red wine any longer. (Tanya)

Closely related to the theme of gratitude and acceptance is the renegotiation of one's time that the confrontation with death leads to, which I will discuss in this last subsection. The question of whether "death teaches us anything at all" (Derrida, 1989, p. 22) is worth asking, not least due to widespread notions of how difficulties in life are charged with a potential for personal growth and changes in one's way of life. And many of my informants have, indeed, experienced a reorganization of priorities following the loss. Tanya, well aware of her privileged situation, uses the red wine metaphor to point out that, from now on, life has different premises. This has consequences not only on her dinner table but likewise in relation to her social world:

> *I've become very much aware of what I want to concede to, who I'm around, and to what extent I'm willing to accept being treated badly. I've learned that when things change rapidly, there are loads of things that no longer make sense. There are some people that I don't stay in touch with any longer.*

From the perspective, it is not at all clear that death awareness amounts to nothing more than "superficial conscious lip service" (Johnston, 2014, p. 218). Not only in relation to children, who were in focus in the previous chapter but in one's own existential outlook, life is perceived differently following the death of one's life partner: "*You learn to appreciate what you have. Life has a different weight. When you lose someone, you realize: Shit, I'm vulnerable*" (Theresa). It is clear that the notion of tolerating less bullshit is tied to feeling less obliged to live up to duties that earlier has provided important guidance for how one ought to act and live. The reasoning, which is much related to the notion of the privileged position as a life partner, seems to go as follows: "Since life has treated me this unfathomably bad, the contract is broken, and I can do whatever." Often, this is seen as a relief and an important tool with regard to how life after the loss is handled.

> *I've become much better at saying, "I wouldn't put up with that. No way! I want a decent relation with the people I'm in touch with. And if that isn't possible, I'm out." For the moment, I'm very much "no bullshit"-like. Life is too short for many things. And seriously, when you've passed 70, you are getting closer to the point where you can begin to count the days*. (Felicia)

While Felicia explicitly related this existential awakening to her aging, it is a widespread reaction among the informants in all groups. Speaking on behalf of her children and herself, Sarah says, "*I think that we've all renegotiated what is important.*"

Immediately following the death of another, one confronts the question of whether to live or die. For as long as the "decision" to live on is made, this seems to be fueled by the awareness that this life did not have to be, and from that perspective, the significance of issues that earlier would have created dilemmas and anxiety fade away. At our last interview, Nina has just returned from a ski vacation with her family and tells me how her cousin, who, just like her, is a parent of a young boy, is making big troubles out of minor details. "*You know what, I've been through a catastrophe. So, relax! It is not a catastrophe that we're about to run out of rye bread. Eat a carrot, God dammit!*". In Nina's perspective, the end of rye bread is not the end of the world; the death of Oscar was. Having lived through that, other issues are seen in a different light, as is life itself. Death is a catastrophe and there is nothing that we can put up against it. Nina then seems to recapture Ciroan's eloquent response from the very beginning of this chapter; when confronted with death in any form, be that grief or the sometimes-irresistible thoughts of suicide, "relax": "*Eat a carrot, God dammit*."

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this conclusion, I will outline the main findings of this dissertation by responding to the research questions asked in the introduction.

6.1 Empirical Research Questions

What can partner bereavement tell us about the existential core of partnerhood?

This dissertation begins by noting that any understanding of grief presupposes a notion of what has been lost. While being a life partner is far from an exhaustive portrayal of the people who have participated in this study, it was one part of their lives and, for many, a very important one. I also noted that this way of living has shown itself to be particularly durational and often remains a favored way of orchestrating one's love life across the globe. *Why?* Drawing on testimonies from the participants, I note that a sense of dyadic we-ness can be seen as the core feature of partnerhood. The togetherness of the couple is a real ontological entity, and that is what has been shattered upon the loss of a partner. *We* are no more. While there might be other partners, there is a singularity and uniqueness at the heart of partnerhood that places its functional aspects in a different light. On this note, knowing that "it was *him*" is sufficient for understanding the proportions of the wound. It was *him,* and there is no one else like him.

One key mediator for both the singularity and the we-ness was the loving gaze, and I try to show that this gaze plays a double function. On the one hand, from the perspective of the life witness, the partner's gaze sees the me as a person with a certain personality, set of qualities, and a given history. On the other hand, the partner sees me as a realm of possibilities not yet realized, a chance of becoming something that I am not. Furthermore, partnerhood provides an arena for imperfection, a much-needed refuge in a culture that demands constant self-improvement. Everyday life is the arena where the we-ness of partnerhood plays out, and I provide a rich empirical grounding for why everyday activities, eating, and sleeping are phenomena that deserve to be given the highest existential priority. *This* is what my interviewees and many others do with their lives. Much of this shared life took place within the sphere of a shared home, and I describe the equally existentially poignant meaning of co-habiting in the light of their current spatial and bodily bewilderment.

This, then, is my reading of the existential core of partnerhood: *A shared life with an irreplaceable person, mediated by the loving gaze.*

* * *

How does the death of a life partner affect one's relation to mortality?

Death always strikes with unseen suddenness. Despite prolonged sickness, it is close to impossible to prepare for the last breath. Generally, being two, immersed in the we-ness of everyday life, is an efficient treatment for death anxiety. *We* are more than the sum of two people, and that realm is not mortal in the same distinct way as a person is. Being part of this "we" was, for many of the participants, a welcomed excuse for not worrying about death. Life keeps us occupied and shared life even more so. Death always comes in the midst of all matters, and an initial inability to understand and accept what has happened is often testified to. The habitual and embodied life world of the bereaved life partner is still full of signs of the deceased, and grappling with the consequences of this death might seem unmanageable. In this light, death comes as a *disappointment* and *mockery* to the life that one considered one's own.

While grief makes it indisputably evident that death is real, it seldom leads to an increased degree of contemplation about one's own death. The *life* of a bereaved life partner is troublesome enough and requires all the attention. Thoughts of one's own demise are indirectly expressed as a clinging to life and an attempt to live it as good as possible. Given the ephemeral nature of death, I argue that it could hardly be otherwise. While death is always the horizon for our lives, it seems difficult to confront it in any other way apart from living. For the interviewees, the arena where death awareness is most intensely felt is in relation to one's children. Being a single parent makes one utterly aware of the catastrophe it would be for the child also to lose its other parent.

What I call intergenerational death awareness refers to *how our perception and understanding of what it means to be mortal is meditated by the significance that one's death would have for others, and for the bereaved life partner, most noteworthy for one's children*.

* * *

How can the experience of losing a life partner be understood?

Losing a life partner amounts to being called into question. The life that one has lived so far has taken a sudden turn, and countless questions emerge. In the most fundamental sense, grief exhibits the aliveness of one person and the deadness of another. The bereaved is alive but asks herself how and why this is. Accepting that one became the one who survived and is forced to reckon with life on one's own is a fundamental part of grief. I have argued that the trope of losing part of oneself is a suitable way of capturing the loss of possibilities for living a certain life. Grief alters not only my psychological state of mind but the ontological conditions for what defines my life. Through the death of one's partner, life changes radically, and so does the bereaved partner. There is no way of sustaining a shared life on one's own, and a life with another partner will be of a different kind.

In this way, grief points to the simultaneity of living on and being another. I am still here, but fundamentally altered. Doing so is, I argue, an inherently ethical enterprise. While life itself is always ethical, being bereaved brings many of these quandaries to the fore. A bereaved life partner will ask herself how the life that she is now living *ought* to be carried out in relation to her deceased partner and the life that they shared. The threads and the traces that bind one to the former life will not determine what is to come, but it will often trigger considerations of how to go on properly. The bereaved will ask herself how to grieve, a question that cannot be fully answered on behalf of the sociocultural framework but exclusively on the background of a singular relationship that one had with the deceased. Learning to grieve is something that one does progressively throughout an ongoing discussion with oneself as another. Remembering stands out as a vital feature in this domain, and the bereaved life partner will often worry about the limitations of memory and the inevitability of forgetting. The continued bond to the deceased is withheld in various ways, often in relation to belongings and earlier shared areas of living, but also in everyday activities such as driving and walking.

The bereaved life partner will experience grief as a very bodily phenomenon. Grief is described in terms of being pulled downwards, of wanting to lay down and hide from the world, often combined with intense crying. The social network still surrounding the person is challenged since, from the bereaved's perspective, only one thing could provide a remedy for her suffering, which is to bring the dead person back to life. Ontologically, others are wrong in and throughout their very being and supporting a bereaved person, an accordingly ungrateful endeavor. The bereaved life partner will often compare her situation with those of friends, colleagues, and children who also grieve this person. Her loss is often perceived by herself to be of a

more penetrating kind since the sociality of partnerhood environs most hours of the day, and mutual understanding becomes difficult. Their grief can be fruitfully understood as an altered way of being-in-the-world—a different mood rather than a transitory feeling.

The grief after losing a life partner is temporal through and through. Being bereaved is trying to navigate the process which can be understood as one's way back to life. The loss of a life partner is a paradigmatic limit situation that pulls the rug from under one's feet and makes one fall. The process of grief amounts to rising again. The experience of there being a before and after is often expressed; this loss is slowly becoming a defining moment of one's lives. Sudden pangs of grief often show up when one least expects it, inescapable reminders of what has been lost and that this world is nothing of what it used to be. Grief amounts to accepting that the future one had anticipated and expected did not happen. While being robbed of this particular future life is predominant in the younger generation, it seems to be a general feature of partner bereavement. That said, it is clear that the psychological burden of being bereaved reprieves during the two years following their loss, and all participants in this study seemed "better off" at the last interview. The acknowledgment that *there is a future* and that this future will not necessarily be one of chronic unhappiness takes time but gradually evolves. At some points, this is experienced as a stressful kind of total freedom that one would rather do without, at others, a welcome escape from a world of despair. For the participants and their social surroundings alike, whether this future encompasses a new life partner often seems crucial. Engaging in a new relationship often actualizes many questions about how our earlier relational bonds inescapably affected later ones. Finally, upon a note of fate, the recognition that *I* suffered this loss, that it happened to *me*, and that this became *my life* is expressed along the lines of gratitude, acceptance, and at times, even a more embracing way of living.

Losing a life partner, then, means *losing the possibilities of living a certain life; and hereby reckoning with a transformation of one's being-in-the-world in a normative poignant manner, encompassing social, bodily, and material dimensions.*

6.2 Theoretical Research Questions

How can grief inform our understanding of the dialectic between relationality and finitude?

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored the relationship between relationality and finitude in general and the question of how grief can enlighten this dialectic specifically. With a point of departure in Butler's notion of grievability, I installed grief as an ethical a priori of relational life. It is because the loss of your life will not leave me unaffected that I care and love. Following Derrida's notion of anticipatory mourning and Hägglund's secular faith, this argument is stretched even further, encompassing a process of subjectification as well. We become who we are in the encounter with vulnerable and mortal others, and their vulnerability is inscribed as a frame in relation to which I become. Negativity grounds every interpersonal relation, and traces of the ever-threatening loss marks all our doings. It is because everything that we care for and love is doomed to vanish, that we have the remarkable capacity to love one another. In this way, *finitude is installed at the heart of relationality*.

Correspondingly, I have argued that relationality grounds our understanding of what it means to be finite and mortal. The existential privileging of one's own death seems to neglect both the fact that my life only acquires its value and bearing through the recognition of others and that the only death I experience is the death of another. Following Lear and Loewald, I have sought to show that our first dawning experiences of finitude are a driving motor of the oedipal complex, where struggles of separation and individuation are at their most intense. The acceptance of parents' and care persons' otherness is essentially an acceptance of their mortality and the limitations intrinsic to finite life—an acceptance only possible through grief. From that early moment, life could be aptly described as a long array of losses and attempts to deal with them. We ultimately learn what it means to be finite through others leaving this world behind and the reckoning with this, which is grief. Grief teaches us that your life matters, and throughout this recognition, I grow to learn that the lives of all the others, as well as my own, matter accordingly.

In this way, *relationality is the heart of finitude, and grief is the glue that binds us to the world, others, and ourselves*.

* * *

In what ways does grief transcend the border between the ontological and the ethical?

Being human is always being with others. Drawing on Heidegger's existential ontology of Being-with and Freud's notion of the melancholic grounding of the subject, I have argued that we become who we are in a world of others and that these others persistently become part of who we are. Following Ruin and Derrida, I have likewise sought to show how this Being-with transcends the borders between the living and the dead and that our lives can be perceived as a response to our generational, natal, and relational being. Historicity ultimately means that the rank of the dead is not quietly seated on the shelves of history but roars around in and through our every undertaking. The multitudes that I contain carry traces of all humanity, including those not yet born. Who we are is a question of how we live, and how we live is a question of how we respond to others, dead, alive, and not yet born. We become who we are in an ongoing response to the world of others, and there is nowhere to hide from these predicaments. *Not responding* is also responding since the givenness of life makes us into historical beings, and our vulnerability makes us depend on others in one way or another. This implies that life is a fundamental ethical endeavor and, accordingly, that we *are*, through and through, ethical beings.

We do not choose to be born but are given life in the midst of all matters. Following Butler and Lear, I have described the process of subjectification as a contingent matter; our psyches grow out of a particular historical and relational fabric, and we are increasingly asked to respond to these conditions. The process of becoming oneself takes place between an acceptance of the fact that I am not the source of my own existence nor its historical conditions *and* an attempt to shape this life in one way or another despite these limitations, between freedom and necessity. Needless to say, this endeavor can never fully succeed; and there are no ultimate parameters on which a human life can be completed.

With particular reference to the death of a concrete other who has marked my life in one way or another, I have argued that her death *requires* a response. It is not the quality of this response, be that sadness, anger, despair, remorse, or even happiness, that interests us here, but the fact that others leaving this world behind forces us to reckon with the fact that our lives take place in a prolonged and intermingled intergenerational chain, and that we always define ourselves in relation to what has been and what is to come. The care for the dead, which is emblematized through burial and the cult of graves, testifies to an expanded social ontology through which we live and act as

historical beings. We remember people, read texts, and honor what has been in a *certain* manner, and in making those decisions, we partake in the process of defining who we are, and a vital part of that is answering the question of who we wish to become.

The border between the ontological and ethical is transcended because *who we are is a question of what we do and how we live—questions that are actualized in grief and related to our natal, relational, historical, and, therefore, ethical way of being*.

* * *

How can a social ontology of grief inform our understanding of what it means to be human?

The core of a social ontology of grief can be formulated in three steps. First, who I am is a question that necessarily involves the other. While there is an irreducible ipseic first-person perspective that makes this *my* life, who I am, is, ontogenetically, a question of others caring for me and making their irreducible mark on my being. I enter a world that is already old and inhabited by others before I am anyone at all, and through their intentional care, I grew to become someone. Hence, *I am an other* in the most fundamental meaning of that line—a sedimentation of objects loved and lost.

Second, the ontological openness whereby others are invited into my realm of being is a question that concerns the lives we live and share. As argued pervasively throughout this dissertation, there is no way of accounting for who we are without recourse to the lives that we carry out. We are the lives that we live, and these lives are shared. Despite living in utmost solitude, all of us have belonged somewhere, and if that is not the case, it ought to be seen as a violation of the fundamental human need of doing so.

Thirdly, losing these others is a loss that pervades my being. I lose part of myself in the sense of losing possibilities for living a certain life. The lesson learned from a social ontology of grief is that *I* do not stand firm through *your* death.

From the perspective of grief, being human means, to be given over and dependent on mortal others to an extent that blurs any distinct boundary between self and other. Taking part in their death through grief testifies to a notion of shared finitude rooted in the lives that we aspire to live.

Chapter 7: Perspectives

Writing about grief, death, and love is, to a large extent, an encounter with the inexplicable. It requires an equal dose of naivety, courage, misery, hubris, anxiety, passion, and existential bewilderment to conduct such a study, and one will always face the bitter end thinking that it could have been done otherwise and better. With that in mind, this section attempts to pinpoint the theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions of this study while, at the same time, point onward toward future investigations of grief that could be suggested in this light. In what ways does this study contribute to the ever-expanding field of grief research? How can future studies on grief benefit from a socio-ontological perspective? How can this study inform the current debate about diagnostization, pathologization, and treatment-relevant questions? How can we improve our ways of dealing with grief on a cultural and individual level?

7.1 Theoretical Perspectives

In this section, I seek to show how a social ontology of grief can inform and inspire future investigations of grief on three levels. General grief perspectives are relevant for all types of studies related to grief after the loss of another person. Partner loss specific perspectives are tied to the loss of a life partner. Non-specific grief perspectives refer to other types of losses that are not necessarily related to humanity or mortality.

General Grief Perspectives:

- A social ontology of grief can help us understand how the loss of someone to whom one is related will alter the conditions of possibilities for living a certain life. The loss of a significant other amounts to a partial loss of self and the subsequent reckoning with this alteration.
  In this light, this dissertation calls for an ontological turn within the field of grief studies.

- Any understanding of grief presupposes a phenomenological understanding of the peculiarities of the life that has been lost. Grief always points to the loss of *someone* or *something*, and the grief researcher will be well informed by considering this content.
  This dissertation calls for a continued phenomenological focus within the field of death and grief studies with an extended focus on the relationship between life, activity and grief.

- For as long as understanding what it means *not to be* presupposes what it means *to be*, future studies of grief would do well to consider further how human subjectivity evolves in a historical and relational nexus. By taking the natal and infantile aspects of personhood into consideration, a deepened understanding of the relationship between fading into and fading out of life might be attainable.
  This dissertation calls for a further investigation of the natal, relational, and historical aspects of grief.

- Any encounter with grief is an encounter with death, and death installs an enigmatic realm of unknowingness at the heart of human life.
  This dissertation suggests that future studies of grief would profit from taking the radicality of death into account, including the lack of omnipotence, the limits of reason, and approach these phenomena with a suitable degree of humbleness.

- Future grief studies could fruitfully continue investigating how our experiences of loss and grief affect our experience of being mortal. Grounded in a social ontology of grief, I have suggested that we approach finitude as a shared condition in general and developed a notion of intergenerational death awareness in particular.
  This dissertation calls for further investigations of finitude as a shared condition with regard to how the death of one person affects and alters the meaning of the death of others.

- I have argued that grief is an inherently ethical phenomenon, crystalized through the responsibility of the bereaved to live on and embrace a futural existence while remaining in continued dialogue with the person lost.
  This dissertation calls for further exploration of the ethical questions and dilemmas of grief.

Partner Loss Specific Perspectives:

- This study offers a comprehensive account of how partnerhood can be conceived of existentially.
  Future studies of partner bereavement could benefit from considering the profound existential significance of partnerhood when trying to understand and conceptualize the loss of a life partner.

- The different themes that comprise my reading of partnerhood: singularity, we-ness, the gaze, everyday life, and a shared home most likely overlap in various ways with losses of parents, children, friends, and colleagues.
  Future research could preferably investigate the significance and meaning of these themes in relation to the grief following other forms of losses, such as children, parents, and friends.

- A social ontology of grief necessarily operates with a tension between we-ness and individuation, between being bound and merged with another on the one hand and carrying out a life in separation on the other.
  This dialectic could be fruitfully applied to other forms of relationality to investigate whether and how a partial loss of self is experienced in these domains.

- This study portrays partnerhood and partner loss in Denmark at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Like all relations, partnerhood changes historically and geographically. Studies conducted in other parts of the world would undoubtedly tell a somewhat different story of how shared life in partnerhood is configured. I have suggested that relating these socioculturally fluctuating predicaments in relation to existential conditions can be a way of universalizing without overruling the specificities of this relation.
  Exploring how different features of partnerhood can be understood existentially could be one path for future studies.

- This study has included bereaved life partners in three different generations. This has provided a broad picture of how this way of living takes place during different life phases. Due to the existential focus of the study, a comparative analysis between the different groups has been downplayed. While I have indeed outlined how age affects the temporality of bereavement in general and its futural

aspects in particular, *further studies could preferably investigate the differences between different generations more comprehensively and thereby provide a deeper understanding of the temporality of partnerhood and grief, respectively.*

Non-specific Grief Perspectives:

- Throughout this dissertation, I formulate an understanding of grief as an essential part of our relationship with the world. The dialectic between relationality and finitude indicates that every attachment and ascription of value is driven by anticipatory grief. It is because we would grieve the loss of someone or something that we love and care for it. Future studies could fruitfully apply this line of thought to the ecological predicaments of our time.
  How can a grieving relationship to the world make us understand the willingness and unwillingness fight climate change? Can the ability to care necessary to motivate political action be cultivated in more resourceful ways with a point of departure in grief, and if so, how?

- The relation between ethics and grief that I argue in favor of throughout this dissertation relates directly and indirectly to the political realm. Just as there will be no grief without ethical implications, there will be no politics without ethical grounding.
  How can grief and grievability inform discussions of global injustice, war on terror, the refugee crisis, and so on? How could a further developed "politics of grief" be formulated, and what could it achieve?

- In this dissertation, grief is portrayed as an inherently human phenomenon, intimately tied to the specifics of an ontogenesis and self-consciousness that make us different from other mammals. Still, there seems to be no reason why losing part of oneself understood as a loss of possibilities for living a certain life, which is the core of a social ontology of grief, could not be applicable to non-human losses.
  If there is such a thing, what is animal grief, and how does it differ from human grief? And still, within the human perspective, how does the loss of land, buildings, livestock, and cattle differ from the loss of human beings?

7.2 Practical and Clinical Perspectives

The *Zeitgeist* surrounding this dissertation has been encased by the question: *What to do with grief*? Intense debates sparked by the ongoing diagnostization have been taking place in the background and have likewise been touched upon throughout the interviews. My immediate answer to the question of what we should do with grief at the beginning of this study went along the lines of: "*absolutely nothing*." Grief is an existential condition that we can only learn to live with, and any attempts to control it, treat it, or provide any form of solution for it was at best useless and at worst directly harmful, or so I thought. As of today, I believe that my take on this question is at least a little more nuanced, and perhaps, even though this was far from the object of this study, we can learn something about "what we do with grief" from the interviews conducted. In the following, testimonies from all 15 participants on the topic of what participating in this study have been like are presented. Some of them have arisen spontaneously in the course of the interviews, others as a response to the question asked at the end of the last interview about how they had experienced being part of the study. Afterward, I will consider what we do with grief in light of these testimonies.

> *"You ask some really good questions that make me reflect upon things in a whole new way."* (Clara)

> *"It's been a pleasure. Even though I have friends that I talk to a lot, I'm never totally honest. In this context, I don't feel that I've had to hide anything."* (Mary)

> *"I've been happy to have you as a conversation partner"* (Felicia)

> *"It's been exciting and useful to have someone asking all the stupid questions. That's what helps!" (Simon)*

> *"It's been a pleasure, really. I hadn't thought of how I would react in the case Henrik died, but I'm surprised by how long a time it takes to find some kind of solace."* (Anne)

> *"The interview half a year ago became the turning point. I had talked to the doctor and all, but there is always someone in the waiting room. I've enjoyed having someone that was patient enough to wait for what I had to say."* (Iris)

"It's been a privilege to be part of this because you're given the opportunity to understand what the hell is going on." (Alicia)

"It's been far better than seeing my psychologist." (Rebecca)

"It's been a good project and useful to force oneself into thinking some thoughts that otherwise would have remained in the dark. It's been two years, and I still like to talk about him." (Theresa)

"It's been interesting being a witness to my own process through the questions that you have asked. That's not too bad considering the circumstances." (Sarah)

"I think that it's been total luxury having someone coming here and ask me about all these things. I've been lucky." (Judith)

"I've gotten something out of this. It is one thing to have all these feelings in here—it is something different to put words on them." (Carl)

"To me, it's been like a kind of therapy. Having an opportunity to heave everything out in a way that everyday life does not allow." (Tanya)

"It's been good. You're ok." (Jack)

"It has given a lot to the process. I've often got an idea at one of the interviews and thought of it until the next time." (Nina)

The point of including these testimonies here is not to tell the story of my excellence as an interviewer, and I am well aware that excessive politeness is probably the motivation behind several of these utterances. The point is rather to make an argument for how bereaved people might *need* and *want* to be treated—in other words, *what we do with grief*. On the background of the experiences from this study, the following considerations are worth taking into account during discussions about how support and treatment for bereaved people can be enhanced in the future:

Personal considerations

Talking about the person who has been lost is seen as intrinsically meaningful. The process of grief often amounts to an inner dialogue about who this person was and what one had together. Excessive psychologizing might risk overshadowing the fact that *grief is always about the other*. Talking about this other is perceived as a way of reckoning with the fact that she is no more and honoring the fact that she once was. Focusing on what has been is not neglecting the fact that it no longer is, but a vital aspect of understanding what the loss means. Having someone genuinely interested in this person and the life in which one took part could be an important part of encountering people in grief.

Normative considerations

Talking with someone without any motivations or hidden agenda in the areas of symptom relief, personal development, or change of lifestyle can be seen as a relief in a situation where the only thing that could possibly provide a solution to one's problems is the return of the dead. Despite having other agendas, the church has traditionally provided a less demanding room for grief than the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy. Paradoxically, one could say that *not* resolutely aspiring to change, development, or *any* predetermined way of being can alleviate the process of bereavement. Grief is one of the utmost confrontations with finitude and takes time. The one most important "tool" in the encounter with bereaved people is time.

Temporal considerations

The empirical part of this study has been longitudinal and stretched out over almost one and a half years. Conducting interviews on three different occasions with half a year in between has made possible a deeper understanding of the temporal nature of grief. These three occasions have also provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on how life has changed since last time and functioned as a landmark in their grieving process. Expecting that I would show up and conduct an interview often made them reflect upon their grief in what was seen as a helpful manner. In this light, providers of care and support could preferably consider less intensive and prolonged treatment options when encountering bereaved people.

Spatial considerations

The interviews conducted throughout this study have predominantly taken place in the homes of the participants. Doing so neutralizes, partly, the asymmetrical power relationship and provides a safe point of departure for the conversation. In the case of partner loss, where this home was equally the primary arena for a shared life, meeting and speaking in this environment might encourage remembrance and make it more natural to encounter difficult and painful feelings. Since the person who recently suffered a great loss might have excessive difficulty taking any form of action, offering support and conducting conversations in bereaved people's homes might be seen as preferable.

Existential considerations

Many of the questions asked throughout this study has come with existential valor. They have touched upon love, death, and everything in between. Despite the fact that this might seem awkward from the perspective of both everyday life and scientific discourse, it seems to suit the situation that the bereaved person finds herself in. Life is already shattered, death is already on her mind day and night, and the meaning of love all too clear. This certainly does not imply that one can and should ask bereaved persons about anything, but it does imply that questions that take the precariousness of their situation seriously are much welcomed. The participants in this study often testify to not otherwise being confronted with these kind of questions and that the interviews was a much welcome break from discourses that seldom allow one to ask fundamental questions about life.

Appendix 1 - Recruitment Letter

Have you lost a life partner/spouse, and would you be willing to share your experiences in a research project?

The research centre, *The Culture of Grief*, are now recruiting participants from all over the country that have lost a life partner or spouse.

In *The Culture of Grief*, we're investigating how grief is experienced individually, and in relation to our contemporary culture. My subproject focuses upon the relationship between grief and love, and the way we understand happiness, suffering and the good life in this light.

By participating in the project, you are given the opportunity to share your experiences and reflect around issues related to bereavement. You will also contribute to our effort to shed on an existential phenomena, and our cause of providing a better understanding of the many aspects related to grief.

Your contribution is relevant, if you:

- Have lost a life partner/ spouse within the previous 6 months.
- Are aged 30-40, 50-60 or 70-80 years old.
- Are willing to participate in three interviews for about one and a half hour at the following occasions: November/December 2018, May/June 2019, and November/December 2019.
- Understand and concede to that your experiences will be used anonymous for research purposes.

Further information about the project, can be found here: www.sorg.aau.dk

If you are interested in participating, please contact psychologist and Ph.D.-fellow, Alfred Bordado Sköld through e-mail: alfred@hum.aau.dk or phone: +45 - 2289 4551.

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Appendix 2 – Informed Consent

Informed Consent

The Ph.D.-project 'Relationality and Finitude –
A Social Ontology of Bereavement', led by
Ph.D.-fellow, Alfred Bordado Sköld, Department
of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University.

In relation to my participation in these interviews, I have been informed about the following to which I give my full consent:

- The purpose of this study
- The procedure; how, where and when the interviews till be conducted.
- That my participation is voluntary and that I have the right not to respond to questions, withdraw from the study and/or withdraw consent.
- That the interviews will be transcribed by the person in charge for the study in cooperation with a student assistant.
- That my name and all personal details will be anonymized in the written products.

Date:_____

Name:_____

Signature:_____

Appendix 3 – Instructions for Transcription

Generally:

Transcribing the interviews is viewed by me as one analytic tool among many. Directly after the interview, I'll write a shorter autoethnographical statement regarding the interview. Following this, I will be listening to the recording during the upcoming days and conduct a preliminary meaning condensation. When the transcription is done, I will listen to the interview once more, while reading the text simultaneously. That being said, if you would miss anything, I'll catch it afterwards. View the transcription as a rough round of groundwork and don't get caught up in details.

I have added my autoethnographical notes to our shared folder. The first one was written as part of a Ph.D.-course in Qualitative Methods, where I experienced that it was an efficient way of getting the interview worked through, emotionally and intellectually. It might work as a frame that can improve your understanding of what is being said in the course of these interviews. The notes are a rather strange combination about my experiences traveling to the interview location, coffee preferences and personal thoughts about a wide variety of issues. Please be considerate, and you are not obliged to read this.

The content of the interviews is probably typical for a first round of interviews in a longitudinal study. Some of the informants are still very close to their loss, and express deep sadness. I am relatively passive as an interviewer, and view this as an opportunity to understand their lives, and provide a possibility for them to tell their story. Most of them speak freely, and I expect to become more active and focused as an interviewer in the upcoming interview rounds.

I have added an example on a transcription from xxx and xxx in the folder for you to use as a model. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me by phone or e-mail.

Specifically:

- I will anonymize their names in the final draft. Use their real names in the text.
- My utterances are preceded by 'A:' and the informant's by 'I:'.
- Mark crying, hesitation and prolonged silence with (CRYING), (HESITATION), and (SILENCE).
- Mark strong expressions with '!'

Appendix 4 - Project Description, *The Culture of Grief*[56]

The culture of grief

Grief is a common human experience that often results from the loss of someone closely related. On the one hand grief is a universal human phenomenon, and may even be a defining trait of humanity, but on the other hand it is also a form of expression that varies across historical epochs and different cultures. Furthermore, within a given cultural context, there is a considerable variation in the way people experience and express grief. Thus, grief is a significant human phenomenon, which deserves to be studied in its own right. But at the same time, it is relevant to analyse our understandings and ways of handling grief in order to throw light on the present development of a culture that is seemingly less and less willing to accept distress as a part of life. Today, a huge "happiness industry" has arisen comprising psychologists, therapists and other practitioners (Davis, 2015), who are intent to relieve us from our distress and make us happy. Some even argue that happiness has become a profound duty (Bruckner, 2011). Presumably no other culture has ever had such an evident happiness imperative as today's Western culture and been so intent to eliminate distress. But how does that related to the painful phenomenon of grief?

In this research centre, we will specifically examine grief experiences, but also the cultural setting and conception of happiness and distress within which grief is situated in our time. The focus on grief will lead the way for a wider analysis of the human condition in our culture, and the research on grief will simultaneously gain from the reflection on the embedding of grief in the cultural setting.

In recent years, more and more types of human suffering have undergone a medical treatment and there is an increasing emergence of new psychiatric diagnoses. Critics have emphasized the risk of a pathologization of common human experiences and reactions. According to new research from Aalborg University (e.g. Brinkmann, 2016), one can argue that we have witnessed the emergence of a "diagnostic culture" where psychiatric diagnoses are utilized for more and more purposes. Also, grief is now more frequently viewed as a medical phenomenon, and several psychiatric diagnoses on grief have been proposed including "Complicated grief disorder" and "persistent complex bereavement disorder", which is now included in the latest version of DSM-5 (in the section "Conditions for further study"). In Denmark, the system of diagnoses utilized is the WHO diagnostic system (also called ICD) which is currently being revised (the new

[56] The Project Description can be downloaded from:
https://www.kommunikation.aau.dk/digitalAssets/268/268233_the-culture-of.grief.pdf

version ICD-11 is to be published in 2018), and, according to WHO, a new diagnosis will be "prolonged grief disorder" (#7B22)[1]. It is to be expected that the Danish Health Authorities will shift to the ICD-11 and thereby implement the coming grief diagnosis, but even if this does not happen, it will still be relevant to study the changing conceptions of grief, suffering and happiness – comprising a medicalisation of grief – that occur during these years.

The implementation of a new diagnostic grief category will provide a unique opportunity for studying the ongoing changes in the human conception on grief specifically, and suffering and happiness more generally. How can the current cultural conception of grief be comprehended? What does it mean to introduce a new diagnosis? How will the conception of grief evolve during the following years?

The research perspectives of the project

The ambition is to use the coming grief diagnosis as a launch pad for establishing an internationally leading research environment regarding research on grief concerning all of the most substantial psychological, cultural and clinical aspects of grief. The goal is to establish a research centre that is globally significant in the following three fields: (I) grief research as such, (II) research on the psychological and sociological influence of psychiatric diagnoses specifically regarding the coming grief diagnosis, and (III) cultural analysis committed to analyses of types of human suffering, a tradition deriving from Durkheim, Freud and the critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and Honneth among others, where experiences of suffering (notably grief) is used to open up for a comprehension of the cultural situation as such. We believe that the centre will be able to integrate these three fields in an original way, which also represents a synthesis of the research interests of the primary applicants.

As grief is an existential and procedural phenomenon with various aspects; each research project will be unfolded with regard to three fundamental dimensions:

1. (1) *The personal and existential dimensions of grief*
   The central themes will here concern the phenomenology of grief (meaning the immediate experience of bereavement and grief), grief in a life-course perspective (lifelong consequences of early loss experiences), the experience of the grieving on diagnosed grief (with the focus on the dilemma between admission to help and pathologization) and differences in the course of grief (among other things, through the development of a method elucidating the "affective logic" of grief, see sub-project 1c).
2. (2) *The cultural dimensions of grief*
   Here, the research questions include the cultural transformation of grief from religious and moral perspectives to psychological and medical

positions, grief as a ritualized practice (studying contemporary cultural conventions regarding the practice of grief – and eventually the lack of rituals), grief as a public and collective practice, as in online forums (e.g. social media) and memorials, changed institutional practices in continuation of the new grief diagnosis, and grief as a predictor of a general societal direction (what can be learned about the human condition and suffering from the way grief is perceived and handled today?).

3. (3) *The natural perspective of grief*
   Here, the fundamental questions comprise the natural expression and function of grief: Is there a natural core way to grieve (across cultures)? Can grief by any means be understood as a mental disorder? Does grief have an evolutionary function? Is grief at all to be understood in evolutionary terms? Grief, suffering and death: How is it possible to accept and make room for grief in a time when people avoid relating to death and instead seek to eliminate all types of distress?

The ambition is to grasp the many facets of grief, both in order to achieve a thorough comprehension of the phenomenon, but also in terms of being able to take a qualified position of the diagnosis and treatment of grief in order to improve community services to people in grief. With a new grief diagnosis, the discussion concerning over- and under-treatment becomes crucial for avoiding unnecessary pathologization on the one hand and to offer support for people in actual need on the other.

The progress of research on grief and prevailing questions

The modern research on grief began with the ground-breaking work of Freud around 100 years ago. With Freud's work the former idealisation of grief during Romanticism was replaced by an increasing problematizing and taboo, and people in grief were encouraged to put their grief away and focus their energy on the future. With terms such as "grief work" and "detachment", Freud paved the way for the psychological approach to grief of the 20th century. Following the basis of the Freudian theories of grief as a detachment task, a range of Freudian grief models has emerged, describing grief as a job comprising several more or less defined tasks. Such a model can be seen in the American psychologist Worden's (1982) working model of mourning, identifying four task of mourning: (1) to accept the reality of the loss, (2) to work on the pain of grief, (3) adjusting to a world without the deceased and (4) to withdraw the energy of the deceased and reinvest it in other relations. In a Danish context, this type of working model is known with the book *Den nødvendige smerte* (*The necessary pain*) (Davidsen-Nielsen & Leick 1987). Since the first edition in 1987, the book has been published in further editions and numerous printings and it has been ground- breaking for the

understandings and handling of grief in both clinical environments and the everyday population at home.

Another widespread comprehension of grief derives from the so-called *phase* or *stage models*, which at first was developed by the psychologists Robertson and Bowlby (1952) as a description of the behavioural repertoire of toddlers, presumably evolved through evolution by the detachment from their mothers. Robertson and Bowlby categorised the children's reactions of detachment in three phases. The first phase described the child as 'angry and searching' followed by 'depression and despair', which finally leads to 'detachment'. Bowlby and Parkes (1970) further developed this model to describe the adult's reactions to a loss, adding "numbness" as the first phase. The Swiss- American psychiatrist Kübler-Ross' development of a similar model describing the reactions of the terminally ill and later the grieving, also had a huge impact on the understanding of grief in clinical and popular psychology of the 20th century (Kübler-Ross 1970; Kübler-Ross & Kessler 2005). The well-known task and phase-models formed the basis for a number of intervention strategies and therapeutic practices, as well as becoming landmarks on how grief is comprehended, experienced and handled in the Western culture during the 20th century and until today.

However, the task and phase-models have been met with increasing criticism from both quantitative oriented research as well as anthropological studies, clinical research and practice. Especially, the notion that the process of grief must lead to complete emotional detachment from the deceased has been heavily criticized. As an alternative to the rigid division and one-sided emphasis on detachment of most phase models, both researchers and clinicians now often emphasize continuing bonds to the deceased as not just a normal phenomenon, but also as something helpful for the grieving (Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1996; White 1998). Furthermore, the idea that grief is only to be understood as an *emotional process* has been challenged by the Dutch psychologists Stroebe and Schut, among others, in their so-called Dual process model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut 1999). It describes a continuous oscillation between confrontation with and avoidance of the loss. The loss-oriented process comprises the emotional processing of the loss and relocating bonds to the deceased. The avoidance of the loss is in the model described as the restoration-orientation in which one attends to the changes and challenges caused by the loss in the present and future: capability of doing new things; acquire new roles, and distraction from grief. There is no priority of either process in the model, and the oscillation between the processes is described as an individual and time wise undefined process. In addition to the dual process model, the narrative approach has become prominent in recent decades (Walter, 2000). The narrative approaches focus on the meaning of the stories about the deceased from the surviving relatives. Surviving relatives not only need to process emotions, but also process the stories they have about the deceased as well as their relationship with the deceased. The narrative

perspective emphasizes that the surviving relatives must find a way to integrate the life-story of the deceased into their own life-story.

The novel approaches represent a break with the one-sided phase and task-models, including their focus on emotional processing as a chronologically well-defined process. Moreover, the dual process model and especially the narrative approach put more emphasis on the social aspects in which grief takes place by accentuating the importance of social relations. The confrontation with the phase-theories involves a critique of the idea of grief as a well-defined phenomenon with its final closing comprising emotional detachment from the deceased.

From a sociological perspective, Walter (1999) argues that our present understandings of death and grief may be an indication of both late-modern and post-modern tendencies. The late-modern tendencies comprise how the individual in one's own lifestyle inevitably implicate interpretative repertoires provided by institutionalised expert systems. In late-modern society, the personal narrative is inextricably linked to knowledge on humans provided by science, especially psychology and psychiatry – most recently with the coming grief diagnosis. The post-modern tendencies are conversely characterized by an explicit scepticism regarding universal theories and authoritative expert systems in favour of a focus on the authentic, personalized and specific dimensions. In the post-modern view,

the individual is the highest authority in relation to one's own life, thus also in relation to one's own grief. Alongside late-modern expert knowledge on grief and crises, a new flourishing market has arisen, comprising self-help groups, books and webpages about and for individuals sharing their personal experiences with loss.

Hence, the development of research on grief has since the time of Freud moved from ideas of grief-work following certain phases to more complex models, and to the present schism between grief comprehended as a common psychological phenomenon to be handled with expert systems – most recently in psychiatry – and grief comprehended as a uniquely personal experience. Now we need knowledge on how this schism plays out in peoples' lives today; about how grief is conceived culturally, and not only personally and socially; about what role the institutional agents have concerning peoples' understanding of grief; and finally, about what happens with the perception of grief as a result of medicalisation processes and the coming grief diagnosis. This project will explore the above-mentioned questions in parallel with the implementation of a diagnosis for grief into the Danish treatment system; and the unique possibility to study the phenomenon before, during and after the implementation of the diagnosis.

Objectives

The primary objective of the project is to understand the current status and experience of grief and follow its development in an age of medicalisation and implementation of new diagnoses. The secondary objective is to utilize grief, and the development of this phenomenon, as a historical seismograph to understand the more comprehensive development of the cultural conceptions of suffering and happiness. It is universal for people to experience distress during their lives, but the opportunity to ascribe meaning to distress varies across cultures and epochs. We will examine the existence of meaningful resources currently available in our culture regarding distressful phenomena such as grief. Form an empirical perspective the projects will imply a focus on *grief following the loss of a parent* (sub- projects 1a & 1b), *Grief following loss of a child* (sub-project 2a) and *grief following the loss of a spouse* (sub-project 3a).

Thus, the aim of the projects is to fulfil the following objectives:

(1) Provide a general psychological understanding of grief, both in the present cultural context and prospectively following the development in a 5-year period as the new diagnosis is introduced

(2) Devise a thorough critical analysis of the latest research and theory development regarding grief in general and complicated grief specifically

(3) Identify issues related to grief amongst doctors, psychologists, teachers and NGOs with a view to improve their opportunity to act adequately in a time when the perception of grief may change drastically because of the expected implementation of the diagnosis for grief.

(4) Initiate a qualified societal debate on informed basis regarding conceptions of grief, suffering and human
expectations for a happy life.

(5) Distribute the research findings in a wide sense reaching both colleagues as well as laypersons and thereby contribute to greater understandings of grief as a cultural phenomenon as well as the influence of psychiatric diagnoses on peoples' sense of self in modern times

Research questions and work packages

The objectives will be fulfilled through three work packages comprising subordinate sub-projects:

Work package 1: The personal and existential dimensions of grief

Grief in its essence is a personal experience, where the loss of a close relation involves intense distress, changed existential ways of relating to life and ultimately changes to one's self-conception. There is a risk of developing psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety and complex grief. But there is also an increasing cultural and scientific awareness on personal growth as a possible consequence of a grief process (e.g. concerning maturity, increased appreciation of life etc.). The projects in work package 1 study the loss of a parent from an existential phenomenological and cultural psychological perspective, both prospectively (1a) and retrospectively (1b), and the informants are recruited through cooperation with the organisation Child, Adolescents and Grief (Danish: Børn, Unge og Sorg).

1a): Ditte Winther-Lindqvist (associate professor, AU): Parent loss among adolescents
The project is existential phenomenological and investigates how the experience of loss influences adolescents that lose a parent. According to research, there is an acute and severe strain following the loss of a parent and the loss often has lifelong consequences for the bereaved. Among known factors influencing the long-term effects of a loss are the quality of the relationship with the deceased parent, social network and presence of additional stressors (Stroebe & Schut 2001). The research will examine the relationship between acute reactions and the first-year adjustments to live with the loss of a parent in adolescence. There will be drawn upon a new existential model of the personal self as a bodily historical developmental process, with a view to develop a vocabulary covering bodily and pre-verbal experiences with loss (Køster & Winther-Lindqvist, forthcoming). Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 20 adolescents who have lost a parent within 6 months, and 10 of the same adolescents will be followed prospectively with yearly follow up interviews during the coming 4 years. The design makes it possible to engage in critical dialogue with the phase models and the novel dual process model of coping with bereavement, given that both the acute loss experience and the following transition is examined with a view to cover the process and its consequences with regard to distress, complicated grief and/or personal growth.

1b): Allan Køster (Ph.D., post. doc.): Loss-experience in a long-term perspective
This sub-project studies the long-term effects of the loss of a parent during

childhood/adolescence on the basis of the same theoretical foundation as sub-project 1a, but with informants examined retrospectively. 30 informants (15 having lost a parent before turning 10 years of age and 15 having lost a parent after turning 15 years of age) are being interviewed after they themselves have become adults (between 30-45 years of age). The analytical strategy is utilising the novel existential model to clarify how the loss settles as a bodily anchored constituting part of the person, and e.g. reactivated in later life events (e.g. when the person becomes a parent, marries and settles down). The informants will be asked the same questions regarding their experience at the time of the loss – how the loss influenced them back then and now (the current situation, personal relations and occupational duties). The questions are designed to cover both the pre-reflective bodily experience and the more reflective experiences and the material are to be analysed both phenomenologically and narratively. This design enables coverage of long-term effects of the loss of a parent and a theoretical discussion between existential phenomenology and narrative traditions with a view to cover the relationship between bodily experiences and how they surpass and reshapes in to narrative self- stories.

1c) Luca Tateo (associate professor, AAU): The affective logic of grief.
The third sub-project works in the intersection between personal experience of grief and its cultural history (Valsiner, 2014). The process of grief comprises a certain relation with the world, which in cultural psychological terms is referred to as "affective logic" (Ciompi, 1997, Lennon, 2010). Through rituals and practices, cultural contexts invite people into certain affective contexts while simultaneously inhibiting others. The individual path through these affective contexts is rich on ambivalence, and on the one side being particular while on the other side drawing on general cultural repertoires on ways of thinking, feeling and taking acting in the form of discourses on grief as well as typical narrative scripts on the course of grief. These repertoires are normative and indicate culturally accepted ways one "should" grieve and express grief. But from which "affective logic" is the normativity of grief organized? The objective of this project is to answer that question. In the first phase by developing a qualitative research method to detect the affective logic. The method will be tested on approximately 100 students. In the second phase, the method will be utilized on two groups of adolescents of whom they respectively imply both normal and problematic reactions from grief based on valid diagnostic criteria. The second phase will comprise repeating in-depth interviews (in collaboration with a research assistant) with 6-10 participants with regard to obtaining an in-depth understanding of the affective logic.

Work package 2: The cultural dimensions of grief

Experiences with loss and death are fundamental existential conditions during human life, exceeding historical, geographical and cultural boundaries. At the same time, the meaning attributed to experiences of loss are different in different

cultural contexts, which also implies rituals and practices regarding death and grief (Walter, 1999; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen & Stroebe, 1992). The projects in work package 2 will by different means examine the present cultural context for grief and distress in Denmark and follow the changes concurrently with the expected implementation of the diagnosis for grief.

2a) Ester Holte Kofod (post. doc): Medicalisation of grief: the consequences of the coming diagnosis.
Historically speaking, religious frames of interpretation have provided people with significant rituals and practices of handling grief (Durkheim, 1915; Malinowski, 1948). However, in the late-modern time, grief has increasingly become the object of medical and psychological intervention and now more than often understood in a health and risk- perspective (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007; Walter, 2006). The coming grief diagnosis is expected to entail various consequences both for the individual and the society, and research indicates that between 10 and 20 % of all bereaved will meet the criteria for complicated grief (Shear, 2010). This project will examine the different historical, sociocultural, discursive and material conditions, which shape the present practices of grief, how these practices change with and during implementation of the diagnosis for grief and how individuals actively utilise and co-create these practices and understandings of grief. The empirical data will be manifold, including historical documents, diagnostic manuals, psychometric tests, professional and biographical stories of grief, online-materials and field observations of supportive groups for the bereaved, among other things. Furthermore, over a 2-3 year period repeated in-depth interviews will be conducted with approximately ten persons, who have lost a child during the past year, and according to the literature, are in high risk of developing complicated and prolonged grief reactions. The objective is to understand how the phenomenological experiences and biographical stories of the individual relate to the contemporary medicalised understandings of grief.

2b) Brady Wagoner (professor, AAU) & Ignacio Brescó (associate professor, AAU): Socio-material practices of public grief and collective memory.
Socio-material practices of grief in public contexts have traditionally been connected with the collective memory and identity of a group. From a reconstructive (Wagoner, 2017) and a context-based (Brescó & Wagoner, 2016) approach to memory, researchers have studied monuments and memorials among other things, in the wake of the world wars, Holocaust and the Vietnam war (Young, 1993). These studies have examined the mediating role of rituals, material artefacts and public contexts in relation to experiences of mutual loss . This sub-project will focus on the various socio-material practices, which currently mediate the public of expressions of grief, and how the lost object is socially negotiated, becomes meaningful and remembered differently from various cultural positions. Three empirical paths will be followed: (a) public grief expressed through online memorials (Harju, 2015), studied through online ethnography

research, also called "netnography" (Kosinets, 2010); (b) public grief expressed through official memorials, which will be studied through the utilisation of the "Dialogical Accompaniment Interactive Group Method" (Espinoza & Piper, 2014), whereby the participants are invited to walk around a memorial and express their impressions followed by a focus group interview; and (c) public grief expressed through temporary memorials, which are studied just as in (b) but with special focus on performative and ritual elements characterising such places (e.g. one minute of silence, praying, flower lay down, cards, poems etc.). The project is expected to proceed over a 5 year period, which enables coverage of the ongoing cultural transformations of grief's socio-material practices.

2c) Anders Petersen (associate professor, AAU): Grief as diagnosed suffering: the socio-structural transformations behind the grief diagnosis
To an increasing extent, grief is contemplated as a form of suffering, which is amenable to being treated. It thereby becomes enrolled in the same category as depression, anxiety and attention deficits. On this basis, urgent sociological questions arise: Which socio-structural transformations permitted this development? In parallel with the increasing prevalence of depression diagnosis (Ehrenberg 2010; Petersen 2016), this sub-project claims the impossibility of comprehending grief being transformed into the category of a diagnosis just by looking at psychiatry as a discipline (which develops manuals on diagnosis) or at the medical industry, which has an interest in creating yet another treatment for a form of distress. It is also necessary to examine the changed social rules and norms, which have permitted the journey of grief going from the everyday sociocultural world into the diagnostic, medical sphere. This sociological sub-project raises the question of what is supporting this development in late-modern society. Empirically speaking, this will be examined utilising document-analysis of historical documents (Duedahl & Jacobsen 2010; Lynggaard 2010) – anything from socio-medical scientific literature covering trivial and popular literature to internet materials – where the history of development regarding grief can be linked to the societal developmental trends. In regard of the above, primarily contemporary sociological diagnoses will be utilised seeking to determine the nature of the society we live in. In addition to the focus on the socio structural transformations, this sub-project will follow an institutional path and ethnographically examine how different institutional practices change with the implementation of a new grief diagnosis (Agar 2008). This will be examined in collaboration with a Ph.D.-student and there will be a selection of two to three institutional contexts.

Work package 3: The nature of grief and its dimensions

The three sub-projects in work package 3 are interconnected and are meant to work in an integrative way with the above-mentioned work packages and sub-projects.

3a) Svend Brinkmann (Professor AAU): Grief between happiness and suffering
The first sub-project examines grief in a field of tension between the contemporary ideals about the happy life and suffering. Sometimes, grief is said to be the price of love, i.e., the price one must pay in order to love someone. In this perspective, grief is a distressing phenomenon though it is also meaningful and existentially universal. From our contemporary understanding of grief, what can we learn about our understandings of happiness and suffering? Is the happy life also a life without distress? If not – how do people make room for grief and suffering in a "happiness culture" (Davis, 2015), characterised by "forced happiness" (Cederström, 2016)? Are there differences in generations in this regard – and how do people's reactions to grief, happiness and distress evolve years after a loss (and in the light of a new diagnosis)? The project is empirical and involves interviews with approximately 30 subjects, who within the last year have experienced the loss of a spouse (distributed between 3 identical groups, respectively in their 30ies, 50ies and 70ies). Utilising phenomenological and narrative analyses, the object is to cover the subjects' experiences of grieving in a culture requiring happiness, efficiency and performance. The project is longitudinal and the subjects will be interviewed regularly 3 times over a 5-year period. The project is conducted in collaboration with a Ph.D.- student.

3b) Svend Brinkmann (Professor AAU): Grief as a mental disorder
This sub-project is theoretical and philosophical and asks the question: what is a mental disorder? Based on the theory of mental disorders as "harmful dysfunctions" by Jerome Wakefield (1992) it will be examined how "dysfunctions" can be involved in grief, comprising complicated reactions to grief. Wakefield's theory is based on the idea of natural, evolutionary developed mental modules, which can sustain injury and thereby cause harm. Recent theories (e.g. Ingold, 2011; Lock & Nguyen, 2010 et al.) have questioned the distinction between the naturally developed and the cultural, and the question is what this implies for the authoritative theory of mental disorders (which among others forms the basis of the latest developments in the diagnostic system)? Furthermore, the challenge of grief regarding the theory of mental disorders concerns the fact that there might not be any adaptive function connected with grief. In this sense, grief can be contemplated as a kind of "existential protest" against the fact that everything has to be "useful" in evolutionary terms. This project builds on the general theory of mental disorders developed during the past years (Brinkmann, 2016), but is here utilised specifically for the purpose of an analysis of grief.

3c) Svend Brinkmann (Professor, AAU): Grief between nature and culture
The third sub-project continues this topic and asks the question: why do people grieve at all? Does grief have an evolutionary function or is it a mere "random" by-product of our capacities to form relations and have emotional life? This question represents a challenge to evolutionary psychology and its understanding of psychological processes developed in response to evolutionary pressure. It has

been difficult to conceptualise an evolutionary function of grief. The question will be clarified through comparative study of the differences and similarities between humans and higher primate's ways of grieving. The sub-project will also comprise an empirical study of the normativity of grief, that is differences in "how much" and "how" one "should" grieve, depending on the relationship with the deceased. The study will utilise artistic paintings (e.g. paintings of grieving people in different epochs) and literary stories (stories about grief through the ages, peaking with the coming grief diagnosis) with the assumption that the differences in "correct" grieving as interpreted in different epochs, may tell us something about the relationship between the cultural normativity and the natural causality. This project will among other things be based on the theory by the hermeneutic philosopher Charles Taylor (e.g. 1989), understanding grief as functioning within a meaningful horizon or context, which is capable of undergoing historical and cultural transformation.

Appendix 5: Literature Review

Sköld, A.B. (2020). A Hopeless Search for the Hopeless: A Literature Review of Contemporary Qualitative Studies on Partner Bereavement. *Human Arenas*.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00122-w

Abstract

This literature review examines qualitative studies on partner bereavement from the year 2000 to 2018. The aim is to investigate which perspectives, theories, and models are prominent in this research, and how contemporary sociocultural trends might be related hereto. After giving a brief account of grief research in a historical perspective with a point of departure in partner bereavement and the development of a qualitative methodology within grief research, the following five theoretical frameworks are presented on the background of a close reading of the included 18 studies: *Continuing Bonds, Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, The Dual Process Model, Post-traumatic Growth,* and *Disenfranchised Grief*. In the discussion, I pinpoint how the popularity and influence of these frameworks are related to contemporary sociocultural tendencies and ideologies. It is suggested that a greater awareness with regard to the cultural mediation of experiences and understandings of grief would be beneficial. Specifically, I argue that all the reviewed frameworks – in different ways, remain disturbed by a contemporary inability of handling suffering and impossibilities.

Keywords:

grief, literature review, partner, qualitative studies, partner bereavement, suffering, hopelessness

Introduction

There is general agreement within grief research that Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (2005) can be seen as the first contribution to a scientific understanding of grief (Archer, 2008). Freud's attempt to distinguish melancholia from 'normal grief' can likewise be seen as a move on the cornerstone in the development from a romantic to a modern understanding of grief (Walter, 2017; Holte Kofod, 2017). Whereas the romantic lover held on to the memory of the deceased no matter the price, modernity has come to view grief as a linear and finite process. And whereas the melancholic unconsciously incorporate the deceased, the normally bereaved person—at least according to a superficial reading of Freud—works his or her way through the grief process and finally lets go. Love relationships are hereby seen primarily as instruments for satisfying individual needs (Klass, Nickman & Silverman, 1996). Even though the loss of a loved one causes great pain, letting go and forming new relationships are perceived as the achievable and final goal of the grief process.

This 'grief work hypothesis' became highly influential to grief research in the 20th century (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In the psychoanalytical tradition, Lieberman, Bowlby, and Parkes all developed grief models that inherited Freud's thought of grief being a psychological *task* that the individual could carry out to a more or less successful degree (Wortman & Silver, 1989). In Kübler-Ross's (1973) model, which is inspired by the emotional progression terminally ill persons are facing, grief is likewise expected to end in a state of acceptance. In all these perspectives, grief is seen as a 'stressor which upsets the equilibrium of the person' (Yalom & Lieberman, 1991), and a return to the status quo, resolution, or recovery as the goal of bereavement (Balk, 2004; Rosenblatt, 2007)

Loss of partner or spouse and widowhood specifically play an important part in the development of grief theory. According to Holst-Warhaft (2000), women have throughout history, in a wide range of otherwise diverse cultures, been the 'carriers of grief', and Walter (1999) observes that grief studies is one of the few academic discipline where women's voices have been heard and been allowed to make a

profound mark upon the theoretical development. The early empirical development of grief research (Marris, 1958; Parkes, 1970) is often criticised for being based exclusively on experiences of older widows from the English-speaking world (Valentine, 2008). This neglected not only other cultures and groups but also other types of loss, for example, parent and child loss, that have received increasing attention in the last decades (Dyregrov, 1990). The rationale for this could be that men die earlier, and that widowhood, therefore, is a more prevalent phenomenon than widowerhood and the experiences of younger bereaved people. Furthermore, it is often pointed out that women are generally more prone to share personal experiences, and, therefore, generally are more accessible in grief research.

The history of grief research on partner bereavement testifies to the fact that the process of grieving is tightly connected not only to the specific relationship but also to marriage as an institution and sociocultural understandings of love and romantic relationships. Even though it is not always made explicit, the studies reviewed here confirms that challenges faced by widows and widowers today cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural climate. Early studies of widowhood considered the final proof of grief resolution as a desire to remarry, assuming widowed women unable to live a meaningful life by themselves (Hobson, 1964). Widowers were, on the other hand, often said to be unable to handle the daily routines, and their persistent drive to remarry was explained by a need to get life back on track (Daggett, 2002). In this light, some of the normativities surrounding grief were a high degree of dependency between the sexes, heterosexuality, and, as we have seen above, grief understood as a finite process. Some of the studies included in this review testify to the fact that bereaved people still face these expectations, but the number and art of competing normativities that bereaved individuals navigate between has increased and changed significantly (Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018). These normativities concern not only the way we perceive couple relationship but likewise includes broader features of what counts as a good life. Carried out as part of the research centre *The Culture of Grief*[57], that specifically examines grief experiences through a number of

[57] www.sorg.aau.dk

empirical projects, and "the cultural setting and conception of happiness and distress within which grief is situated in our time" (The Culture of Grief, p. 1), this review pays close attention to the way our contemporary notions of suffering and the good life influence qualitative research on partner bereavement. Throughout this focus, the review transcends the particular focus on partner bereavement and touches upon issues related to grief in a general.

A new paradigm?

The perspectives presented in this review testify in several ways to the paradigm shift that has taken place within grief research since the beginning of the nineties (Klass et al., 1996). The new paradigm grows out from an increased awareness among clinicians and researchers that see grief as a highly individual experience linked to personal characteristics and coping strategies, and the meaning ascribed to the specific relationship with the deceased (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Objections to the use of stage and task models, and the thought of grief work, resolution, and acceptance were primarily raised from clients not recognising themselves in the models and clinicians speaking their case (Walter, 2017). According to Klass et al., (1996), a qualitative methodology contributes to a global critique of positivistic, mechanistic, and therefore, reductionistic view on science that "loses sight of the complex social and historical context in which human behaviour takes place" (p. 21). That bereavement is now seen as a far more multifaceted process, highly affected by both the psychological setup of the bereaved, the art of relationship to the deceased, and the surrounding sociocultural climate, is to a certain extent made clear from the frameworks included in this study.

Establishing a *continuing bond* to the deceased is no longer perceived as a dysfunctional or pathological defence but as part of a normal grief process. *The dual process model* is often seen as a paradigmatic illustration of this development, incorporating a diverse view on grief that includes a wide range of grief reactions that formerly have been looked upon as mutually excluding. *Constructivist and narrative theories* emphasise the role of language in regard to personal identity, intersubjective

relationships, and worldviews, as well as the ability to create meaningful and coherent life stories as essential to bereavement. The thought that grief can stimulate a form of *post-traumatic growth* has grown out from a meeting between existential and positive psychology and is gaining increasing influence. Finally, the concept of *disenfranchised grief* comes from a greater awareness of minority groups' grief experiences not being sufficiently recognised.

In the first part of the article, I will provide a detailed analysis of how these frameworks are applied in the included studies. In the following discussion, I will point out a number of critical aspects that make it dubious to what extent we can speak of a "new paradigm". I argue that the mentioned frameworks and theories remain ideologically indoctrinated by certain predominant features of our present cultural condition that makes the delineation to earlier grief-theories less radical than is often argued. In particular, I point out how they - despite their explicit interest in bereavement, lack an ability to conceptualize the unfathomable suffering that is part of grief and the hopelessness that often colours the world of the bereaved. In a time where grief is increasingly being perceived in a diagnostic light, I pinpoint how the task of giving voice to this suffering is becoming increasingly important. In this light, I pose a number of intricate questions that ought to be investigated by future qualitative studies within the field of bereavement studies.

Methods

The studies included in this literature review are based on searches in PsychINFO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and via the internal databases in journals dealing with bereavement, death, and dying such as *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying, Mortality* and *Death Studies*. Keywords used were *grief/bereavement/loss, spouse/partner,* and *qualitative research/study*. Bibliographies in the relevant articles have been checked for further references. The outlined frameworks were found via an iterative process that involved close readings of the found articles, formulation of preliminary categories, and re-reading based on these (See Table 1).

Studies dating from before the year of 2000 were not included in the review, the goal being to provide a state-of-the-art overview of contemporary qualitative grief research on partner bereavement. Studies dealing with anticipatory grief and studies focusing on the experience of living with a deadly sick partner were excluded as well. This is because these grief processes are characterised to a significant degree by the specific difficulties that arise from living with a partner with, for example cancer, dementia, or AIDS. Whereas some of deceased partners in the included articles have, indeed, died from the mentioned diseases, issues related hereto are not their main focus.

The literature search makes it clear that a phenomenological framework Is the most popular choice of methodology when investigating partner bereavement in a qualitative manner. The phenomenological studies explicitly try to capture the 'lived experience' of the bereaved. In many cases, the stories told are thereafter hermeneutically interpreted, and predominant themes accentuated. Other frameworks, such as grounded theory, narrative interviews, and open-ended surveys were used as well, but to a much lesser degree. No studies were excluded on the basis of methodological orientation as long as they fell within the category of qualitative studies. The search was stopped by the time no new perspectives were arising, and while there is a possibility of other studies within the relevant category, they are not likely to alter the results of this literature review in any substantial manner. The semi-structured interview is by far the most used research strategy with the number of informants ranging from three to 25. The great majority of the included 18 articles have their origins in the Anglo-American world.

Table 1: Included studies

Study	Population	Method(s)	Relevant findings/themes	Frameworks
Richardson, T. (2014). Spousal bereavement in later life: a material culture perspective, *Mortality*, 19(1), 61-79	20 older widows and widowers, English population	Qualitative interviews	The deceased is present through material emergent objects; Memory is dynamic, sedimented, and intercorporal.	Continuing bonds, Material culture studies, Embodiment
O'brien, J. M., Forrest, L., M. & Austin, A. E. (2002). Death of a Partner: Perspectives of Heterosexual and Gay Men. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 7(3), 317-328.	6 heterosexual and 6 gay men who had experienced the untimely death of their partner, Urban American population	Semi-structured interviews	Men's specific grief-problems are shaped by male gender socialisation, which makes them reluctant to seek emotional support. Similarities and differences between heterosexual and gay men exist.	Disenfranchised grief, Gender studies
Bennet, K. M. & Vidal-Hall, S. (2000). Narratives of death: a qualitative study of widowhood in later life. *Aging and Society*, 20, 413-428.	20 widows aged 60-80, English population	Semi-structured interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Widows give elaborate narratives to events surrounding their husband's death. Thereby, they commit to the memory, establish a continuing bond, and make public presentation possible.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, Continuing bonds
Harrison, T., Kahn, D. L. & Hsu, M. (2005). A Hermeneutical Phenomenological study of widowhood for African American women. *OMEGA*, Vol. 50(29), 131-149.	11 African American widows	Semi-structured interviews, Hermeneutical phenomenology	The women struggle with finding a new place in the local community, appropriate expressions for grief, and a balance between a continuing bond and a more independent lifestyle.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, Post-traumatic growth, Continuing bonds
Fasse, L. & Zech, E. (2016). Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement in the Test of the Subjective Experiences of	16 widows and widowers aged 42-69, who had lost their spouse 18 to 29	Semi-structured interviews, IPA	The informants generally endorsed the Dual Process Model, though they experience loss and restoration process as concurrent and intertwined. Conscious coping can furthermore be connected to	The Dual Process Model, Continuing bonds

Bereaved Spouses: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *OMEGA*, Vol. 74(2), 212-238.	months before, French population		guilt, and strategies are employed non-intentionally. Respite can function as an 'every day without grief'.	
Dagget, L. M. (2002). Living With Loss: Middle-Aged Men Face Spousal Bereavement. *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 12, 5.	8 men aged 40 to 60, English population	In-depth phenomenological interviews	The grief process is understood as a 'journey' from irreconcilable loss counted by disbelief, confusion, anger, and guilt, through the struggle to 'living through' via coping strategies, support seeking, and finally, the reconstructing of a future.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, The Dual Process Model
Collins, T. (2017). Conducting longitudinal research with older widows. *Journal of Women and Aging*, vol. 29, 2, 102-114	26 older widows, English population	Longitudinal study, Semi-structured interviews, Personal Community Diagrams	The meaning of relations to friends and children change radically after the death of a husband. These changes are affected by normative understandings of grief and social relationships.	Grief as a normative phenomenon
Chi Ho Chan, W. & Chan, C. L. W. (2011). Acceptance of Spousal Death: The Factor of Time in Bereaved Older Adults' Search for Meaning. *Death Studies*, 35:2, 147-162	15 widows and widowers, aged 65 or above, Chinese population	Interviews, Grounded theory	Time was considered essential in several respects. The timing of death was seen as important as well as the ability to remember the shared life with the deceased partner and to imagine a future. Self-transcendence as a way of overcoming experiences of 'truncated time'.	Shattered worldview, Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction
Bennet, G. & Bennet, K. M. (2000). The presence of the dead: An empirical study, *Mortality*, 5:2, 139-157	19 widows, age 60 to 76, lost their spouse 2 to 26 years ago, English population	Interviews	Two competing views on the presence of the dead are suggested, one rationalist/materialist and one supernatural. The widow's way of expressing these experiences depend on context and audience.	Continuing bonds, Grief as a normative phenomenon
Taylor, N. C. & Robinson, W. D. (2016). The Lived Experience of Young Widows and Widowers. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 44:2, 67-79	12 widows and widowers (mean age 35 years old), lost their spouse around four years	Semi-structured focus-group interviews	The young population was challenged by loss of social identity, worries regarding family life or pregnancy, and finding a fitting balance in regard to social support. Humour was found to be an important coping mechanism.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction

Haase, T. J. & Johnston, N (2012). Making Meaning out of Loss: A Story and Study of Young Widowhood. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 7, 204-221	11 widows (mean age 33 years old), lost their spouse on average 16 months ago, American population	Semi-structured interviews, Phenomenological analysis	Participants struggle with handling the shock, finding a new identity without the deceased, making meaning out of the loss, and taking care of material belongings.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, Continuing bonds
Jones, E. et al. (2018). Lived experience of young widowed individuals: A qualitative study. *Death Studies*, 1-10	11 widows and widowers (8/3), mean age 34.64, spouse dead on average 16 months ago,	Semi-structured interviews, Hermeneutical Phenomenological analysis	The quality of the relationship before the death is considered important. Coping with the prospect of navigating in the world after death involves use of literature, a continuing bond, cognitive processes, and spirituality.	Kübler-Ross's stage model, The Dual Process Model
Rodger, M. L et al. (2006). Living beyond the unanticipated sudden death of a partner: A phenomenological study. *OMEGA*, 54(2), 107-133	15 widows and widowers (10/5), aged 18 to 65, spouse lost within five years, Australian population	Phenomenological analysis (Giorgi)	Experiencing a partner's sudden unexpected death necessitates controlling the 'dosage' of grief—testifying to DPM. Participants are sceptical about the concept of 'grief resolution', and 'memorialisation capsule' is suggested as a way of conceptualising the continued place of the deceased.	The dual process model, Hogan's experimental model of grief, Continuing bonds
Spaten, O. M., Byrialsen, M. N. & Langdridge, D. (2011). Men's Grief, Meaning and Growth: A Phenomenological Investigation into the Experience of Loss. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 11:2	3 widowers, aged 32 to 54, lost their partner to cancer between 3 to 7 years ago, Danish population	Semi-structured interviews, Hermeneutical phenomenological analysis (Van Manen)	The widowers immediate experience their lifeworld and identity as shattered and a loss of meaning and purpose in life. Anger is likewise suggested to be a prominent theme, previously overlooked within grief research. The widowers express greater existential insight after the loss.	Existential psychology, The dual process model, Narratives, Post-traumatic growth
Lowe, M. E. & McClement, S. E. (2010). Spousal Bereavement: The lived experience of young Canadian widows. *OMEGA*, 62, (2), 127-148	5 widows, 45 years or younger, bereaved for 1 to 8 years, Canadian population	In-depth, unstructured interviews, Phenomenological analysis	Widows experience losing their life companion and co-parent as well as hopes and dreams for the future. Their widowhood affects their relationship to children and friends, and their status as single is seen as confusing. The widows had different strategies for continuing the bond with their lost partner.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, Continuing bonds

Danforth, M. M. & Glass, J. C. (2001). Listen to my words, give meaning to my sorrow: A study in cognitive constructs in middle-age bereaved widows. *Death Studies*, 25, 513-529	Six widows, aged 51 to 56, bereaved for 18 months to five years	Unstructured narrative interviews	The widows experience their husband's death as an existential crisis with both their assumptive world and expectations for the future being shattered. Meaning-making is experienced as a change in perspective which is seen to take several years.	Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction, Shattered world view, Post-traumatic growth
Jenkins et al. (2014), Older Lesbians and Bereavement: Experiencing the Loss of a Partner. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 57:2-4, 273-287	45 lesbian widows, mean age 64.6 years	Open-ended survey	Participants experience isolation from their deceased partner, the partner's family, and the health and support system. They experienced having to struggle to make their voices heard both before and after the death.	Disenfranchised grief, Gender studies,
Bent, K. N. & Magilvy, J. K. (2006). When a Partner Dies: Lesbian Widows. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 27:5, 447-459	6 lesbian widows, aged 50 to 70	In-depth, open-ended interviews; Phenomenological analysis	The study focuses on the art of social support received by the bereaved. Whether the relationship was disclosed to the surroundings before the death of the partner made a great impact.	Disenfranchised grief

Results

In this section, I outline the five frameworks and give examples of how they figure in the reviewed articles. It could be argued that the aspect of how the death of a partner affects relationships with family members, friends, and others would deserve a separate category. Because this aspect overlaps to a high degree with several of the chosen categories, I have opted not to treat this separately but included it in the discussion of the others. The order of the categories is based on the degree to which the different perspectives were found in the reviewed articles, continuing bonds being referred to the most often. It is indeed worth mentioning that there are several internal overlaps between the different perspectives, a point that will be developed further in the discussion.

Continuing Bonds

Several studies consider a continued bond to the deceased partner to be of great importance to the grief process (Jones et al., 2018; Lowe & McClement, 2011; Chan & Chan, 2011; Harrison, Kahn, & Hsu, 2005; Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000; Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Richardson, 2014) That the relationship does not end with the partner's death but continues to play a vital role for the partner still alive can, therefore, not be underestimated. The question of how this influence is manifested and experienced at different times in the years to follow is an aspect that not only has revolutionised grief research but changed our views on death and dying. The death of a loved partner affects the bereaved in various ways during the life to come, and the theory of continuing bonds tries to safeguard this dynamic. In the following, I firstly pinpoint the influence of age in regard to the meaning ascribed to the continuing bond and secondly the question of how this very bond is understood.

Both Jones et al. (2018) and Lowe & McClement (2011) investigate the experience of young widowhood and point out how the continuing bonds have a special meaning for this population. They were widowed at an age where pregnancy or having young children living at home are common. These widows, therefore, have the double task of handling their grief as well as mediating the children's relationship to the parent they no longer have. The 'daddy box', where some of the memorabilia are placed, is an example of how this last effort is carried out (Lowe & McClement, 2011). Rodger et al. (2007) suggest the concept of a 'memorialisation capsule' as a way of capturing the surviving partner's experience of creating a mental space dedicated to the memory of the deceased partner. It is pointed out that this capsule can be both intentionally revisited and seen to intrude when prompted in a certain way. For widows not having children, shared pets can serve both as a reminder of the partner and a way of recalling good memories (Jones et al., 2018). The older African-American widows in Harrison et al. (2005) manage to keep their positive memories alive while adjusting to the new life-situation with a large amount of social support from the surrounding community. Marriage had been of immense social, legal, and

emotional importance to the lives of these women, and all expressed gratitude without idealising their deceased husbands.

Two studies (Richardson, 2014; Bennett & Bennett, 2000) highlight how the possessions left by the deceased contribute to the continued bond. Richardson (2014) focuses on how the embodied aspect of bereavement affects the art of the continued bond to the deceased. In her view, the modalities of vision and hearing have been thoroughly investigated, hereby overlooking touch and smell.[58] This might well be explained by a prevailing view that sees contact with possessions as 'a maladaptive form of coping' compared to memories that are seen as internalised intra-psychologically and thereby separated from the material realm (Field, Nichols, Holen & Horowitz, 1999). In this perspective, hanging onto possessions is considered an understandable immediate reaction, but in the long run, seen as interfering with the project of 'moving on' (Rubin, 1984).

Richardson (2014) perceives the possessions of the deceased as 'emergent memory objects', having metonymic status. That is, they not only *represent* the lost loved one but stand as if it *is* him or her. The intracorporeality (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) characterising human relationships blurs bodily and material borders, and possessions hereby 'take on' the life of the deceased. In this light, the continued bond is kept through repeated and sustained interaction with the environment once shared. Several of Richardson's informants see the material aspects of seasonal rhythms, routines, and traditions as a way of maintaining a bond to the lost partner. For example, one of Richardson's informants speak about shifting the same curtains as the deceased wife once used to do on a regular basis is a way of continuing the bond to her (Richardson, 2014).

Bennett & Bennett (2000) argue based on two qualitative studies conducted 15 years apart that the *sense of presence* is a lasting phenomenon and not bound to a specific stage in the bereavement process which has been suggested by Field et al., (1999). A large majority of the older widows interviewed in the studies recognise feeling the presence of their husbands, experiences described on a continuum from

[58] See Brinkmann & Kofod (2018) for a view on grief as an extended emotion.

'ineffable feeling' to clear 'sensory experiences'. In explaining these phenomena, the women rely on two distinct discourses, much depending on the audience. In the medical discourse, these experiences are framed 'as if…' and referred to as 'hallucinations', 'dreams', and so forth. In the supernatural discourse, great emphasis is placed on 'that he was actually here' and the experience described as 'real' (Bennett & Bennett, 2000).

A continuing bond is hereby seen as an important aspect of adjusting to life after losing a partner in various ways. The deceased person is 'present' via objects, activities, and by confronting people who function as a reminder of the missing partner. The issues that arise from this vary substantially depending on life situation and culture. Whereas younger widows and widowers contemplate how to integrate new love relationships with the one still ongoing with the former partner, many older widows and widowers express gratefulness for the time they had together and rely on social and religious frameworks in their endeavour to continue the bond to the deceased. With regard to the ontological status of the deceased, figurative speech is used to demystify the experience, even though a large number of bereaved individuals insist on the 'realness' of the other's presence.

Meaning and Narrative Reconstruction

A partner plays an important part in the meaningful web of relationships in which persons are immersed (Attig, 2010), and their death threatens deeply held assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 2014). This opens up for a range of questions regarding meaning, which likewise figures as one of the more common themes for bereaved partners. According to Gillies & Neimeyer (2006), the process of meaning reconstruction in which the deceased is engaged has three components: *sense-making, benefit finding,* and *identity change.* While sense-making and benefit finding clearly will be seen as separate processes (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), how we understand the loss and how it affects us also impact our personal narratives. As the reviewed studies testify to, questions such as: 'Why did he die?', 'Why me?', 'Who am I without him/her?' are tightly intertwined and the reviewed studies testify to the

fact that meaning and narratives are central to many of the respondents' grief experiences.

In Haase & Johnston (2012), it becomes clear that the partner was an important part of the personal identity of the surviving young widows. The border between self and other is a hard line to draw as evinced in statements such as 'When a spouse dies, you die' and 'Our identities were intertwined. So I lost mine.' (Haase & Johnston, 2012, p. 212). The process of meaning-seeking in Daggett (2002) is likewise stimulated by a feeling of having lost part of oneself and a 'desperate' struggle to find some meaning to this: 'There has to be a reason'. Participation in the study is here regarded as an integrated part of this struggle, the hope being that sharing the story will make it more bearable (See also: Spaten, Nørremark Byrialsen & Langdridge, 2011).

In Bennett & Vidal-Hall (2000), giving the event meaning was important for social purposes as well. Being able to tell the story in a coherent and meaningful way to others was seen as an important way of gaining understanding and support. Moreover, recalling the days and hours surrounding their husbands' death was perceived to be of great importance and a condition for establishing a continuing bond. Regarding this, several studies (Harrison et al. 2005; Chan & Chan, 2011) accentuate the importance of saying goodbye in a proper way and the meaning of the place of death. Having experienced the caring environment as insufficient is something many bereaved individuals have trouble accepting, and this is seen as interfering with the effort to see the partner's death in a meaningful light.

Sense-making in this perspective focuses on finding 'acceptable causes' of death and thereby being able to make the event understandable. To nuance this, Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) point out that whether finding meaning is seen as helpful depends on a range of personal and social factors. The older African-American widows in Harrison et al. (2005) did not find meaning-seeking to be a particularly troublesome part of the grieving process. The fact that a large majority of them had a robust religious identity and belief is assumed to be part of the explanation for this. In sharp contrast hereto, the young widows in Haase & Johnston (2012) and Jones et al. (2018) experience the loss of their husbands to be a great challenge regarding both

experiencing the world as a meaningful place and their identity. At the same time as they express doubt when it comes to identifying themselves as 'single', they feel confused when being asked if they are married. The questions of remarrying are seen as something they are expected to take an active stance towards but are uncomfortable with. Moreover, their relationships with friends and role as a parent have changed radically. Losing a partner at this young age is also to suffer several parallel losses regarding both other relationships and dreams and hopes for the future (Ratcliffe, 2018).

Even though there are differences regarding how younger and older people relate to the death of a partner (Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000), being older is by no means a guarantee that the death is seen as natural and, as such, meaningful. Danforth & Glass Jr (2001) investigates loss in middle adulthood, 'a time when women tend to re-examine direction and meaning due to transitions in life' (p. 515). This is most likely the case for men as well, and the loss of a partner surely complicate this process. For the widows interviewed in this study, it was not until several years after the loss that they 'got a grasp on life again'.

For the older widows and widowers in Chan & Chan (2011), an inability to find meaning in the loss was associated with a high degree of suffering that shaped both the experience of the present as meaningless and the future as hopeless. Time was experienced as 'truncated' after the death of their spouse. In one move, both their future and past was annihilated: 'Acceptance of spousal death was inhibited by the failure of meaning searching from the present, and the continuity of time was disrupted' (Chan & Chan, 2011, p. 154). This inability to keep the memories alive in a meaningful way led to isolation and a feeling of being locked up in a 'meaningless now'. Even though their spouses died at old age, the timing was often seen as 'inappropriate'.

That 'meaning' is a key word for understanding the existential struggles of late modernity (Badiou, 2016) is confirmed by these studies. Rather than accepting death as meaningless, finding appropriate ways of explaining the event, integrating it into one's life story—and focusing on the positive changes are indeed vital aspects for many bereaved people. The task of finding meaning and explanatory models is seen

as part and parcel of the healing process. In the discussion, I will relate the importance given to meaning to broader societal tendencies.

The Dual Process Model

The dual process model of coping with bereavement (DPM) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) has received increased attention over the last decades and is being used both explicitly and implicitly in qualitative grief studies as well. The model posits a healthy grief reaction as being characterised by a flexible oscillation between a loss-oriented (LO) and a restoration-oriented (RO) process. DPM thus accepts both the need 'to grief-work' by confronting the loss and the necessity to move on and focus on other aspects of life. It hereby features a postmodern view of grief as being characterised by romantic as well as modernistic features, where holding on and letting go are not mutually exclusive options (Walter, 1999; Klass et al., 1996).

In their interpretative phenomenological study, Fasse & Zech (2016) explicitly investigate whether informants could recognise themselves in DPM. They conclude that a large majority of French middle-aged widows and widowers does so. This being said, they suggest several 'subtle modifications' to the model. First of all, the LO and RO are not easily distinguished and often intermixed. Loss is often confronted while being in the RO mode, and restoration is likewise seen as something that requires constant confrontation with the loss. For the bereaved interviewed by Fasse & Zech (2016), 'the two ways of responding, LO and RO, are intermixed to such a point that they are practically the same' (p. 221). Second, the intentionality of the coping processes is questioned. Both LO and RO are generally seen as something that primarily happens nonintentionally: 'It is 'life' and its imperatives that impose theses tendencies […], from the outside…' (p. 226), and this absence of causality is not seen as threating but in line with the general chaotic state of affairs of the bereaved. Third, 'respite' is suggested as a condition separate from both RO and LO, an 'everyday life without grief' often stimulated by significant others and generally perceived as associated with emotional well-being.

Rodger et al. (2007) testify to the need for 'dosage of grieving' (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) in their study of Australian widows and widowers. Perceiving loss as unresolvable and grieving as an infinite process, requires 'that some distancing from unpleasant emotion is needed' (Walter, 1999). The need for respite testifies to the flexibility that the model posits—bereavement is indeed a social phenomenon that becomes adjusted depending on contextual factors. The 'life' that interferes from the outside is, to a high degree, the relational world of other people. The painful fact that the world moves on after the loss of another hereby also becomes possibilities for the respite needed to endure.

Daggetts (2002) phenomenological study of English middle-age men who have lost their spouse likewise relies on DPM in their model illustrating irreconcilable loss. The reclamation and reconstruction of a life go through the two tracks of 'responding to the loss' and 'living through the loss' (p. 630), and it is likewise argued that the two processes occur simultaneously. The theory of post-traumatic growth, which we will turn to in the next section, puts an even greater emphasis on restoring life after losing a loved one. Within this framework, grief is not exclusively seen as an obstacle to be confronted or a condition that we need to learn how to live with, but likewise a source of personal and existential growth.

Post-traumatic Growth

The post-traumatic growth perspective is likewise tightly connected to the reconstruction of meaning and narrative mentioned above. It differs though regarding the expectations connected to the grief process. Where the endeavour of creating meaning and rewriting the personal narrative is *re*-constructive and aims at handling and managing the loss, the concept of post-traumatic growth – in line with the general strength-focused perspective of positive psychology (Lopez & Snyder, 2002; Seligman, 2002) presents this process not only as a return to the status quo but as a way of stimulating personal growth and development in the light of grief.

According to Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006; 2007), positive changes regarding the struggle with bereavement falls in five general categories: the experience of the

emergence of new possibilities, changes in relationships with others, an increased sense of personal strengths, a greater appreciation for life, and changes in existential and spiritual orientations. According to Yalom and Lieberman (1991), talking from an existential psychological perspective that shares vital aspects with this paradigm, there is a significant relationship between existential awareness and personal growth. In their perspective, the inevitability of death, questions about the deeper meaning of life, and/or what their purpose is, and if they are troubled by regrets for the life lived so far become highly relevant for bereaved people after the loss of partner. An ability to take these existential challenges seriously is hereby seen as a condition for managing the loss in a constructive way.

In the words of Bennett & Bennett (2000), 'Following the death of a spouse, the bereaved partner has, in effect, two choices: to die or to continue living' (p. 1). On the basis of the studies reviewed here, there can be no doubt that the death of a partner is an immensely life-transforming event that will be inscribed with a before and after in the lives of the bereaved. Even though the studies included in this review do not allow for any generalisations in regard to the existential questions raised here, several of the mentioned aspects are taken up by both participants and researchers. 'To continue living' demands an active stance, and the process of grieving is often referred to as a 'struggle' (Spaten et al., 2011; Lowe & McClement, 2011). Many of the bereaved refer to themselves as 'survivors' (Danforth & Glass Jr, 2001), and grief is not seen as a natural process but something that requires an immense effort.

How this effort has resulted in personal and existential growth is described in several of the reviewed studies. In Spaten et al. (2011), 'the participants all spoke of having learned a number of things as a result of their experience of loss' (p. 10), thus confirming several of the aspects mentioned by Tedeschi & Calhoun (2007). The participating middle-age Danish men testify to existential and spiritual growth, a greater appreciation of life, and a more caring and tolerant way of being with others, a development that is seen as a result of an intense existential struggle. In Harrison et al. (2005), life without a partner was seen as an opportunity for increased autonomy. 'When one widow was asked what widowhood meant to her, she said, 'freedom!' (p. 145). Life as a widow was likewise, in Danforth & Glass (2001), seen as requiring

'critical awareness and reflection processes' that made 'experiences to insight and new meaning' possible. Interestingly Chan & Chan (2011) describes self-transcendence as the most constructive way to tackle the loss. Engaging in activities that made people forget, both about themselves and their lost loved ones, was seen as one of the few things that could ease the pain. In Harrison et al. (2005), a more everyday form of 'keeping busy' is likewise seen as a key to handle otherwise overwhelming emotions: 'Once you get busy, it leaves' (p. 141) as one of their informants eloquently put it.

Disenfranchised Grief

In Doka (1999), disenfranchised grief is defined as 'grief experienced by those who incur a loss, that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported' (p. 37). Disenfranchisement has, in due course, become a multifaceted concept involving both non-recognised relationships (e.g., homosexual relationships), losses seen as unworthy of grieving (e.g., perinatal loss, abortions, etc.), grievers that due to age or mental disabilities are looked upon as 'unable to grieve' or extraordinary circumstances surrounding the death (e.g., suicides, AIDS), and certain ways of grieving (e.g., lack of strong affective response) (Doka, 1989; Doka, 2002). Even though disenfranchised grief cannot be counted as a framework on the same level as continuing bonds, meaning and narrative construction, the two-track model and post-traumatic growth, it plays an important part in several of the studies and is likewise interesting in a sociocultural perspective.

In Attig's (2004) critical perspective, disenfranchised grief is not only the result of a lack of empathy but likewise a political and ethical failure. Respect for the bereaved person transcends empathy with the experienced pain and suffering; it includes an acknowledgement of the existential struggle to restore a meaningful life after losing a loved one.

Generally, losing a partner is still seen as a severe event that leads to understanding and support from the surrounding environment. Even though divorce rates are increasing in all generations, long-term romantic relationship is still

recognised as an important institution, and this affects how losses are perceived. This being said, various studies reviewed here testify to individuals and groups struggling with having their grief recognised. This is actualised both in relation to family, the extended network, and the social system.

Spaten et al. (2011) argues that men's reactions of anger after losing a partner might have 'resulted in a rage that potentially disconnected them from others who may have been able to offer comfort and support'. This confirms Walter's (1999) suggestion that the clinical lore within grief research is centred around the normative assumption that 'it is good to talk', which might undermine alternative ways of coping. Taylor & Robinson (2016) accentuates humour as an important coping mechanism for the young widows and widowers. In Holst-Warhaft's (2000) historical reading of grief-rituals, tremendous sorrow has often turned into its total opposite. As we have seen, the idea of temporary respite as a necessary moment in the grief process has been promoted by Fasse & Zech (2016). Support is, therefore, considered broader than merely emotional comfort—and much appreciation is expressed for friends who manage to use humour both directly regarding the loss and to aspects not related to it (Taylor & Robinson, 2016)

The young widows in Lowe & McClement (2011) experience support groups as being alienating due to the fact that the great majority of the other members are of an older generation. In O'brien, Forrest & Austin (2002), several men doubt the effects of support groups and choose not to participate—grief is seen either as a personal thing or they 'didn't need a support group'. On the other hand, the need to mirror the grief in others within the same group is expressed by older widows in Bennett & Vidal-Hall (2000). The strength of these bonds comes from a common feeling that nobody else 'really understands' what the bereaved is going through, and that support from others in a similar situation acquires extra value.

Three of the studies examine experiences of bereaved homosexual individuals (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Jenkins, Edmundson, Averett, & Yoon, 2014; O'brien et al., 2002) where the concept of disenfranchised grief plays a prominent role. Being in contact with funeral and health services as well as dealing with administrative issues following the death of their same-sex partner were experienced

as discriminating by lesbian widows in both Jenkins et al. (2014) and Bent & Magilvy (2006). Rights and privileges that naturally would have been granted the bereaved in traditional heterosexual relationships were overruled. Respondents 'described how they experienced anger and sadness at not having the relationship recognised, at not being able to spend time with the loved one in her final hours, at being denied access to financial resources they shared, and at not finding the support they had hoped for from family and friends.'(Jenkins et al., 2014, p. 282).

Bereavement, conceptualised as the survivors' common struggle to write the biography of the deceased (Walter, 1996), can be made problematic for several reasons. Not only are many of the acquaintances of the deceased unaware of each other; they might also disagree on who the deceased 'really was'. Some of the gay men in O'brien et al. (2002) experienced being left out of the story by a family that didn't acknowledge the sexual orientation of their lost son. The stigma still surrounding AIDS was likewise seen by several of the men as a factor contributing to a negative valence surrounding their partners' death.

Discussion

Grief is played out on the borderline between existential universality and cultural specificity (Brinkmann, 2018b). That death happens to each of us does not alter the fact that this is understood in radically different ways across time and place (Ariès, 2008). Grief has a complex and paradoxical nature that is not diminished in the reviewed articles. That intense sadness and longing do not exclude moments of respite or personal growth is one example of this.

The methodology in the reviewed qualitative studies testifies to a certain degree to both individual and cultural sensitivity. The groups investigated are, in most cases, a small number of same-sex people of a relatively homogeneous population. Except for one study of bereaved Chinese men, all studies are from either Western Europe, Australia, or Northern America. At the same time as this limits any possibility of drawing general conclusions, it should make possible some cautious suggestions regarding how grief after partner loss is experienced and understood in Western

societies. The outlined frameworks figure in no small degree in the reviewed studies and can be seen as representative regarding how bereavement after partner loss is understood within the field of qualitative studies today. That being said, generalizing within qualitative studies is a controversial issue (Roald et al., Accepted/In press), and should not shadow the specifies and singularities of experiences nor the knowledge gained from particular relationships. The generalizations made – both in the included studies and this literature review is a necessary evil that only to a limited extent manage to capture the complex reality of bereavement.

Establishing and maintaining a continuing bond to the deceased was of vital importance for people of different ages, sex, and cultural heritage. This finding confirms the point that grief is not overcome, but something one may learn to live with and that a vital part of bereavement today consists of integrating the dead among the living. Moving on was not seen as involving 'overcoming' the loss in the sense of forgetting or breaking the bond. A partner's death confronts us with an existential challenge of re-negotiating our hitherto existential worldview and constructing meaning out of the loss is suggested to be a driving force in the endeavour. According to DPM, this process proceeds through an oscillation between a loss- and restoration-oriented positions. The studies reviewed here testify that bereaved people cannot easily distinguish these processes that tend to occur simultaneously. How grief is seen as a source of personal growth is accentuated via the concept of posttraumatic growth and several groups experienced disenfranchised grief in various ways.

In the following sections, I will raise a few critical questions and point out some issues that could deserve further attention on the background of these results. I will begin by analysing how the included frameworks are shaped by broader sociocultural tendencies, continue with a discussion about how the 'culture of happiness' is affecting the experiences and interpretations of bereavement, and ask if the art of late modern love relationships should be made more explicit when trying to understand grief. Before concluding, I consider the potential consequences of understanding grief in a diagnostic language. I would like to emphasize that the discussion of the theoretical frameworks is not exclusively connected to partner

bereavement, as these are likewise applied on other types of losses. The following discussion on modern love life relates more directly to this group.

A case for the hopeless?

Grief research is, like every other scientific discipline, not a merely descriptive enterprise but one that reflects broader cultural and political tendencies and interests (Habermas, 1972). One might ask in what way the theoretical frameworks presented in this review reflect broader tendencies in Western society. Several writers (Walter, 1999, Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen & Stroebe, 1992; Valentine, 2006) have pointed out that the line between a modernist and a postmodernist understanding of grief plays a major role within the field of bereavement studies. While modernist theories perceived grief as a state that were limited in time and overcome through detachment or resolution, postmodern theories have a higher degree of acceptance for the complexity that grief encompasses. My reading will point out that - as indicated by many of these writers as well, "there is no rigid dividing line between modernist and postmodernist thinking" (Valentine, 2006, p. 58). Importantly, I identify this blurring not only in the results of the reviewed empirical studies, but in the fundamentals of the theories and frameworks applied. Since these theories often function as a lens through which the grief experiences are understood, they play an important role in the way grief is understood today. In the following I will suggest a number of ways in which these theories remain bound to sociocultural tendencies that often work counter to their acclaimed missions. Even though this format does not allow for extensive discussion, they certainly demand attention elsewhere.

According to the most widely used framework, the continuing bonds, intersubjectivity is broadly mediated and does not presuppose the living presence of the other. Even though the original theory did not regard the bond as something that was always present or as an antidote to loss (Klass et al., 1996; Klass, 2006), I ask whether the obstinate insistence on the importance of continuing the bond in the review's articles serves the interest of not accepting the utmost fact of mortality, that the lost partner is indeed lost. In phenomenological terms, human relationships have two poles of intentionality, which the continuing bond lacks. My image of the lost

loved one remains *my* image, and the otherness of the deceased is thereby paradoxically reduced even though he or she is dead. Following Brinkmann (2018c), one could argue that the ontological aspects of bereavement, that is, the fact that the other is no more, has been neglected through a one-sided focus on the psychological reactions among the bereaved. In the words of Kierkegaard (2009), the deceased is a 'silent man', and the fact that the continued bond will be partly shaped by a projection of the other should not be overlooked. Without neglecting the fact that many people experience a continued relationship, it is worth asking in what narratives bereaved people place these relations, what ontological status they ascribe to the deceased, and finally their reasons for doing so (Klass & Steffen, 2018).

Regarding meaning construction, one could raise the question whether the weight given to functional narratives and meaning construction is a consequence of a contemporary inability to bear the meaningless and other aspects of life that somehow break the continuity and do not easily integrate into this coherence? In the words of Bennett & Vidal-Hall (2000), the task of 'moving forward and continue to live' is conditioned by 'a need to make sense of it all' (p. 424). Explaining death is indeed a demanding enterprise, and it could be argued that the felt imperative to 'create meaning' that figures in many of the reviewed studies is seen as an individualised reduction of an inherently existential and social concept. Even though meaning and narrative coherence are achieved through talking with others, there are reasons to be sceptical that finding a plausible cause of the event, inscribing it into one's life narrative, and finding positive aspects of bereavement should be sufficient to make the death of a partner 'meaningful'.

Meaningful experience presupposes sociality, and losing a partner is, as we have seen, a loss of this other pool of meaning. Contemporary discourses of meaning that are having significant influence within grief research tend to view meaning as something individuals create when needed. Both in a sociological and phenomenological perspective, this individualisation of the concept is implausible. Meaning is not created ex nihilo but *experienced* within a lifeworld that transcends the individual and is shaped by the relations that make up an individual's social world (Heidegger, 2013; Merleau-Ponty 2012). According to Norbert Elias (2010),

criticising the individual focus of the existential philosophical tradition, the world of the atomic subject *is* indeed meaningless and absurd *due* to this very lack of relations. The bereaved is in a situation where she experiences herself as fundamentally alone, and the world, therefore, discloses itself as meaningless (Attig, 2010). In this perspective, the only way of giving meaning to the situation would be to bring the dead back to life. This being impossible, the question arises whether acceptance of meaninglessness becomes just as important a task as meaning creation. The 'struggle' of bereavement and the individual confusion regarding whether this process takes place within the limits of normality would perhaps be relieved if demands on meaning-making where less prominent. Death remains, a "pure question mark" (Levinas, 2000, p. 14), "the ultimate humiliation of human reason" (Bauman, 1992, p.15). The fact that the other – perhaps the one that I loved the most, has died, is not easily understood, and the question whether that's not all for the best is worth asking. At the very least, unreserved demands on meaning-making should not be seen as universally helpful for the bereaved person.

On the surface of it, DPM does make a place for a multifaceted and pending grief process and does indeed have a less normative string than earlier task and stage models (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The oscillation between loss and restoration is highly dependent on the social context, with public areas often implying a prohibition against intense sadness and thereby stimulating the restoration mode. Loss is restricted to the life scene played out 'backstage' (Goffman, 2008). Even though the DPM is presented as both descriptive and able to capture a broader range of grief reactions, it is clear that a maladaptive grief reaction is the one being non-flexible and not adjustable (Valentine, 2006, p. 62). It could certainly be asked whether these demands are not also in line with an increasing late modern focus on flexibility and adaptivity (Sennett, 1998; Petersen, 2016).

Counter to the position that grief is—and should be—adjusted to the present context with regard to the potential personal and social consequences of doing it "wrong", it could be argued that there are fundamental limits regarding how smooth the 'fit' with the rules of the living can become (Becker, 2014).

While DPM makes it clear that a successful grief process make possible an adjustment to the present environment, it could be argued that grief - as a reminder of the otherness of death, cannot be adjusted nor restricted to the required smoothness and lack of negativity of late modern society. Kofod's (Accepted/In press) argues, drawing on a longitudinal interview study with bereaved parents, that they often find themselves in the position of the "killjoy". Being bereaved amounts to being unable to play the game of happiness and a critical argument against the flexibility demanded by DPM would emphasize that grief makes appropriateness exceedingly difficult. Indeed, to find a proper place in the social world without the lost person is an urgent task for the bereaved, but it is not given that adjustment to any given society and its governing norms is the proper solution. The question whether the position of the bereaved is not paramount for any society and worthy of preservation is worth poising. In his expanded social ontology, Ruin (2018) writes that the answers given to the questions how we relate to the dead and which deaths we perceive as "grievable" (Butler, 1999) or not "will structure the material and intellectual landscape of the living, not only in terms of their archives, memorials and graveyards but also in their rituals and means of learning and ultimately in the shaping of their political communities" (p. 199). The flexibility aspired by DPM answers to broader feature our age, and should be perceived in this light. Walter (1999) likewise argues that the results of the DPM are highly compatible, not only with "a general distancing from unpleasant emotion" but "it also fits the power of positive thinking" (p. 161). The question, then, is whether the lack of flexibility that colours bereavement is a trait worth preserving? Is there a place for the killjoy today?

A Culture of Happiness

I have suggested that continuing bonds, meaning construction, and DPM reflect, in different ways and degrees, contemporary difficulties dealing with negativity, and the question now arises whether this is not even more obviously seen in relation to post-traumatic growth. One could ask whether the popularity of this theory can be seen as an expression of an individualistic and perhaps even self-centred

culture that primarily perceive human relationships in an instrumental light? The 'struggle' metaphor that I have mentioned on several occasions suggests that grieving is something that can be conquered and won. Grief is functional via the overcoming of the crisis it exposes the bereaved to, and thereby reduced to a source of personal growth and self-development.

The fact that some people handle traumas and crisis constructively does not imply that this should be turned into an imperative for the bereaved. Critics have pointed out how discourses within cancer and AIDS societies have come to perceive the disease as a 'gift' that should be utilised most effectively (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2010). Since grief differs from these diseases through its social and ethical aspects, it could be argued that this development is even more suspicious within the world of bereavement. In grieving, we praise a life once shared, and how this is done is one of the most intimate and personal matters we can imagine. The explicit or implicit demands that this experience should necessarily be instrumentalised in *any* way is potentially problematic.

The disadvantage of a high cultural sensitivity could be that the existential core of losing a loved one becomes diminished. Grief research focusing on the specific experience of sub-groups and persons does capture vital aspects of bereavement but, at the same time, tends to overshadow more basic questions. It could be worth asking whether contemporary grief research with its high degree of specificity is losing sight of more basic existential issues. The perspectives outlined in this review share the characteristics of being more or less constructive answers or reactions to the loss. In this light, what happened to the loss itself? In his book *A Grief Observed* (1961), following the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis (1961) makes this point in the following way: "It is hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter'. There is death. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible" (p. 15). Descriptions of how the dead partner has left an irresolvable wound that cannot be healed do figure in the reviewed articles but tend to be overshadowed by a constructive focus on how the process of moving on is best tackled.

There is death, and one could argue that the perspectives outlined in this review – despite their explicit attempts of overcoming earlier stage- phase- and taskmodels, have a 'positive aura' around them. They often presuppose a more or less autonomous individual willing and capable of overcoming the *struggle* that grief confronts them with. Grief, in this view, requires an effort to get back on track and continue life more or less exempt of suffering. This does not imply that suffering is left totally out of the picture, but it does indicate that the irreversible and impossible aspects of bereavement are somewhat neglected. Hopelessness is seemingly forbidden territory in contemporary qualitative grief research.

Asking whether this reflects broader aspects of a Western society that fashions happiness, effectiveness, and agility is, indeed, a question worth investigating. Several critics have suggested that personal and social spaces earlier devoted to negativity have been evaded with a constant focus on showing a positive face and being optimistic about the possibilities in life (Bruckner, 2011; Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Davies, 2016). Since grief is an inherently normative phenomenon (Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017), the suggestion that this cultural climate affects both the experiences and the interpretations thereof among bereaved people today demands further studies. Is there at all room for aspects not conforming to a happiness paradigm today, and how does this relate to grief?

Diagnostisation and late modern love

Another issue worth drawing attention to in this context – not unrelated to the former discussion, is the ongoing implementation of prolonged grief disorder In ICD-11. Despite the fact that both the issue of diagnosing grief as such and the specificities of the diagnostic criteria in particular has been intensively discussed during the previous decades (Horowitz et al., 2009; Prigerson et al., 2009; Wakefield, 2012), none of the studies mentiones this poignant issue. The fact that receiving a psychiatric diagnosis profoundly affects people (Hayne, 2003) calls for studies examining the implication of the fact that prolonged grief is now becoming pathologised. According to Granek (2010), "grief has been constructed as a pathological condition necessitating

psychological intervention for people to heal as quickly as possible" (p. 46). A continuation of this process can be seen in the ICD-11, where grief is seen as potentially pathological if longing and preoccupation with the deceased, together with intense psychological distress, is still present after six months following the death of a person close to the bereaved (Brinkmann, 2018a).

The long and intense discussion on how the diagnostic criteria should be formulated testifies to how controversial the pathologisaition of grief is. Even though both the bereaved and organisations trying to speak their voice are positive with regard to the diagnosis because it provides an opportunity for recognition and treatment, knowing that there are objective limits to what 'normal grief' consists of will most likely affect how people relate to their loss (Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017). On the one hand, an urge to 'be done' with grieving after half a year will be a likely response to the diagnosis. On the other hand, pathologising itself can be utilised in the name of love. That is, a prolonged and potentially 'never-ending' grief process can be seen as an effective way of stating one's sorrow to the surrounding word. The diagnosis thereby functions as a confirmation that one's grief is 'real' and their pain worthy of recognition. This being mere speculation, future studies should consider how diagnostic language affects people and their understandings of grief.

Before concluding, I would like to pinpoint how the questions of how contemporary culture is shaped by a form of 'happiness imperative' border on the question of how romantic relationships are lived in late modern society. While it is often said that grief is the flipside of love, the conditions for contemporary love life is seldom explicitly paid attention to within the reviewed studies nor grief research in general. As pointed out in the introduction, marriage and partnerhood have gone through massive transformations in the course of the last decades and it would indeed be surprising if this did not affect bereavement and the adjustment to the world without a former life partner.

That our love life to a large degree is shaped by the cultural climate is not a revolutionary claim. That the serial monogamy of the contemporary West has resulted in increased divorce rates and a radically changed view on the function of love

relationships has likewise been claimed for a long time. Late modern love relationships are, to a large degree, based on 'free choice', with both sexes being independent regarding how the relationship proceeds (Illouz, 2012). Could it be that the way we engage in romantic relationships has excluded a part of love that was earlier seen as vital for a longstanding relationship, for example an ability to endure periods that do not qualify as decidedly happy, and the fact that our needs and wants in reality could be more effectively satisfied elsewhere (Giddens, 1992)? The 'marriage market', to a high degree, places demands on partners to live up to expectations 'negotiated' beforehand, and many people move in and out of love relationships with great haste (Badiou, 2012).

Contrasting this line of thought, Smart (2007) and others have pointed out that claims depicting the steady decline of family life and eruption on relationships based on commitment in general is hastened. Empirical studies on how adults deal with the loss of a partner could indeed bring new knowledge in this domain. Losing a life happens – with few exceptions, against one's will. How bereaved partners navigate in the normative minefield of questions that surround it, when and how to find a new partner would indeed be worth pursuing, Can grief tell us anything about love, and how does it position itself in relation to an overreaching 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz, 2007)? Does this readiness of a potential leave and non-expectancy of lasting love make bereavement easier, or does it complicate the question of guilt to a further degree? Can the grief provide further knowledge with regard to the expectations that govern partnerhood today? And can the continuing bonds paradigm be seen as a way of perceiving grief as a more integrated part of loving? At an even more fundamental level, one might ask how the perspective of the bereaved can give access to some of the more existential aspects of partnerhood. If there is any truth to the folk wisdom that we only know the value of something by the time it is lost, bereaved partners could indeed make an interesting case for studying partnerhood as such.

Conclusion

In this review, I have sought to examine the field of qualitative studies on partner loss in the previous two decades. In the bulk of this article, I describe the ways five prominent frameworks are applied in 18 qualitative studies. Continuing bonds, Narrative meaning construction, The two-track model of bereavement, Post-traumatic growth and Disenfranchised grief make up the theoretical landscape in the field of qualitative studies on partner bereavement today. I outline the basic features of these frameworks and how they are applied in the included studies. In the following discussion, I ponder on how particular sociocultural conditions shape both the art of love relationships, the experiences of bereavement as well as the interpretations and theories that are seen as compatible with these. Drawing on a broad range of sociological and phenomenological theories, I question several aspects herein. First, I suggest several "blind spots" when it comes to how the theory of continuing bonds, narrative meaning construction and DPM remain bound to a culture that have exceedingly difficulties with handling suffering. While I respond to several unique features in the mentioned frameworks, the general issue identified is a tendency of avoiding or suppressing negativity and the relentless suffering that grief comprises. Despite their explicit attempts to part with modernistic notions of letting-go and working through, these frameworks remain partly solution-based. This tendency is even more widespread among the proponents of post-traumatic growth, that I argue testify to a clear-cut example of a "culture of happiness" which has contributed to an instrumentalization of human relationships and made happiness, enjoyment and subjective wellbeing the ultimate goal in life. Furthermore, I pinpoint how the reviewed studies do not consider the question of whether grief is to be perceived and treated in a diagnostic light, something that is urgent in a time where prolonged grief-disorder figures as a separate diagnosis in ICD-11. I finally suggest that this - together with a greater awareness to the sociocultural predicaments of love and partnerhood, should guide future qualitative studies of partner bereavement.

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