

Article

# Love, Grief, and Resilience

Songyao Ren 

School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology, The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX 75080, USA; songyao.ren@utdallas.edu

**Abstract:** This paper defends resilience in bereavement by way of responding to two prominent objections in the contemporary philosophical literature. Resilience in bereavement pertains to the ability to return to one's functional and emotional baselines in a comparatively short period after the death of a loved one. Contrary to what Moller thinks, resilience is compatible with having a deep appreciation for the deceased loved one. Appealing to the example of Zhuangzi's grieving of his wife, I argue that the agony of grief is assuaged as one comes to terms with one's loss through a realization of the universality and inevitability of death. This can be so even as one continues to appreciate the significance of what one has lost. Also, contrary to Smuts' view, resilience does not indicate a failure to care. Although the resilient is free from prolonged and intense grief, she could continue to care for the deceased by constructing a new relationship with her and contributing to this relationship in ways that are appropriate to it. This view is further corroborated by empirical bereavement research. According to the continuing bonds theory, healthy grief is resolved by establishing changed ties with the deceased rather than detaching ourselves from them.

**Keywords:** resilience; grief; love; continuing bonds; Zhuangzi



**Citation:** Ren, S. Love, Grief, and Resilience. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 74. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8040074>

Academic Editors: Laura Candiottio and Rick Anthony Furtak

Received: 6 July 2023

Revised: 31 July 2023

Accepted: 15 August 2023

Published: 16 August 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

In his well-regarded book, *The Other Side of Sadness*, psychologist George Bonanno [1] argues that people are naturally resilient in the face of adversity. Resilience refers to the ability to return to normal levels of psychological and physical functioning in a comparatively short period after being exposed to disruptive events. Insofar as emotional equilibrium is crucial to psychological and physical functioning, resilience also allows us to quickly return to our emotional baselines. According to Bonanno, we hurt deeply when we suffer severe losses. However, for many of us, the hurt goes away relatively quickly so that within a few months we can “resume functioning and enjoying life” [1] (p. 24). Ann Masten, in her study of resilient children, corroborates this finding. Resilience is defined by her as “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” [2] (p. 10). Calling it “ordinary magic”, she argues that resilience is common: it arises from “the operation of basic protections” rather than “extraordinary talents or resources” [2] (p. 7).

Insofar as resilience reduces pain and suffering and allows us to move on with our lives, the results of these studies seem worth celebrating. However, many philosophers are less sanguine about resilience, arguing that it is at least partially unethical<sup>1</sup>. Take, for example, resilience in bereavement. Many individuals in long-term, satisfying relationships exhibit only short-lived grief reactions that dissipate in a few months, rather than years [1]. According to Moller [3], this emotional immunity constitutes a form of epistemic blindness. Since emotions allow us to perceive values, a lack of grief “renders us unable to take in or register fully the significance of our losses” and “deprives us of insight into our condition” [3] (pp. 310–311). Smuts also argues that resilience dismays us, and rightly so, since it amounts to “a death of self” [4] (p. 186). In particular, the prospect of resilience points to a future self that no longer cares much about the beloved. This cannot be attractive from our current vantage point unless we are alienated from our present concerns.

This paper defends resilience against the above two worries. Note first that I focus on one paradigm of grief and resilience, that which happens in response to the more or less sudden death of a beloved. Although there are other kinds of grief and resilience, I choose this paradigm because it dramatizes resilience and elicits in us the strongest resistance to it. Also, it is the one most discussed in the philosophical and psychological literature<sup>2</sup>. Second, I focus on Moller [3]’s worry from epistemic blindness and Smuts [4]’ worry from the failure to care. Not only are these worries shared by prominent scholars (Nussbaum [5]; Solomon [6]; Cholbi [8,10]), but they have also sparked heated debates about the ethical aspects of resilience (Vitrano [11]; Preston-Roedder and Preston-Roedder [12]; O’Hagan [13])<sup>3</sup>. While there are other important objections to resilience, I leave a discussion of them for another occasion.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 draws on Confucius’ grieving of his disciples to provide a relational account of grief. This suggests that grief is grounded in the loss of the relationship between oneself and the deceased loved one. Section 3 addresses Moller [3]’s objection from epistemic blindness by appealing to Zhuangzi’s resilience in the face of his wife’s death. I argue that resilience is not only compatible with our appreciation of the significance of our losses but also could reflect our insight into our own condition as mortal beings. Section 4 addresses Smuts [4]’ objection from the failure to care. I argue that intense and disruptive grief, though a frequent symptom of care, is not necessary for it. In fact, the resilient may be able to care in a way that is more attuned to her changed relationship with the deceased. Section 5 turns to empirical bereavement research to support my defense of resilience. The continuing bonds theory suggests that a healthy resolution of grief consists in establishing changed ties with the deceased rather than detaching ourselves from them. This is further evidence that resilience is compatible with the continuation of care.

## 2. Grief: A Relational Account

Grief as an emotion is accompanied by a wide array of bodily symptoms and sensations. When in grief, one may experience a fluttering stomach, a weakness in the muscles, a gnawing pain, and a sense of emptiness. One may find oneself fatigued but hopelessly wakeful. The world becomes a blur seen through one’s teary eyes. Although grief has a rich phenomenology, it is not reducible to its phenomenology. Like other emotions, grief has cognitive elements and is embedded in our ways of seeing the world. In the most straightforward sense, grief is about an important loss. Complications arise, however, as to how such loss should be characterized.

To see this, consider Confucius’ grief on two occasions:

Bo Niu fell ill. The Master called upon him, grasping Bo Niu’s hand through the window. He said, “There is nothing for it! It is fated. Yet for such a man to have such an illness! For such a man to have such an illness!” [14] (6.10)

Yan Yuan died. The Master said, “Oh! *Tian* destroys me! *Tian* destroys me!” [14] (11.9)<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, Confucius’ grief reactions in these two passages seem at odds with each other. In 6.10, as Confucius grieved over the terminal illness of his student Bo Niu, he focused on Bo Niu himself and what was lost to him. The little that we know of Bo Niu from the *Analects* suggests that he was notable for his virtuous conduct [14] (11.3). This makes his impending death especially tragic: as a morally fine man, Bo Niu could have lived a flourishing life, but his premature death would deprive him of a range of possibilities where his virtue could further be expressed. This is not to deny that Bo Niu was virtuous and accomplished during his allotted lifespan [15] (p. 285). However, the brevity of his life would preclude his virtue from obtaining its fullest expression, which could only be afforded given time and opportunity [15] (ibid.)<sup>5</sup>. Thus, as Confucius exclaimed, “yet for such a person to have such an illness”, his grief appears other-focused: it was directed at what was lost to Bo Niu due to possibilities unrealized [14] (6.10).

By contrast, Confucius' grief in 11.9 acquires a different focus: it was directed at his own loss brought about by the death of his favorite student Yan Yuan<sup>6</sup>. Yan Yuan grew up in a poor family and was known to be quiet, humble, and dedicated to learning. Confucius thought highly of Yan Yuan, looking after him not only as a student but also as a son, and their relationship was filled with affection. Once Confucius was in danger in the state of Kuang, Yan Yuan fell behind [14] (11.23). Upon being rejoined by Yan Yuan, Confucius said, "I thought you had died" [14] (ibid.). Yan Yuan replied, "while you are alive, Master, how would I dare to die" [14] (ibid.)? Yan Yuan's response can be made intelligible in light of the demands of filial piety in Confucianism, which implies "not only cheerful obedience to parents during childhood but also reverential support of them through their old age, and faithful worship of their spirits after their death" [16] (p. 113). When Yan Yuan eventually did die prematurely, Confucius wailed "beyond proper bounds" and repeatedly exclaimed that *Tian* was destroying him [14] (11.09; 11.10). This uncontrolled display of grief appears puzzling given Confucius' advocacy for emotional moderation and his usually reliable self-command until we recognize the significance of his own loss.

Both of Confucius' grief reactions are familiar to us: one's grief can engage with the deceased loved one herself and the loss that her death represents to her; it can also turn back to attend to oneself and one's own loss incurred by the death of the beloved. That grief is like this is because it is grounded in the loss of the relationship between oneself and the deceased loved one. To be specific, even when Confucius' grief for Bo Niu focused on what was lost to Bo Niu himself, this makes sense only in view of the fact that Bo Niu was Confucius' student, whom he cared for deeply. As Cholbi [8] suggests, many people presumably suffer such losses when their lives are cut short, but our grief extends only to those with whom we are personally entangled (p. 495). Also, while Confucius' grief for Yan Yuan focused on his own loss, what is at stake is not just his foregone self-interest, that he had lost a son who could have provided him with care and comfort in his old age. Such sentiment by itself would be narcissistic and self-absorbed and could hardly count as genuine grief [6] (p. 89). Rather, what is at stake is the loss of Confucius' relationship with Yan Yuan, an ongoing pattern of interactions between them characterized by mutual care<sup>7</sup>.

That grief is grounded in the loss of a relationship can also be seen by way of comparison with love. In particular, love is the precondition of grief, and grief is about the loss of what one loves. Love is not selfless, as the one in love cares about the beloved's reciprocal concern for oneself. As Wong [18] writes,

One may not only desire one's beloved's well-being for her own sake, but want also to be an active agent in promoting her well-being. One might also want for one's relationship with her to become part of her well-being, and part of one's own. (pp. 180–181)

Nor is love selfish: one does not love another merely as a means to one's own state of satisfaction. In fact, there are reasons to think that "selfishness is the antithesis of love" [6] (p. 90). What one loves and what one grieves for when it is lost is the relationship, which is constituted by both one's self and the beloved as they interact with each other in the joint pursuit of their well-being<sup>8,9</sup>.

Since one's self is constituted by a web of relationships, the loss of an important relationship, which grounds grief, also amounts to a loss of self. Parkes and Prigerson [7], for example, find that when losing a loved one, ordinary people report experiencing damage to the self (p. 101). They sometimes compare this to amputation, such as losing a limb [7] (p. 111). The loss of self is both metaphysical and ethical, a point that can be shown in Zhuangzi's discussion of his friendship with Huizi:

Zhuangzi was attending a funeral when he happened to pass Huizi's grave. He looked at his followers and said, "There was a man of Ying who, when a bit of plaster no thicker than a fly's wing got smeared on his nose, had Carpenter Stoney slice it off. Carpenter Stoney swung his ax with a whoosh, slicing it off exactly as requested, removing every bit of the plaster without harming the nose,

leaving the man of Ying standing there completely unperturbed. When Lord Yuan of Song heard about this, he called Carpenter Stoney to court and said, ‘Try it on me!’ Carpenter Stoney said, ‘It is true that I could once slice like that. But my material is now long dead.’ Since Huizi died, I, too, have had no material to work on. There is no one I can talk to anymore”. [21] (pp. 199–200)

Huizi was Zhuangzi’s friend and philosophical interlocutor. The *Zhuangzi* records many of their intellectual exchanges where they challenged each other’s views with playfulness and humor. When Huizi died, Zhuangzi underwent a loss of self. Such loss is in the first place metaphysical, as a loss of personal identity, or the properties that make one who one is and distinguish one from others. In particular, many of our constituting traits are context-specific: rather than being dispositions solely possessed by us and manifested across different contexts, they are triggered by specific persons in specific contexts [22] (p. 422). Carpenter Stoney was not capable of slicing off the plaster simpliciter. He could do so only when he was working with the man of Ying, who could maintain a calm composure as a result of his trust for the carpenter. Similarly, Zhuangzi was not the sole author of his wit and humor: he depended on his friendly rival Huizi to make a philosophical dialogue that engendered “mutual transformation and insight” [23] (p. 215). Thus, to lose the beloved is to lose an important context and the context-dependent traits that partly make one the person one is.

The loss of self is also ethical, as a loss of practical identity. The notion of practical identity is characterized as the description under which one finds one’s life worth living and one’s actions worth undertaking [24] (p. 101). Insofar as one sees the beloved and one’s relationship with her as an important constituent of one’s well-being, the death of the beloved amounts to a disruption of one’s practical identity. One has built normative expectations regarding how one’s life should go around the beloved. The death of the beloved upends this normative outlook, such that the roads that one hopes to embark on become *culs de sac*<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. The Objection from Epistemic Blindness

I have argued that grief is a response to the loss of a relationship. Insofar as this is one of the most important losses that many of us suffer, it tends to bring about significant distress and pain. However, empirical research shows that we are more resilient than expected. Although we undergo intense pain at the beginning, many of us are able to return to our baseline levels of happiness and functioning relatively soon, within a few months after the loss [1]. This makes us wonder: granted that resilience reduces pain and suffering and allows us to continue to live productive lives, is it nevertheless partially unethical?

According to Moller [3], the answer is yes, since resilience constitutes a form of epistemic blindness. In particular, emotions are necessary for us to gain epistemic access to certain aspects of our situations. Similar to sensory organs, which are needed for us to perceive non-evaluative facts, emotions are needed for us to perceive values. As Moller [3] writes, it is “hard to envision someone being fully capable of recognizing a good or a bad without the appropriate emotional responses” (p. 311). Psychopaths, for example, cannot fully “grasp the moral significance of their victims” despite having normal cognitive abilities, since they are unable to experience the relevant feelings [3] (ibid.). They may claim that it is ‘wrong’ to hurt people, but this is “only a ‘superficial discrimination’ of the fact” [3] (ibid.). The moral term is used by them in an “inverted-commas” sense: rather than making a genuine evaluative judgment, they merely make a descriptive judgment about the moral view held by others in their community. It is for this reason that Moller is skeptical about resilience. The resilient person who has recovered from the pain of grief is no longer able to fully register the significance of the loss and is deprived of insight into her own condition<sup>11</sup>.

Moller’s argument rests on the assumption that emotions are needed for us to grasp the evaluative aspects of our situations. This thesis about the epistemic role of emotions is

well-documented in the philosophical and psychological literature<sup>12</sup>. However, this does not by itself support the objection from epistemic blindness. That is, all that the existing research shows is that one who is unable to experience certain feelings fails to recognize certain values. This in no way implies that the recognition of values requires that feelings be intense and prolonged. Thus, although the pain of grief plays an important role in one's understanding of the significance of one's loss, it does not follow that resilience necessarily amounts to an impairment in such understanding.

In fact, there are reasons to think that resilience can be achieved not through a failure to appreciate the significance of one's loss, but through placing that appreciation in a larger perspective, which enables one to come to terms with the loss. To see this, consider Zhuangzi's reaction to the death of his wife, which exemplifies a common way of achieving resilience<sup>13</sup>. When Zhuangzi's wife died, Huizi went to offer his condolences, but found Zhuangzi squatting on the floor, pounding on a washtub, and singing. Huizi was puzzled and questioned Zhuangzi about his unconventional reaction. Zhuangzi replied:

“...When this one first died, how could I not feel grief just like anyone else? But then I considered closely how it had all begun: previously, before she was born, there was no life there. Not only no life: no physical form. Not only no physical form: not even energy. Then in the course of some heedless mingling mishmash a change occurred and there was energy, and then this energy changed and there was a physical form, and then this form changed and there was life. Now there has been another change and she is dead. This is how she participates in the making of the spring and the autumn, of the winter and the summer. For the moment a human lies stiffened here, slumbering in this enormous house. And yet there I was getting all weepy, even going on to wail over her. Even to myself I looked like someone without any understanding of fate. So I stopped”. [21] (pp. 145–146)

Zhuangzi had a wife with whom he lived, raised children, and grew old. His attachment to her was such that he could not help but grieve when she died, and this allowed him to attend to and interrogate the significance of his loss. Rather than indulging in grief, however, Zhuangzi was able to reconcile himself to this loss by accepting the inevitability of death. He became aware that life and death are part of the universal flow of nature, just like the procession of the four seasons. The same forces that bring about one's birth will subject one to constant transformations and eventually bring about one's death. This acceptance of fate brought consolation to Zhuangzi, and his weeping and wailing stopped as a result<sup>14</sup>.

According to Wong [31], resilience of this kind can be achieved because we are able to take up two different perspectives. As small parts of the whole, we are keenly aware of the value of the beloved and grieve over the beloved's death (p. 214). However, we are also able to identify with the whole through our “intellect and imaginative capacities” and embrace what is inevitable. In fact, identifying with the whole entails accepting not only our own mortality but also “sorrow and grief as natural reactions to extinction” [31] (pp. 215–216). This in turn brings solace to us and alleviates the agony of grief.

Thus, resilience does not show that we are no longer able to appreciate the importance of our loved ones to their full measure after they are gone. As Zhuangzi's example suggests, resilience can be accomplished by placing that appreciation in a larger perspective that acknowledges death as an integral part of the ceaseless processes of creation and destruction<sup>15</sup>. This understanding of human mortality does not necessarily diminish our attachment to loved ones or our recognition of their importance to us. It does allow us to reconcile ourselves to our fate, thereby easing the pain of loss and grief<sup>16</sup>.

Consider Gustafson [33]'s account of grief, which could further illuminate the kind of resilience resulting from an acceptance of human mortality. Gustafson [33] suggests that many emotions involve not only cognitive states but also conative states, such as desires, which enable them to provide motive force and produce actions (p. 462). For example, fear

involves the recognition of danger as well as the desire to stay away from it. One who is in fear is thereby motivated to seek actions as means to the desired end of avoiding danger. Grief, however, is a special case, as it often reduces one to inaction. One who is in grief may wail, moan, or beat her head, but these are “expressions of grief”, or ways of “acting out of grief”, not “actions motivated by grief” [6] (p. 83). “The laziness of grief” is also pointed out by C. S. Lewis [25]: “. . . I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth” (p. 5)?

Gustafson [33] suggests that the laziness of grief can be explained by the fact that it involves an unsatisfiable or impossible desire. That is, grief involves not only the recognition that the beloved is permanently separated from oneself, but also the desire that this not be so. The belief and the desire are incompatible, as the desire is “unsatisfiable on the truth of the belief” [33] (p. 466). Thus, grief is not just the recognition of a significant loss, but also a longing for what one can no longer have. This partly explains why grief can be especially painful and distressing: not only is one in misery, but there is also nothing that can be done about it<sup>17</sup>.

This leads to a further difference between grief and the other emotions. Many other emotions can be resolved as one satisfies the desires that they generate: flight relieves fear, revenge quells anger, and so on [33] (p. 469). Grief, by contrast, cannot be similarly resolved: the desire that it involves is impossible, as one cannot bring the dead back to life. Despite this, grief can be assuaged as the desire wanes. As the example of Zhuangzi’s resilience suggests, one can be brought out of one’s individual suffering to realize that death is a fate that no one can escape, and that bereavement accompanies every experience of love. This enables one to come to grips with one’s loss without sentimentally yearning for the irretrievable past. When this happens, one may still harbor a wish that the loved one had not died, but one no longer desires it in the robust, occurrent sense. As the conative ingredient in grief subsides, one becomes resilient even as one continues to recognize how great a good one has lost.

#### 4. The Objection from the Failure to Care

Smuts [4] presents a different reason for why resilience in bereavement is partially unethical, arguing that it reveals the failure to care. To be specific, the person who cares for the beloved is emotionally invested in the beloved’s well-being: she is delighted when the beloved flourishes and saddened when the beloved suffers. Since the resilient is free from intense and disruptive grief in a comparatively short period after the death of the beloved, her emotional reaction does not match the magnitude of the beloved’s misfortune. This is an indication that she has gotten over the beloved and no longer cares for her in any deep way<sup>18</sup>.

Smuts [4] further argues that one’s prospective resilience cannot be attractive from one’s current vantage point. In particular, one who cares for the beloved sees one’s identity as being bound up in one’s relationship with the beloved. Because of this, one’s prospective resilience, which points to a future self that no longer cares, amounts to a death of self:

One cannot enthusiastically endorse the loss of significant concerns that one currently wants to have. We can only welcome radical changes if we are alienated from our contemporary concerns. For those of us who don’t want to stop loving our beloved, a resilient future is necessarily unattractive in at least one significant respect. The more significant our love, the less attractive a resilient future must become, and the closer it amounts to a death of self. [4] (p. 186)

Smuts’ concern is shared by many. When C. S. Lewis [25] felt better after his wife’s death, this initially brought him “a sort of shame” (p. 53). It seemed to him as if his recovery amounted to a desertion of his wife and that he had a duty out of love to “cherish and foment and prolong” his unhappiness [25] (*ibid.*)<sup>19</sup>. Nussbaum [5] likewise suggests that her grief over her mother’s death diminishes because she no longer sees her mother as playing a central role in her own flourishing (p. 82). Further, to the extent that she no longer

builds her aims and aspirations around her mother, she has become a different person. This, according to Nussbaum [5], is why the diminution of grief cannot “take place without a struggle”, “for it is a loss of self, and the self sees forgetfulness and calm as threatening to its very being” (p. 83).

Despite its prevalence, however, I think that the concern about the failure to care is ungrounded. Intense and disruptive grief may be a way to care for the deceased, but it is not the only or perhaps even the best way to do so. Because of this, resilience does not necessarily imply that one has gotten over the deceased but is compatible with the continuation of care.

To see this, consider the story of Karen, one of Bonanno [1]’s interview subjects. Karen was beset by grief after her daughter Claire died during the September 11 attacks: “She felt her heart sink”, and “heard the life rush out of her, and then, only silence” [1] (p. 11). However, Karen did not let herself be debilitated by this tragic loss but quickly resumed her usual roles. Even in the early months of bereavement, she was able to concentrate on her work [1] (p. 14). She also found joy in mutually satisfying relationships with friends, colleagues, and especially with her husband and son. Karen manifested resilience in coping with loss: despite occasional disruptions and emotional upheavals, she managed to restore her normal functioning and enjoy life.

Karen’s resilience in no way evinces a deficiency of love. When Claire was alive, Karen loved her with all her heart, and they had a good relationship overall [1] (p. 68). Nor did Karen abandon their relationship after Claire died. In fact, Karen organized a private memorial among family and friends as well as a public event in Claire’s name “so that her life would be honored and remembered within the community she had grown up in” [1] (p. 12). Karen and her husband also “maintained a steady relationship with a breeding association that Claire had been involved with” and “set up a fund in Claire’s name to support humane care for unwanted dogs” [1] (p. 197). Moreover, Karen thought often about Claire: “reminiscences from Claire’s childhood, images of her accomplishments, or simply memories of daily life together, at the dinner table, walking in a park, or caring for their dogs” [1] (p. 71). These fond memories brought comfort to Karen and gave her a sense of Claire’s continued presence in her life.

Karen’s story shows that one can continue to care for a deceased loved one in ways that are compatible with resilience. Rather than dwelling on the painful loss, one can stand with the beloved by carrying on the projects that she has left behind, finding ways to commemorate the beloved, appreciating the loveable traits of the beloved, and attending to the fond memories of the beloved, to name just a few [12,35]. One can also incorporate the beloved’s attitudes in forming one’s own goals and projects. Karen, for example, remained strong and healthy all along because “Claire would have wanted it that way” [1] (p. 197).

Compared with intense and disruptive grief, resilience like the above may even be a better way to value one’s relationship with the deceased. In particular, the distraught survivor focuses on what is lost to her and the beloved due to the latter’s death. She yearns for an irretrievable past and refuses to interact with reality, from which the presence of the beloved is removed. The resilient survivor also recognizes her loss and is occasionally subject to “intensely painful waves of longing for the lost loved one” [1] (p. 74). However, she does not see bereavement as marking the cessation of the relationship but manages to establish a changed bond with the beloved.

More specifically, there is no doubt that the death of the beloved cuts short many salient aspects of the relationship. We can no longer have meaningful conversations with the deceased loved one. We can no longer act in concert with her in our joint pursuits. We can no longer have our appreciation for the beloved be conveyed to her or acquire her forgiveness for the wrongs that we have done to her. As Cholbi [8] suggests, bereavement renders the relationship asymmetrical: our relationship to a deceased person, who is no longer a full-blown practical agent, cannot be the same as our relationship to a peer or equal (p. 496).

Despite this, bereavement does not by itself terminate the relationship, as key aspects of paradigmatic loving relationships can continue after the death of one of the parties [35]<sup>20</sup>. In particular, the dead can continue to shape our choices and practical identities and contribute to our well-being even though they can no longer do so as active agents. Memories of one's past shared with the beloved continue to give one consolation in the darkest times. Memories of the wisdom and warmth of the beloved continue to motivate one to become a better person and live a more meaningful life. The corporeal body of the beloved may have died, but her legacies live on and continue to exercise influence on one's life<sup>21</sup>.

That the relationship may persist in spite of bereavement is also because one can continue to appreciate the deceased loved one for the person she is. This appreciation "comes from a history of interpersonal interactions that allow one to value another's traits—and love the deceased for her" even when such love becomes unreciprocated [35] (p. 423). Further, one can continue to be an active agent in promoting the well-being of the deceased. In particular, the dead retain some interests, even though they are non-experiential [35] (p. 428). This makes it possible for us to benefit the beloved by acting upon and satisfying their interests even after they die. We can do so, for example, by taking over the unfinished projects that the dead have left behind. We can also benefit them by taking care of their surviving descendants and helping them navigate these devastating losses.

I mentioned earlier that C. S. Lewis [25] initially viewed his recovery from the death of his wife as an act of desertion. However, he later came to reject this view:

We don't really want grief, in its first agonies, to be prolonged: nobody could. But we want something else of which grief is a frequent symptom, and then we confuse the symptom with the thing itself. . . . But we are not at all—if we understand ourselves—seeking the aches for their own sake. The less of them the better, so long as the marriage is preserved. And the more joy there can be in the marriage between dead and living, the better. [25] (pp. 53–54)

Lewis [25] suggests that although love can be expressed through grief, it is separable from and should be separated from grief. This is consistent with my view: the resilient survivor is able to care for the deceased loved one even more so than her distraught counterpart. In particular, while the distraught survivor mourns for the loss of the relationship as it was, the resilient survivor also finds ways to establish new ties with the deceased. She may continue to allow herself to be influenced by the deceased, as she seeks guidance from the deceased when making important decisions in her life. She may also actively contribute to the welfare of the deceased by completing the projects that the deceased has left behind. This allows her to care in a way that is more attuned to the changed nature of her relationship with the deceased<sup>22</sup>.

## 5. Continuing Bonds in the Resolution of Grief

In this section, I turn to empirical bereavement research to further support my defense of resilience. To do so, I focus on the continuing bonds theory, which was first introduced at the end of the 20th century and has since revolutionized the way bereavement is understood by researchers and practitioners. In particular, the theory of grief that held sway in the 20th century was the breaking bonds theory put forward by Freud [37]. This suggests that the resolution of grief consists in disengaging oneself from the deceased loved one, reinvesting in other relationships, and forming a new identity in which the deceased plays no part. However, psychologists in recent years find that empirical evidence favors continuing bonds rather than breaking bonds [9,38–40]. That is, maintaining a connection with the deceased is not only normal but also healthy and normative<sup>23</sup>.

In "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud [37] proposes the breaking bonds theory, which suggests that successful grieving consists in the process of detaching oneself from the deceased so that one becomes free to form new attachments:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This

demand arouses understandable opposition—it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. . . Normally, a respect for reality gains the day. . . The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again. [37] (pp. 244–245)

The breaking bonds theory implies that continuing bonds is symptomatic of pathology and indicative of unresolved grief. To be specific, the bereaved who maintains an ongoing attachment to the deceased does so by constructing an inner representation of the deceased. This representation is unrealistic, a mere fantasy object for wish fulfillment. It shows the bereaved's resistance to the reality of loss and prevents her from living fully in the present. Volkan [41], for example, takes issue with introjection, a form of internalization in which the object represented is felt as existing within oneself (p. 70). He suggests that the introject is "a frozen entity remaining in the psyche" that prevents the survivor from establishing healthy interactions in the present [41] (*ibid.*).

Parkes and Prigerson [7] likewise found that widows identified with their husband: they "deliberately modelled themselves on their husband and went out of their way to take over his interests and carry out activities in the way in which he would have them carried out" (p. 117). Such identification is in part due to practical necessity: the widows need to take over the roles previously undertaken by their husbands. It also serves to satisfy the widows' wishes to maintain a sense of proximity to their husbands. Despite this, Parkes and Prigerson deny that identification is conducive to recovery:

It seems, rather, that identification with the lost person is one of the methods that bereaved people adopt to avoid the painful reality of loss; as such it may delay acceptance of the true situation, but, like most other coping mechanisms, it is only intermittently effective. [7] (p. 120)

Despite its popularity, however, the breaking bonds theory falters in the face of multifarious data that testify to forms of healthy ongoing bonds with the dead. To start, it is common for the bereaved to maintain ties with the deceased. As Klass [9] suggests, for many survivors, "memorializing, remembering, knowing the person who has died, and allowing them to influence the present are active processes that seem to continue throughout the survivor's entire life" (p. 102). This is corroborated by the Tübingen Longitudinal Study of Bereavement, which finds that two years after the death of the spouse, more than two thirds of the bereaved continue to live their pre-bereavement lifestyles as much as possible; nearly one third of the bereaved report sensing their spouses' presence; and more than half of the bereaved report consulting the deceased when making a decision [42] (p. 39). Valentine [39] in her study of bereavement narratives also finds that the bereaved often maintain connections with the deceased through a range of beliefs and behaviors. This highlights the continued role that the dead can play in the bereaved's "day-to-day lives and sense of identity" [39] (p. 125).

Also, the inner representation of the deceased can be realistic: it can be based on the deceased as she was, and it is under no illusion that its object still exists. Tahka [43], for example, refers to this process as remembrance formation, and argues that it rests on

. . . building and integrating the representation of the lost object into a remembrance of him as he was really experienced during a common period of time. Once it has been established, its later calling back to mind, reminiscing about it and dismissing it again from the mind, are invariably experienced as activities of the self taking place exclusively on the subject's own conditions. Although it is experienced as a fully differentiated object representation, no illusions of its separate and autonomous existence are involved. In contrast to fantasy objects possessing various wish-fulfilling functions, it includes the awareness that nothing more can be expected from it and therefore, in its fully established forms it has chances for becoming the most realistic of all existing representations. [43] (p. 18)

It is possible for one to maintain ties with the deceased while acknowledging the reality of loss because a relationship can operate on “several levels of actual, symbolic, internalized and imagined relatedness” [44] (p. 14). Although the actual (“living and breathing”) relationship is lost in bereavement, “the other forms remain or may even develop in more elaborate forms” [44] (ibid.).

Furthermore, continuing bonds of this kind can facilitate the effective coping of loss. Rubin [45] finds that how well one resolves grief correlates positively with “the comfort and fluidity with which one can relate to the representations. . . of the deceased” (p. 17). Klass [9] likewise suggests that parents who fare well in bereavement do not sever bonds with the dead child. Rather, they actively interact with the inner representation of the dead child and integrate it into their everyday living<sup>24</sup>. Based on this, Klass [9] concludes that it is not only common but also normative that mourners maintain connections with the deceased (p. 103). Thus, the resolution of grief consists in an ongoing process of negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of the loss and constructing and reconstructing new connections with the dead, rather than a radical departure from the dead. The resilient does not reject the past and abandon the old self but ties the past and the present together with rewoven strands of meaning and reintegrates what remains viable about the old self into the new self.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper has defended resilience in bereavement against two prominent objections raised by Moller [3] and Smuts [4]. To start, resilience does not indicate a superficial appreciation for the deceased loved one. Although grief may be needed for one to gain epistemic access to the significance of one’s loss, it is not necessary that grief be prolonged, intense, and disruptive. In fact, the agony of grief is assuaged as one comes to terms with one’s loss through a realization of the universality and inevitability of death. This can be so even as one continues to appreciate the significance of what one has lost.

Nor does resilience indicate that one has gotten over the deceased loved one and no longer cares for her in any deep way. Although emotional intensity is symptomatic of love, it should not be confused with love. The resilient could continue to care for the deceased by constructing a new relationship with her and contributing to this relationship in ways that are appropriate to it. This view is further corroborated by empirical research on bereavement. According to the continuing bonds theory, healthy grief resolves by establishing changed ties with the deceased rather than detaching ourselves from them.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although these philosophers use empirical findings to motivate the discussion about resilience, their inquiry is the normative one about the goodness or badness of resilience. Also, the scope of their normative claims is moderate. They intend to show that there are considerations that speak against resilience, not that resilience is bad *all things considered*.
- <sup>2</sup> For discussions of this paradigm of grief, see Nussbaum [5], Solomon [6], Bonanno [1], Parkes and Prigerson [7], Cholbi [8], and Klass [9], among others.
- <sup>3</sup> I choose Moller [3] and Smuts [4] as my main targets since their arguments are relatively developed and focus explicitly on resilience. I also occasionally draw on other scholars who share Moller’s and Smuts’ views.
- <sup>4</sup> *Tian* 天 carries the meaning of sky, a supreme deity, or a naturalistic force. Because of its flexible conceptual range, Eno [14] leaves it untranslated.

- 5 As Olberding [15] suggests, the world would know Bo Niu as a student but never as a teacher or a husband in a long-lived marriage that he might have become (p. 285).
- 6 Yan Yuan was also known as Yan Hui or Hui.
- 7 This differentiates my view from that of Moller [17], who thinks that insofar as genuine grief is other-directed, its object is the loss of the person. As has been shown by the example of Confucius' grieving of Yan Yuan, however, grief can be genuine even when it is partially occupied with what is lost to oneself.
- 8 Cholbi [8] argues that the relational account does not remove the deceased loved one "from the heart of the grief experience", since "one cannot interrogate this relationship without in some way interrogating the deceased" (pp. 504–505). See Kolodny [19] for a similar point about love.
- 9 Ratcliffe et al. [20] challenge the relational account, arguing that it cannot make sense of sentiments such as "I would give my own life to have her back" (p. 11). While I cannot provide a full response to this objection, I think that valuing the relationship gives one a reason to care about the beloved, and this reason could sometimes take priority over the reason to promote one's own flourishing.
- 10 In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis [25] writes: "So many roads lead thought to H. I set out on one of them. But now there's an impassable frontierpost across it. So many roads once; now so many *culs de sac*" (p. 47).
- 11 Much in sympathy with Moller [3], Cholbi [10] argues that the pain in grief discloses to us the importance of the deceased and contributes to making self-knowledge possible (p. 113). Because of this, one who does not grieve enough foregoes an important occasion for self-knowledge.
- 12 Damasio [26], for example, shows that a defect in emotion leads to impaired decision making. This is in part because patients who are unable to engage emotions in relation to complex situations are unable to see different outcomes in value-laden ways. See also Johnston [27], Prinz [28], and Tappolet [29].
- 13 The *Zhuangzi* includes many examples of resilience, some of which are in tension with one another. My response to Moller [3] depends on the particular instance where Zhuangzi grieved over the death of his wife rather than the Zhuangists' attitudes towards grief and resilience as a whole.
- 14 There is a similar story of resilience in the Buddhist tradition. Kisa Gotami was in deep grief after she lost her only child. She sought help from the Buddha and was told that a mustard seed from a household where no one had died could help bring her child back to life. Gotami went into town and knocked on every door in search of such a mustard seed. She was unsuccessful, as expected, but her grief was assuaged by the realization of the universality of death [30] (pp. 222–232).
- 15 An acceptance of mortality is a common way of achieving resilience. Bonanno and colleagues [32] find that those whose worldviews include an acceptance of death can "readily assimilate the death of a loved one, thereby obviating the need for more elaborate cognitive restructuring of different aspects of the self" (p. 196).
- 16 Some individuals in the *Zhuangzi* are super resilient and can avoid grief altogether. However, even the most resilient among us tend to undergo intense grief at the beginning in part because it takes time for the knowledge about our own mortality to sink in.
- 17 Cholbi [34] questions whether grief involves the desire that the deceased loved one come back to life. He argues that when X's partner, Y, is terminally ill, X may decide that Y is better off dead but still grieve over Y's death. I think, however, that X likely still harbors a desire that Y be alive and healthy even though X judges that Y is better off dead than suffering the pain of a terminal illness.
- 18 According to this objection, resilience is problematic because it shows that one no longer cares for the beloved after her death, not that one never cared for the beloved when she was alive. As Moller [3] suggests, to know the latter, we need to look at the evidence of care during the beloved's lifetime, such as whether one was willing to make sacrifices for the beloved, whether one was emotionally invested in the beloved's well-being, and so on (p. 307).
- 19 Solomon [6] similarly argues that we have an obligation to grieve because "grief is the continuation of love" (p. 90).
- 20 As C. S. Lewis [25] writes, bereavement "follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or as autumn follows summer. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance, but the next figure" (p. 50).
- 21 One example about the dead's legacies is found in Klass [36]. A recovering alcoholic, K., resumed drinking after his 15-year-old daughter died in a shooting incident. When K. visited his daughter's grave, he was reminded of how she used to tell him off when he was being stupid. His daughter became "part of his good self", and motivated him to stay sober as well as offer help to other bereaved parents [36] (p. 83).
- 22 I suspect that there are ways to address Moller [3]'s and Smuts [4]' concerns about resilience without subscribing to my relational account of grief. However, the specific forms that my responses take are to some extent shaped by the relational account. My argument against Smuts, in particular, focuses on how one can continue to value the relationship with the deceased loved one in ways that are compatible with resilience.
- 23 This is not to deny the existence of pathological forms of continuing bonds, such as those that result from a failure to acknowledge the reality of the beloved's death. The point, however, is that not all forms of continuing bonds are pathological and that some of them may be crucial to successfully coping with loss.

- <sup>24</sup> Many cultures have rituals that facilitate continuing bonds with the deceased. One example is the ancestor worship in Japan, where altars and memorial tablets are placed in one's home to symbolize the deceased's continued presence in one's life [36] (p. 65).

## References

- Bonanno, G.A. *The Other Side of Sadness*; Basic Books: New York, NY, USA, 2009.
- Masten, A. *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*; The Guilford Press: New York, NY, USA, 2014.
- Moller, D. Love and Death. *J. Philos.* **2007**, *104*, 301–316. [CrossRef]
- Smuts, A. Love and Death: The Problem of Resilience. In *Immortality and the Philosophy of Death*; Michael, C., Ed.; Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MA, USA, 2015; pp. 173–188.
- Nussbaum, M. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2001.
- Solomon, R. *Defense of Sentimentality*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2004.
- Parkes, C.M.; Holly, G.P. *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*; Routledge: Oxfordshire, UK, 2010.
- Cholbi, M. Regret, Resilience, and the Nature of Grief. *J. Moral Philos.* **2019**, *16*, 486–508. [CrossRef]
- Klass, D. *Culture, Consolation, and Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: The Selected Works of Dennis Klass*; Taylor & Francis Group: Abingdon, UK, 2021.
- Cholbi, M. *Grief: A Philosophical Guide*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2022.
- Vitrano, C. Love and Resilience. *Ethical Perspect.* **2013**, *20*, 591–604.
- Preston-Roedder, R.; Preston-Roedder, E. Grief and Recovery. In *The Moral Psychology of Sadness*; Anna, G., Ed.; Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MA, USA, 2018; pp. 93–116.
- O'Hagan, E. Grief, Love, and Buddhist Resilience. *J. Value Inq.* **2020**, *55*, 41–55. [CrossRef]
- Eno, R. The Analects of Confucius. 2015. Available online: [https://chinatxt.sitehost.iu.edu/Analects\\_of\\_Confucius\\_\(Eno-2015\).pdf](https://chinatxt.sitehost.iu.edu/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2015).pdf) (accessed on 16 December 2021).
- Olberding, A. The Consummation of Sorrow: An Analysis of Confucius' Grief for Yan Hui. *Philos. East West* **2004**, *54*, 279–301. [CrossRef]
- Mather, R. Filial Paragons and Spoiled Brats: A Glimpse of Medieval Chinese Children in the *Shishuo Xinyu*. In *Chinese Views of Childhood*; Anne, K., Ed.; University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, HI, USA, 1995; pp. 111–126.
- Moller, D. Love and the Rationality of Grief. In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Love*; Grau, C., Smuts, A., Eds.; Oxford University Press: Oxfordshire, UK, 2017.
- Wong, D. The Different Faces of Love in a Good Life. In *Moral Cultivation and Confucian Character: Engaging Joel J. Kupperman*; Li, C., Ni, P., Eds.; SUNY Press: Albany, NY, USA, 2014; pp. 165–212.
- Kolodny, N. Love as Valuing a Relationship. *Philos. Rev.* **2003**, *112*, 135–189. [CrossRef]
- Ratcliffe, M.; Richardson, L.; Millar, B. On the Appropriateness of Grief to Its Object. *J. Am. Philos. Assoc.* **2022**, *9*, 318–334. [CrossRef]
- Ziporyn, B. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*; Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.: Indianapolis, IN, USA, 2020.
- Wong, D. Relational and Autonomous Selves. *J. Chin. Philos.* **2004**, *31*, 419–432. [CrossRef]
- Lundberg, B. A Meditation on Friendship. In *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*; Ames, R., Ed.; State University of New York Press: New York, NY, USA, 1998; pp. 211–218.
- Korsgaard, C. *The Sources of Normativity*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1996.
- Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*; HarperCollins: New York, NY, USA, 2001.
- Damasio, A. *Descartes' Error*; Avon: New York, NY, USA, 1994.
- Johnston, M. The Authority of Affect. *Philos. Phenomenol. Res.* **2001**, *63*, 181–214. [CrossRef]
- Prinz, J. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2004.
- Tappolet, C. *Emotions, Value, and Agency*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2016.
- Dhammapada, A. *The Commentary on the Verses of the Theris*; Translated by William Pruitt; Pali Text Society: Bristol, UK, 1999.
- Wong, D. The Meaning of Detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism. *Dao A J. Comp. Philos.* **2006**, *5*, 207–219. [CrossRef]
- Bonanno, G.A.; Papa, A.; O'Neill, K. Loss and Human Resilience. *Appl. Prev. Psychol.* **2001**, *10*, 193–206. [CrossRef]
- Gustafson, D. Grief. *Nous* **1989**, *23*, 457–479. [CrossRef]
- Cholbi, M. Grief's Rationality, Backward and Forward. *Philos. Phenomenol. Res.* **2017**, *94*, 255–272. [CrossRef]
- Millar, B.; Lopez-Cantero, P. Grief, Continuing Bonds, and Unreciprocated Love. *South. J. Philos.* **2022**, *60*, 413–436. [CrossRef]
- Klass, D. The Inner Representations of the Dead Child in the Psychic and Social Narratives of Bereaved Parents. In *Meaning Reconstruction & the Experience of Loss*; American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, USA, 2001; pp. 77–94.
- Freud, S. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*; Translated by James Strachey; The Hogarth Press: London, UK, 1966; Volume XIV, pp. 1914–1916.
- Silverman, P.R.; Klass, D.; Nickman, S.L. (Eds.) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*; Taylor & Francis: Abingdon, UK, 1996.
- Valentine, C. *Bereavement Narratives*; Routledge: Oxfordshire, UK, 2008.
- Klass, D.; Steffen, E.M. (Eds.) *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice*; Routledge: Oxfordshire, UK, 2017.

41. Volkan, V. *Linking Objects to Linking Phenomena*; International Universities Press: Madison, CT, USA, 1981.
42. Stroebe, M.; Mary, G.; Kenneth, G.; Stroebe, W. "Broken Hearts or Broken Bonds?". In *Continuing Bonds*; Taylor & Francis: Abingdon, UK, 1996.
43. Tahka, V. Dealing with Object Loss. *Scand. Rev.* **1984**, *7*, 13–33.
44. Shuchter, S.R.; Zisook, S. The Course of Normal Grief. In *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, and Intervention*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1993; pp. 23–43.
45. Rubin, S.S. The resolution of bereavement: A clinical focus on the relationship to the deceased. *Psychotherapy* **1985**, *22*, 231–235. [[CrossRef](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.