




Matthew Ratcliffe, "Grief Worlds, A Study of Emotional Experience"

Jacob Bell 

Volume 43, Number 4, November 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108424ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108424ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bell, J. (2023). Review of [Matthew Ratcliffe, "Grief Worlds, A Study of Emotional Experience"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(4), 31–33.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1108424ar>

© Jacob Bell, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Matthew Ratcliffe. *Grief Worlds: A Study of Emotional Experience.* The MIT Press 2023. 296 pp.; \$45.00 USD (Paperback 9780262544801).

In *Grief Worlds: A Study of Emotional Experience*, Matthew Ratcliffe embarks on a Maurice Merleau-Ponty-inspired phenomenological investigation of grief. To help illuminate grief as it is experienced and provide a point of departure for phenomenological inquiry, Ratcliffe references a range of first-person accounts of grief, including a collection of 265 testimonies of grief gathered via a survey designed by Ratcliffe and colleagues. While the phenomenology of grief serves as the express aim of the book, Ratcliffe does not confine himself to such a narrow scope. By drawing on a vast and varied pile of resources and discussing the broader implications of his analysis, Ratcliffe positions *Grief Worlds* as a valuable resource beyond the confines of specialized philosophy.

Grief, which refers to ‘emotional experiences stemming from bereavement’ (4), is described as a ‘process’ (34) with a two-sided dynamical structure. To understand the two-sidedness of grief, Ratcliffe calls attention to an experiential ‘backdrop’ (34), which, in our normal experience, is usually implicit and inconspicuous. In chapter two, Ratcliffe argues that this backdrop provides a context that structures how we experience the world. ‘The *world* (in the relevant sense of the term) is not an object of passive experience but a context in which we are actively immersed. It consists in a cohesive, unfolding arrangement of significant possibilities, which are experienced and acted upon in ways that reflect projects, cares, and concerns’ (30). Ratcliffe refers to Edmund Husserl’s ‘horizontal structure of experience’ (29) to help make sense of this structural backdrop. Surprisingly, Ratcliffe neglects to reference Martin Heidegger’s care structure, which strongly influences Ratcliffe’s articulation of the experiential backdrop despite the lack of reference. This influence is evidenced by Ratcliffe’s earlier works (i.e., *Feelings of Being*), in which Heidegger serves as a central reference point. In these earlier works (which Ratcliffe cites throughout *Grief Worlds*), the experiential backdrop is articulated in much the same way and with similar language—hence the surprise.

Ratcliffe argues that our relationships with other people—especially when those people are part of our everyday lives—are integrated into this structural backdrop. For example, the unfinished jigsaw puzzle in the living room is encountered as *our* project; holiday dinners are cooked by *us*, this is *our* home, etc. When the very structure of our world is disrupted, such as when our life partner dies, tension can arise between what we *know* about the world and how we experience the world. The backdrop that structures our world presupposes that person, which conflicts with the reality of their death. ‘One knows full well what has happened, continues to inhabit a world that runs contrary to it, and experiences a tension between the two’ (31). Several survey responses support this claim: ‘sometimes when the house phone rang, I forgot that she had died and expected to hear her voice’ (31), and ‘at the beginning, when I came into the house, I expected to see him there’ (31). The two-sidedness of grief, then, can be summarized as a tension between one’s established experiential structure, which presupposes the person that has died, and the explicit recognition of their death. The processual nature of grief involves a reconciliation between these two sides, which involves ‘changing how one experiences and relates to a practically meaningful world’ (34). Before



elaborating on grief as a process, Ratcliffe takes a detour to discuss the body in relation to grief.

In part to avoid a cognitivization of the experience of grief, Ratcliffe emphasizes the body's role in experiences of grief, which serves as the theme of chapter three. Ratcliffe argues that the body is not only an 'object of experience; it is also that *through* which we experience our surroundings as imbued with significant possibilities, as mattering to us in various ways' (43). In 'reaching for a cup' (52), there is an anticipation, which, if unmet, results in a feeling of surprise. This incongruity 'is inseparable from our bodily engagement with the situation' (52). A bereaved person might wake suddenly and reach out toward their partner, or they might hear a car in the driveway, anticipating the arrival of their beloved. The absence of the beloved lags our experiential anticipations. Ratcliffe continues by introducing Merleau-Ponty's work on phantom limbs, contrasting the loss of a limb with the loss of a life partner. When one loses a limb, such as an arm, one may attempt to use that missing arm to reach out for a cup or to catch something falling. The experiential backdrop that structures their practically meaningful world presupposes the arm, and it takes time for one's life structure to be reorganized to account for this loss. Ratcliffe argues that there is a similar disharmony in cases of bereavement. In Merleau-Ponty's words, there is a 'previous present that cannot commit to becoming past' (62).

Returning to the idea that grief is a process, chapter four articulates this process. This process is a movement from a 'pre-bereavement world' (79) to one with 'new networks of projects and concerns' (79). Ratcliffe notes that the process is not a seamless move from one life structure to another; rather, one exists between worlds. There is not yet a new world for one to inhabit, only a disrupted and fragmented world accentuated by a lack of structure. Ratcliffe continues by expanding on themes introduced earlier in the book, such as the tensions that can arise due to the two-sidedness of grief, discussing such tensions in relation to language. He calls on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between language that has an entrenched meaning and speech, which 'somehow transcends the familiar possibilities associated with words, giving rise to new meanings' (90). Ratcliffe suggests that 'grief can involve involuntary transitions' (91) of this kind, where words that once had entrenched meanings must be reinterpreted in light of bereavement, as they lack the worldly orientation that they once had. Ratcliffe closes the chapter with a discussion of temporality, which can become fragmented when one is experiencing grief due how one's experiential backdrop lacks a 'structuring framework of values and projects' (103).

To account for the disharmony involved in experiences of grief, including the discordance between one's anticipatory experiential structure and the reality that one's beloved has died, Ratcliffe proffers an unorthodox conception of the object of grief in chapter six. Ratcliffe argues that grief is not directed toward a 'singular, concrete object' (161); instead, the loss involved in grief is more diffuse, encompassing a range of lost possibilities. As such, grief is not a contained event but a world-changing event that reverberates throughout one's entire life structure, including one's sense of the future. *We* were supposed to travel there for our anniversary; *we* were supposed to be grandparents; *we* were supposed to retire and move to that city. Possible *worlds* are lost along with the person.

Bringing the book to a close, the final three chapters are less explicitly about grief than it is experienced. Chapter seven discusses interpersonal emotion regulation and the unique challenge that

grief poses. Not only do we often feel detached from the wider world when we are experiencing grief, says Ratcliffe, but it is often the case that the person we would turn to for support is the very person who has died, resulting in an experience that is ‘doubly disorienting’ (171). Chapter eight provides an overview of typical, atypical, and pathological forms of grief, and grief is distinguished from depression through an analysis of the phenomenological features of each respective experience. Chapter nine is a meta-analysis of grief and the phenomenological method, in which Ratcliffe suggests that the experience of grief, which disrupts the usually inconspicuous background structure of experience, brings to the fore ‘precisely those aspects of experience that phenomenologists draw attention to and seek to describe’ (217). Grief is further instructive, Ratcliffe claims, in that it elucidates the limits of phenomenological inquiry by showing that when aspects of our experiential backdrop are made ‘explicit objects of reflection, we eventually reach a point where linguistic thought is no longer possible’ (218). In other words, we can only ever partially reduce our habituated tendencies and modes of interpretation—what Husserl referred to as the *natural attitude*. As such, Ratcliffe ends by echoing Merleau-Ponty’s point that ‘grasping the true nature of the phenomenological reduction involves appreciating the “impossibility of a complete reduction”’ (223).

While *Grief Worlds* is intended primarily for an academic audience, Ratcliffe’s lucid writing style lends itself to a wider readership—including those who wish to better understand their own experiences of grief. Furthermore, the implications of Ratcliffe’s analysis of grief are far-reaching such that if grief presupposes the loss of someone with whom we had an intimate relationship—someone that was integrated into the very fabric of our life structure—then the structures of experience that are affected by this loss are informative in an attempt to understand the experiential structures of love, too.

Jacob Bell, University of Wales Trinity Saint David