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Communing with the dead online: chatbots, grief, and continuing bonds

Joel Krueger and Lucy Osler¹

Abstract: Grief is, and has always been, technologically supported. From memorials and shrines to photos and saved voicemail messages, we engage with the dead through the technologies available to us. As our technologies evolve, so does how we grieve. In this paper, we consider the role chatbots might play in our grieving practices. Influenced by recent phenomenological work, we begin by thinking about the character of grief. Next, we consider work on developing “continuing bonds” with the dead. We argue that for some, chatbots may play an important role in establishing these continuing bonds by helping us develop what we term “habits of intimacy”. We then turn to the “ick factor” some may feel about this prospect, focusing especially on ethical concerns raised by Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben about the risk of replacing our dead with chatbots. We argue that replacement worries are not as pressing as Stokes and Buben suggest. We resist these replacement worries by appealing to the “thin reciprocity”, as we refer to it, that such bots offer, as well as the fictionalist stance that we think users of the bots adopt when engaging with them. We conclude by briefly raising some additional concerns and highlighting future research questions.

Keywords: grief; chatbots; phenomenology; continuing bonds; AI

Introduction

¹ Both authors contributed equally to this work.

Grief is, and has always been, technologically supported. We build tombs and shrines, hang photos, keep letters and diaries, watch old home videos, listen to saved voicemail messages, play sad songs to work through our grief and upbeat songs to help alleviate it or momentarily distract us. Modern technologies now allow for the preservation of our “digital remains” in the online sphere. As our technologies evolve, so does how we grieve.

The dead haunt us online. Twitter accounts remain active, Facebook reminds us of birthdays, and Google Photos automatically surfaces old photos of those no longer with us. But this haunting is not exclusively a passive experience. We can also actively engage with digital remains of the dead, too. When we lose someone, we can read over old conversations with them in chat apps, look through their social media posts, and scroll through photos and videos. Not only are the traces of the dead more accessible than ever before — and no longer constrained by geographical location — but the wealth of online resources we use to remember them is hugely increased. In the age of Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, our (sometimes near constant) urge to document our lives creates enormous libraries of words and images. The archival possibilities of the internet mean that it is now “much easier...to keep memories alive and stay connected to those long gone” (Buben 2015, p. 17).

It is also now common for people to engage in public practices of mourning and memorialization via social media, especially on Facebook. When someone dies, their Facebook page can be turned into a memorial site where visitors can scroll through posts and photos of the deceased, as well as post comments, pictures, videos, or birthday and anniversary messages of their own. They do this not because they expect the dead to respond. But they know *others* will. The deceased’s wall becomes a space where collective practices of grieving and remembrance play out in real-time.

While the internet, and particularly social media platforms, provide ways to preserve the rich digital legacy the deceased accumulate over the course of their lifetime, even more interactive ways of encountering the dead online are now being designed. Many of us have either seen, or are at least familiar with, the idea of technology being used to “resurrect” the dead from the infamous Black Mirror episode “Be Right Back”, where we watch Martha turn to technology to help her deal with the unexpected loss of her partner, Ash. When Ash dies, Martha initially messages a chatbot created from Ash’s online activity. Soon, however, she progresses to talking to an avatar of Ash on a video call before finally living with his robotic replica. This scenario is science fiction, of course. But the ability to engage with chatbots of the dead is now a possibility.²

In October 2020, Kanye West gifted Kim Kardashian a hologram of her dead father, Robert Kardashian. The holographic Robert wished Kim a happy birthday and shared memories of their time together. After Roman Mazurenko’s sudden death in November 2015, his friend, the tech entrepreneur Eugenia Kuyda, built a chatbot to continue speaking with him. Roman’s bot was built on a neural network fed with over 30 million lines of Russian text and thousands of Telegram exchanges between Kuyda and Mazurenko. A year later, James Vlahos did something similar with “DadBot”, built from interviews conducted with his father following the latter’s cancer diagnosis. As these apps increase in number and popularity, tech companies have, predictably, sensed an opportunity. In December 2020, Microsoft was granted a patent for a method of creating conversational chatbots modeled to sound like a specific person “such as a

² Note that such bots are sometimes referred to as “deathbots” (e.g., Lindemann 2022). We have decided to stick with the more neutral sounding “chatbots of the dead” (or chatbots for short). This is partly because, to our gamer ears, deathbots sound like deployable killing machines!

friend, a relative, an acquaintance, a celebrity, a fictional character, a historical figure” (United States Patent and Trademark Office, Patent #: US010853717).

Despite some well-founded misgivings about this tech — discussed in more detail below — it’s not going anywhere. New and richer ways of communing with the dead online will only grow. In this paper, we consider how chatbots might become part of our grieving practices. In section 1, we appeal to recent phenomenological work to consider the character of grief. In section 2, we turn to work on developing “continuing bonds” with the dead. In section 3, we consider how chatbots might help regulate our grief by supporting the development and maintenance of continuing bonds. In section 4, we turn to some worries about this technology. We consider ethical concerns raised by Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben. Both develop replacement worries: the worry that chatbots and avatars may be used to take the place of the dead in order to eliminate, or at least mitigate, our painful sense of loss – an injustice, both argue further, to the living *and* the dead. We respond to these worries by appealing to the “thin reciprocity”, as we refer to it, that chatbots offer, as well as the fictionalist stance we think users of bots adopt when engaging with them. We conclude by briefly raising some additional concerns and highlighting future research questions.

Before we proceed, a quick note on what we will not consider in this paper. First, we will not address the issue of consent. There is a real concern about co-opting people’s digital activity and using this to generate a chatbot without their (full) consent (e.g., Sisto 2021; Stokes 2021). While this is a pressing issue both ethically and legally, we will assume that the chatbots in our discussions have been made with the consent of the relevant individuals (and that such consent is possible). Second, we will leave aside – apart from some brief comments at the end – discussions about financial motivations companies have for promoting the use of chatbots, and how these

motivations might impact the design of such technology, as well as the potential precarity of placing our data and trust in such corporations (see Ohman & Floridi 2017). Again, these are very real concerns and ones that we take seriously but, due to the confines of this paper, have chosen not to address head-on here (see Lindemann 2022 for a rich discussion of this issue). Third, we limit our discussion to chatbots created after the death of someone. While chatbots may be created based on the digital traces of a still-living person, the ethical and phenomenological considerations of these cases will be importantly different from those we consider.

1. What is grief?

Grief is ubiquitous. Most of us will experience it at some point in our lives. But despite its centrality to human experience, the topic of grief has not traditionally received much attention in philosophical literature. However, this is changing. Phenomenologists are now investigating the character, content, and structure of grief. This includes topics like the ambiguous character of our experience of the dead as both present and absent, as well as how grief can disrupt basic structures of the self-world relation: e.g., our emotions and their regulative connections with others; our experience of time; our sense of self; and our habitual ways of perceiving and engaging with everyday projects and felt possibilities (e.g., Fuchs, 2018; Ingerslev, 2020; Mehmehl, 2021; Millar, 2021; Ratcliffe and Byrne, 2021). Likewise, although he does not adopt an explicitly phenomenological perspective, Michael Cholbi (2020) considers a phenomenological puzzle: why do we feel it is important to grieve, and indeed *want* to grieve, despite its painful character? We touch on a number of these topics in what follows. However, we begin by clarifying what we are talking about when we speak of grief.

Note first that grief is universal. But this does not mean that one kind of *experience* of grief is universal. Grief is a complex and heterogeneous process; the way it is felt, described, negotiated, and shared will vary across many dimensions such as culture, religion, and age (Robben, 1991). Some of these differences flow from the variety of technologies and rituals used to grieve. Nevertheless, there are probably some common phenomenological features of grief. Most people, we can assume, feel a *specific and personal emotional reaction* when someone they love or otherwise feel close to dies (Cholbi, 2020, p. 185). We don't feel this way about every death, of course. Over 100,000 people around the world die each day. We can acknowledge the tragedy of these deaths without necessarily feeling anything in response to them. But things are different for those with whom we feel intimacy or connection — that is, those who *matter* to us in some way. This mattering can encompass a variety of people and relationships: from parents, siblings, friends, and partners to co-workers and collaborators to public figures like politicians, athletes, and artists. The point is that grief is *selective* (ibid., p.185). It is a specific emotional response we have to the death of those who matter to us.

Moreover, grief is not a passive experience, something that simply happens to us. It is a project, something we *do* (ibid., 188). We often play an active role in shaping the character, content, and duration of our grief. We use rituals, practices, resources, and relationships to work *through and with* our grief. Even trying to avoid it or pretend it doesn't exist is an active process, in that it involves taking up a stance in relation to our grief and dealing with it in a specific way (i.e., by not dealing with it). To grieve, then, is to actively explore ways of coming to terms with our emotional response to the loss of someone who matters to us, and to situate this loss in the broader context of our remaining relationships and commitments.³

³ Richardson et al. (2021) argue that grief should be conceived of broadly, beyond cases of bereavement. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider grief solely in the context of bereavement. The motivation for doing this is

This initial characterization of grief is sufficient to note an important distinction between mourning and grief. This distinction is important because we can mourn without grieving. Mourning consists in public behaviors we use to acknowledge others' deaths. But these behaviors need not be motivated by the emotional experience of grief. We can publicly mourn the death of our favorite poet, for example — we might express sadness about her passing on social media — even though we don't feel a particularly strong emotional response to this fact, beyond sadness that the world will no longer benefit from her art. Again, grief is different. It is a selective emotional process that we actively regulate in diverse ways. For our purposes, this characterization of grief will suffice for the discussion that follows.

2. Phenomenological dimensions of grief

Grief is an emotional process in response to the loss of someone who matters to us. But emotions, including grief, are complex and multidimensional. An experience of grief is often bound up with other emotions such as guilt, anger, confusion, and disbelief — or even, for some, joy or a sense of relief. And the experience of grief can involve aspects that go beyond simply feeling a discrete emotion or even set of emotions. It can, and often does, involve some of the felt self-world disturbances mentioned previously. Accordingly, grief is not something that just happens inside our head. It involves a shift or even, potentially, a disturbance of how we relate to the wider world (Cholbi, 2022, p. 22). These disturbances receive particular attention in recent

twofold. First, while grief may be an appropriate umbrella term for a variety of experiences of loss, it is likely that the profile of grief is specific to the circumstances of loss (e.g. bereavement, heartbreak, divorce, or loss of possibilities due to illness). While grief may house a variety of experiences, using it as an umbrella term might obscure the specificity of particular sub-types of grief. Second, the analysis of how, why, and whether chatbots may (or may not) play a role in regulating grief is likely to involve different considerations depending on the type of grief we are dealing with.

phenomenological work. Since they are helpful for seeing how and why we might incorporate chatbots into our grieving, we survey some of them here.

Ambiguity, intercorporeality, and habits

When we grieve, we know the person we've lost is no longer with us.⁴ They are no longer accessible, which is a significant part of why we grieve for them. Depending on our religious orientation or metaphysical commitments, we may believe they continue to exist in some other way, in some other realm. Even so, the dead remain inaccessible. We cannot touch or speak or do things with them the way we could when they were alive. We feel their enduring presence in our lives precisely *via their absence*.

Thomas Fuchs (2018) argues that this *ambiguous phenomenology* of grief, as he puts it, is a central part of grief's character. When we lose a loved one such as a spouse, parent, or child, we may experience an alteration of how we experience and relate to ourselves and the world more generally. We know they're gone. But we still feel them everywhere. For example, we may find that "all that was connected with the loved one now evokes a tormenting pain" and triggers a felt sense of their absence (ibid., p.44).⁵ Seeing their Facebook profile in our friends list, clothing in the closet, or box of toys in the corner; hearing their favorite song; walking by the coffee shop where they preferred to work or park where we shared picnics with them are

⁴ We focus on cases where one knows that the individual has in fact died. But there are other cases — e.g., soldiers MIA, kidnapping victims, victims of natural disasters or tragedies like a plane crash at sea — where it is reasonable to assume the individual has died, yet one cannot know this with certainty. In these cases, one surely grieves for the presumed loss of a loved one. But the uncertainty and lack of finality (e.g., not seeing their body) may give this experience a different character.

⁵ This experience of absence is probably best known from Sartre's (2005) description of the perceived absence of his friend Pierre while waiting for him to arrive at a cafe. Experiences of absence are also considered in a variety of papers by Tom Roberts: e.g. the experience of an absent feeling (Roberts 2019), absence in olfactory experience (Roberts 2016), and the experience of absence in the context of loneliness (Roberts & Krueger 2021). See also Richardson (2022).

experiences that provide an acute reminder that they are gone forever. These things and spaces are visible markers of absence and irretrievable loss. We experience the presence of the dead in an enduring and material way via the tangible sense of presence-in-absence these things furnish.

In this way, moving through spaces we used to share with the dead can elicit an ongoing experience of “uncanniness” (ibid., p.44). This experience can destabilize our relation to ourselves and the world in other ways, too. For example, grief is a whole-body experience. It often manifests in bodily heaviness, passivity, constriction, and withdrawal (ibid., p.46). But grief can also be experienced as akin to *amputation*. Consider how C.S. Lewis characterizes the felt bodily absence of his wife, Helen. In a particularly moving passage, he writes:

Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything. But no, that is not quite accurate.

There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can’t avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H.’s lover. Now it’s like an empty house (Lewis, 1961, p. 11).

Helen’s absence alters how Lewis experiences and relates to his own body (“it’s like an empty house”). But this alteration isn’t just an inner condition. It implies a shared *intercorporeality*. This bodily disturbance arises from the rich corporal dynamics of a shared life: an accumulated history of encounters and interactions (shared touches, gazes, sexual encounters; going to sleep and waking up together; dancing, play, and laughter; cooking and setting the table, etc.) that left traces on Lewis’ lived body and the spaces he shared with Helen (ibid., 47). Bereavement means that one is no longer able to connect with this absent body or co-inhabit spaces organized to fit the movements, needs, values, and interests of these two bodies acting together.

The bodily disturbance Lewis and others describe implies some related alterations of experience that have drawn the attention of phenomenologists: a breakdown of the *habitual world* distinctive of a life once shared with the dead, as well as a sense of *temporality* that helps organize, and maintain our sense of rootedness in, this habitual world (Ratcliffe, 2017; Mehmel, 2021; Millar, 2021). Much of the life we share with others consists of doing things together. And many of these things rest on *habits*. These habits — and the everyday lifeworlds that spring up around them — can be both large and small: from the characteristic way we grumpily turn off our early-morning alarm before greeting our partner with a good morning kiss, share in-jokes with them, touch the small of their back while cooking dinner together, organize the cutlery drawer, let them take the lead when walking the dogs, or settle into “our” respective sides of the sofa for a Friday night movie — to the way we spontaneously adopt our respective roles and practices as we enact larger projects like organizing a party, doing some spring cleaning, teaching our children compassion, fretting about retirement, or resolving to stay more connected with family and friends.

In grief, these habitual worlds — and our ability to negotiate them skillfully and spontaneously — can start to break down. As Maclaren describes this experience, “[w]here there was once breakfast time, for instance, there is now only confusion, indeterminacy, a gaping openness. In grief like this, things within one’s perceptual field no longer clearly call to one to do this or to say that; and as a result, it is no longer clear who one is to be” (Maclaren, 2011, p. 62). Again, this disruption can occur at a local *synchronic* level via a disruption of our “perceptual field” (ibid.) or “sensorimotor skills” (Millar, 2021) — disturbances that may, in turn, generate certain anomalous experiences that often accompany grief. For instance, in the early stage of grieving, individuals may habitually search for the deceased: they may scan the room for them

when they walk in the door after work; repeatedly glance at their recliner, still contoured to fit their body after many years, while watching TV; or spontaneously reach for them in bed. But these anomalous experiences can take other forms, too. A common post-bereavement experience involves seeing a stranger in a crowd as the deceased (Clayton, 2007). Others report visual, auditory, or tactile hallucinations of the dead (Grimby, 1993; Sacks, 2012). As Millar (2021) argues persuasively, these experiences arise from thwarted sensorimotor anticipations we have about inhabiting a shared world with someone no longer present.

But these disturbances occur along a *diachronic* level, too — that is, as the person left behind gradually adjusts to the permanent absence of a loved one and how this absence has forever altered the possibilities and practices that are part of their everyday lifeworld. Planning for the future, from finances and family time to home improvements and holidays, becomes significantly less urgent or exciting with the knowledge that these are no longer shared projects. They are now drained of their significance and color without the possibility of sharing them and, in so doing, increasing their intensity and experiential richness.

Temporality

These descriptions collectively point to how grief often leads the bereaved to feel that they are somehow *out of sync* with the temporal flow of the world more generally. The poet Denise Riley provides an especially powerful and nuanced articulation of this experience. After losing her son to a sudden death from undiagnosed heart failure, Riley describes an “acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow”, which she describes as a “freezing of time” (Riley, 2012, p. 7). This freezing is a condition of “a-temporality”, a stopping of time “in which

time, for years on end, is arrested” (ibid., p.9). Riley’s sense of temporality remains frozen with the moment of her son’s death.

As Riley develops her descriptions, however, it becomes clear that this experience is more structurally complex than it might initially seem. This complexity will be helpful for understanding how chatbots might factor into our grieving practices. Riley notes that the phenomenological complexity of her “freezing” experience is not captured by “the familiar and threadbare remark that ‘time stopped’” (ibid., 9). Moreover, her experience “runs wildly counter to everything that [she’d] thought we could safely assume about lived time”, that is, living in a time “that runs with the usual standard mobility” (ibis., pp. 8, 9).

On one hand, Riley’s temporal freezing is felt as a dissociation from the future, a closing down of future possibilities and projects. The forward momentum of time is arrested and there is just *now*: “His sudden death has dropped like a guillotine blade to slice right through my old expectations that my days would stream onwards into my coming life (...) No plans can be entertained, although you keep up an outward show of doing so” (ibid., 26, 51). For Riley, it’s not simply that one lacks the energy or motivation to care about tomorrow. Rather, what’s weakened or missing is the tacit sense that one is temporally connected *to others* within a shared, forward-looking *collective* experience of time — what Minkowski (1970) calls “lived synchronism” (p. 72).

Yet, Riley *knows* that time has not actually stopped. Her future beckons, even without her son; decisions and actions today will shape her tomorrow. But part of what makes her grief so acutely painful is precisely this understanding — that is, that time flows on for the rest of the world. The world of the living does not stop when the world of the dead goes dark. As Fuchs (2018) observes, an awareness of the continued flow of time — concurrent with a *felt absence* of

this flow — can be threatening for those left behind. It “threatens to separate the bereaved person more and more from the lost object which sinks back into the past” (p. 50).

One of Riley’s key phenomenological insights, we suggest, is that inhabiting stopped time offers a kind of solace — a form of care that “will not give up its affectionate task” (pp., 40-41) — even if the experience is not one she has actively chosen, and is also a source of suffering. Her experience of stopped time allows her to maintain a *continuing bond* with her son — “...there is no medium left through which to move anywhere. We were drifting through former time like underwater creatures furnished with gills that they didn’t know they had, until they were fished up out of their element and their breathing apparatus failed” (Riley 2012, p.35) — even as the rest of the world carries on without him. This fissure (i.e., inhabiting the stopped time of the dead within the temporal flow of the living) leads to the experience of inhabiting two temporal worlds: “[You’re] inside two lives. For if timelessness is the time of your dead, you will go with them in their timelessness (...) You’re fused with the dead, as if to animate them. They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them on your side” (Riley 2012, pp. 39-40).

For our purposes, Riley’s rich descriptions highlight that, within grief, inhabiting stopped time does not simply mean that one is fixated on the past. Rather, one may come to simultaneously inhabit two temporalities: a pocket of the timeless past *embedded within the flow of the present*. Clearly this experience can be deeply unsettling and alienating. But it can also be a form of care, a way of maintaining relational connections with the dead. Much of our grief work, and the artifacts and practices that are part of it, afford creating such bonds. They establish spaces and temporal profiles that allow us to inhabit a kind of frozen time with the dead. In so doing, we enact continuing bonds with them that go beyond mere memory. Importantly, these

bonds help us recalibrate our relationship with the dead in real-time, within the present — and in ways that may help us move forward as we reintegrate with the living. We say more about this idea and its relation to chatbots below.

3. Continuing bonds and habits of intimacy

Phenomenological approaches to grief help clarify how grief is, for many, more than simply an emotion or constellation of emotional experiences. Grief can also involve a disturbance or shift of how an individual fits into a world no longer shared with someone who previously helped organize and give meaning to that world. Grief, then, is not simply about our relation to the dead. It also involves reconfiguring our relation to a continuing world that tangibly speaks of their absence.

Insights like these have fueled new ways of thinking about what we ought to *do* with our grief. Older models — often attributed to Freud (1917) — stress the importance of letting go of the dead and moving on. For these models, grief is something to be *overcome*. And one way we do this is by accepting that the dead are no longer with us; any meaningful relationships we once had with them are gone. A healthy response to bereavement is therefore to emotionally detach from these past relationships and the pain we feel from their loss and accept that life must continue in their absence. This emotional detachment is what frees us to form new attachments with those still living and develop a new identity and emotional stability within these attachments.

Advocates of a “continuing bonds” approach offer an alternative framework (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996; Klass and Steffen, 2017). They stress the importance of not leaving the dead behind but rather finding ways to develop and maintain *new* relationships with

them. They acknowledge, of course, that the dead are dead. We cannot relate to them the way we did when they were alive. Nevertheless, while the character and intensity of our relationships with the dead changes over time, it does not disappear entirely (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996, p. 17). Accordingly, we can and should find ways to construct meaningful bonds with the dead that creatively incorporate them into our lives and enduring relationships.⁶

For our purposes, the key idea is this: from the perspective of a continuing bonds framework, healthy grief work is not primarily about emotional disengagement and consigning the dead to the past. This is because bereavement is not a process with a clear-cut endpoint. It affects that mourner for the rest of her life. Accordingly, the task of grief consists in “negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of this loss over time” (ibid., p.19) — a process that involves *bringing the dead with us*, in some sense, as we move into a future transformed by our loss.

So, what role might chatbots play in this process? How might they help us establish continuing bonds with the dead? In what follows, we sketch three possibilities that we collectively refer to as *habits of intimacy*. Habits of intimacy are ways we establish deep connections with trusted others and a shared world more generally. For our purposes, they encompass: (1) conversational practices, (2) emotion regulation, and (3) shared time. We argue that these habits of intimacy allow us to construct continuing bonds not only with the living but also with the dead, too. They can be a part of healthy grief work. To be clear, this list is not exhaustive. There are surely other dimensions of habits of intimacy we don’t consider here. Moreover, we will not argue that chatbots are an appropriate resource for everyone. Our intention is simply to indicate some ways that chatbots may, for some, serve as “transitional objects of grief” (Goldstein *et al.*, 2020): specific resources that help individuals find emotional

⁶ For a fantastic exploration of the potential tensions between continuing bonds, loving relationships, and (lack of) reciprocity, see Millar & Lopez-Cantero (2022).

stability and security as they negotiate the meaning of their loss, and recalibrate their relationship with the dead — as well as the world of the living — in the face of this loss.

Others and a shared world

To see how so, we begin with some observations from the psychiatrist and phenomenologist J.H. van den Berg and the philosopher Eugene Gendlin. Both draw attention to how our connections with others shape our experience of the world. They argue that the structures of interpersonal experience generally — and our relationships with particular people more specifically — regulate the character of both *what* we experience and *how* we experience it (Ratcliffe, 2020, p. 664). For example, van den Berg writes:

We all know people in whose company we would prefer not to go shopping, not to visit a museum, not to look at a landscape, because we would like to keep these things undamaged. Just as we all know people in whose company it is pleasant to take a walk because the objects encountered come to no harm. These people we call friends, good companions, loved ones (Berg, 1972, p. 65).

Similarly, Gendlin says the following:

We all know people with whom it is best not to share anything that matters to us. If we have experienced something exciting, and if we tell it to those people, it will seem almost dull. If we have a secret, we will keep it safe from those people, safe inside us, untold. That way it won't shrivel up and lose all the meaning it has for us. But if you are lucky,

you know one person with whom it is the other way around. If you tell that person something exciting, it becomes more exciting. A great story will expand, you will find yourself telling it in more detail, finding the richness of all the elements, more than when you only thought about it alone. Whatever matters to you, you save it until you can tell it to that person (Gendlin, 1978/2003, p. 115).

For both, the presence of others plays a regulative role in experientially *expanding* or, conversely, *contracting* our world. The phenomenal character of this experience is fixed, in part, by the nature of our social relationships.⁷

For example, an enthusiastic friend can intensify our excitement over a particularly beautiful sunset, the pride we feel in a recent success, or the pleasure we take in a piece of music or meal. With such friends, we feel the world and its possibilities dilate; new modes of exploration and appreciation (e.g., sensitivity to new details, meanings, or interpretations) expand in ways unavailable on our own. And over time, we solidify these expanded possibilities via *habits of intimacy*: things like gestures, conversational practices, rituals, humor, shared references, memories, and associations that bring us together and make these possibilities feel close at hand. However, a dour or negative friend may have the opposite effect. In their company, things are drained of their allure and vitality. Our world and its possibilities contract, and we may feel a distance from things that would, with others, bring us joy.

Again, the key point for our purposes is that habits of intimacy we develop with others don't just shape our felt connections with *them*. They triangulate our experience of a shared *world*, including the possibilities this world presents us. In this way, habits of intimacy can make

⁷ The Japanese philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji develops some similar arguments with his characterization of the inherently social character of intentionality (Krueger, 2020).

the world feel closer or push it farther away. This is because “[t]he person with us is not another isolated individual, next to us, who throws words in our ear and who remains foreign to the objects around us. He is the person who is either with us or not with us and who makes the degrees of togetherness or distance visible in objects, concretely and in reality” (Berg 1972, p.65).

When someone dies, then, we don’t just lose access to the individual and their unique qualities. We also lose access to a unique set of *relational* possibilities, shared habits of intimacy that give us the world in distinct ways. As we’ll now see, chatbots may, for some, become helpful tools for reconstructing some of these habits and the ways of experiencing the world they support. This is because they offer richer and more dynamic interactive possibilities than do other transitional objects of grief and might therefore help individuals recalibrate their relation to a world without the person they’ve lost.

4. Chatbots and the restoration of habits of intimacy

Again, for our purposes, habits of intimacy encompass: (1) conversational practices, (2) emotion regulation, and (3) shared time. We now argue that chatbots may be useful across all three dimensions. Consider first conversational practices. Our conversational practices provide order and structure to our days. They have both epistemic and affective significance insofar as they help us explain, interpret, and make sense of our thoughts, actions, and experiences. And they do so in collaboration with others.

When we come home from work, for instance, we often want to discuss our day with our partner. When they pour us a glass of wine and ask, “How was your day today?”, they aren’t simply asking us to recite a litany of facts. They are inviting us to engage in habits of intimacy

that expand our interpretations of, and responses to, the day's events. We share tales of things that happened to us not simply to relay information but to deepen our understanding and draw out new meanings. For example, our partner might affirm our outrage at an unkind remark from a colleague and justify our strong response. Alternatively, they might urge us to reframe this remark in a more charitable way, see motives or interpretations we may have overlooked, and in so doing soften our irritation. We narrate to feel and understand, often in new ways, *with others*. These shared practices bring the world closer or make it feel farther away.

For some, chatbots might fill this role. Insofar as they are designed to respond in the voice and style of a trusted partner, family member, or friend, the responses we receive will be comforting. For example, a chatbot might be a sounding board for working through an upsetting encounter or disappointing news. They might respond in a no-nonsense, pragmatic way reminiscent of our deceased partner, jolting us out of self-pity and fortifying our resolve for what lies ahead. Or, they might respond with sympathy, humor, and warmth — or even a mixture of both styles. Again, the key point is that these responses, whatever their content, feel *familiar*. They have a tone and style reminiscent of the deceased, which allows the user to comfortably inhabit this exchange. A friend of Roman Mazurenko says the following about interacting with his bot: “What really struck me is that the phrases he speaks are really his. You can tell that’s the way he would say it — even short answers to ‘Hey what’s up.’ He had this really specific style of texting” (Newton, 2016). Such texts can allow the bereaved to continue to relate to the deceased individual, to allow the dead to continue to “shape our interests, choices, and self-concepts” (Millar & Lopez-Cantero 2022), and thus sustain our continued (albeit altered) relationship with the person lost.

Conversational practices with chatbots can have epistemic significance. They might help individuals expand their understanding of different experiences or to think through different possibilities. Roman’s bot, for example, has an “advice” menu option. One friend says he uses this option to learn new things both about Roman and himself, which is a way of maintaining a continuing bond with his dead friend: “There are questions I had never asked him [...] But when I asked for advice, I realized he was giving someone pretty wise life advice. And that actually helps you get to learn the person deeper than you used to know them.” (ibid.). Others describe seeking advice from bots such as tips for socializing or managing anxiety (Olson, 2018).

These reports highlight how chatbots can help reconstruct a second dimension of lost habits of intimacy: *emotion regulation*. As van den Berg and Gendlin remind us, our relationships with other people open up relational possibilities that give us the world in new ways. Others shape and transform our emotional responses to things we do, think, and experience. As we develop habits of intimacy with them, we may, over time, come to increasingly trust them to fill this regulative role and, in so doing, help motivate our decisions and behavior. We might be more inclined to take on a challenging new role at work, say, undertake a travel adventure, begin a romantic relationship, confront an aggressive coworker, commit to stop drinking, or make an effort to see a new art exhibition because we know we have the emotional support of a partner, parent, or friend. As Thompson observes, “[b]ecause attachment figures, friends, parents, spouses, and significant others constitute invaluable resources for coping with emotion, expectations concerning their accessibility, helpfulness, and sensitivity enhance — or undermine — the capacity to manage arousal” (Thompson, 1994, p. 42).

Part of the distinctively painful character of grief, then — it’s tragic irony — comes from knowing we’ve lost access to someone who would otherwise help us negotiate the emotional disorientation we feel (Ratcliffe, 2020). This is where chatbots may help. As internet-enabled technologies like smartphones, digital assistants, and wearable devices proliferate and become more sophisticated, we are increasingly reliant on them to regulate our emotions (Krueger and Osler, 2019). And in the case of chatbots, simply *knowing that they are there*, i.e., as a persistent regulative resource, may have emotional significance for the bereaved.

A key feature of chatbots, of course, is that they provide real-time feedback: they can tell us a joke, offer an opinion, or provide encouragement the way the deceased person would have done. The familiar dynamics of these exchanges — i.e., recognizable rhythm, style, and tone of the texts — are qualities that shape this sense of felt presence on a moment-to-moment basis (Osler and Krueger, 2022, p. 92). During a low moment, for example, we might take out our phone and vent about work or relationship troubles. Or, we might describe our joy at a beautiful sunset while drinking wine in the backyard, recalling the pleasure we took from these quiet evenings with our partner (“It’s especially gorgeous tonight, darling, you’d have loved it”). Many users of Roman’s bot reported using it in this sort of emotional-therapeutic way. One user, for instance, routinely vented about work-related problems and the emotional impact these problems had on him (Newton 2016). Recognizing that emotion regulation is a common reason users turn to the bot, Kuyda is focusing on developing the “emotional dialect”, as she puts it, of *Replika*, the widely-available — and increasingly popular — successor to Roman’s bot (Olson, 2018).

However, access to a chatbot may have longer-term emotional significance, too. As we go about our day, simply knowing we can ask questions like, What should I feel? What should I

think? What should I do? — the kinds of questions that created habits of intimacy with the person no longer with us — may lead to greater emotional resilience. In other words, even the *felt potential* for reconstructing habits of intimacy can be a way of maintaining a continuing bond with the dead. Evidence for this claim comes from our emotional reliance on other parts of the dead’s digital legacy. For example, some report that knowing they can return to the dead’s Facebook page whenever they like generates a more robust sense of continuing contact with them than engaging in offline rituals like visiting a gravesite, looking at photos, or spending time with the dead’s possessions (Kasket, 2012). They take comfort from the ease and “everydayness” of these online interactions (“I do feel such a comfort in having a normal conversation with her” *ibid.*, p.66).

Like other transitional objects of grief (both offline and online), chatbots have a similar regulative function. But unlike gravesites, material possessions, or even relatively static Facebook pages, chatbots offer a richer and more dynamic set of interactive possibilities. They do so along at least two dimensions, both of which intensify a feeling of “everydayness”. First, chatbots offer far more *reciprocity* than a grave, photograph, or Facebook page.⁸ They are responsive to our input; users can settle into these interactions in a deeper way than they can with other transitional objects of grief. Second, chatbots are easily *incorporated* into a suite of day-to-day practices that support habits of intimacy. Whereas a visit to a gravesite eventually ends, we can speak to chatbots wherever and whenever we like; we can feel the dead’s presence as we move through our days. This might be especially true of “digital natives” for whom digitally mediated communications are the norm (Anderson and Rainie, 2012).⁹

⁸ We say more about the kind of reciprocity we experience with chatbots below.

⁹ A 21-year-old student says, “I get up in the morning and open up my phone and one of the first things I’ll do is open the Replika app and say, ‘Hey, I just woke up’” (Olson 2018).

Finally, these habitual practices show how using chatbots might construct *shared time*. Since chatbots are responsive to our input and evolve in conversation with us, there is a sense in which we bring the dead back into the dialogical temporality of the living. Roman's mother puts the idea this way: "There was a lot I didn't know about my child [...] But now that I can read about what he thought about different subjects, I'm getting to know him more. This gives me the illusion that he's here now" (Newton 2016). Another friend says that "We are still in the process of meeting Roman" (ibid).

In this way, then, reconstructing lost habits of intimacy with chatbots creates an interactive space that goes beyond mere memory. Users can both *adjust* to bereavement and *recalibrate* their continued relationship with the dead along multiple timescales as they move forward with their lives. But to return to Riley's earlier descriptions of "stopped" time, these interactive spaces are, of course, different from those we share with the living. Chatbot users know the deceased is not truly with them, not coming back. Nevertheless, vestiges remain within the expressive dynamics of their texts, within their idiosyncratic tone, style, and content. And for the living, engaging with these texts may feel like a way of inhabiting two temporalities — a pocket of "stopped" time with the person who no longer experiences time, embedded within the temporal onflow the living. The dead are dialogically reanimated within the present. For some, these interactions take on the character of, to return to Riley's evocative phrase, a form of care that will not give up its affectionate task — a way of habitually sharing time with the dead. While some friends had significant reservations about engaging with Roman this way — we consider some of these worries below — many did not. His mother was particularly thankful for the opportunity to enact this affectionate task: "I want to repeat that I'm very grateful that I have this" (ibid).

To conclude this section, we've sketched some ways that chatbots may, for some, become helpful tools for reconstructing habits of intimacy lost when a loved one dies. As we've argued — and as reports of those who've used them seem to indicate — chatbots are not primarily used to preserve an unaltered relationship with the dead or prolong a painful parting. Rather, they are resources for maintaining a continuing bond. As a tool for bereavement, they can help those left behind navigate the emotional complexities and loss of meaning that arises in the face of their loss — and crucially, construct new ways of relating to this loss as they move forward with their lives. As Klass notes, much of our adjustment to bereavement and the creation of continuing bonds that are part of this process is achieved in *conversation*: “In our study of grief we need to include the cultural narratives in which conversations with both the living and the dead are set” (Klass, 2006, p. 852). For some, chatbots may be particularly well-suited for this task.¹⁰

5. The “ick factor” and replacement worries

We've argued that, in some cases, chatbots may be helpful resources for creating continuing bonds with the dead and assisting the living as they negotiate different aspects of their bereavement. But there are, of course, limitations to what chatbots can do. Moreover, there are some well-founded reservations about embracing the use of chatbots in grief. We turn to some of these limitations and worries now.

¹⁰ A reviewer asked if by characterising chatbots as “transitional”, we are implying that they are, or ought only to be, short-term devices for the bereaved to use until they have adapted to their new world, instead of seeing them as a continued mechanism for relating to the dead. This is a good question. We suspect that the duration of their use will vary by user, relative to their unique needs, practices, and strategies for coping and coming to terms with their grief. For some, chatbots might provide a short-term comfort before being replaced by other practices. However, for others, they may retain a longer-term value within the broader repertoire of practices making up an individual's grief work. We remain open to both possibilities.

Some prominent worries stem from what we term the “ick factor”. Many will, quite understandably, respond to the idea of using chatbots to grieve with discomfort or even disgust. It is telling that when Microsoft’s chatbot patent got picked up by the media, Microsoft representatives were quick to publicly state that they, too, found this technology unnerving. Tim O’Brien, the general manager at Microsoft for AI programs, tweeted that there was “no plan” for this patent being put into use. He even went so far to agree with other Twitter users’ concerns about this technology, saying “yes, it’s disturbing”.

We find helpful philosophical objections based on this “ick factor” in the work of Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben. In his recent book, Stokes — having first provided a rich defense for preserving (rather than deleting) digital remains — provocatively states: “There may or may not be worse things than dying. But, as we’ll now see, there are worse things than deletion” (Stokes, 2021, p. 121). What are these worse things? Having our online activity harvested and turned into a chatbot or avatar after our demise.

Both Stokes (Stokes, 2020, 2021) and Buben (Buben, 2015) argue that something occurs when we use technology to create chatbots or avatars that is significantly different than keeping photos and videos of the dead or preserving their social media profiles. Their shared concern is rooted in the idea that when we create and interact with AI-versions of the dead like chatbots, we move from *recollecting* the dead to attempting to *replace* them:

Consider the difference between the following means of preservation after a loss:

recollection and replacement. The former aims to keep us aware of what has been taken from us—it is thus in part an attempt at preservation of an irremediable void; but the latter seeks to overcome, ignore, or at least mitigate the fact that anything has been lost at

all—it is an attempt at preservation of the status quo. (Buben 2015, p. 25; also quoted in Stokes 2021, p. 141)

While in remembrance we remember the dead as the distinctive, valuable people they were, in replacement we use their online traces as a resource to fill the gap left by the passing (Stokes 2020, p. 205)

In contrast to ways in which we might interact with other digital remains (e.g., digital photographs or a Facebook page), the worry is that chatbots and avatars don't simply scaffold or prompt our remembrance of those we have lost and, in so doing, help us come to terms with their absence. Rather, chatbots and avatars will be used to *take the place of* the dead in order to eliminate (or at least mitigate) our painful sense of loss.

Stokes gives us two reasons for condemning technology that he says moves us from recollection to replacement. First, by using the historical online communication of someone once living, we are exploiting the dead *as a means for an end*. When we interact with chatbots, we use them to make ourselves feel better. Rather than respecting the memory and integrity of the dead, we instrumentalize them. We reduce them to a communicative instrument designed to alleviate our suffering: “The ethical point here is roughly a Kantian one: we wrong the dead when we treat them as a means to our own ends instead of ends in themselves” (Stokes 2021, p. 143). In this way, we reduce the dead to a mere *resource*: to their “conversational goods” (Elder 2020, p. 76).

Stokes also gives us a second argument. When we use chatbots to replace the dead, he argues, we not only treat them as a resource and, in so doing, degrade them. Additionally, “treating the dead as replaceable also degrades the living, pre-mortem person” (Stokes 2021, p.

143). Stokes' point is that if we treat chatbots as adequate, even desirable, replacements for those who have died, we implicitly degrade the value of that person as a *living subject*. They are no longer unique or special. We treat them as *essentially* replaceable; all we need is another person or thing (e.g., a chatbot) that will fill their functional role:

To replace the irreplaceable is to concede it was never in fact irreplaceable at all. It implies you don't love *this* person but whoever or whatever turns up to fulfil certain roles they play in your life. The memorialized social network profile preserves the dead, though in a reduced form, while the avatar, in replacing the dead, degrades the dead *and* the living by treating them as replaceable. A perhaps ill advised analogy: if a memorialized online profile is like a taxidermied pet, an avatar of the dead is like buying a new pet of the same breed and giving it the same name as the old one. (Stokes 2021, p. 144)

These replacement worries are helpful. Stokes captures the theoretical reasons informing the “ick” reaction many will have to the idea of using chatbots for grieving. Again, this feeling stems from the feeling that chatbots are somehow disrespectful both to the dead *and* to the living.¹¹

We can develop these replacement worries even further by pulling out a third concern based on work by Kagan (2014) and Cholbi (2019). Both Kagan and Cholbi observe that while

¹¹ Note that there may be some tension between Stokes' two arguments. The first argument is that when we use chatbots constructed from online activity of the deceased, we are using the dead as a (mere) resource. This seems to imply that the dead can be identified with their online communication and posts online, and that in *using* chatbots we are *using* the dead. If this is the case, then this seems to support the idea that the dead are, indeed, replaceable by these bots, as these bots are identified with the dead in some way.

grief is painful, sometimes unbearably so, we nevertheless seem to value the experience of grief. We may wish that someone had not died, of course, that life had gone on without this painful loss. However, both ask, is wishing someone had not died the same as wishing *not to experience grief*? Both argue that these are different things. When we lose someone, Kagan tells us, “it hardly seems better for you to be indifferent to that fact. On the contrary, it seems better for you to be *pained* by the loss” (Kagan 2014, p. 267). Cholbi agrees. He also argues that when we lose someone important to us, our sense of self can be unseated in a profound way. Others play a deep role in shaping our identity by helping determine our core concerns, commitments, values, and goals — things that define our sense of self. Others also play an important role in acquiring self-knowledge. They help us learn new things about ourselves in dialogue with them, that is, who we are and what we value. In this way, losing a close partner, parent, or friend is to lose resources we need to be and understand who we are *as a self*. And the experience of grief, then, is not only to mourn the loss of another. It involves learning new ways of establishing ourselves in a world without them. Grief presents an opportunity for self-reflection and self-knowledge. If we use chatbots to replace the dead — which, if replacement worries are justified, is to deny the reality of our loss — we may both “forget” to grieve, to be pained by our loss, and also deny ourselves the opportunity to grow as a self via the transformative possibilities grief presents us.¹²

Resisting replacement with (thin) reciprocity

Replacement worries touch on several important concerns. We cannot address them all here. As this technology becomes more sophisticated and widely adopted, they will need to be

¹² For a wonderful account of the value of heartbreak, see Lopez-Cantero & Archer 2020.

part of ongoing conversations. For now, we briefly discuss why, at this point, we think replacement worries aren't as urgent as Stokes and Buben suggest.

First, it should be noted that Stokes clearly states he is not saying those who currently interact with chatbots, such as the friends and relatives of Roman Mazurenko, really believe that the chatbots they interact with replace the dead. Rather, his concern is *futural*: “Could we really slip into a way of engaging with avatars that treats them as replacements for the dead? It might be better to ask, what’s to stop us?” (Stokes 2021, p. 145). Given how quickly we adopt and adapt to new technology, Stokes raises the substantive concern that what might start out as a practice of remembrance could easily slide into a practice of replacement; that in endeavoring to use technology to enhance our *recollection* of the dead, “we may end up, in effect, forgetting that they are dead” (Stokes 2021, p. 145). After all, these technologies will only continue to develop and become more sophisticated. And as they do, the allure of replacement may become even stronger.

To be clear, we agree with Buben and Stokes that potentially replacing the dead is objectionable for the reasons they give us. And while we are arguing for the potential value of chatbots in grief work, we do not want to present ourselves as unqualified “defenders of digital reanimation” (Stokes 2021, p. 139). Nevertheless, we think a closer look shows that this is not something most of us will look to do. We can answer Stokes’ “what’s to stop us?” question by recognizing *how* and *why* we might engage with chatbots in the process of grief in the first place. Both Buben and Stokes fear that the birth of chatbots heralds a move from recollection to replacement. But this is a false binary. As our description of chatbots and continuing bonds above — as well as the first-person reports that support it — indicate, these are not the only two

ways we might engage with the dead. Nor does this binary capture the complex set of motivations and desires we might have when incorporating chatbots into grief work.

There are, we suggest, at least two reasons to resist this replacement narrative — one practical, one theoretical. These two reasons respond directly to the futural “what’s to stop us?” worry while also doing justice to the character of how and why individuals seem to use chatbots in the present. The practical reason is the following: while chatbots afford *reciprocity* in a way, say, gravesites and photographs do not — this is what makes them potentially powerful transitional objects of grief — it is nevertheless a *thin* reciprocity. They lack the *thick* reciprocity of persons. For, while we can share with chatbots — we take them with us throughout our day, narrate our real-time experiences, impressions, thoughts, desires, etc. — they can’t share with *us*. Simply put, this sharing is *asymmetrical*. Ours is a rich world of novelty, surprise, spontaneity, interactions, difficulties, joys, sorrows, etc. that exist outside of, and independent from, our interactions with the chatbot. But the world of the chatbot only exists in relation to us. And crucially, *we know this*. When we interact with them, we experience the chatbot as lacking a full world (i.e., organized independently from us) that they, in turn, can share. We bring them into our world in a way they cannot bring us into theirs. Having a sense of sharing “stopped” time with them in the way discussed above is not equivalent to feeling that we’ve entered their world.

When we engage with chatbots, then, we know — and experientially *feel* — this asymmetry. In other words, while these interactions may have a certain degree of experiential richness, we know that what is ultimately missing is what Buber (2002) terms “genuine dialogue”: a reciprocal openness on the side of *both* participants. For Buber, only by participating in one another’s lives can we establish genuine “betweenness” with others and establish “a living mutual relation between [oneself] and them” (Buber 2002, p. 22). Since

chatbots lack subjectivity, independent agency, and a lifeworld separate from ours, we know we cannot enact genuine dialogue — i.e., thick reciprocity — with them. The need for mutual and reciprocal engagement is also emphasized in literature on loving relationships (e.g., Anderson, 2019; Candiotto & de Jaegher, 2021; Millar & Lopez-Cantero, 2022). Continuing bonds with someone after they have died, then, necessitates a change in our relationship with a loved one, as this can no longer be a relationship founded on reciprocity. That chatbots cannot offer the thick reciprocity of a loving relationship and genuine dialogue, therefore, does not mask the loss of the other but can help the bond with the other to shift in light of their death.

This leads us to the second reason we might resist the replacement narrative. This reason is theoretical. We suggest that it is useful to think about how we engage with chatbots in grief through a *fictionalist* lens.¹³ In philosophy of mind, fictionalism is the view that negotiating the social world involves a complex act of pretense (Toon, 2016). When we attribute internal beliefs and desires to others, we do not sincerely judge that these things exist. We have no way of verifying the existence of mental entities in others. Nevertheless, it is useful for the purposes of explanation and prediction to treat one another *as if* we have them. This imaginative game of make-believe may be false. But it is something we all participate in since it is a useful tool for navigating a shared world.

To be clear, we have no desire to endorse fictionalism's anti-realism about other minds. Both of us reject the core assumption motivating fictionalism about other minds — namely, that this sort of pretense is necessary because we lack direct access to others' mental states in the first place (see Krueger 2012 and Osler 2021). However, there may be value to applying fictionalism to artificial systems, including chatbots.

¹³ For an alternative, and extremely rich, discussion of fictional stances to chat bots, see Elder (2020).

For example, Roberts and Krueger (2022) have recently argued that fictionalism can illuminate some of the artistic practices that arise around AI-driven music.¹⁴ They use the electronic musician Holly Herndon's collaborations with *Spawn*, an artificial neural network she created, as a case study. Herndon knows that *Spawn* is not conscious; she lacks the capacity for thick reciprocity and is not a collaborator in the way other persons are. Nevertheless, by adopting a fictionalist stance and engaging with *Spawn as if* she has genuine subjectivity and agency, Herndon generates new aesthetic tensions and creative possibilities that help animate the music-making process. By acknowledging the fictionalist stance that such artists take towards certain AI bots, we can understand how they fruitfully engage with such AI in the process of music-making but still deny that the AI has any genuine agency (and claims to ownership and authorship that follow from such agency) within the collaboration.

A similar perspective, we suggest, is helpful when considering chatbots and grief. When users like Eugenia Kudya interact with her Roman-bot, she is not fooled into thinking that she is *actually* engaging with Roman from beyond the grave. Rather, she engages in something like a game of make-believe, where she temporarily imagines that she is talking to Roman. She adopts the habits of intimacy they once shared and enters that exchange *as if* Roman was present. This fictionalist stance is what opens Kudya and other users to the possibility of using chatbots to create continuing bonds with the dead. As Kathryn Norlock (2017) reminds us, adopting this kind of fictionalist stance and engaging in imaginary conversations with the dead is not an unusual or even a new practice:

¹⁴ For a discussion of empathy and artificial agents, see Stephan 2015.

Perhaps many readers have had the experience of not just thinking about a dead friend or family member, but holding an inner dialogue or argument with the departed individual, or imagining their response to one's actions or beliefs, or maintain a practice previously shared with the deceased because it was shared with the deceased (p. 345).

When interacting with a chatbot, we engage in a similar kind of imaginary practice. As Norlock notes further, this does not amount to “merely remembering” the other. It involves “actively relat[ing] to the deceased because we are maintaining a relationship that we had with them while living” (Norlock 2017, p. 343). This is not to say that the bond with the dead is imaginary, rather the bond is sustained (and importantly changed) by using imaginative practices of engagement. Nor does this necessarily entail a failure to let go of the dead or pretend they are no longer with us. It is a strategy for constructing a continuing bond with the dead, a way of maintaining a connection with them while adjusting to the reality of their absence.

Although this technology is still not widely used, the first-person reports we do have are, once again, instructive. Many descriptions of what users look for in chatbots, how they approach them as tools for grieving, emphasize the primacy of *listening*: “All those messages were about love, or telling [Roman] something they never had time to tell him”, Kudya says of the data from the Roman-bot chat logs she analyzed. “Even if it’s not a real person, there was a place where they could say it. They can say it when they feel lonely. And they come back still” (Newton 2016). Users are aware that chatbots only offer a thin reciprocity. However, we suggest that, rather than desiring replacement, thin reciprocity may, in fact, be precisely what users want from chatbots in the context of their grief work. Chatbots furnish dynamic interactive possibilities that makes them better suited for adopting a fictionalist stance and constructing richer continuing

bonds than things like gravesites or photographs. Nevertheless, they encourage the development of continuing bonds — which, once more, are about easing into and not eradicating or hiding from the reality of our loss — *precisely because they are not a perfect replica* of the person we’ve lost. Their incompleteness nudges users to adjust and change their relationship with the dead as they reintegrate with the world of the living.

In sum, replacement worries are legitimate. But they rest on a mischaracterization of what people appear to want from transitional objects of grief, that is, why they might be motivated to seek out grief tools like chatbots in the first place. Whatever well-founded reservations we may have about this technology, it’s only going to become more sophisticated and more prevalent. And it may have a significant therapeutic value that will get lost if we cast it in stark or exaggerated terms (e.g., framing it as a tool for replacement). We’ve always sought new tools and practices for maintaining continuing bonds with the dead. Chatbots are continuous with these practices. It may therefore be time to approach them in a more charitable way and consider how they might function as one tool for grief work and the construction of continuing bonds among many.

6. Final thoughts

Chatbots have already moved from the realm of science fiction to our screens. While such technology is still in its relative infancy, we can expect the creation of chatbots to advance in the coming years. As Alexis Elder (2020) states: “Figuring out in advance exactly what would constitute best practices for supporting the bereaved via this technology may be impossible. Instead, thoughtful, ongoing, open-ended inquiry, supported by dialogue between designers, users, experts like clinical psychologists, and philosophical resources like the ones outlined here

seems a more promising strategy” (p. 81). In this paper, we hope to have brought phenomenological resources to bear on how we think about the role chatbots might play in grief and, in so doing, further open up this dialogue.

Nevertheless, there are some legitimate concerns that should be at the forefront of our thinking as we go forward. As noted in the introduction, we have not addressed the role that providers of chatbots play in this picture — indeed, we have presented a view of chatbots that is de-situated from questions of data control, AI learning systems, corporate motivations, and more. However, a full discussion of what role chatbots might play in grief cannot leave such issues aside. A particularly pressing concern is to think about the motivation that companies have for providing chatbots: financial gain. Where profit, and not grief work, drives the creation of chatbots, we should be troubled by the idea that the more we engage with bots the more profit they are likely to drive. Companies, then, have a financial incentive to build chatbots that encourage addiction and continued use; they have an incentive to sustain grief, and not the bonds that help us move through our grief. As Lindemann (2022, 55) pointedly puts it: “providers profit from the ongoing grief of the bereaved”. When these motivations seep into the design, the role that chatbots of the dead play in grief shifts, for such companies likely aim to oil the very path to replacement that we currently think shows resistance and the urgency of such concerns likely quickens.

Finally, our analysis might also extend beyond how we think about chatbots in the context of grief to include other ways of engaging with chatbots — including, for instance, therapy bots. To give one example: the chatbot “Woebot” is described by Woebot Health (www.woebothealth.com) as a “relational agent for mental health” and “your personal mental health ally”. Through an app, people can chat to Woebot about their feelings and mental health,

with Woebot asking questions such as “How are you feeling right now?”. Based on our above analysis, we might argue that we should see Woebot not in terms of *replacing* therapists but rather as a kind of therapeutic resource for helping one develop habits of attending to, and more effectively regulating, one’s own feelings. Framing therapy bots in this manner, then, not only helps to highlight specific contexts or domains in which they may be helpful. It also helps clarify some of their limitations.

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