This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

4 Between Worlds

We have seen how grief involves tensions between aspects of experience that accommodate the death and others that do not. At a given time, the surrounding world may appear consistent with one's loss in some ways but not in others. In addition, there is alternation over time between pre- and post-bereavement worlds. This alternation is not simply a matter of moving between two differently structured realties. It is important to distinguish the following scenarios: (a) one moves between pre- and post-bereavement worlds, where the latter involves new networks of projects and concerns; (b) one ceases to inhabit the pre-bereavement world, but there is nothing to replace it with yet. In the case of (b), one does not have a *different* life structure; one instead confronts the absence of structure. Experiences of the kinds described in chapters 2 and 3 involve different balances (and sometimes imbalances) between loss of structure and establishment of new structure. To the extent that this balance is skewed toward loss, there is a heightened sense of what I will call "indeterminacy," a sense of lacking something that more usually shapes and guides one's experiences, thoughts, and activities.

In chapter 3, I emphasized the role of *feeling* in grief. In so doing, I also suggested that other people contribute to the structure of experience in ways that are similar to and inseparable from the contributions of one's own body. In this chapter, the focus shifts away from feeling and toward linguistic thought. Through a consideration of the phenomenology of indeterminacy, I will show how disturbances in habitual patterns of anticipation also encompass the experience of linguistic meaning. Thus, a seemingly true utterance can at the same time appear at odds with one's situation or bereft of meaning. To account for this, I draw on themes in

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

the writings of Merleau-Ponty and William James, both of whom indicate that linguistic experience, like world experience, is infused with a sense of the possible. Grief, I propose, can involve a kind of linguistic experience where certain possibilities that were associated with one's words no longer apply, while others continue to do so. Consequently, an utterance can appear obviously true and at the same time somehow false. I add that it is important to distinguish different ways in which language works during grief. Words that operate in one way against the backdrop of a stable life structure can play different roles in the context of its disturbance, serving to stabilize, to further disrupt, or to express disruption. Hence, by reflecting on the phenomenology of grief, we arrive at the view that experiences of linguistic thought, and of written and spoken language, participate in the same anticipatory structure as our wider experiences and activities. Given this, it would be wrong to conceptualize disturbances of that structure in terms of distinctions between feeling and thought, cognition and affect, or unthinking habit and conceptual understanding. Grief involves a level of experience that does not respect such distinctions.

I go on to show how experiences of indeterminacy implicate the sense of time. This involves identifying a number of different ways in which temporal experience can be altered during grief. I conclude by turning to the relationship between grief's indeterminacy and rationality. Grief can involve the disruption of something that rational thought presupposes, fragmenting patterns of thinking and even altering relationships of implication between propositions. However, I suggest that this does not render it irrational. In fact, susceptibility to such disruption is integral to the ability to think in ways that reflect the realities of one's situation. Grief and other emotions are involved in the maintenance, repair, and reorganization of an experiential world that is presupposed by the capacity for rational deliberation.

4.1 No Path to Follow

I have discussed how grief involves various contrasts and tensions between a world once taken for granted and the reality one now faces. In further characterizing these, it is important to distinguish between moving from one life structure to another and losing life structure before new structure has taken shape. A grief process involves both. Where there is a pervasive

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

loss of structure, things seem curiously *indeterminate*. This is due to a lack of cohesively organized significant possibilities that more usually shape experience, guide thought, and specify and elicit patterns of activity.

Chapter 3 drew on the work of Merleau-Ponty, in order to investigate relationships between bodily and interpersonal experience in grief. In turning to the topic of indeterminacy, his writings are again informative. Aside from comparing the experience of bereavement to phantom limbs and anosognosia, Merleau-Ponty says little about grief. At another point in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, grief is mentioned briefly: "He suffers because he has lost his wife, or he is angry because his watch has been stolen" (1945/2012, 372). This at least indicates an emotional experience of some duration, with a specific object. It is not entirely clear what Merleau-Ponty takes emotions to be or how he would distinguish them from more subtle and ubiquitous experiences of significance. However, he does emphasize that an emotion is not simply a mental event hidden inside a head; it is "not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude" (1964b, 53).[1] More specifically, he suggests that the expression of an emotion, including its linguistic expression, is not secondary to an emotional experience but part of it. Words can "express" the "emotional essence" of objects, in ways that are inseparable from how those objects are experienced emotionally (1945/2012, 193). I will endorse a position along these lines with respect to grief. Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that an emotion is a "variation" in our relationship with the social world is also potentially revealing, perhaps marking the contrast that I drew in chapters 2 and 3 between emotional experiences and more mundane experiences of significance. For example, as I walk up the steps to the railway station, go through the ticket barrier, and wait for the train during my regular journey to work, these things are experienced as mattering to me in ways that are mundane, unsurprising, and not at all disruptive. But the subsequent announcement, "we regret that services between Newcastle and York are severely delayed," is experienced differently. It is a disruption of my various projects, a "variation" in how I relate to my surroundings in light of my projects—I will miss my meeting; I will need to catch up on work tomorrow; I ought to notify those people now.

Nevertheless, grief is importantly different from the majority of emotional "variations," which are fleeting and shallow. When faced with the prospect of a delayed train, the import of the situation is fairly limited. The

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

disruption envelops only certain aspects of my life, and only in a transient way. It is experienced against the backdrop of a world that remains largely intact. In seeking to further understand this difference, the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's thought is not limited to his brief remarks on grief or, for that matter, emotion. Larger themes, which feature in *Phenomenology of Perception* and are also developed in his later writings, help us to appreciate what is distinctive about profound emotional disturbances. Consider the following passage from his unfinished manuscript, *The Visible and the Invisible*:

> Each perception is the term of an approach, of a series of "illusions" that were not merely simple "thoughts" in the restrictive sense of Being-for-itself and the "merely thought of," but possibilities that could have been, radiations of this unique world that "there is" . . . —and which, as such, never revert to nothingness or to subjectivity as if they had never appeared, but are rather, as Husserl puts it well, "crossed out" or "cancelled" by the "new" reality. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 41–42)

These reflections relate to a broader position set out in Edmund Husserl's later work, which Merleau-Ponty for the most part endorses and also develops further.[2] According to that position (which I introduced in chapter 2), human experience ordinarily involves the dynamic and holistic actualization of possibilities, in ways that are mostly consistent with anticipation. This is not to say that matters turn out *exactly* as expected. For one thing, what we anticipate has varying degrees of determinacy. For instance, as I walk around the corner to the main road, I anticipate seeing traffic but not a white van. Even so, the van's appearance is entirely consistent with a less determinate set of expectations. So, although I did not anticipate seeing the van, it is neither surprising nor anomalous, unlike an elephant or a Challenger 2 tank. However, we also experience another form of uncertainty, which involves being unsure whether events will unfold in line with one set of expectations or another, competing set of expectations. There can also be doubt over whether an anticipated scenario will arise, even when a specific alternative has not been envisaged. Regardless of whether there is any preceding sense of uncertainty or doubt, subsequent events might be experienced as contrary to what was anticipated. This can take the form of surprise (where something is both unusual and salient) or negation (where something specific, which was expected with confidence, fails to occur). However, experiences of doubt, competing possibilities, surprise, and negation ordinarily arise within the context of a larger pattern that continues to involve unambiguous, confident expectation and unproblematic fulfillment.[3] Perturbations of that

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

pattern are only localized anomalies, which run contrary to what Merleau-Ponty would call a general "style" of experience—an overarching *way* of experiencing, whereby things unfold in a cohesive, unproblematic fashion.

When the style of experience takes this form, it instills a sense of completeness and determinacy. Where only one possibility presents itself, with no alternatives to undermine it, that possibility appears in the guise of certainty. Where the possibility is perceptual in nature and concerns the revelation of properties inherent in one's surroundings, it contributes to an experience of those properties as already there and of one's surroundings as complete, bereft of ambiguity. And, when it concerns something that *will* happen, it contributes to a sense of determinacy: only one set of future possibilities is there to be actualized. Merleau-Ponty maintains that we ordinarily take a clearly defined, spatiotemporal world for granted, failing to acknowledge the phenomenological achievements underlying it. Nevertheless, these achievements can be brought to light by reflecting on ways in which the overall style of experience is susceptible to disruption.

We can think of emotional episodes and processes in terms of phenomenological style; they involve experiencing and negotiating potential and actual disturbances of possibilities. In mundane cases, such as the delayed train, these amount to localized perturbations of a more enveloping style that remains intact. However, in profound grief, there are widespread disturbances of anticipatory structure. Two broad types of experience become more prevalent: (a) one continues to anticipate *p*, *q*, and *r* but is repeatedly faced with their negation; (b) previously taken-for-granted patterns of anticipation break down, leading to experiences of conflict and uncertainty. Here, I am concerned primarily with the breakdown of anticipatory structure, having already considered experiences of negation in chapters 2 and 3. We might think of disrupted anticipation in terms of widespread changes in experiential *content*. One ceases to have various experiences of anticipation, the contents of which can be specified by propositions concerning events and their likelihoods: *p* will happen; *q* is likely. However, it is important to acknowledge that widespread disturbance of anticipatory content can also constitute a shift in the overall form or structure of experience, in its style of unfolding. Potential and actual anomalies are so widespread that they are no longer encountered against a backdrop of stability. The style of experience shifts, with uncertainty and doubt taking the place of confident engagement with practically meaningful situations.[4]

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

Phenomenological changes of this kind amount to a nonlocalized sense of disorientation, of being lost. A stable arrangement of significant possibilities, integrated into the experiential world, is analogous to a map that identifies paths to follow and paths to avoid. It is through our emotions that we recognize and respond to potential and actual changes to that map. Sometimes, we face a situation where the paths are gone, where things lack the kinds of significance they previously had and no longer relate to one another in the ways they once did. With this, experienced situations cease to specify or guide actions. It is not merely a case of our not *knowing* how to proceed. There is no fact of the matter over whether action *p* or action *q* would be appropriate, as the life structure relative to which competing options are more usually evaluated is absent. A nonlocalized sense of confidence or certainty regarding what is likely to happen and what one could and should do is replaced by a quite different anticipatory style: "I feel like a rudderless boat in a stormy sea with endless time to endure it" (#81).[5]

Granted, even those in the midst of profound grief can still anticipate the practically significant states of affairs that will be actualized when walking up to a supermarket checkout or squeezing toothpaste out of the tube. Even so, larger arrangements of interconnected, unfolding possibilities can implicate the deceased in a host of ways: I did all of those things for him; we did this to sustain and enhance our life together; I could only do this with her help. Consequently, various entities, events, and situations no longer relate to one another in stable, unambiguous ways that reflect long-term projects. That is what I have in mind when referring to heightened *indeterminacy*. Enduring arrangements of practically significant possibilities, which comprise the structure of a life and are experienced in the guise of an organized, unambiguous, predictable, practically meaningful world, give way to phenomenological disorder. Carse (1981, 5) thus describes grief as a "cosmic crisis," during which we "live in a universe that makes no sense," a realm that "has lost its fundamental order." Similar descriptions can be found in many first-person accounts of grief. Having lost a person who was central to one's life, one comes to inhabit a very different *kind* of world, bereft of guiding structure: "The landscape of your life has been demolished and now you are standing in an unrecognisable place. It expands in every direction. You do not know where to go. You are completely alone" (Dooley 2020).

Even if one could somehow let go of the past entirely and experience the world in a manner fully consistent with the death, there would be nowhere

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

to go, no path to follow, nothing to be done. Tensions and movements between worlds past and present (as described in chapters 2 and 3) are integral to a process whereby a life structure is reorganized over time rather than abandoned in one go and then somehow rebuilt out of nothing. And there is a balance to be had here—indeterminacy is mitigated through retention of life structure, while a degree of indeterminacy facilitates revision of that structure. It can be added that not all aspects of a person's life will be disrupted to the same degree by bereavement, and some may be relatively unscathed. There will be projects and pastimes in which the deceased was not implicated at all or, at any rate, not implicated to an extent that would compromise their integrity. The scope and profundity of indeterminacy thus varies considerably, depending on the particularities of one's relationship with the deceased. Nevertheless, it is commonplace in bereavement to experience at least some loss of life structure. So, when contrasting the worlds of *before* and *after*, we also need to consider what lies between them. During profound grief, one does not just experience a contrast and conflict between pre- and post-bereavement practical identities. The sense of identity is also eroded; one is neither who one was nor who one will be. With this, there is no fact of the matter concerning what is to be done next, how to continue.[6] Importantly, this aspect of experience is not limited to how the *surrounding world* appears and how it elicits activities. As I will now show, disturbances in the anticipatory structure of experience also envelop linguistic thought, as well as experiences of written and spoken language.

4.2 Impossible Thoughts

I argued in chapter 3 that disturbances in the style of experience are a matter of felt, bodily anticipation. However, this should not be taken to imply that they are wholly distinct from experiences of language and linguistic thought. Granted, the propositional belief that someone is dead can come into conflict with our habitual experience of the world, thus indicating a distinction between the two. But such conflicts can also be integral to the experience of language. An utterance can seem obviously true and yet, at the same time, somehow inadequate to or at odds with one's situation. The relevant experience concerns linguistic meaning itself or—if you prefer—a certain *kind* of linguistic meaning. To account for this, we need to acknowledge that language is inseparable from the overall anticipatory style of experience.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

Given this, it is misleading to think of felt, bodily anticipation and linguistic experience as distinct phenomenological constituents of grief.

Bereavement and other forms of upheaval make salient a subtle kind of *self-referentiality* inherent in much of our everyday thought and talk. Ordinarily, this is something that passes unnoticed. However, the different connotations of words can come apart, in ways that illuminate how linguistic experience relates to wider experience and practice. When words fall short, it is not always a matter of struggling to articulate something, of trying and failing to find the right words. In the absence of such difficulties, words can still be experienced as somehow failing, even as they are uttered. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin (1962) considers how certain utterances "misfire" and fail to have their intended effects. What I seek to describe here involves an *experience of their misfiring*. One might utter exactly the words that one sought to utter and know those words to be true. Even so, they are experienced as conflicting with the realities of one's situation, to the extent that the same proposition might appear true and, at the same time, false.

An author who conveys this aspect of experience especially well is Joyce Carol Oates, in her memoir *A Widow's Story*. At one point, Oates reflects on the sense of impossibility associated with thoughts of collecting her husband's "belongings" from the hospital where he had just died and taking them "home":

> Someone must have instructed me to undertake this task. I am not certain that I would have thought of it myself. The word *belongings* is not my word, I think it is a curious word that sticks to me like a burr.
>
> *Belongings. To take home.*
>
> And *home*, too—this is a curious word.
>
> Strange to consider that there would be a home, now—without my husband—a *home* to which to take his *belongings*. . . .
>
> These toiletry things—that they were *his*, but are now no longer *his*, seems to me very strange.
>
> Now they are *belongings*.
>
> *Your husband's belongings.*
>
> One of the reasons I am moving slowly—perhaps it has nothing to do with being struck on the head by a sledgehammer—is that, with these *belongings*, I have nowhere to go except *home*. This *home*—without my husband—is not possible for me to consider. (Oates 2011, 64–65)

As these passages illustrate, tensions and conflicts are not limited to the experiences conveyed *by* one's words; the words themselves seem somehow

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

wrong too. "Home" is a "curious word," embodying some form of tension. But what does that tension consist of? Kirsten Jacobson (2009, 361) suggests that the sense of being at "home" resembles and is also intermingled with how we experience our own bodies; both contribute to an orientation through which we engage with the world. In addition, home is somewhere to which we can retreat when required—a place of "stability." Now, suppose that home is, among other things, a place where we can relax and unburden ourselves. While one person might do this by listening to music and drinking alcohol, another might cook and read books. However, a common experience of *being at home* is compatible with these different life structures and can thus be characterized in fairly general terms: home is the place where most of one's belongings are located, where one can rest, prepare for the day, relax, feel safe, and so forth. However, in referring specifically to "my home," there is also a sense of its particularity, of how it relates to the unique structure of one's own life. In saying "I am going home now," the most salient aspect of doing so may be returning to a particular person and acting in ways that imply their actual or potential presence.

Given that the experience of *being at home* can depend on one's relationship with a particular person, it can be affected significantly by bereavement: "If you live with someone, it's that presence, like pop the kettle on, . . . the laughter at the TV, or something you see. Then total silence, I felt at first like I'd gone deaf" (#113). In thinking or uttering "I am going home now," the bereaved person may be struck by the impossibility of certain things. On some occasions, this will involve a kind of forgetting; one slides into habitual patterns of activity and thought, only to then recall that things are different now. However, this does not capture other experiences, where a feeling of alienation from the utterance arises even as it is spoken. In a way, going home still makes sense; I can still return to my private residence. In thinking "I am going home," the same thought points both to this and to other possibilities that no longer apply. So, there is a sense of tension, conflict, even contradiction. Yes, one is going home. But, in another way, one cannot go home anymore. Thoughts of "home" that once included these various connotations in a harmonious way now seem oddly decoupled from the world, pointing to possibilities that no longer have a place:

> "We" becomes "I." I still find it hard to say "my house," for example, it is "our house." Every single thing that you used to do has changed. You go to work, but come home to an empty house with nobody to discuss the day with. Preparing

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

something to eat is a means of keeping your body going, rather than enjoyment. Watching TV is a way to pass time, rather than something you would discuss or comment on together. (#108)

We can account for experiences of linguistic incongruity by acknowledging that, when words relate—however indirectly—to patterns of practically meaningful possibilities, they are also *experienced as* doing so. In much the same way that a cup or a computer might be experienced as mattering, as harboring significant possibilities relative to a wider context, spoken and written words frequently relate to one's life structure. Importantly, this kind of *self-referentiality* is not exclusive to explicitly indexical words such as "home." In principle, it can extend to almost any utterance. Take the example of going to the cinema. In contrast to thinking "it is possible for an unspecified person to go to the cinema," when one thinks "I could go to the cinema," the prospect of doing so may also point to that of going with a particular person, of sharing popcorn, of laughing together, of talking about the film afterward. As one contemplates "the cinema," affirms that one will go, or responds to an invitation to go, such possibilities can be experienced *as* absent. One is still able to go to the cinema; the proposition makes sense and also happens to be true. But doing so no longer relates to one's life in the manner it once did; a certain *way* of going to the cinema is no longer possible. The tension between past and present is embodied in an utterance that points to both at once. Such tensions could occur due to the incompatibility between two practically meaningful worlds in which words operate, one including the deceased and the other not. However, the experience of strangeness, lack, and even apparent contradiction that I have described here relates more closely to indeterminacy. A life structure once associated with being at home has not been replaced by something new that is equally consistent with feeling at home. Instead, that structure is lacking, accounting for the sense that one cannot "go home."[7]

It is difficult, on the basis of the publicly available content of an utterance, to determine whether or not it is likely to involve an experience of this nature. Suppose that two people both utter the proposition "The Eiffel Tower is in Paris." For one of them, the Eiffel Tower has no significant connotations. They passed by it once, looked up at it, and may even have taken the lift to the top. But it has no current significance in the context of their life, and neither does it feature significantly in their biography. For the other person, in contrast, the Eiffel Tower was where they first met their spouse,

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

the place to which they returned in order to mark their most recent wedding anniversary. How can it be that same Eiffel Tower when everything is so different now? How does it make sense for that place to endure, with him gone? As this example suggests, the self-referential dimension relates both to a current life structure and to a rich biography connected with it. So, one could utter all manner of things and find that they no longer *mean* quite what they did before. They do not point to the same possibilities, or they point to possibilities that have been negated. Having lost a partner, words such as "home," "dinner," "holiday," "friends," "walk," "gardening," and so forth may be riddled with tensions. It is *our* home; *we* always eat dinner together; *we* go on holiday; they are *our* friends; *we* are working on the garden; those are the walks *we* enjoy most. In a general sense of the term "home," it is true that I am going home. I am returning to my private residence rather than someone else's. Yet it is not my home anymore. I am having dinner at home now, but how can that be when it is not *our* dinner? I am going to see friends, but how can I when they are no longer *our* friends? The point applies equally to other types of bereavement. When possibilities that were central to one's life no longer apply, associated words may be experienced differently. How can that still be *the school* without her? How is that still *his bedroom*? Am I really driving to *my parents' house*? How could we be going to that place again for *our family holiday*?

Linguistic tensions can be especially pronounced when talking of the body or ashes of the deceased and their location. What might be referred to as *that individual* is at the same time something that makes salient the person's nonexistence: "The ambivalence of language. After his death it was obvious that 'he' wasn't in his body, yet to an extent it was still him, as were his ashes" (#192). This conflict can also apply more specifically to the person's name. To use that name in referring to a body, and to identify the person's location with where the body resides, is to talk in a manner that is not straightforwardly false. Nevertheless, the very object to which one refers comprises a negation of all those possibilities associated with the name, possibilities with which that name remains imbued. Present-tense talk of this kind can therefore be wrought with tension and ambiguity, involving statements that might strike one as true and yet self-contradictory—he is what he is not, and he resides where he does not.

Experiences of this nature are not unique to grief over the death of a person. They are associated with profound and pervasive disturbances of

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

life structure, which can arise due to a range of causes. The case of grief thus draws attention to a much wider phenomenon: a distinctive way in which utterances are sometimes experienced as lacking, as conflicting with a situation without being false.[8] To further analyze this aspect of experience, I will return to Merleau-Ponty, whose approach to language serves both to accommodate and to illuminate what is involved.

As I understand Merleau-Ponty, he is proposing that linguistic experience itself has what Husserl calls a "horizonal" structure. As mentioned in chapter 2, Husserl maintains that, when we encounter something perceptually, our sense of *what it is* and our sense *that it is* both depend on our experience of various interrelated possibilities involving that entity. These possibilities do not adhere to things in isolation from their surroundings; experience as a whole has a cohesive horizonal structure. Merleau-Ponty suggests that this applies equally to linguistic experience. Our words and utterances are experienced as pointing to possibilities involving further utterances, thoughts, perceptual experiences, and activities.[9] Hence, words are not spoken, written, and read in isolation from our wider engagement with a world of possibilities; they are entwined with our practice. According to Merleau-Ponty, words can relate to possibilities in two importantly different ways. He distinguishes language as a "sedimented" or habitually entrenched institution from a form of authentic "speech" that somehow transcends the familiar possibilities associated with words, giving rise to new meanings. In his late (and incomplete) work, *The Prose of the World*, the two are contrasted as follows:

> We may say that there are two languages. First, there is language after the fact, or language as an institution, which effaces itself in order to yield the meaning which it conveys. Second, there is the language which creates itself in its expressive acts, which sweeps me on from the signs toward meaning—sedimented language and speech. (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 10)

Here and elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty draws inspiration from his interpretation of Saussure.[10] However, something approximating the distinction is also present in his earlier work, prior to any engagement with Saussure. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he also distinguishes a "sedimented" language, which demands no effort of expression or comprehension, from a speech involved in the creation of new meanings (1945/2012, 202). To clarify how the two differ, we can draw on the comparison with perceptual experience. The horizon of a familiar entity such as a drinking glass

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

is shaped by habitual activities involving that entity and/or entities of its type. Given this, the possibilities associated with it remain fairly consistent over time. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the possibilities attached to our utterances are ordinarily fixed, for the most part, by habit and convention. Nevertheless, when we speak or write, familiar words are sometimes used in ways that open up new possibilities. A familiar entity taken out of context, or an unfamiliar entity placed in a familiar context, can point to possibilities that differ from the norm, in ways that are often experienced as disruptive. For instance, a work of art may combine habitual patterns with something incongruous, shaking up and—in so doing—making explicit practical meanings that are more usually taken for granted. Similarly, certain uses of language deviate from established arrangements of possibilities and evoke new ones.[11] My suggestion is that grief can involve involuntary transitions from "language" to "speech." When there is pervasive indeterminacy, what we have is a distinctive variant of speech, where words are dislodged from their usual contexts without evoking new possibilities for coherent patterns of thought or activity.

In contemplating the experience and comprehension of "speech," Merleau-Ponty indicates explicitly that we encounter linguistic possibilities in a manner that resembles practically engaged perceptual experience. Skillful, perceptual activity involves coming to adopt an optimal orientation relative to an object of perception, through which possibilities are resolved and integrated so as to reveal its nature. By analogy, consider how we might come to understand an original philosophical work. Here too, Merleau-Ponty suggests, we strive for an optimal resolution whereby its various possibilities coalesce into a distinctive, unambiguous arrangement:

> Even though only *Abschattungen* of the signification are given thematically, the fact is that once a certain point in discourse has been passed the *Abschattungen*, caught up in the movement of discourse outside of which they are nothing, suddenly contract into a single signification. And then we feel that *something has been said*—just as we perceive a thing once a minimum of sensory messages has been exceeded. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 91)[12]

This is not to be construed in terms of rendering something *fully* determinate. Even when language is resolved in this way, an original work, whether spoken or written, continues to point beyond itself. In the same way that perceived objects always point to further possibilities and are "inexhaustible, never entirely given," "what is expressed is never completely

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

expressed" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 37). Hence, in comprehending speech, we engage with possibilities that remain to some degree indeterminate. This incompleteness is not merely epistemic. What is said does not remain indeterminate only because we do not *know* the contents of someone else's thoughts, or even our own thoughts, in their entirety. Rather, the content is itself indeterminate, pointing to something further that is not fully specified. So, although we have a sense of where our thoughts are taking us, their destination often remains hazy; we only recognize exactly where we were heading once we get there. Furthermore, completion need not be an exclusively first-person matter. For instance, when contemplating an original work by another philosopher, we might ourselves seek to actualize possibilities inherent in it, sometimes in ways that their author did not foresee or even could not have foreseen. This is how Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 160) conceives of his own intellectual debt to Husserl:

> At the end of Husserl's life there is an unthought-of element in his works which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else. To think is not to possess the objects of thought; it is to use them to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about.

Merleau-Ponty seeks to "evoke this unthought-of element in Husserl's thought," to actualize possibilities that are there in Husserl's thought, although not explicitly recognized by Husserl (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 160). To inhabit a system of philosophical possibilities in this way is not just to grasp what is already there but to embark on paths toward which it points.

Although some uses of words disrupt established arrangements and point to new possibilities, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that much of what we say and write is dictated largely by convention, running along familiar trails laid out by habitual, shared norms. Our "language," in contrast to our "speech," is imbued only with the usual, generic possibilities:

> We live in a world where speech is already *instituted*. We possess in ourselves already formed significations for all these banal words [*paroles*]. They only give rise in us to second-order thoughts, which are in turn translated into other words that require no genuine effort of expression from us, and that will demand no effort of comprehension from our listeners. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 189)

Hence, as with the possibilities offered by a stable, cohesively organized experiential world, the possibilities of language are constrained by established structure. Furthermore, the two are inextricable. Our words, like our experiences and activities, are embedded within contexts of practice that

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

presuppose fairly stable arrangements of projects and values. Consequently, they are disrupted by forms of experience that impact upon the intelligibility or sustainability of those arrangements. In the case of grief, what is yet to accommodate the loss thus extends beyond nonconceptual, bodily anticipation. The rupture envelops linguistic thought as well, which is equally integrated into the overarching style of experience. Conceiving of grief as a dynamic process that envelops world experience, language, thought, and activity is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that an emotion is not simply a thought or a feeling but a "total act of consciousness," a "mode of our relation to the entire world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 61).

It is arguable that a distinction akin to that between "language" and "speech" also applies to the wider structure of an emotional experience, in a way that further illuminates the phenomenology of grief. I have suggested that, unlike shallow, episodic emotional disruptions that arise against the backdrop of a largely intact world, grief involves a change in how we experience and relate to the world as a whole. However, this contrast can be further refined by distinguishing between emotional responses to disruption that *themselves* depart from established structure and others that do not. Drawing inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's contrast between language and speech, Kym Maclaren distinguishes between "emotional clichés" and "authentic passions." In her words, clichés involve "familiar routes and enticing possibilities sketched out by the individual's habits within the sensed situation," while authentic passions involve the "realization of unforeseen meanings within the world and new ways of becoming oneself" (Maclaren 2011, 56–58). Both types of emotional experience involve disturbances of habitual arrangements. But, unlike authentic emotions, clichés involve responses to these disturbances that unfold in familiar ways, akin to scripted performances or routines.

To illustrate the distinction, Maclaren (2011, 60–62) turns to profound grief, which she regards as an authentic passion. It involves, she says, the "crumbling" of a world, which can "no longer exist with the meanings that it had," the "*breakdown* of our habitual negotiation of the world." However, the kind of indeterminacy associated with grief is not attributable solely to its being an "authentic passion"; it stems from something more specific. For Maclaren, an authentic passion is uninhibited by constraining structure and thus harbors the potential to reshape a world that is more usually presupposed. It can be added that grief takes this form because it disrupts

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

the very setting within which it arises. Full acknowledgment of loss *implies* the alteration of a world within which it is initially experienced as occurring, undermining certain shared habits and norms that might otherwise have shaped its unfolding. Hence, there is a further distinction to be drawn between authentic emotions, which depart from established paths, and a narrower category of emotions (such as grief), which remove those paths.

Where grief is concerned, we should not think of clichés and authentic emotions as mutually exclusive. While undergoing a profound phenomenological disturbance, one might seek out familiar patterns wherever possible (including familiar emotional patterns), sometimes with the support of other people. So, certain clichés may turn out to be symptomatic of authentic passions, perhaps integral to their expression. The same point applies to authentic "speech." Some familiar linguistic paths will remain largely or wholly intact, offering a degree of respite from indeterminacy. There is also a distinction to be drawn between speech that offers new possibilities and speech that does this *by* making salient the loss of a context within which the relevant words would more usually be spoken. Words need not simply misfire; their misfiring can be used *in order to* make explicit the loss of their usual context. As illustrated by the earlier quotation from Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story*, words such as "home" and "belongings" can be employed in ways that explicitly acknowledge, convey, and evoke a loss of the familiar.

When interpreting the language of grief, it is important to keep in mind that it operates in these different ways. Words can disrupt familiar patterns, in a manner that may or may not be conducive to the formation of new life structure. At the same time, established linguistic arrangements, integral to those areas of life that remain sustainable, are a source of continuing stability. The utterance "I am going home" could involve recognition of and engagement with indeterminacy (when one is reflecting on its strangeness), retreating from indeterminacy (when one did not live with the deceased and the sense of "home" is largely unaffected), or an attempt to reimpose structure (as when one seeks to instill, via the utterance, something that remains of home or, alternatively, a new sense of home).[13]

The suggestion that language works in these ways looks all the more plausible if, like Merleau-Ponty, we reject clear boundaries between language and thought, as well as between emotions and their expression (including their linguistic expression). According to Merleau-Ponty, the two relationships are similar in kind. Something does not first arise in its entirety and only then

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

generate something else, at least not always. There is a tendency within an emotional feeling *toward* its expression. Furthermore, that expression may be partly constitutive of the emotion; it completes rather than follows it. Expressive completion can render one's emotion more determinate, perhaps even making it the *kind* of emotional experience it is. Sometimes, it is only by expressing my anger that I come to recognize that it is anger I feel, that I am angry with you, that I am angry about what you did.[14] Similarly, Merleau-Ponty suggests that language not only expresses preformed thoughts; it sometimes *completes* them. In the absence of linguistic expression, the thought is not something that can be introspected and pinned down precisely:

> Thought is nothing "inner," nor does it exist outside the world and outside of words. What tricks us here, what makes us believe in a thought that could exist for itself prior to expression, are the already constituted and already expressed thoughts that we can silently recall to ourselves and by which we give ourselves the illusion of an inner life. But in fact, this supposed silence is buzzing with words—this inner life is an inner language. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 188–189)

Although it might seem that we already have the thought prior to its expression, this is due to the activity of inner speech, which, like speaking and writing, is partly constitutive of thinking. Furthermore, the thought only appears fully formed in those instances where it has already been articulated via established "language." Where "speech" is concerned, this sense of a thought coming ready-made is lacking. Instead, we experience thought in the making.

Thus, by drawing on Merleau-Ponty, we arrive at the view that language, thought, feeling, and world experience are phenomenologically inseparable. All are integrated into the anticipatory structure of experience, something that has an overarching *style*. This approach, I have suggested, enables us to describe and analyze aspects of grief that are otherwise elusive and difficult to comprehend.

4.3 Where Words Point

When a phenomenon is difficult to pin down and explicate, as with linguistic experience in grief, it can help to approach it from more than one perspective. So, having drawn on Merleau-Ponty, I will now turn to William James. Despite working in different philosophical traditions and using different terminologies, the two philosophers develop conceptions of linguistic meaning

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

that are largely complementary and, I suggest, mutually illuminating. Like Merleau-Ponty, James identifies a certain type, or perhaps aspect, of linguistic meaning, consisting in a sense of our words as *pointing* somewhere—toward possibilities that might be actualized. One important element of James's approach is his conception of "pragmatism," both as a philosophical method and as an account of meaning and truth:

> The pragmatic method . . . is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. (James 1907/1981, 26)

Put simply, James identifies meaning with practical utility. However, he has a very permissive conception of the latter. In order to mean something different by *p* and *q*, all that is required is their having different implications at least somewhere, in practice or in thought. This is also the kernel of James's conception of truth. Truth, he suggests, is not a matter of static "agreement" or correspondence between an idea (or, as one would say nowadays, a "proposition") and a state of affairs. Instead, truth is dynamic; it is something that "*happens* to an idea." James further proposes that what is true is simply what is useful to us: "The possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action" (1907/1981, 92–93). There are straightforward and compelling objections to this claim, involving various scenarios where something is clearly either true or false, without there being any practical consequences one way or the other. Nevertheless, James's position is more subtle than it seems. He is not concerned with our assessments of particular propositions as true or false but with our underlying grasp or sense of what it is for something to be true or false. This is presupposed by our assessments of specific truth claims; their intelligibility depends on it. And, James insists, for the distinction between truth and falsehood to be intelligible at all, for us to be able to even conceive of these contrasting possibilities, we must already inhabit a world that matters to us. Our sense of "truth" is inextricable from the appreciation that something *could* have significant consequences somewhere:

> To "agree" in the widest sense with a reality *can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed*. (James 1907/1981, 96)

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

James refers to "truth," "belief," "meaning," and "conception" without much sensitivity toward potential differences between them. One could therefore object that his account does not in fact concern *x* at all (insert whichever term you like), but instead *y* (insert another). I am not concerned with whether he captures all aspects of truth or all notions of truth that might be identified, and the same goes for meaning. What he does provide, though, is a helpful way of understanding conflicted experiences of language that arise in grief and other contexts. James identifies a distinctive *kind* of meaning, which accounts for how we can recognize the meaning (in one sense) of a given proposition, and also assent to it, but at the same time find that proposition lacking in meaning (in another sense) and consequently assent to it with a peculiar feeling of tension or conflict. To see this, we need to combine—as James does—his pragmatism with aspects of his later "radical empiricism."

In the essay "A World of Pure Experience," James proposes that there is more to meaning something by an utterance than its actually having certain consequences elsewhere. In addition, we *experience* our words and thoughts as pointing somewhere. If you like, he is advocating a kind of *phenomenological pragmatism*. Consistent with Merleau-Ponty's approach, it seems that differences in the practical sphere that render one's utterance meaningful are integral to what Husserl would call the "horizon" of the utterance. James finds traditional forms of empiricism lacking, in their failure to acknowledge that experience incorporates relations and, more specifically, temporal relations. There is, he says, a sense of where things are heading, of consistency with what has gone before, and of actual and anticipated completion. The suggestion is not that we only take things to be true or experience things as meaningful when we actualize all of the possibilities toward which they point. Instead, James proposes that the meaningfulness of an utterance always involves some sense of what its fulfillment *would* involve, where it *would* lead us. An additional appreciation of its truth involves recognizing that this path *could* indeed be followed. The utterance in question might be far removed from one's current engagement with the surrounding world. Even so, there remains the feeling that one could find one's way back from it to a practically significant world, albeit indirectly.

Hence, according to James, the meaning of an utterance is not fully grasped at the time of its occurrence; it is not somehow *contained* within it. And to hold something as true is also to sense that there is a route to be

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

followed. Truth only comes into being when that route is actually followed, a process that can involve a number of steps. In James's words, there are "intermediary experiences (possible, if not actual) of continuously developing progress, and, finally, of fulfilment, when the sensible percept, which is the object, is reached" (James 1912, 60). Much of our discourse, he suggests, amounts to a semi-autonomous realm, where we wander far from immediate experience. Nevertheless, our thought and talk remain tethered to the practically meaningful world we inhabit. For example, when thinking of Memorial Hall (at Harvard), he says that "it is only when our idea of the Hall has actually terminated in the percept that we know 'for certain' that from the beginning it was truly cognitive of *that*." The percept thus has a "retroactive validating power," turning us from "virtual" to "actual" knowers (1912, 68). For the most part, James adds, we do not progress from the language to the percept. Nevertheless, although much of our discourse is removed from practice, the system as a whole is ordinarily tied to the world by an organized, but not fully determinate, arrangement of possibilities. This terminates—ultimately—in the world of practically engaged perceptual experience. James draws a financial analogy (as he is fond of doing):

> Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs "pass," so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. (James 1907/1981, 95)

Another way of putting it would be to say that our everyday talk involves a kind of nonlocalized confidence, a sense that we could find our way back to the world if we needed to, like a confident swimmer who knows that she will always be able to return to shore. A comparison can be drawn here with the overarching style of experience described by Merleau-Ponty. Drawing on Husserl, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012, 359) refers to this style in terms of perceptual "faith" and "primordial opinion." But it is not a matter of taking any number of things to be the case or to be true, in the guise of propositional beliefs or perceptual experiences with localized contents. As we have seen, it instead consists of an organized, cohesive pattern of confident anticipation and fulfillment. In turning to James, we can add that *perceptual faith* is inextricable from a more specific *linguistic faith*, a sense that our words ultimately point back to practically engaged perceptual experience in a cohesive, reliable way. With profound disturbances of life structure, this

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

linguistic faith falters too; words are no longer integrated into the experiential world in a coherent way, pointing instead to conflicting possibilities.

The indeterminacy of linguistic meaning (or, at least, a certain kind of "meaning") implied by this account might strike one as implausible. Surely, we can fully grasp which states of affairs would make a proposition true and also what is meant by that proposition, without actualizing the possibilities that it somehow points toward. In response, it should first be noted that at least *some* experiences do appear consistent with James's account; we do not know quite where we are going until we get there and the sense of agreement consists, first and foremost, in a kind of temporal completion. Consider tip-of-the-tongue experiences. On one interpretation, the word we sought was there all along, shut in a cupboard that had to be opened. On another, the word that eventually surfaces is consistent with a less determinate anticipatory structure, which pointed to that word without containing it. And take the case of hearing a melody for the first time, not knowing what exactly is coming next, but recognizing that what one now hears is consistent with what was anticipated. Another example is that of the student who struggles with an essay deadline and says, "It was all in my head, but I couldn't get it down on paper." Perhaps a more plausible conclusion to draw in many instances is that it was not there at all. What the student actually had *in mind* was a more inchoate sense of a path to be followed and where it would lead, a path that turned out to be incomplete or absent. Often, we find out what we are thinking by pursuing possibilities and seeing what, if anything, crystallizes in spoken or written words. Of course, the majority of our linguistic experiences are not like this. However, by drawing on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between language and speech, we can see how a wider sense of determinacy and completeness could stem from the predominance of established language, which follows paths that have already been laid out. Our unwavering faith in the ability to follow those paths is such that the "meaning" appears fully present all along; no contrary possibilities present themselves. However, when those paths are no longer there, a different *kind* of linguistic thought occurs.

The objection remains that what we have here is surely not a comprehensive account of all those phenomena encompassed by the terms "meaning" and "truth." However, nothing is lost by conceding that. All I wish to claim is that James succeeds in identifying a certain kind of *experience of meaning*, which corresponds to what is disrupted in grief and other forms

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

of upheaval.[15] In one sense at least, terms do lose their meanings and, with this, our grasp of certain things being the case is also eroded. One might state repeatedly that *x* is the case, while remaining unable to instill a feeling that this is so. How could it be the case that I am going *home*, when the prospect of doing so seems somehow incoherent or even unintelligible? The grieving person still understands the meanings of relevant propositions and may also acknowledge that they are true. But what is lacking is a certain *experience* of meaning and truth, of their connecting or being able to connect in the right way to a significant world. The path to the world is unclear, obstructed, or absent. With this, words lose their grip on things.

4.4 Experiences of Time

Phenomenological changes of the kind considered in this chapter can also be described in terms of temporal experience. This is not to say that they happen to involve the sense of time *as well*. Rather, what I have referred to in terms of phenomenological style, indeterminacy, and tensions between worlds can all be couched in terms of how time is experienced. Hence, in considering temporal experience, we acquire an additional perspective on the phenomenology of grief, as opposed to identifying a separate ingredient of grief. Alterations of temporal experience in grief encompass both the immediate sense of *flow* or *passage* and a longer-term sense of order and duration. Bereavement's effect on the sense of time is attributable in part to the complex temporal organization of a human life. Some nonhuman animals behave in ways that appear consistent with grief (King 2013). Although there may be a sense in which they can indeed be said to grieve, the aspects of grief that I have focused on in this and the preceding chapters all relate to something distinctively human: a dynamic life structure consisting of cohesively organized values, commitments, projects, and pastimes. This often involves pursuing significant possibilities that stretch many years into the future, which relate in intricate ways to past activities, achievements, and failures. The kinds of experiences that I have described are rendered possible by this structure, its fragility, and the extent to which it can come to depend on our relationships with particular individuals.[16] Without it, there could not be a temporally extended phenomenological disturbance involving wide-ranging disintegration of life structure and conflicts between worlds past and present.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

We should be wary of endorsing any straightforward generalizations concerning grief and the sense of time. Grief processes encompass a wide range of experiences, including different forms of temporal experience. Furthermore, people's experiences of grief differ in various ways. For instance, insofar as temporal experience in grief relates to life structure, it is likely to vary markedly depending on—among other things—the age of the bereaved. An experience of indeterminacy is compatible with various changes in the sense of time. In considering these, it is important to distinguish the following aspects of temporal experience: (a) an ongoing experience of transition or flow; (b) a sense of temporal order and duration; and (c) a sense of past, present, and future as clearly distinct from one another.

First of all, let us consider the experience of temporal flow. This consists, at least partly, of an interplay between anticipation and fulfillment. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, I have suggested that world experience ordinarily involves a certain overall style of anticipation, whereby possibilities are actualized in ways that are largely consistent with what was anticipated. The experience of temporal transition is altered when a great many things cease to matter as they once did. Things still change, but new states of affairs no longer differ in practically meaningful ways from earlier states of affairs. So, one moment does not stand out from another and the transition from future to past is not marked to the same extent by the actualization of *significant* possibilities. This also alters the longer-term sense of temporal duration. One does not anticipate the next moment being different in a consequential way; one does not experience it as different; and one does not remember the recent past as relevantly different—nothing stands out. Hence, as is sometimes said, "time doesn't mean anything at the moment" (#162); "time didn't seem to matter" (#174). A diminished experience of *meaningful* change, enveloping both current experience and recent autobiographical memory, is sometimes described in terms of stasis:

> The feeling of progress that you have goes when life is interrupted by the death of the person you love the most. Moving forward stops. Stasis sets in. Time merges disconcertingly, slowing to nothing. (Rosenfeld 2020, 242)

The sense of being "stuck" in time is especially pronounced when the rest of the world seems to carry on regardless. As discussed in chapter 3, it may appear that things still change in meaningful ways, but only for other people. This amounts to an experience of being dislodged from consensus

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

time: “I felt like I was trapped looking out of a window watching other people’s lives go by but mine had stopped on that day” (#54); “couldn’t be everyone just carries on when my world shattered” (#44). A closely related theme is that the days, weeks, months, or years seem to have passed by quickly, as there is nothing to fill them with or distinguish them from one another. Yet, with a diminished sense of meaningful change, it also seems that one’s present situation has lasted a long time, as nothing distinguishes it from the moments preceding it: “Time seems endless now, the days last forever, but at the same time the years are going by” (#86). In addition, one may anticipate only more of the same. Hence, the same experience can be described in terms of time speeding up, slowing down, or lacking structure: “The first six months were long, but looking back I barely remember what happened in them. Like time extending with nothing to keep it in shape” (#191). With the erosion of life structure, even events that do matter, including the death itself, lack a fixed place in a stable biography: “My concept of time is very mixed up. Sometimes it feels like a lifetime ago, then others it feels like yesterday” (#55); “I can’t order time and it’s all meaningless” (#45). A collapse of significant projects that once provided temporal organization can also involve erosion of the phenomenological boundaries between past, present, and future. The difference between them no longer matters or, at least, no longer matters as much as it did or in the ways it once did: “Grief reconfigures time, its length, its texture, its function” (Barnes 2013, 84).

The themes of a diminished sense of passage and of being somehow outside of time are both prominent in Denise Riley’s book, *Time Lived without Its Flow*. Riley describes a profound transformation of her world that persisted for approximately three years after the death of her adult son. She focuses on an experience of time as bereft of “flow.” This, she writes, involved a “sensation of having been lifted clean out of habitual time”; the “sensation of living outside time” (Riley 2012, 10, 45). One might interpret this in terms of losing a life structure required for engaging with a realm of meaningful, shared possibilities and their unfolding. However, Riley’s experience is not so much a matter of exclusion as of indifference. Consensus time no longer matters. And, in the context of her own life, temporal transition and the differences between past, present, and future do not matter either. She attributes this to a pronounced and enduring connection with her son, which detaches her from a realm where he no longer resides and involves sharing in his inability to actualize new possibilities. Hence,

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

although what Riley describes is consistent with the sense of indeterminacy discussed in this chapter, it should not be attributed exclusively to it (a point to which I will return in chapter 6).[17]

Another form of stasis experience is that identified by Merleau-Ponty, in comparing grief and phantom limbs (see chapter 3). In both cases, he maintains that we can never fully *succeed* in preserving an impossible world in the face of loss. Such a world can only be sustained by avoiding the actualization of new and significant possibilities that might threaten its structure. We thus come to inhabit a world without openness and dynamism, one that no longer accommodates the possibility of certain kinds of meaningful temporal transition. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012, 85) puts it, "personal time is arrested." Given that such an experience involves retention of an impoverished world rather than loss of that world, it is to be distinguished from forms of temporal experience that arise when indeterminacy predominates.

Loss of life structure can involve a *fragmentation* of temporal experience. Certain "pockets" of experience still point to a person's potential presence, while others accommodate the loss and no longer include such possibilities. With this, there is a degree of temporal ambiguity; something is not firmly established as past and continues to appear as a competing present. These tensions also extend to autobiographical memory. Past events often continue to matter to us insofar as they relate in significant ways to our current values, projects, and possibilities—it was important because it allowed us to do *p*, which led to *q*, without which we would not be doing *r* together now. So, consigning something to the past is not merely a matter of identifying its place in a sequence of events. There is also the question of where it led, whether and how possibilities radiating from it themselves became past. Autobiographical memory can therefore involve a similar ambiguity to the present, with events belonging to different, conflicting patterns of unfolding. The sense of *when* something occurred is disrupted, to the extent that this involves its occupying a meaningful place in one's life, relative to various other events.

I have characterized the disruption of life structure principally in terms of *losing* possibilities. However, it is also consistent with another form of experience, where one continues to experience things as significant, but in ways that are untethered from any structuring framework of values and projects. Past and future are of little consequence; there is just the allure of the present. Robert Romanyshyn (1999, 24, 33) describes something like this in terms of the *reverie* of grief:

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

> In grief and the long slow process of mourning, the plotlines of my life were undone, the past that was and the future that no longer would be were dissolved. I could not have imagined, however, that from this dissolution of personal time there would arise reveries of origins and destinies. . . . Reverie, like grief, is a way of haunting the world, a kind of consciousness which has slipped from its usual moorings of everyday worries and concerns; it drifts in a mood of detachment among the things of the world.

A decontextualized, drifting fascination with things amounts to a distinctive way of experiencing time—without any connection to a temporally organized life, nothing distinguishes the present pragmatically from what is past, anticipated, or imagined. However, experiencing things as significant in an unstructured way is equally compatible with a pronounced sense of what is missing and a felt need to reestablish life structure. Consider the following passage:

> My mind struggled to build across the gap, make a new and inhabitable world. The problem was that it had nothing to work with. There was no partner, no children, no home. No nine-to-five job either. So it grabbed anything it could. It was desperate, and it read off the world wrong. I began to notice strange connections between things. Things of no import burst into extraordinary significance. (Macdonald 2014, 16)

In both cases, experiences of significance are unconstrained by a backdrop of values and projects, resembling what is referred to elsewhere as "salience dysregulation" (Ratcliffe and Broome 2022). It is debatable whether such experiences should be construed as making a positive or negative contribution to the process of reorientation. On the one hand, "strange connections" might dislodge familiar organization in such a way that new patterns can form. On the other hand, they could disrupt the establishment of new structure by exacerbating disorder.

What I have referred to as "indeterminacy" is therefore compatible with a range of subtly different changes in the structure of temporal experience. In all cases, though, the association with an altered sense of time is not incidental. To feel lost in this manner is also to feel lost in relation to time.

4.5 Grief and Rationality

A pervasive sense of indeterminacy interferes with the capacity for rational thought. Nevertheless, it need not involve *irrationality*, at least not in a way

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

that could be contrasted with an alternative, rational response to loss. Instead, it is an important aspect of the temporal organization of human experience and thought. Much of our thinking occurs against the backdrop of a preestablished world with a fairly consistent, stable organization. However, we do not and indeed cannot think and act exclusively *within* these confines. The experiential world is always in flux, usually in subtle, localized ways that do not compromise its overall integrity. Other disruptions, however, are more profound and pervasive. In recognizing and responding to them, language and thought cannot operate in quite the same way. As suggested by Merleau-Ponty, there is a difference between language that presupposes familiar arrangements and another kind of language (or "speech") that either elicits or participates in their disruption. We thus saw how there are important differences between how the word "home" is used in the habitual, unproblematic utterance "I'm off home now" and in expressing and comprehending a loss of life structure—"I'm going home now, but it's not home, not without her." Vulnerability to such phenomenological disturbances is unavoidable for a being with a complex, dynamic life structure, which depends for its integrity on contingent, fragile relationships with other beings.

It is through our emotional lives that the structure of an experiential world presupposed by much of our thinking is responsive to the changing realities of our situation. In experiencing profound emotional upheaval, we confront the limitations of mundane, practically oriented rational thought. Relationships of implication, along the lines of "if I do *p*, then *q* will be achieved, thus contributing to *r*," break down to varying degrees. As with "home," numerous instances of *p*, *q*, and *r* will have a self-referential aspect, such that the relations between them depend on circumstances particular to one's own life. Bereft of those circumstances, one no longer "means" quite the same things by them, and so they no longer relate to one another in the ways they previously did. When numerous relationships of implication that were presupposed by thought and practice cease to hold, there is no way of determining how to proceed. It is analogous to writing "1, 2, 3, and 4," only then to be struck by the revelation that nothing specifies what comes next; the rules do not apply anymore.[18]

A comprehensive account of what it is to think rationally ought to accommodate both times of stability and times of upheaval. It will not do to construe rational thought solely in terms of the former, with no account

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

of how we do or should engage with the latter. But this point is easily missed, if emotional experiences such as grief are conceived of as responses to events that occur *within* an otherwise intact world and the achievement of having a meaningful world at all is simply presupposed by the enquirer.

If the profundity of grief is not acknowledged, then an aspect of our lives that is inevitable will instead appear avoidable and also, perhaps, irrational in one or another way. For instance, Gustafson (1989) takes grief to consist centrally in the belief that someone is dead and the desire that they not be dead. Given that it involves a belief-contrary desire, it turns out to be inherently irrational. However, such characterizations do not capture the kinds of tensions that arise between certain propositional beliefs and the wider structure of experience. Furthermore, as we will see in chapters 5 and 6, the "desire" that someone not be dead does not come close to acknowledging the nuances and diversity of interpersonal experience and relatedness in grief.[19]

A concept that can help to broaden our understanding of rational thought and agency in the context of emotional upheaval is that of "transformative experience," introduced by L. A. Paul (2014). According to Paul, not all decision-making can involve weighing up the probable consequences of our decisions in light of our current values, as some decisions have consequences that we are incapable of envisaging. Furthermore, some of these decisions harbor the potential to alter *who we are*, by substantially changing our values. Hence, they are both epistemically and personally "transformative," in ways that cannot be fully grasped before we make them. Given this, they cannot be chosen rationally on the basis of cost-benefit analyses or the aim of maximizing utility: "If we want to rationally choose our acts based on how we envision our possible futures, transformative experiences raise philosophical barriers with practical implications" (Paul 2014, 52).

The emphasis of Paul's discussion is on choices we make. However, such experiences do not arise solely through the intended effects of our own actions. They can also originate in failures of action, unintended consequences of action, the actions or omissions of others, events that do not depend on human agency, and various combinations of actions and events that occur over short or long periods of time. Carel and Kidd (2020) emphasize how the capacity for transformative experience reveals the extent of our vulnerability, contingency, and dependence on others. They add that these experiences should not be construed as occasional blips in otherwise stable lives. Many people live with an enduring sense of vulnerability and instability.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

Circumstances over which they have little control continually undermine the kind of structured world required for certain kinds of deliberation:

> If our epistemic and practical agency takes place against a complex background of contingency, vulnerability, and subjection, then few of us enjoy anything like optimal conditions for the careful, procedural deliberation and decision that, ideally, human agency requires. Many of the major experiences of the lives of most people are not elected or chosen—we do not *select* them but are *subjected* to them. (Carel and Kidd 2020, 201–202)

I have suggested that even an apparently stable experiential world is in a state of flux, due to more subtle changes associated with mundane emotional episodes and processes. So, we could take the line that most or even all experience is transformative to some degree. However, when contemplating the phenomenology of grief, it is more fruitful to adopt a contrastive conception, according to which certain disturbances of life structure stand out from the mundane background. It can be added that these disturbances generally involve temporally extended processes, which themselves include various constituent transformative experiences. Such processes encompass both active choice and passive subjection. A consideration of grief's temporally extended structure and the phenomenology of indeterminacy also leads us to emphasize the process of transformation itself. Grief does not involve simply moving from one epistemic and evaluative predicament to another. There is also the place in between, which may become an enduring aspect of one's life.[20]

Thus, instead of maintaining that grief is irrational, we should question impoverished conceptions of rationality that fail to accommodate the challenges faced by a dependent being with an intricately organized life structure, placed at the mercy of contingent events.[21] We make our decisions against the backdrop of an experiential world that is constantly shifting in subtle ways, and our emotional lives cannot be understood adequately if they are thought of as arising exclusively *within* that world. Emotions maintain, repair, and revise a structure that much of our thought operates within. This role is not contrary to reason but part of a broader ability to think in ways that are consistent with the realities of our changing situation.

When tasked with navigating indeterminacy, we do not rely solely on our own abilities. We also draw on relations with other people and a wider social world. For instance, where the life structure needed to choose between *p* and *q* is lacking, there remains the option of turning to others for guidance

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a portion of the eBook at doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

and support. Something that distinguishes bereavement from other forms of loss is that the person who has died may also be the person to whom one would otherwise have turned when navigating upheaval. One therefore faces a distinctive challenge. However, this need not involve coming to recognize the irrevocable, total absence of the deceased. As we will see in chapters 5 and 6, it is also important to acknowledge another, quite different form of indeterminacy, which can amount to an enduring sense of connection with the deceased.

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

This is a section of doi:10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001

Grief Worlds

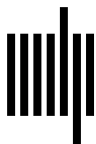
A Study of Emotional Experience

By: Matthew Ratcliffe

Citation:

Grief Worlds: A Study of Emotional Experience
By: Matthew Ratcliffe
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/13987.001.0001
ISBN (electronic): 9780262372619
Publisher: The MIT Press
Published: 2023

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024

MIT Press Direct

© 2022 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-ND-NC license.

Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.

The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ratcliffe, Matthew, 1973– author.
Title: Grief worlds : a study of emotional experience / Matthew Ratcliffe.
Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022004533 (print) | LCCN 2022004534 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262544801 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262372602 (epub) | ISBN 9780262372619 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Grief. | Bereavement.
Classification: LCC BF575.G7 R38 2023 (print) | LCC BF575.G7 (ebook) | DDC 152.4—dc23/eng/20220621
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022004533
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022004534

Downloaded from http://direct.mit.edu/books/oa-monograph/chapter-pdf/2237100/c001600_9780262372619.pdf by guest on 21 May 2024