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9 The Phenomenological Significance of Grief

Throughout this book, I have been concerned primarily with phenomenological issues: what it is to *experience* grief and what might be learned about human experience more generally by reflecting on grief. Although my discussion is not explicitly situated within the phenomenological tradition, I have drawn on themes in that tradition throughout and, in particular, on the work of Merleau-Ponty. In so doing, I have focused on two main themes: (a) the world that is more usually taken for granted as a backdrop to our experiences, thoughts, and activities; and (b) what it is to experience someone in a distinctively personal way. In combining the two, I have emphasized—above all else—our experience of *possibilities* and how it is bound up with interpersonal relations.

This concluding chapter will reflect on the implications of my account for our understanding of phenomenological enquiry itself. If human experience is structured in the ways I have described, what does this say about the nature of phenomenological thought? What might it have in common with the experience of grief? And what are its limitations? Hence, this is an exercise in what we might call *meta-phenomenology*: the task of reflecting on the nature of phenomenological research in light of its subject matter.

By returning again to Merleau-Ponty, I will suggest that profound grief serves to make explicit precisely those aspects of experience that phenomenologists draw attention to and seek to describe. There is a structural similarity between the phenomenology of grief and a kind of perspectival shift that is common to work in the phenomenological tradition. Of course, there are important differences as well. For instance, grief is not attached to a specific theoretical framework, and phenomenological enquiry need not be distressing. Nevertheless, phenomenological method, at least as conceived

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of by Merleau-Ponty, requires a change in perspective that is essentially *felt*. Like grief, it can involve a sense of disorientation and puzzlement, as well as the challenge of using established language to articulate something that our words more usually presuppose. This indicates a limit to phenomenological thought. In ceasing to take various aspects of experience for granted and instead making them explicit objects of reflection, we eventually reach a point where linguistic thought is no longer possible. It is not a matter of being unable to find the right intellectual path, but of lacking the conditions of intelligibility for linguistic thought. Like grief, phenomenological thought must find a balance between continuing to inhabit a world and leaving it behind.

9.1 Grief and Phenomenological Method

Phenomenological research can be construed in a permissive way, as any form of enquiry concerned primarily with the nature of experience. But what distinguishes work in the phenomenological tradition, encompassing the likes of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, and Sartre, is the adoption of a distinctive methodological perspective or stance. Despite many differences in how phenomenologists conceptualize and describe this, there is a common, underlying theme. In naive phenomenological reflection, one might contemplate *what it is like* to perceive, remember, imagine, or think something or other, what it is like to act, what is like to have certain bodily feelings, and so on. However, reflection of this kind continues to presuppose, and thus fails to acknowledge, a more fundamental phenomenological achievement: already finding oneself immersed in a shared world. It is *within* this world that we have experiences and thoughts with specific contents, such as seeing a car, hearing music, or thinking that it might rain (Ratcliffe 2015, chap. 1).

A consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition is the need to apply some kind of procedure in order to make the world explicit as a phenomenological achievement, such that it then becomes accessible to study. There are very different accounts of what this might involve, which are compatible to varying degrees. In the preceding chapters, I did not explicitly endorse any such perspective. Furthermore, rather than limiting myself to work in the phenomenological tradition, I adopted a more permissive approach, which involved drawing on a wider philosophical literature and

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on work in several other academic disciplines. Even so, I have emphasized that, in order to appreciate the phenomenological structure of grief, we must come to recognize the contingency and changeability of an experiential world that is more usually presupposed by explicit reflection, operating as a context *within which* enquiry proceeds. As we reflect on the phenomenology of grief, a number of themes are brought to light, including the structure of world experience, the pervasiveness of habitual patterns of anticipation, and how interpersonal experience is inseparable from a sense of the possible. Hence, although the approach I have adopted here does not limit itself to the phenomenological tradition, the position and philosophical perspective that I arrive at remain very much in the spirit of that tradition. However, rather than explicitly imposing a phenomenological perspective from the outset, I have sought to show how the subject matter of grief can serve to nurture such a perspective. So, in addition to being a subject matter for phenomenological research, the topic of grief can be integral to its method, promoting a certain kind of philosophical thought.

Grief also points to a more specific conception of phenomenological thought. How is it that we are able to recognize and reflect upon an ordinarily presupposed world? And where do the limits of phenomenology lie—how far can we go in suspending our habitual acceptance of things? If the everyday world is to become explicit as a phenomenological achievement, we cannot continue to rely exclusively on ways of thinking and speaking that presuppose it. How, though, do we move beyond them? One approach is to reflect on disruptions of world experience, which either occur within one's own life or are conveyed by others. Another, compatible approach is to actually elicit disruptions of certain kinds. In the work of Merleau-Ponty, we find both. His conception of phenomenological method resembles, in revealing ways, the dynamic phenomenological structure of grief. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology does not provide straightforward answers to preestablished questions. Consider this well-known passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> Perhaps the best formulation of the reduction is the one offered by Husserl's assistant Eugen Fink when he spoke of a "wonder" before the world. Reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world; rather, it steps back in order to see transcendences spring forth and it loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, lxxvii)

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The phenomenological "reduction" to which Merleau-Ponty refers is a methodological shift advocated by Husserl, whereby we come to study the world as a phenomenological achievement, having first suspended our habitual acceptance of it.[1] Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty accepts that the phenomenologist cannot somehow suspend all aspects of habitual acceptance, thereby coming to reflect upon the structure of human experience without presupposing anything of it. Instead, we gain insights into that structure by attending to incomplete disturbances, which make salient at least something of what is more usually presupposed. The "intentional threads" slacken, enabling reflective access to what our thoughts and words ordinarily inhabit and overlook.

This procedure is not just a matter of adopting a distinctive theoretical perspective that leads to new propositional knowledge. As Merleau-Ponty writes in his late and incomplete work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, philosophy "interrogates the perceptual faith—but neither expects nor receives an answer in the ordinary sense" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 103). What, then, does this kind of philosophical enquiry consist of? One thing that distinguishes it from answering preestablished questions in preconceived ways is the experience of revelation—the discovery of something that alters one's conception of philosophical enquiry and its subject matter. The "perceptual faith," or overarching style of experience, is no longer obliviously presupposed. As when the world is shaken by grief, it comes to be recognized as a contingent achievement, something that could give way to a pervasive sense of unpredictability and indeterminacy. Instead of looking down to find a smooth, solid, monochrome floor beneath our feet, constantly supporting us in an unchanging way, we are confronted by a vast, stormy cavern. During both grief and phenomenological enquiry, the glimpsing of underlying phenomenological achievements involves a sort of emotional recognition. In the passage from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* quoted above, this takes the form of "wonder." Grief, in contrast, involves a sense of bewilderment and being lost. Even so, there is a revelatory quality common to both. We saw in chapter 3 how a sense of the possible is inextricable from feelings of certain kinds, including emotional feelings. Thus, insofar as recognizing a cohesive, dynamic arrangement of possibilities as a phenomenological achievement involves disruption of that arrangement, it also involves changes in feeling.

A phenomenological enquiry could proceed by engaging with one's own experience or that of others. Here, I have opted for the latter. But how, one

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might ask, can we be affected by the experiences of others in ways that are phenomenologically illuminating? That someone else experiences and describes a disturbance of world does not entail that we will recognize it as such. In fact, how could we, unless we have *already* undergone the required perspectival shift? My account of grief points to an answer. To experience someone in a personal way is to be affected by their *style*, something that is peculiar to them. This includes being affected by disturbances of their style. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological enquiry involves being affected by others in ways that disrupt one's own style of habitual immersion in the world. As he remarks in a discussion of hallucination, "the situation of the patient whom I question appears to me within my own situation and, in this phenomenon with two centers, I learn to know myself as much as I learn to know the other person" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 353). This applies equally to the case of grief; we can be affected in phenomenologically informative ways by the distinctive styles of those who are grieving. The contrast between one's own world and theirs, as manifested through interpersonal experience, reveals one's habitual immersion in the world to be a contingent and precarious phenomenological achievement.

Importantly, this point is not limited to face-to-face interaction; it also extends to the phenomenology of language. To see how, let us return to the structural similarities between language and world experience discussed in chapter 4. It might seem to naive reflection that perceptual experience reveals the constituents of a stable, fully determinate world. But this overlooks the way in which seemingly simple and effortless perceptual achievements are indebted to a history of habitual activities and associated patterns of anticipation. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012, 194) suggests that, in the same way, "the clarity of language is in fact established against an obscure background." Linguistic meaning might appear stable, determinate, fully shared, and unproblematic, but this is only because we fail to recognize phenomenological achievements upon which it depends. According to Merleau-Ponty, everyday "language" follows familiar, preestablished trails. However, there is also "speech," which disrupts habitual arrangements, reveals their contingency, and opens up new possibilities:

> One can have no idea of the power of language until one has taken stock of that working or constitutive language which emerges when the constituted language, suddenly off centre and out of equilibrium, reorganizes itself to teach the reader—and even the author—what he never knew how to think or say. (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 14)

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Consider, for example, Merleau-Ponty's account of coming to understand another philosopher's thought, where this involves engaging with an original philosophical work. Rather than merely digesting a series of propositions and how they relate to one another, he maintains that we come to recognize and engage with a distinctive style. The overarching style of the work is something we may encounter before we have quite understood what is being said: "A philosophical text that remains poorly understood nevertheless reveals to me at least a certain 'style'—whether Spinozistic, critical, or phenomenological—which is the first sketch of its sense" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 184–185). A more specific, determinate apprehension of that philosopher's thought then proceeds to coagulate. Finding one's way around a philosophical text thus resembles immersing oneself in and gradually coming to know an unfamiliar place, which has an initial, inchoate *feel* to it.

The nature of this elusive style and how a philosopher's position emerges from it depend on that philosopher's use of language. This is not just a matter of whether the philosopher uses certain terms rather than others or uses those terms in distinctive ways. Individual words hang together as parts of a larger pattern and cannot be grasped independently of their interrelations. We begin by attributing established, generic meanings but gradually come to appreciate subtle, distinctive, and interlocking ways of using words, as a unique *style* is progressively resolved (e.g., Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 91). With this, we also recognize the incompleteness of what is said. Our understanding is not limited to discerning what is already *there*, fully determinate. We also follow paths, whereby possibilities inherent in another person's thoughts are actualized.

In chapter 4, I suggested that Merleau-Ponty's distinction between a "language" that presupposes the world and a "speech" that embodies new possibilities is plausible to the extent that it illuminates aspects of linguistic experience in grief that are otherwise difficult to grasp. Words lose some of the possibilities more usually attached to them. With this, they are also used in different ways, sometimes expressing phenomenological disturbances through the manner in which they *misfire*. Words that ordinarily presuppose certain states of affairs are instead invoked to communicate how those states of affairs no longer apply: I am going back to a *home* without *him*, which is no longer a *home*. Merleau-Ponty regards this same linguistic duality as integral to phenomenological thought. By remaining within "language," we

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would presuppose the very achievements we seek to study. We also require "speech," which defamiliarizes established arrangements and points to new possibilities.

9.2 The Limits of Phenomenology

The comparison between grief and phenomenological thought also points to the *limits* of the latter. Grief can involve losing shared projects, habits, norms, and expectations that were presupposed by one's thoughts and activities. As discussed in chapter 4, this can amount to a pervasive sense of indeterminacy and of lacking direction. Sometimes, patterns of implication between propositions break down and words seem hollow, bereft of their usual meanings. The culmination of this would not be a complete emancipation from everyday assumptions but the impossibility of coherent, meaningful, linguistic thought. We thus have a way of understanding Merleau-Ponty's oft-quoted remark that grasping the true nature of the phenomenological reduction involves appreciating the "impossibility of a complete reduction" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, lxxvii). There is a limit to how far the phenomenologist can become unstuck from the world while still managing to think and say something.[2]

A more specific comparison can be drawn with the dynamic structure of grief. We have seen how profound grief involves a fragile balance between sustenance and loss of life structure. Imbalances can arise, involving either the preservation of a world that is no longer sustainable or a degree of indeterminacy so pronounced that it impedes or even prohibits development of a new life structure—there is not enough left to build on. During grief, we *alternate* between activities that continue to presuppose established life structure and others that involve disengaging from it and opening up new possibilities. According to Stroebe and Schut (1999), "oscillation" between engagement with and disengagement from loss is an unavoidable aspect of healthy grief, as incessant confrontation with loss would be psychologically unsustainable. To this, it can be added that a certain degree of phenomenological indeterminacy would deprive one of structure that is needed in order to navigate indeterminacy.

Phenomenological thought can be conceived of in an analogous fashion. It is not possible to think *outside* of the world, given that linguistic thought presupposes established, shared life structure. Consequently, some degree

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of "sedimented language" is unavoidable, and "speech" only ever involves a partial departure from it. We could not think with "speech" alone, as new possibilities arise in coherent ways only relative to already established systems of possibilities. However, engagement with speech is also transformative, opening up possibilities that may later become part of established patterns. In considering the comprehension of a text, Merleau-Ponty (1973, 13) remarks that there is always "the language the reader brings with him, the stock of accepted relations between signs and familiar significations without which he could never have begun to read." But, where there is also "speech," it can happen that "a certain arrangement of already available signs and significations alters and then transfigures each of them, so that in the end a new signification is secreted." Hence, in both grief and phenomenological enquiry, we do subtly different things with words, which are sometimes difficult to discern: using words in established, shared ways, in order to make points, and periodically disrupting those uses.

Phenomenology does not involve striving to understand something that is independent of the process of enquiry; its subject matter includes our capacity for phenomenological understanding. Like grief, phenomenological thought involves an engagement with possibilities. It incorporates what it seeks to explicate: style and how it is affected by other styles, something that encompasses linguistic thought (including that of the phenomenologist), just as it does world experience.

So, it would be a mistake to construe Merleau-Ponty's distinction between language and speech as a straightforward contrast between good and bad forms of linguistic thought and their expression, even if attention is limited to philosophical thought. "Language," in the relevant sense of the term, is integral to having a world and is needed to think and speak at all. Speech involves its disturbance, which could not occur without there being something to disturb. Speech thus has a role to play in arriving at a phenomenological account of grief; it exposes the contingency of what is more usually taken for granted. Nevertheless, this is consistent with the further inclusion of arguments that are played out within the bounds of established language, and also with drawing on insights from other disciplines. Distinctively *phenomenological* thought need not proceed in isolation; it does not have to be purified. Considered in isolation, it is not something that could ever culminate in a singular, inflexible account of human experience, however intricate that account might be. That is because the distinctiveness of

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a phenomenological perspective or stance depends on its continuing openness to possibilities. Only this can prevent us from forgetting a world that established bodies of knowledge presuppose. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 110), philosophy of this kind is "not a particular body of knowledge; it is the vigilance which does not let us forget the source of all knowledge." Essential to a broadly phenomenological perspective is sustained insight into what is more usually overlooked, which requires a continuing disruption of the familiar. This type of thought is something that Merleau-Ponty both describes and—at the same time—enacts via his own distinctive style; it involves disrupting, evoking, and pointing to new possibilities, while at the same time working within established thinking.[3]

Over the course of his career, Merleau-Ponty increasingly came to regard the boundaries between phenomenological philosophy, art, and literature as blurred. All involve forms of expression that somehow disrupt entrenched patterns, revealing their contingency and opening up new possibilities. For instance, he writes of how certain kinds of "critical thought" fail to capture the "inexhaustible signification with which the novel is invested when it manages to throw our *image* of the world out of focus" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 91). Something similar applies to various kinds of artworks, which "arouse more thoughts" than are "contained" within them (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 199).[4] Hence, although phenomenological enquiry relies on language and is embedded within a distinctively *philosophical* tradition, at its core is an engagement with possibilities that is common to various different media, including linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of expression. A phenomenological approach to philosophy is therefore an amalgam of sorts: a distinctive form of intellectual enquiry, which involves a type of disruptive engagement with possibilities that is not unique to it.

If this is how we are to think of phenomenological thought, then its structure is much like that of grief, in ways that are mutually illuminating. We might say that grief resembles an involuntary phenomenological reduction, one that involves an extended temporal process. Granted, we are forced into this without philosophical insight or prior training and left disorientated and bewildered. Even so, a common theme is the revelation of an indeterminacy that lurks beneath the world of everyday experience and is seldom explicitly recognized or acknowledged.[5] As the philosopher Susan Dunston (2010, 166) writes, reflecting on her own experience of grief, we are "immersed in a fluid world that fixed, representative, and codified facts scarcely touch."

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The kinds of phenomenological insights sought by Merleau-Ponty could be obtained in various ways, all of which involve somehow making explicit what is more usually taken as given. Hence, engaging with one's own and others' experiences of grief can be integral to phenomenological method. The difference between the two is attributable to a combination of reflective attentiveness and philosophical training, more so than their respective revelatory capacities. In both cases, there is a balance between being able to contemplate the structure of experience and letting go of so much that the ability to do so is compromised. In reflecting on the indeterminacy and meaning-loss experienced in profound grief, we identify a point beyond which phenomenological thought can proceed no further. This is not a cessation or conclusion of phenomenology, but a boundary. We can continue to work within that boundary and, indeed, right up against it, enriching, refining, and diversifying the subject matter with which we engage. Experiences of revelation and limitation are thus common to grief and phenomenological thought, in ways that render phenomenology consistent with its subject matter.

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Grief Worlds

A Study of Emotional Experience

By: Matthew Ratcliffe

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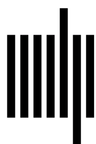

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