

GRIEF AND OTHER UNCHOSEN TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

by

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Grief and Other Unchosen Transformative Experiences

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Abstract

My dissertation addresses alterations to identity and agency created by unchosen transformative experiences. These are experiences such as grief, illness, accident, and war that alter one's perspective, values, and habitual expectations, and that arise due to events one did not choose. I focus on the experience of grief, theorizing grief as an unchosen transformative experience that alters the griever's phenomenology and calls on them to reorganize their identity as an agent. My dissertation consists of three central chapters. In Chapter 2, I give a phenomenological account of unchosen transformative experiences, focusing on the problem for one's agency that these experiences pose. In an unchosen experience, the agent's habitual structures of thought and action become unworkable, leaving them with the question of how to reconstitute themselves as an agent. I argue that one reconstitutes oneself as an agent through a process of sense-making, in which one acts in new circumstances to redetermine their practical significance. In Chapter 3, I give a framework for situating grief amongst other unchosen transformative experiences, arguing that grief is transformative (i) cognitively, by altering the griever's expectations, beliefs, desires, etc., (ii) phenomenologically, by altering their experience in a diffuse or global way, (iii) normatively, by altering their practical identity, (iv) and existentially, by confronting them with an existential condition of their life. In Chapter 4, I examine the problem of resilient grief. The cessation of grief presents us with a problem insofar as our reasons for grief are stable but our emotional response quickly diminishes. Formulated in terms of fittingness, the problem is about whether grief fittingly diminishes or whether it remains forever fitting to grieve. I explain the fitting diminishment of grief through a change in the griever's patterns of attention as the griever's projects change. I also address whether it is regrettable that we change so as to accommodate the loss, focusing on the argument that the diminishment of grief prevents us from

fully grasping the significance of the loss. I argue that the diminishment of grief provides an accurate perspective on the loss, but that it is nonetheless regrettable.

Lay summary

My dissertation addresses alterations to identity and agency created by unchosen transformative experiences, focusing on the experience of grief. I give an account of unchosen transformative experiences as ones in which an agent is called upon to rebuild bodies of practical meaning, including habitual expectations, thoughts, and ways of attending, by making sense of their new circumstances. I theorize grief as one such unchosen experience, which profoundly alters the griever's experience of self and world and calls on them to reorganize their identity as an agent. I also examine a problem for our understanding insofar as grief diminishes faster than we might expect, arguing that this is appropriate given how we change in our projects to accommodate the loss.

Preface

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Some experiences radically change who we are, how we see the world, and how we pursue what's meaningful to us. These are experiences such as grief, illness, accident, and war that many, if not all of us, will face in our lifetimes. Such experiences are transformative in L. A. Paul's (2014, 2015) sense of the term: they transform us *epistemically* by teaching us something we could not have known prior to having the experience, and *personally* by changing our perspective, core values, desires, preferences, and sense of self. However, while much of the literature on transformative experiences pertains to the problem of transformative choice—that is, the problem of how we can rationally decide to have a transformative experience—the experiences I am interested in are not the result of a choice. These experiences, which I will refer to as *unchosen transformative experiences*, present very different problems for one's agency. Unchosen transformative experiences are event-based transformations that are not chosen by the agent, that is, experiences in which the agent is transformed by circumstances beyond their control (see Chang, 2015).¹ In an unchosen transformative experience, an agent has cares, priorities, commitments, and ways of seeing things as meaningful and important that they are forced to revise by altered circumstances. A person undergoing a transformative experience has to rebuild this structure, and in that sense reconstitute themselves as an agent, after an unchosen event. In my dissertation, I address the challenges to one's identity and agency that are posed by unchosen transformative experiences.

I will examine the challenges posed by unchosen transformative experiences by focusing on one such experience, the experience of grief. Grief is epistemically and personally

¹ Chang focuses on transformative choice and thus construes event-based transformations as following from a choice. I am using 'event-based transformation' in a way that includes experiences following from an unchosen event.

transformative, meeting Paul's criteria for a transformative experience. It also exemplifies the challenges we face when our lives are upended by external events. Losing a loved one drastically changes our perspective and calls on us to alter how we pursue meaningful projects. However, despite addressing overlapping problems, the philosophical literatures on transformative experience and grief have been pursued largely in separation from each other. In my dissertation, I will connect these two literatures, with the aim of illuminating agency and selfhood in unchosen transformative experiences.

1.1 Transformative experiences, chosen and unchosen

The current literature on transformative experience focuses on the problem of transformative choice, that is, the problem of deciding whether to have a transformative experience according to the procedure given by rational decision theory. To decide rationally (according to rational decision theory), we should choose the outcome that leads to the highest expected value. When making a decision, we first determine the potential outcomes of the actions we can do, and assign each outcome an expected value, that is, the value of the outcome multiplied by the probability that the outcome will occur if we perform the action. We then act so as to bring about the outcome with the highest expected value (Paul, 2014, pp.19-24). Paul argues that, because transformative experiences are personally meaningful and people vary in how they evaluate these experiences, we should make transformative decisions based not on the objective expected value of the outcomes, for instance, information drawn from empirical research or testimony, but rather on their subjective value (*ibid.*, pp.24-30). According to Paul, subjective values are “first-personal, psychological values [that] can be described as the values of

what it is like to have the experiences or...be in these experiential states” (2014, p.11).² This leads to two problems for following the rational decision-theoretic procedure when it comes to transformative experiences. One, these experiences are epistemically transformative and we are thus unable to cognitively model the potential outcomes of our actions (since it is only in experiencing the outcome that we obtain knowledge of its subjective value).³ And two, these experiences are personally transformative, and thus our values and preferences will change. Even if we did know the subjective values of the outcomes, the future version of ourselves will weigh the value of the outcome differently. (Paul argues that we have no rational way of weighing our two sets of preferences against each other.)⁴ Paul argues that given that we cannot decide according to the procedure recommended by rational decision theory, we should decide based on the value of what she calls *revelation*. That is, we should make a transformative choice according to the value, to us, of finding out (having revealed to us) what the experience will be like.

The transformative choice model captures a profound and meaningful predicament that we face when making certain major life choices. To decide, for instance, to have a child or pursue a certain career, is to embark on a new life that one doesn't understand until the choice point has passed. Nonetheless, the transformative choice paradigm leaves aside a broad range of common and significant transformative experiences. More recently, several authors have made an effort to push the discussion beyond transformative choice and address problems for rational agency that arise in experiences we did not choose. For instance, Havi Carel and Ian James Kidd

² Paul assumes that experiences can only have the subjective values that they do when they are veridical (see 2014, pp.11-2, though see p.12 n.14). Some authors object to this claim (Kauppinen, 2015).

³ Dougherty and colleagues (2015) and Pettigrew (2015) argue that we can continue to apply the rational decision theoretic procedure. Sharadin (2015) argues that we can form reasonable expectations about the valence of transformative experiences.

⁴ For critiques of this claim see, e.g. Barnes, 2015; Pettigrew, 2020. For example, Barnes (2015) argues that we can rationally retain our current set of preferences. Pettigrew (2020) argues that we should give weight to both sets of preferences.

(2020) argue that the problem of transformative choice should expand to include the ways in which our choices are conditioned by circumstances such as our economic conditions, health, and so on. We not only choose to have transformative experiences, we are also vulnerable to them due to the contingency, vulnerability, and subjection that is part of the human condition. The transformative choices considered by Paul occur under “optimality conditions” such as “autonomy, freedom to choose, noncoercion, availability of resources, and having time for deliberation” (p.8). But, for many experiences, such conditions do not hold. Carel and Kidd argue for an expansion of the transformative experience framework to include experiences that the agent did not choose. They give two categories of unchosen experience, nonvoluntary and involuntary transformative experiences. Nonvoluntary transformative experiences occur due to events beyond the agent’s choice, for example, being diagnosed with cancer, or war breaking out in one’s country. Involuntary transformative experiences are unintended experiences that are nonetheless caused by the agent, for example, being hit by a car after one acted to move a child out of its way.

Carel and Kidd’s point about the situatedness of our choices is related to a set of other concerns about the scope of transformative choice, and how subjective and objective values play out in making a transformative choice. For instance, there has been some debate about the “shark attack case,” and which decisions count as “like” the shark attack case, in the sense that the agent does not need to cognitively model the outcome to make a transformative decision about it (Paul, 2014, pp.27-28; Chang, 2015, pp.252-260; Barnes, 2015). Paul argues that we make major life choices through first-personal subjective deliberation: we imaginatively simulate the possible outcomes of our choice, assess them in contrast to each other, and choose the experience that has the highest expected subjective value. Paul emphasizes that we assess subjective rather than

objective values because what we care about when it comes to these experiences is what it will be like for us to have them. However, Paul notes that there are experiences, such as being eaten by a shark, where the transformative nature of the experience does not pose a problem for choosing rationally. Although I don't know what it would be like to be eaten by a shark, I can be fairly certain that it would be awful even without doing any cognitive modeling. I can thus rationally avoid swimming with the sharks (2014, pp.27-28). Although Paul considers this case to be peripheral, other authors argue that it intersects with central issues in transformative choice. Elizabeth Barnes (2015) argues that shark attack cases generalize more than Paul acknowledges. According to Barnes, cases such as choosing to be a parent are like the shark attack case insofar as we can rationally choose *not* to have the experience on the basis of our current preferences, even if we do not know the subjective value of the experience. Ruth Chang (2015) argues that the shark attack case illustrates that, despite some experiences being epistemically transformative, they can be assigned a subjective value, and that this in turn indicates that epistemic transformation isn't really causing the problem of transformative choice (2015, p.253). Of broader relevance is that the shark attack case, in addressing the interplay between subjective and objective values in transformative choice, touches on how we construe subjectivity and phenomenology in relation to transformative experience. For instance, Chang (2015) argues that objective values being important to transformative decision-making undercuts the ignorance claim made by Paul—that is, if objective values matter (as they seem to do) for transformative choice, then we can assign a rough value to an outcome even if we can't know its subjective value (Chang, 2015, pp.256-9). Chang argues that how subjective and objective values interact in a transformative decision is a “substantive matter for axiological theorizing,” and that we should not assume that we cannot assign an experience a rough value overall if we do not know its

subjective value (2015, p.257). John Campbell (2015) makes a related criticism about Paul's notion of imagination. He agrees that in making a transformative choice, we should employ imaginative modeling, but he takes Paul's notion of imagination to be overly internalist and concerned with the mental states of the agent. According to Campbell, we should employ an "externalist" or "de re" notion of imagination, one that involves imagining the "external, mind-independent environment" (2015, p.788), as well as our mental states in that environment, and doing so in an emotionally rich way. Both authors identify a tension between the veridicality and richness of subjective values, and their divergence from objective values (and thus their epistemic inaccessibility). If subjective values reflect the way the world actually is, then it seems that their assessments should be reflected in (pre-transformatively accessible) objective values. If they don't, then they seem less important as a basis for making transformative decisions.

Evan Thompson (2020) examines dying as a transformative experience and, moreover, the "ultimate" transformative experience. Dying is 'ultimate' in the sense of 'final' but also in the sense that it has fundamental significance and gives us a meta-perspective from which we can assess the significance of other transformative experiences.⁵ Thompson aims to provide tools for understanding this unchosen experience, and what it would mean to approach it rationally. In dying one cannot apply the same model of rational agency as one does in paradigmatic transformative experiences such as having a child, moving to a new country, etc., as one is not making choices in the context of an open future. In dying, the sense of an open future erodes, and the sense of oneself as "a rational, autonomous agent in control of its life and its future" (p.276) is called into question. Dying is at the extreme end of a continuum of autonomously chosen vs. constrained experiences as it is not only (usually) unchosen, but it disrupts the sense of self and

⁵ Thompson notes that dying is not alone in being ultimate in these ways, and that love and grief are also ultimate transformative experiences (2020, p.285).

agency that is used to pose the problem of transformative choice in the first place. Furthermore, its unchosen character is crucial to the experience and forms part of how it is transformative. Thompson argues that the dying agent may exercise their rational agency not by aiming to control the experience but by “sitting with suffering,” practicing witnessing and accepting the out-of-control nature of the experience. Thompson also argues that there is an additional way in which dying is transformative, namely, it is existentially transformative. Dying constitutes and reveals to the agent their finitude in a unique and “all-encompassing” way (p.281).

In my dissertation, I aim to explain a challenge to one’s agency and alteration to one’s identity posed by unchosen transformative experiences. This challenge is: how does one reconstitute oneself as an agent given a transformative event? Experiences such as bereavement or serious illness are distinctive in that the agent isn’t standing by and questioning whether to leave behind their current values and preferences. They are instead forced to revise their preferences by the circumstances. Crucially, there is no ready path for the agent to follow. The period in the initial wake of an unchosen transformative experience is filled with confusion and disorientation. The agent isn’t choosing whether to become, for instance, a mother or a doctor. Instead they now *are* something, which they don’t really welcome or grasp, e.g. a widow, and the transformation consists in their learning and defining what that means.

I will aim to explain this interim period of transformation by focusing on the experience of grief. Grief has a pervasive effect on an agent’s experience, it can be bizarre and unexpected for the agent regardless of their previous familiarity with death, and it challenges the agent’s identity, and may leave them unsure about how to carry on into the future. As I will discuss below, there are already resources in the grief literature that can be extended to capture other major transformative life events. I take there to be a productive link between the grief and

transformative experience literatures that can be pursued under the banner of the unchosen transformative experience concept.

I wish to make a note about the term “unchosen.” I mean for the “unchosen” concept to pick out a paradigm, that of a transformative experience that is event-based, involves a disruption of one’s existing way of life, that includes negatively valenced emotions, and that leaves the agent without a clear path forward in the sense of a ready identity to move towards. I am not claiming that all grief experiences are unchosen transformative experiences. After all, some grief is not transformative, and some grief is chosen. It might be argued that *all* instances of grief are chosen in the following sense—I choose to enter into loving attachments with others knowing that they are mortal, when I could instead choose a life of superficial companionship and thus avoid grief. However, I disagree with the framing of grief as a choice. As Carel and Kidd (2020) note, being subject to transformation by external events is something we are vulnerable to as human beings. As our mortality and the finitude of our relationships are existential conditions that all humans face, I do not take us to be able to avoid grief in a meaningful way.

1.2 Grief and transformation

My goal is to situate the experiential and practical changes that happen in grief in the larger framework of transformative experience, and to describe the sort of agency involved in the revision of one’s identity in grief.

I use ‘grief,’ rather than ‘bereavement’ or ‘loss,’ as my target is an agent’s subjective experience of loss. I take ‘bereavement’ to refer to a type of loss and ‘grieving’ to refer to one’s experience of the loss. It is possible, for instance, to be bereaved but not to grieve. I am also sympathetic to the view that objects besides bereavement may give rise to grief. Although I do

not pursue this point in great detail (see Ch.3, S.3.4.5), the unchosen transformative experience framework does provide a starting point for that discussion. ‘Grieving’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘mourning’ (e.g. Bowlby, 1980, pp.16-18). I understand ‘mourning’ to refer to public displays of grief, especially as prescribed by cultural rituals.

I will treat grief as a process that comprises a variety of mental states, events, actions, and so on. Several authors in the grief literature have taken care to explain how grief is both an emotion and a process (Goldie, 2012, Ch.3; Ratcliffe, 2022), where this explanatory project is motivated by the question of how an experience that is so individually variable, temporally extended, and heterogeneous in its component parts can still be classified as an emotion. Those who hold the process view are also concerned with how to unify the components of the process (e.g. Goldie, 2012, Ch.3; Ratcliffe, 2022; Cholbi, 2022). I will not address the unity question, or give an account of which mental states, events, etc. count as grieving. Rather I aim to elucidate some structural parallels between grief and other unchosen transformative experiences.

My account focuses on the idea that grief involves the disruption of organized cognitive and practical structures and the activity of revising or reorganizing those structures. This idea is present throughout the grief literature in various ways, although it has for the most part not been explicitly connected to other experiences.⁶

For example, in a view that fits well with a transformative experience perspective on which we are changed by an experience through a revision of the cognitive and evaluative systems with which we reason, Martha Nussbaum (2001) explains the diminution of grief by appeal to changes in one’s cognitive organization as grief progresses. Nussbaum holds a

⁶ Ratcliffe (2022, pp.106–107; Ratcliffe & Byrne, 2022, p.324) states that grief is a transformative experience, and notes that it can be unchosen, drawing on the work of Carel and Kidd (2020). Atkins (2023) also links grief with transformative experience, although she does not engage with the transformative experience literature.

cognitivist view of emotions, on which emotions are judgments, specifically, evaluative judgments about something that is beyond one's control and important to one's flourishing. In the case of grief, such judgments may be, for example, that someone important to my flourishing has died. Nussbaum explains the richness of grief and its development over time by appealing to not only a collection of grief propositions, at, for instance, varying levels of generality, but also to grief propositions in the context of one's whole "cognitive organization" (2001, p.80).

Nussbaum says that her mother's death tore "the fabric of hope, planning, and expectation that I have built up around her all my life" (2001, p.80). She takes grief in part to be the revision of this cognitive organization to accommodate the reality of the death:

Indeed, the experience of mourning is in great part an experience of repeatedly encountering cognitive frustration and reweaving one's cognitive fabric in consequence. ...In every area of my life in which she has played a part, I find myself expecting her to appear – and I then must work to cut short and to rearrange these expectations. (2001, pp.80-81).

In Chapters 2-3, I will develop a view on which grief, qua unchosen transformative experience, involves a change to one's identity, in part through the reorganization of a body of beliefs. I take Nussbaum's account to capture the shift to one's cognitive systems in a way that reflects some aspects of epistemic and personal transformation.

Michael Cholbi defines the scope of grief as the loss of something in which we have invested our practical identity. One's practical identity is the description of our lives under which "we find our lives worth living, and our projects worth undertaking" (Korsgaard, 1996, p.101). Cholbi argues that we may invest our practical identities in others in various ways through our relationships with them—for instance, the other may be the source of some of our values, or they

may be a source of support in pursuing some of our commitments. The death of someone we're in a close relationship with creates a "crisis" in the relationship and in our practical identity (Cholbi, 2019, p.500). Cholbi takes grief to be purposeful activity, and the aim of that activity is to re-examine the change in the relationship that happened as a result of the death. Grieving involves reassessing our practical identity—giving us the opportunity to understand our cares and commitments and, if need be, to revise them.

The notion of practical identity is meant to capture the distinct normative obligations we have in virtue of situated commitments and identities. That this sort of identity is called into question by grief provides a clear connection to the revision of one's evaluative systems in transformative experience.⁷

Matthew Ratcliffe (2017, 2019b, 2022) argues that grief involves grappling with the disturbance of life-possibilities that depended on the deceased person and the relationship. According to Ratcliffe, one's experience is partly constituted by meaningful possibilities for thought and action⁸, which have an organized structure due to the "patterns of implication" between one's projects and commitments (Ratcliffe, 2022, p.8). As Ratcliffe puts it:

Those we care deeply about and share our lives with are integrated into the habitual world in all sorts of ways. Importantly, our relationships with specific individuals partly determine what appears salient to us, the kind of significance it has for us, how the various significant features of a situation knit together, and which actions are appropriate in a given situation. We experience and engage with the world in

⁷ In the transformative experience literature, this connection is made by McQueen (2017). McQueen argues that we ought to make transformative decisions in a way that is guided by our current practical identity.

⁸ This picture of experience draws on the phenomenological accounts of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and others on the role of possibilities in perceptual experience, and of the role of bodily feelings in structuring these possibilities.

the context of the long- and short- term projects that we are committed to, as well as a wider range of cares and concerns. (2017, p.163)

The other shapes our experienced “world,” which is to say, our subjective perspective and patterns of salience (as well as habitual patterns of action and thought). Another way that Ratcliffe makes this point is that, in a close relationship, the other is not only an entity in our world, but a condition for the meaningfulness of our world. The loss of the other person thus disturbs or “undermines” our experienced world (2022, p.9). Our experienced world loses the intelligibility and coherence granted to it by familiar expectations and routines. A loss can implicate our experiential world to varying degrees, and Ratcliffe makes a distinction between localized and global disturbances of one’s experiential world that roughly tracks a distinction between experiences that are not vs. are personally transformative (2022, p.24). While Ratcliffe frames the disturbance of life structure as a way of developing a phenomenological account of emotion, this account also explains phenomenological features of unchosen transformative experiences (See Ch.3, S.3.4.2).

Ratcliffe explicitly connects the notion of an experiential world with the notions of self and identity, including the notion of practical identity (2022, p.26). He notes that our network of cares and concerns roughly tracks Korsgaard’s notion of practical identity insofar as it specifies how our commitments and relationships guide our actions by giving us reasons and determining obligations, prohibitions, etc. that we have. However, Ratcliffe takes our practical identity to extend beyond a reflective conception or description of our lives to pre-reflective ways in which things matter to us. Plausibly, as Ratcliffe says, many aspects of our practical identity are not known to us until they are disrupted by the loss. This is especially important when considering

grief, since part of grieving is discovering some of the unexpected ways in which the other person mattered to you.

While Nussbaum and Ratcliffe frame the notion of cognitive structure or experiential world as insights about emotion, and thus as a way of capturing and unifying various components of grief as parts of an emotion, I aim to broaden out from the grief experience and connect the disruption and change in one's cognitive systems, practical identity, and experiential world with the notion of transformation.

The approach I am taking has parallels in the psychology of grief. Two of the dominant theoretical approaches to grief in the psychological literature are attachment theory and cognitive stress theory. Attachment theory focuses on the rupture in the bond between bereaved and deceased, explaining grief feelings and behaviours in terms of an evolutionarily adapted attachment system aimed at keeping us close to attachment figures (Bowlby, 1980). Stress theory does not focus on the unique features of the relationship, instead focusing on the event of the loss, construed as a stressor that requires the use of coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Psychological approaches to grief thus already examine it along two dimensions, one of which focuses on the bond between the griever and deceased, and the other which focuses on the adjustment to a challenging life event.

One development of the cognitive stress theory is particularly worth discussing. In an aim to link together attachment and stress perspectives on grief, Colin Murray Parkes (1971, 1988) presents the idea of "psycho-social transitions." Psycho-social transitions are "major changes in life space which are *lasting in their effects*, which *take place over a relatively short period of time* and which *affect large areas of the assumptive world*." (1971, p.103, emphasis in original). The assumptive world is the set of expectations and assumptions we have about the world based

on our past experience (Parkes, 1971, 1988). It comprises the organized cognitive structures that we use to act and make sense of our surroundings from day-to-day expectations and know-how such as how to navigate one's home, to more temporally extended possibilities such as life plans and ideal scenarios. When we undergo a psycho-social transition, according to Parkes, many of our habitually held assumptions are invalidated and need to be revised. Parkes means for what he calls "transition theory" to be an account within the stress paradigm that identifies events that increase a person's vulnerability to mental illness, such as bereavement, job loss, or amputation.

The notion of assumptive worlds is in parallel with Nussbaum's notion of cognitive organization and Ratcliffe's notion of experiential worlds.⁹ Parkes does not restrict this notion to grief, however, but explicitly links it to a broader set of life changes. Parkes states that some features of grief can best be explained through attachment theory, whereas others are better captured by considering grief as a psychosocial transition.

A second feature of the psychological literature on grief is worth noting, and that is its long tradition of theorizing activity in grieving (whereas this is comparably more recent in the philosophical literature—see Cholbi, 2021, pp.43-47). For instance, Freud's notion of grief work is aimed at explaining exactly the sort of phenomenon described by Nussbaum, Ratcliffe and others, namely the revision of expectations and cares in light of the loss. Freud describes grief work as a painful and piecemeal process by which we slowly detach our libidinal energy from the deceased person, effectively emotionally divesting from them so that we may invest our emotional resources elsewhere. Although there has been a rejection of the detachment aspect of this model—in favour of the "continuing bonds" view on which grievers sustain their attachments to their deceased loved ones (Klass et al., 1996)—the idea that grieving involves an

⁹ Ratcliffe (2022, p.27) notes the connection between his concept of experiential worlds and Parkes' concept of assumptive worlds.

active process of adjustment has been more enduring. For instance, William Worden (2009, Ch.2) conceptualizes mourning (by which he means the adjustment process in contrast to the griever's experience) in terms of a set of tasks. These tasks are to: accept the reality of the loss, process the pain of grief, adjust to a world without the deceased, and continue one's bond with the deceased while embarking on a new life.¹⁰ Worden means for the task model to assist in counseling as it explicitly foregrounds the agency of the bereaved person. Contrasting his model with phase and stage theories such as those of Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) or Bowlby and Parkes (1970), Worden states:

Phases imply a certain passivity, something that the mourner must pass through.

The tasks concept, on the other hand, is much more consonant with Freud's concept of grief work and implies that the mourner needs to take action and can do something. (2009, p.38)

Stroebe and Schut (1999) also revise the grief work model in a manner informed by cognitive stress theory. Their model, the "dual processing model" of coping with bereavement, takes grief to involve an oscillating process by which the griever alternates between "loss-oriented coping" and "restoration-oriented coping," that is, coping oriented towards the relationship (which is meant to include grief work) and the change in the bond vs. coping oriented towards life adjustments.

1.3 The normativity of resilient grief

¹⁰ Attig (2011, p.49) argues that we should not think of these challenges as tasks, since they are not "circumscribable, modest in scale, or completable."

After a griever has engaged in the process of making sense of the world after the loss, and after they have integrated the loss by altering their expectations, values, and so on—what then? How should we understand this adjustment normatively? For example, if grief is an instrumental process (Na’aman, 2021b, p.263), one that is defined by the endpoint of adjusting to the loss or altering one’s relationship with the deceased, then a good grief process is any process that successfully achieves this goal. We might think that a short grieving process is no worse for achieving this goal more quickly—especially if we consider the ill effects on health and increased mortality risk present in the first six months of grief (e.g. Fagundes & Wu, 2020). However, if grief is, for instance, dedicatory or a continuation of one’s love for the deceased, then a longer grieving process may nonetheless be appropriate as it honours the deceased person and expresses one’s love for them. Grief may even be morally required (e.g. Solomon, 2004, Ch.4).

Depending on what we take grief to do or to indicate about the relationship we may, then, raise problems for grief that is resilient. ‘Resilient grief’ is a term from the clinical psychological literature that identifies a grief trajectory in which depressive symptoms and dysfunction cease after a few months. (Resilient grief is in contrast to, e.g., a “common” grief trajectory, in which grief symptoms last several months to one year [Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001], and a prolonged grief trajectory [now deemed a DSM mental disorder, see Prigerson, 2009], in which grief lasts more than a year [or more than 6 months for children].) Whereas early philosophers were more concerned about excessive grief, arguing for instance, that grieving interferes with an ability to respond rationally to the loss (Plato, *Republic*, 603e-604d), more recently, philosophers have cast doubt on those who grieve briefly.

The impetus to the recent debate is a paper by Dan Moller (2007), who argues that we have reasons to regret resilient grief. His arguments are directed to what he calls the *Adaptive Theory* of grief, the view that the best grieving process is the one that is best for (“most promotes the interests of” p.304) the griever. Moller argues that, even if it is all things considered best that we stop grieving when we do, resilience is regrettable because it (i) indicates that we are not as important to each other as we believe ourselves to be, and (ii) prevents us from fully grasping the significance of the loss. Moller focuses his first argument on spousal bereavement and argues that empirical evidence regarding how quickly bereaved spouses remarry indicate that we, as members of a couple, are fungible and thereby not as important to the life and well-being of our partners as we might believe ourselves to be. Moller’s second argument relies on the claim that emotions have a role analogous to perceptual states in allowing us to grasp evaluative properties, and thus in ceasing to grieve, we cease to fully appreciate the loss. The loss is horrible, yet our brief emotional response means that we fail to fully register its disvalue.¹¹ Although he initially frames these problems in relation to resilient grief, Moller goes on to argue that any deviation from a permanently devastated response to the death raises “difficult and painful questions” (p.315) about our importance to each other, and our ability to appreciate our condition. So the worry also applies to the cessation of grief in general, and is occasionally framed as such in the literature on the resilience problem.

While Moller can be interpreted as giving both moral and epistemic reasons to regret resilient grief (since they are reasons having to do with both our grasp of and respect for our loving relationships) some philosophers have framed the problem of resilience in terms of rationality and fittingness (Na’aman, 2021a,b; Howard, 2022; see also Moller, 2017). Fittingness

¹¹ Moller (2017) adapts this argument to a fittingness reading, arguing that facts about the loss make intense grief fitting, and our actual response, in which grief quickly ceases, is thus unfitting.

is an evaluation of the correctness of an emotion, analogous to the evaluation of a belief for truth. An emotion is fitting insofar as it correctly represents the evaluative feature of its object. For example, fitting fear is directed to an object that is scary, fitting delight is directed to an object that is delightful, and so on. Framing the resilience problem in terms of fittingness, one may ask whether grief continues to be fitting, or whether its fittingness diminishes. If grief is fitting forever (or as long as one loves the person, see Schönherr, 2021), then we continue to have fit-based reasons to grieve. If grief is always fitting, we cease to grieve for non-fit-based reasons such as prudential reasons. In this case, the cessation of grief may be rational (the overall balance of reasons is in favour of our ceasing to grieve) but it is not fitting.¹²

In Chapter 4, I address the fit-based version of the problem as well as Moller’s epistemic argument that resilient grief does not allow us to fully register the significance of the loss. In doing so, I apply a transformative experience perspective to the problem of resilience. While one might think that resilient grief is by definition not transformative (since the lack of prolonged emotional disturbance seems to indicate that there is not a significant change to one’s identity as an agent), we may still use the notion of a transformative experience to think about the agent’s journey through grief as involving a change in their cognitive and evaluative framework. If we understand grief as involving such a change, it reframes the significance of the cessation of our emotional response to grief, as we are permanently changed by the loss despite our emotions being transient.

¹² One issue that I do not address in my dissertation is the “normative authority” of fittingness. If fittingness is normatively authoritative, then that it is fitting to have an emotion implies something about whether we ought to or may have the emotion. A further question is *what* it implies. A common view is that fittingness is deontic and that an emotion’s being fitting implies that it is either permissible or required (see references in Berker, 2022, p.36 n.23). These two views have different consequences for the problem of resilience—are we ceasing to do something we may do or something we must do? (see Howard, 2022, S.6) One might also reject that fittingness is deontic. Selim Berker (2022) argues that fittingness is its own normative category and cannot be identified with either deontic or evaluative properties.

My account takes a transformative experience perspective on resilience insofar as it focuses on the background change to an agent's cognitive and evaluative systems that occurs in grief. This perspective has roots in Nussbaum's account of the diminution of grief through the adjustment of one's cognitive and evaluative structures (Nussbaum, 2001, 1.9). Nussbaum aims to avoid attributing the diminution of grief to an arational feeling state (since these states are not constitutive parts of grief on her account), and she thus gives an account of the diminishment of grief in virtue of the revision of one's contentful judgments about the deceased. According to Nussbaum, while some judgments about the deceased's role in one's life remain the same years after their death, others genuinely change:

But propositions having to do with the central role of my mother in my own conception of flourishing will shift into the past tense. By now, in August 2000, it is no longer as true of me as it was in 1992 that "my mother is an important element in my flourishing"; I now am more inclined to accept the proposition, "The person who died *was* a central part of my life," and this judgmental change itself is a large part of what constitutes the diminution of grief. (2001, p.82, emphasis in original)

Nussbaum notes that this change amounts to a personal transformation. As she puts it:

...as one reweaves the fabric of one's life after a loss, and as the thoughts around which one has defined one's aims and aspirations change tense, one becomes to that extent a different person. (2001, p.83)

Although I am not following Nussbaum in identifying grief with a set of evaluative judgments about the deceased, I agree that grief diminishes through the griever's adjustment to the loss, one that genuinely changes their reasons for grief.

Another author in the resilience literature, Berislav Marušić (2022), also takes grief to rationally diminish due to an adjustment process that changes the griever. Marušić argues, using a distinction from Piaget, that grief involves “accommodating” rather than “assimilating” the loss. That is to say, we alter our cognitive structures in order to grasp the loss, rather than doing so with our existing cognitive structures.

The plan for the chapters is as follows: In Chapters 2-3 I develop an account of unchosen transformative experiences and extend this account to capture the experience of grief (see Markovic, 2022 and Markovic, 2023 for the published versions of these chapters). I will begin, in Chapter 2, by homing in on the phenomenon of unchosen transformative experiences. I will illustrate the concept using my own experience of being in an accident. This experience was deeply challenging and novel, and involved a large-scale revision of habitual ways of thinking and acting. In Chapter 2, I give a phenomenological account of unchosen transformative experiences, using Matthew Ratcliffe’s notion of systems of possibilities or practical meanings (2019b) to get at how an agent experiences the world as meaningful in light of their projects and relationships. I bridge Ratcliffe’s account to transformative experience using William James’ (1917) account of religious conversion as a reorganization of one’s “systems of ideas.” James takes our thoughts (including patterns of attention, cares, interests, etc.) to form organized systems around our “aims” or projects. Our ideas vary in their accessibility and emotional significance both in relation to the context we’re in and the scope of our lives overall. James explains a conversion as a rearrangement of ideas such that religious ideas come to be most accessible and significant to us overall. I adapt James’ account to theorize unchosen transformative experiences as a reorganization of organized systems of practical meaning. To capture the sort of agency employed in unchosen transformative experiences, I use the enactivist

notion of sense-making (Di Paolo & Thompson, 2014). Core to the enactivist approach is the idea that the meaningful perspective had by a cognitive being emerges from its interactions with the environment. This approach is valuable to transformative experience literature as we can think about sense-making as the means by which an agent sets down new values, cares, habits, and so on.

In Chapter 3, I further develop this account in relation to grief. I give a framework for grief as an unchosen transformative experience that includes four ways in which grief is transformative: (i) cognitively, by disrupting a body of beliefs, expectations, assumptions, and so on, that depend on the deceased and the relationship (ii) phenomenologically, by altering one's experience in a diffuse or global manner, (iii) normatively, by altering one's practical identity and (iv) existentially, by confronting the agent with a structuring condition of their life. I connect the adjustment process in grief with the sense-making activity that occurs in unchosen transformative experiences, but emphasize that grief includes both active and passive elements. Grief is both a transformative activity and transformative revelation in Agnes Callard's (2020) sense, in that we learn through our action but also are passively taught by the grief experience.

In Chapter 4, I given an attentional account of the diminishment of grief. Grieving involves attending to the loss and the relationship, allowing one to adjust to and "relearn" the world after the loss (Attig, 2011). Attention is thus part of the process of adjusting to the loss. One of the implications of adjusting to the loss is that we are able to background it in our experience or, in a sense, to take it for granted that it has occurred. This enables a shift in our attention to other projects. I take the diminishment of our grief enabled by this alteration in our patterns of attention to be both fit-based and non-fit-based. To some extent, our grief fittingly diminishes in intensity through our accommodating the loss, but we also stop grieving for

holistic reasons having to do with the place of grief in our lives as a whole (that is, we have to stop grieving to get to other things). I thus take some amount of grief to remain fitting so long as the relationship is important to us. In Chapter 4, I also address Moller's epistemic argument that we have reason to regret resilient grief. I agree with Moller that resilient grief is regrettable, but not because it prevents us from fully taking in or registering the significance of the loss. Instead, I argue that resilient grief offers an accurate window onto the loss, but that what it shows us is regrettable, namely, that the loss is ordinary. The diminishment of grief reveals to us the ordinariness of the loss, and that we come to experience the loss in this way is regrettable.

My aim is to illuminate changes to one's self and agency that occur in unchosen transformative experience by bringing the literatures on grief and transformative experience into conversation. This project expands our understanding of the challenges faced by agents undergoing transformative experiences, and sheds light on the sort of agency involved in adjusting to loss and other unchosen transformative experiences. Moreover, it situates grief in relation to other major life changes in virtue of the global alterations to one's experience and to one's cognitive and evaluative systems that occur in these experiences. An understanding of grief as a transformative experience also allows us to answer normative questions about the cessation of grief, and explain how grief fittingly diminishes as one adjusts to the loss.

Chapter 2: Unchosen transformative experiences and the experience of agency

2.1 Introduction

At some point in our lives most of us will experience something that radically changes us and that we did not choose to undergo. This includes grief, trauma, illness, accident, and other experiences we may call *unchosen transformative experiences*.¹³ In these experiences, one's way of being — including one's plans, expectations, intentions, and desires — becomes unworkable, forcing a reconstitution of one's sense of self and one's orientation to the world. These sorts of experiences highlight a problem for accounts of agency: how do we act intentionally in circumstances that are transforming us as agents? And particularly when those circumstances are beyond our control? I argue that we must reconstitute ourselves as agents by finding ways to make sense of these unchosen experiences. I employ the enactivist notion of sense-making as a basis for analyzing how an agent reorganizes the stable meaning structures that become disrupted in a transformative experience. My account casts light on the nature of agency and shows why focusing only on transformative choice fails to illuminate this deeper and more fundamental form of agency.

The problem of agency in transformative experience is not solved by standard accounts of agency nor by the current transformative decision literature. Standard accounts of agency are concerned with defining intentional action, typically in terms of the agent's mental states causing their actions in the right way. This approach is ill-suited for explaining what goes on in unchosen

¹³ I am using 'unchosen' transformative experiences to refer to experiences in which events that are not chosen by the agent are epistemically and personally transformative. Carel and Kidd (2020) distinguish between nonvoluntary and involuntary transformative experiences, defining a nonvoluntary transformative experience as one that is imposed on the agent by external circumstances and an involuntary transformative experience as one that is an unintended consequence of a choice taken by the agent. In relation to this distinction, my analysis is of nonvoluntary transformative experiences, though it is applicable to involuntary experiences as well (see also the section 'Chosen transformative experiences' below).

transformative experiences, however, since standard approaches to agency presume an agent with set and determinable intentions, desires, or other relevant mental states. The problem of agency faced in transformative experience is deeper. The intentions, desires, and cares of the agent are undermined by external circumstances, altering the agent's experience of themselves and how they are able to act on their values and commitments (McQueen, 2017). The agent's sense of themselves as an individual, which is characterized by their unique grasp on the world and what they take to be significant, is disrupted.¹⁴ In a transformative experience, the agent has to recreate a stable sense of self and intentional structure that fits their new circumstances. For example, in grief, one's reasons for action are undermined in pervasive and systemic ways. The bereaved individual can no longer call the deceased, cook with them, celebrate holidays, or follow through on many other intentions that come naturally to them and that form a core part of their sense of self.¹⁵ The deep problem of agency in grief is not whether (or how) specific actions taken by the griever are intentional, but rather how they remake the structure of their intentions to accommodate the changed relationship to the deceased.

We might look to the literature on transformative experience to solve this problem, but this aspect of agency has not yet been addressed. The literature thus far has identified a problem for agency arising from transformative experiences, but it is the problem of how we can choose to have these experiences. More precisely, how can we rationally choose to have a transformative experience given that we don't know its value prior to having it, and our values

¹⁴ The problem of agency I discuss refers to how one's agency and sense of self are disrupted during a transformative experience. I am not referring to a disruption to one's "identity" in the sense of numerical identity (see Crone, 2021).

¹⁵ Here I am referring to the agent's experience of themselves, in particular as an agent with certain values, projects, and relationships. The possibilities for thought and action that the agent experiences in their environment correspond to a sense of oneself as an agent, and are reflective of the agent's practical identity (McQueen, 2017).

and preferences will change as a result of the experience? (Paul, 2014, 2015) Both the problem and solution focus on the unitary agent prior to and following a transformative experience. The agent both pre- and post-transformation has certain values and preferences — the trouble is that we have access only to their pre-transformation preferences and, moreover, don't know whose preferences to prioritize in decision-making. This framing of transformative choice says little about the process in-between these endpoints, during which the agent lacks stable values and preferences. Yet this transformative phase is a (if not the) central explanandum of transformative experience research — these experiences are unique precisely because they create ruptures of one's sense of self and place the agent in the position of having to reconstitute themselves, in the sense of reorganize their values and preferences, as well as other features such as their habits, desires, social roles, and so on.

The challenge of reconstituting oneself as an agent is most readily apparent when we examine unchosen transformative experiences. Unchosen transformative experiences reveal the problem of agency most clearly, as there is no projection from the pre-transformation agent to their post-transformation self. There is no antecedent desire to find out what the experience will be like, or aspiration to become a certain sort of person, that the agent can use to frame these experiences. For this reason, I will treat unchosen transformative experiences as a paradigm case through which we can gain a better understanding of this aspect of agency in both chosen and unchosen transformative experiences. In the section “Chosen transformative experiences” below, I will indicate how the account I give for unchosen transformative experiences may also apply to some instances of chosen transformative experiences.

Examining unchosen transformative experiences highlights a novel and deep form of agency that has to do with an agent's ability to reconstitute themselves in the face of external

disruptions. I argue that this reconstitution is a process of sense-making through which an agent reorganizes their experience by establishing new practical meanings and habits. ‘Sense-making’ is a concept from the enactivist framework in philosophy of mind and cognitive science, and refers to an organism’s creating a meaningful world through its interaction with the environment (Thompson, 2007). Previous enactivist approaches to agency have theorized sense-making as a minimal form of agency that can serve as a basis for scientific research, modeling, and AI (Barandiaran, Di Paolo, & Rohde, 2009). Here I will build on these enactivist approaches by using the notion of sense-making to describe how human agents enact meaning in light of the disruptions created by a transformative experience. Transformative experiences disrupt an agent’s *systems of possibilities*: the structures of practical meaning that an agent uses to act in and interpret their world (Ratcliffe, 2019b). An agent’s sense-making activity involves reorganizing these structures, finding and establishing another stable arrangement. On this view, the values, plans, and intentions that an agent has are embedded in the way they frame situations around them. How the agent makes sense of the situation is thus what reconstitutes their self.

2.2 Unchosen transformative experiences

I will begin with an example of an unchosen transformative experience:

It’s night and I am cycling home after a dinner with friends. I’m turning left onto my street when light comes flooding onto me from over the hill. It’s a sedan headed towards me. Midway through my turn, it’s only a metre away already. “Oh,” I think, “this is going to hit me.” I come to lying on the pavement. There are people standing around me at a distance. Like a light bulb being switched on, at first I have no

discursive thoughts. Then a narrative sequence comes to me as if I am being given a quick recap about myself (*These are the events that have led you here this evening. You are...*). I lift my head up slowly and touch my hair. It's wet. I look at my fingers. They're dark with blood. I start screaming. "Oh my god!" I'm screaming and crying. A woman kneels down and holds my hand. "It's going to be okay," she says.

An ambulance arrives. They transfer me onto a stretcher without disrupting the position of my body. Straps are fastened over me. I feel snug, like a gently contained animal. They put me in the ambulance. I am still screaming and crying. "Are you in pain or is it just adrenaline?" the paramedic asks me. "It's just adrenaline," I say, vaguely realizing this is the physiological explanation of my behaviour. We arrive and they wheel me into the ER. "Just like on TV" I think, as they move me through the hospital halls with the lights whizzing by overhead. Everything happens as if it's suspended in darkness — a serious, wild, unpredictability. There is an acute and sinisterly exciting potential to everything. They station me in a small area to myself. Several doctors and nurses begin to examine me. They place me in a CAT scanner to test for brain damage. At some point, I lift my left arm and see a baseball-sized lump at my wrist. It's cartoonish and grotesque, and makes me gasp. They tell me I have two fractures, one in my wrist and one in my ankle. The one in my ankle is unstable and requires surgery, for which I will have to wait overnight.

I am taken to a much quieter room in the orthopaedics trauma ward. The next day I am connected to an IV while I wait for surgery. I look out the tall institutional windows at the summer days that people are having. The surgery does not happen that day, or for several other days. I spend these days calling friends and family and more

or less going along with whatever therapies, exercises, and pills are given to me by the medical professionals orbiting around me. I am suspicious of the bureaucratic slippages — a man comes to take my breakfast order but I can't eat breakfast and in any case no breakfast arrives — and frustrated at my passivity — I need to press a button so that a nurse will come and wheel me to the bathroom. But I am also alive. And I feel alive, maybe more than ever. One evening a kind nurse gives me towels to bathe with (instead of negligibly effective wet wipes). I find myself, standing on one leg, alone by the bathroom sink. I gaze at my wolf eyes and feral body in the hospital mirror and feel god, present and black as space, all around me. I am suddenly baffled by the thought that getting hit by a car is “bad”. My former uses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ seem questionable, like a child putting stickers on furniture, at whim and without any real distinction.

After five days of waiting, the surgery suddenly happens. After another night in the hospital I am discharged to my partner's house in a wheelchair. When we arrive, we find that they have to rearrange everything: the table needs space from the couch, carpets are impassable, they have the wrong kind of shower head. I sleep and eat for a week. I enter into somewhat of a routine. The daytime, while my partner is out, is long and tedious. The objects around me feel empty, overused, obstinate. Many of the activities that I can do seem thin, unlikely to grow into anything. I feel almost like a too-sentient pet. Every day, my partner wheels me around downtown or on the seawall. Often, people look at me. Or rather, at my body. Their eyes are glazed over, their thoughts wrapped up inside them. It is cold and I am sedentary, wearing a sweater and pants over my casts. “What is wrong with this young woman?” they must

be wondering. “Keep it to yourself!” I want to shout. The efficiency with which people’s eyes snap onto me makes me feel like I am a foreigner, of which a united mass has been made aware.

The weeks go on. I feel cut off from the world — the productive world, the social world, the world of activity. I feel that I have dropped out of the consensus reality. Simple activities are intricate in ways that, as I repeat them, give me a perspective offset from those around me. What it takes for me to meet someone, to go outside, to move unencumbered in my home are unclear to others, resulting in a greater difficulty connecting.

After six weeks, my casts are removed. At first I gleefully walk out of the treatment room, out of the hospital, out of my friend’s car into my partner’s apartment. But then, pacing around the apartment, I feel a horrible stab of pain like I’ve never felt before. My healing turns out to be much more gradual. My family friend drives me to physiotherapy at the hospital (picture a colourful vintage gym filled with injured people) multiple times a week, then less and less often. After six months, I can comfortably walk six blocks. This essentially reintroduces me to the world — I can go to a cafe, an art show, a dinner, without worrying whether I will get “stranded.” I am somewhat wary to be part of the world again. I had felt perilously close to gaps in institutional and social nets of care and recognition. Why celebrate once again being merely lucky? How long will I be lucky this time?

This experience highlights central features of unchosen transformative experiences. Unchosen transformative experiences create a dual disruption to one’s experience of the world

and one's sense of self. They create a global disruption to one's experience of the world in that the changes involved in the transformative experience permeate many or all aspects of an agent's life. The global change in one's experience corresponds to a change to one's agency and sense of self. Unchosen transformative experiences create disruptions to an agent's stable patterns of thought and action, including their expectations, plans, desires, and habits. These features reflect the agent's practical identity, the commitments, values, social roles, and other features that give them reason to act as they do (Korsgaard, 2009; McQueen, 2017), as well as their "identity" in the colloquial sense of personality (Crone, 2021). Unchosen transformative experiences also disrupt the agent's sense of self, in the sense of their point of view or perspective. This aspect of the sense of self is equivalent to the notion of personal point of view that L. A. Paul appeals to in subjective deliberation (Paul, 2014, pp.24-30). In an unchosen transformative experience, the agent can no longer inhabit the world in the way that is natural to and distinctive of them. While in the midst of these experiences, they find themselves in a predicament: the established ways they have of doing things are no longer applicable, but they have yet to develop ways of being that are appropriate to their present circumstances. This problem of how the agent reconstitutes the structure of their thought and action is the deep problem of agency for unchosen transformative experiences.

2.3 Transformative choice

Unchosen experiences such as the case I give above, fit Paul's definition of transformative experiences (Paul, 2014, 2015). Paul defines a transformative experience as one that is both epistemically and personally transformative. An experience is *epistemically transformative* when it teaches the agent something they did not know prior to having the

experience, and it is *personally transformative* when it changes the agent's experience of themselves, and their values and preferences. Experiences of illness, accident, grief, and trauma fit this definition:¹⁶ they give the agent knowledge that they can gain only by having the experience, and they change the agent's experience of themselves. However, unchosen transformative experiences are excluded from Paul's analysis (and much of the subsequent literature) because the focus of the analysis is the problem of transformative choice.

Paul argues that transformative experiences pose a problem for rational decision theory. Specifically the problem is whether one can choose to have a transformative experience in a way that is both rational and authentic. An agent chooses rationally by choosing according to the norms of rational decision theory, that is, choosing the outcome with the highest expected value. Taking into account the probabilities of the outcomes and the value of each outcome given their preferences, the agent chooses the action that will lead to the highest-value outcome. To choose authentically as well as rationally, Paul argues that the agent ought to employ the *subjective values* of the outcomes. They ought to choose according to the first-personal value of the outcomes rather than the third-personal or objective value (for instance, the outcome with the greatest moral value).

Paul articulates two problems for transformative choice. One problem is that the agent does not have access to the subjective value of an experience until they have that experience. Paul supports this point using Frank Jackson's thought experiment of Mary the black-and-white scientist (Jackson, 1986). Just as Mary doesn't know what it's like to see red until she leaves the black-and-white room, an agent making a transformative choice doesn't know the subjective

¹⁶ More precisely, these experiences fit the definition as well as the cases discussed in the literature. With respect to epistemic transformations, one might object to the claim that an agent cannot gain "what it's like" knowledge third-personally, at least in principle (see Paul, 2014, p.9 n.7).

value of the transformative experience before having it (though see Chang, 2015) and thus cannot follow the rational decision theoretic procedure (though see Dougherty, Horowitz, & Sliwa, 2015). A second problem for transformative choice is that, because it is personally transformative, an agent's values and preferences will change as a result of the experience. Thus, even if the agent could know their future preferences, they would not know whose preferences to use in decision-making — their current preferences or their future ones (though see Barnes, 2015; McKinnon, 2015; McQueen, 2017; see also Pettigrew, 2020).

The focus on transformative choice in the literature leaves out common transformative experiences such as grief, accident, illness, and trauma. Recently, other authors have argued for an expansion of the transformative experience framework (Carel & Kidd, 2020), or addressed unchosen transformative experiences (Thompson, 2020). Carel and Kidd argue that the transformative experience framework should be expanded to include nonvoluntary and involuntary transformative experiences (that is, experiences that are imposed by external circumstances or that are the unintended consequences of an agent's choice, respectively), as well as positive and negative epistemic and personal transformations. Thompson gives an analysis of dying as a transformative experience, arguing that it is epistemically, personally, and existentially transformative.

The focus on transformative choice, especially as a one-time decision, also leaves out the problem of agency for unchosen transformative experiences, namely, how an agent can act intentionally when the projects that form part of their practical identity are undermined by external events. Carel and Kidd (2020) make a related criticism, arguing that Paul's account fails to do justice to the "facts of life" (2020, S.2): the contingency, vulnerability, and lack of control intrinsic to human life. They argue that an account of agency in transformative experiences

should not abstract or idealize away from the biological, social, and political conditions in which our choices are made, but rather incorporate how our decision-making is shaped by them.

Other authors also argue for broader or alternative methods of transformative decision-making. For instance, Agnes Callard (2018) argues that we can gradually (and rationally) work our way into new preferences through a process of aspiration. When aspiring to something, we use proleptic (essentially, interim) reasons to act in accordance with our future preferences while gradually developing those preferences. This approach is important because Callard emphasizes that transformation requires an ongoing commitment on the part of the agent, and highlights the agent's activity throughout the process of transformation.

Another line of critique is that Paul's account does not do justice to the world-involving nature of experience. On Paul's account, experiences have intrinsic natures that are revealed to us when we have those experiences. The notion of revelation (of having the subjective value of the experience revealed to you) places the agent in the position of passively receiving the experience's value, rather than actively creating and interpreting it through their ongoing activity. Several authors criticize Paul's conception of subjective value or the claim that knowing the subjective value of an experience is required for rationally making a transformative choice (Kauppinen, 2015; Chang, 2015; Harman, 2015; Dougherty, Horowitz, & Sliwa, 2015). For instance, it is unclear how an intrinsic property can also be responsive to relational features such as veridicality (Kauppinen, 2015; see also Chang, 2015). John Campbell also argues that Paul's account uses internalist conceptions of imagination and experience, in that an agent making a transformative decision imagines their future qualia rather than features of the world (Campbell, 2015). Regardless of the outcomes of these specific debates, the criticisms highlight that the

transformative experience framework tends to conceptualize experience in a way that divorces it from the agent's interaction with the world.

Finally, given the focus on transformative choice and the decision theoretic literature used to address that issue, the transformative experience literature does not address and therefore fails to capture core phenomenological features of transformative experience. For example, though personal transformation is described in a variety of ways including changes to one's self-experience, who one is, and one's point of view, it is mainly discussed as a change to the agent's values and preferences. This conception doesn't capture the complexity of personal transformation, which goes beyond changes to the agent's values and preferences to encompass their habits, patterns of attention, emotional dispositions, and other features. Furthermore, some transformative experiences involve a more complex relationship between personal transformation and the agent's values and preferences. For instance, grief is a transformative experience in which the agent (at least initially) keeps their values and preferences, and their doing so affects the character of the experience. Moreover, their values and preferences are not changed by the experience *per se* (at least not completely), but rather by the agent's active response to that experience. Another key phenomenological feature of transformative experiences is noted in the previous section, namely, that transformative experiences involve global experiential changes. Personal transformation, involving changes to the agent's activities, their social relationships, and their sense of their own body, shift the agent's background orientation to the world. One implication of this point is that the epistemic transformation of (fully) transformative experiences differs from the epistemic transformation of merely epistemically transformative experiences. My tasting durian for the first time involves new taste

experience in a preserved experiential background, whereas my accident experience involves a global shift in my experience, not limited to the events of the accident itself.

2.4 Sense-making and practical meaning

Transformative experiences create a global disruption in an agent's experience of the world. The experience of disruption arises from conflicts between established practical meanings and current circumstances. In this section, I will give a description of the experience of practical meanings through the enactivist notion of sense-making in precarious conditions and the phenomenological notion of experienced possibilities. In a transformative experience, the agent's systems of possibility are reorganized through their sense-making activity. First I will give examples of sense-making in transformative experiences and then give a phenomenological analysis of systems of possibility in transformative experience.

According to enactivism, cognitive beings, specifically animals and persons, are autonomous agents that generate and maintain their individuality in precarious conditions (Thompson, 2007; Di Paolo & Thompson, 2014). "Precarious conditions" means that the environment is constantly changing and challenging, such that the processes that constitute an autonomous agent will tend to run down, dissipate, or atrophy in the absence of that agent's own self-generating and self-maintaining activities. By maintaining themselves in precarious conditions, agents enact meaning and relevance in and through their interactions with the environment.¹⁷

In an unchosen transformative experience, an agent responds and adjusts to a significant disruption through a process of sense-making in precarious conditions. In gaining a certain kind

¹⁷ For the details of the enactivist framework, see Thompson (2007, 2015), Di Paolo & Thompson (2014), Fuchs (2018), Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher (2018), and De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007).

of embodied understanding — by having a kind of practical capability with or mastery of certain ways of interacting with the environment — the agent alters their practical meanings and sense of what is relevant. For example, after my accident I had to learn to move around and do basic tasks while wearing two casts. These new conditions were precarious; they posed a challenge to my ability to act in my environment. In one instance, I wanted to make coffee but was stuck outside the kitchen because my wheelchair couldn't fit. I didn't know if the problem was remediable but, in an attempt to resolve it, I parked the wheelchair at the end of the kitchen and shuffled in on one foot while holding on to the cabinets. As long as I was careful about keeping my balance, I could operate in the kitchen just fine in this way. In this case, the new circumstance I inhabited was actualized through my sense-making activity.

The process of reorganization in transformative experiences also involve sense-making with other people, or *participatory sense-making*. Participatory sense-making is the coordination of two (or more) agents' intentional activity in a social encounter, such that each of their individual sense-making is affected, and new domains for sense-making appear that were not available to the participants individually (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). For example, my partner pushed my wheelchair during our daily walks, which involved considerable coordination between our behaviour. This included overt communication such as my giving them feedback about which roads are uncomfortable, or signaling to them when to turn. It also included the coordination of more basic bodily movements such as weight shifting and changes in the velocity of their pushing. Over time we each learned the other's movement patterns so that we could make the appropriate adjustments and hold up our end of the coordinated action. In this way we also developed a shared sense of the situations we encountered. We saw certain roads as

“bad” or “good,” some hills as untraversable, and, in general, shared a sense of which things were relevant to our activity.

A key implication of the enactivist notion of sense-making is that the body is not devoid of subjecthood, but that we think and experience through our bodies. For this reason, any investigation of how an agent and their experience of the world change through the course of a transformation has to look to our embodied interactions with the world and how these interactions establish an implicit background of experiential significance. To get at the phenomenological side of sense-making in transformative experience, I will draw from Matthew Ratcliffe’s notion of *existential feelings*, a development of the Heideggerian concept of mood, as well as the phenomenological concept of *possibilities*, developed in the works of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists. In the next section, I use Ratcliffe’s notion of systems of possibilities and William James’ account of conversion to argue that a transformative experience is a rearrangement of one’s systems of possibilities.

On the phenomenological analysis given by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and other phenomenologists, our experience of the world includes practically significant possibilities pertaining to the situations that we are in (Jackson, 2018; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Ratcliffe, 2008). The perception of an object includes not only what presently appears to us, but possibilities for how the perceptual experience could develop. We could, for example, turn the object to see another side of it, walk around the object, or pick it up. The connection between the possibilities enabled by our engagement with the object and its actual appearance give us the sense that we are perceiving the same object over time. Possibilities are delineated by our embodied relation to the world and our affective capabilities. Only certain possibilities appear in our experience, and this is due to our bodily skills and the skills of those around us. When I use

‘practical meanings,’ I refer to these possibilities for practical engagement as well as the surrounding expectations relevant to practical engagement. We perceive possibilities for action, for events that could occur, for the actions of others, and for other ways in which objects can be significant for us.

The notion of existential feelings, developed by Ratcliffe as an interpretation of Heidegger’s concept of mood, can be seen as a phenomenological description of one of the roles of affect in our sense-making activity (Ratcliffe, 2008). Existential feelings are bodily feelings that play a role in constituting our experience of the world. Unlike emotions, which are directed at particular objects in our experience (such as anger that another person went ahead of me in line), existential feelings have a more general role in our experience. They delineate a context in which things can appear as significant. In other words, they affect which possibilities we encounter. The felt disruptions that are part of an unchosen transformative experience are mood-like in Heidegger’s sense: phenomenologically, they involve changes to an agent’s sense of reality, analyzable in terms of the possibilities that appear in their experience. The initial hours after my accident are illustrative of this affective alteration to the sense of reality. After the impact, I was in a state of high adrenaline and uncertainty about my bodily condition. The situation was imbued with a nightmarish mood — everything seemed terribly significant, unpredictable, yet strangely detached or surreal. The ground of expectations about how the situation could unfold was underdeveloped, and I experienced it as shifting and unstable. Given the radically unexpected nature of the events and my passivity in them, I also lacked possibilities for action that would make the situation seem real or tangible. The absence of practical possibilities gave the situation an air of suspension and discontinuity with the rest of my life.

The practical meanings we experience are also determined by our bodily relatedness to the world. Our body's primary way of orienting to the world is practical and skillful, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "motor intentionality" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p.113). Motor intentionality is our bodily directedness to the world: how the body refers to objects not by representing them but by moving towards them in light of our goals. Motor intentionality is not unconscious; rather, our bodily directedness to the world appears in our experience as an implicit awareness of potential and actual movements. Motor intentionality allows us to frame situations in light of our intentions, or "project" a situation around us (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p.114-5; Jackson, 2018). For example, rearranging the furniture in my partner's home after being discharged required perceptually organizing the space in relation to a potential situation, namely, my moving in the space with a wheelchair. Motor intentionality also allows us to respond to affordances in the environment, that is, the motor meanings of one's surroundings that arise from the relation between one's bodily skills and features of the environment (Jackson, 2018). For example, perceiving that a chair affords sitting or that a knife affords cutting. We know these functions propositionally, but we also know them via their motor significance, and it is this latter knowledge that allows for flexible behaviour.

The lived body has an important temporal element, insofar as repeated activities become sedimented into skills and habits as part of one's body schema. The body schema is the system of processes that regulate posture and movement in the service of intentional actions, as well as the implicit sense of our own bodies (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012). Habits and skills become part of our body schema and serve to organize our actions and experience of the world. In transformative experiences, rapid changes in one's circumstances can lead to conflicts between one's "habitual body" (the habitual arrangement of one's body schema) and one's present body

(one's current bodily capacities). For example, early on after my accident I had the frequent experience of being solicited to act in ways that were no longer possible: I felt the urge to run to the other room to grab something, or get up to answer the door when I heard a knock. Part of the process of transformation was the alteration of motor meanings in relation to my current (and changing) abilities.

2.5 Systems of possibility

Our sense-making activities are organized into stable patterns or systems. We have established, habitual ways of doing things that permeate how we encounter situations and how we relate to others. These are *systems of possibility*, the practical meanings that sustain a project or relationship (Ratcliffe, 2019b). For example, an intimate relationship involves a system of possibilities insofar as there is a collection of practical meanings unified around the activity of being in and sustaining the relationship. There are things that we do together, for each other, because of each other and our shared goals, and these things make sense only because of our relationship (*ibid.*).

The practical meanings that make up a system of possibility are built up in part from one's habitual and skilled activity. For example, as parties to a relationship, we have gestures, patterns of speech and touch, and activities that are stable and specific to us. They make up the habitual aspects of our participatory sense-making. A system of practical meanings also includes patterns of attention relevant to the project or relationship (*ibid.*). For situations that involve my partner, I perceive these situations as meaningful (dreadful, promising, exciting, irrelevant) in relation our goals and concerns. Equally, situations that don't directly involve my partner are still experienced in light of the practical meanings that we have developed together. I may look

forward to telling them about the event, and notice things related to their and our shared experiences.

Systems of possibility form a scaffolding for our agency: they allow us to organize our activity so that we can maintain certain projects over time. We do not have to make a decision every time we act to further our projects and relationships, rather our habits and patterns of attention co-ordinate with external structures to build these projects into our lives. Our core projects and relationships become the taken-for-granted background against which we act.

A transformative experience involves the restructuring or reorganization of one's systems of possibility. The practical meanings that an agent experiences in the world change, and how their projects and relationships are situated in relation to one another changes. The analysis of transformative experience as restructuring is one I am adapting from William James' account of conversion (1917), which he defines as a rearrangement of one's systems of ideas. On James' account, one's dominant system of ideas loses its emotional import, eventually becoming displaced by another, formerly peripheral, system. In conversion, religious ideas come to occupy the dominant position in one's mind, what James calls the "habitual centre of personal energy." James' notion of restructuring is generalizable, giving an analysis of transformative experiences that is applicable beyond conversion. The trajectory of a transformative experience, however, may be different from James' account. An agent, especially one undergoing an unchosen transformative experience, may not have an alternate system ready to "take over" when they lose a central system of possibilities. Nor do they know how their projects and relationships are to be reconfigured in the wake of a transformative change.

The restructuring of an agent's systems of possibility that occurs in an unchosen transformative experience is a dramatic instance of the restructuring that living beings do in

response to disturbances from the environment (Barandiaran et al., 2009; Thompson, 2007). The rearrangement of an agent's systems of possibility is created through their sense-making activity. The agent has to "relearn the world" (in Thomas Attig's 2011 sense): determine the practical significance of the transformative event in the various domains of their life. They have to relearn, for instance, their work, their body, their relationships, and their home in the wake of the transformative experience. Given that a transformative experience disrupts the implicit background by which things are practically significant, the meanings of things, even mundane activities, will be lost and have to be relearned.

Above, I gave the example of relearning how to make coffee by moving around in the kitchen on one leg. Initially I did not have an established way of doing things, and the situation presented itself as indeterminate. As I made sense of the situation by figuring out a suitable method through my bodily activity, it settled into definition. With practice, the new way of making coffee became a habit with associated practical meanings and patterns of attention. This process repeated itself with many other daily activities. For instance, bathing is completely different with casts and involves a ritual of coating one's limbs in plastic wrap. In fact, the entire way I had of attending to and moving in a shower was contingent on my physical abilities and had to be readjusted. Through a process of sense-making I began to establish a way that I did this activity. As I settled into these new forms of engagement, the practical meanings for things around me shifted as well.

Above I describe the experience of being socially visible due to disability. We can analyze this experience with the notion of participatory sense-making to give an idea of the resulting changes to practical significance. Participatory sense-making requires coordinated action between two autonomous agents, and regulation of the coordinated action by these agents.

In the street encounters, there was coordinated action between the agents, particularly, mutual eye contact and mutual attention (for instance, eye movements and turning of the head).

However, they were not regulated so as to be sustained as social interactions. And, the scope of my individual autonomy was diminished: I was not treated as a social agent, but rather as an object of cognition for the other agent. This affected my experience of public space as well as my experience of myself as a social agent. Public space was not there for me in the same way; I could not move through it stealthily, either physically or socially. And I experienced myself as public — publicly visible and available — in a way I had not before.

It is these sorts of day-to-day activities that lead to the revision of the practical meanings of an agent's surroundings, and that change their perspective. In relation to transformative experience, what the experience means and how it changes the agent are not discovered or revealed so much as they are created. The agent's transformation — the alteration of their projects, activities, values, etc. — is an active and collaborative process. The significance of the transformative experience arises through the agent making sense of their circumstances by interacting with the world and with others.

The deeper problem of agency, namely, how an agent re-establishes the scaffolding that sustains their central projects and relationships, is resolved by the agent through their activity. By navigating the transformative experience in the various situations they encounter, the agent re-situates their projects and relationships into a stable arrangement, and re-establishes a body of practical meanings for the world around them. For instance, the shift in the system of possibilities related to my home life occurred as a set of activities (cooking, sleeping, bathing) for sustaining myself in the domestic space changed, shifting the overall pattern of this facet of my life. Similarly for the system of possibilities related to my work, as changes to my physical

abilities altered how I could engage in professional activities (such as how I attended conferences and lectures), and emotionally connected me to the projects I could still participate in. Shifts in an agent's systems of possibility, then, occur in a bottom-up manner through the alterations in practical meaning generated through the agent's activity in their changed circumstances.

It is worth returning to the relationship between agency and intentional action in unchosen transformative experiences. What is the status of an agent's actions during the process of rearranging their systems of possibility—are they intentional or unintentional? Many of these actions are intentional, such as the above example of making coffee. My making coffee is an intentional action, though there were complications about how to follow through on that intention. It may seem that if these actions are intentional, there is nothing interesting to say about the puzzle of agency. Nonetheless, there is more going on in a transformative experience than the agent acting intentionally while in some ways being the patient of an external event. An unchosen transformative experience presents a more fundamental problem for agency for two reasons. One, an agent's intentions are supported by their habits and bodily know-how. Motor processes are necessary for fulfilling the intentions that an agent has at the descriptive level of "I want to make coffee." Additionally, an agent's sense that they can fulfill an intention is a component of formulating it. If I want to make coffee but believe it is impossible for me to get to the kitchen, then I can't formulate an intention to make coffee. Or, if I want to make coffee but don't know how to get to the kitchen, I can form an intention but it will be vague on the details of implementation. These considerations are especially salient in a case like mine, where one's physical abilities are altered. However they are relevant at a more abstract level for other transformative experiences. For example, a griever may intend to have dinner but, without their

deceased partner, what they intend to do has changed and how they will fulfill that intention may be unclear to them. It is thus a nontrivial undertaking to revise the habitual scaffolding of one's agency, even though some of one's intentions stay constant under some descriptions.

There is a second way in which the problem of agency in a transformative experience is more fundamental than the standard conception of agency as intentional action, and that is that one's projects can be made impossible by an unchosen transformative experience. The agent can engage in intentional actions such as making coffee, but the overall organization of their life by which they pursue their projects is disrupted. This is the case, for example, in transformative grief. The loss of the system of possibilities related to the loved one results in a loss of significance for many of the griever's actions. In these circumstances, an agent's sense-making activity creates the possibility for creating new systems of practical meaning with which to organize their activities.

Relatedly, an unchosen transformative experience can alter or put into question an agent's values. For example, prior to my accident, I valued independence, and intellectual and emotional connection in my friendships. After my accident, this value system struck me as brittle — a fragile reliance on my body keeping its current features. On the view I have given here, what the agent values shows up and is altered through their experiences and activities. That is, what the agent values is founded on which possibilities appear for them and on what they notice, what seems important, exciting, or threatening, how they experience their day-to-day surroundings, and so on. Their values change through their reciprocal interaction with the world — their possibilities alter as they act differently and reflect on and react to the outcomes of their actions. So, in the example above, my becoming less individualistic or valuing pragmatic

relationships more is going to be expressed in terms of my current sense-making: how do I act in my interpersonal interactions now? Which features do I now experience as relevant?

2.6 Chosen transformative experiences

I have given an analysis of unchosen transformative experiences whereby their central feature is the restructuring of systems of practical meanings that organize one's life. Although I have taken unchosen experiences as the central case, my analysis is generalizable to other transformative experiences. Having a child, the paradigmatic case of transformative choice in the literature thus far, can involve a drastic restructuring of one's systems of possibility. Similarly for other canonical examples like gaining a new sensory ability. These are sweeping changes that affect how an agent experiences their environment as practically significant and how their projects and relationships are organized.

Whether a transformative experience serves as a global disruption for the agent may have more to do with how the rearrangement occurs rather than whether it was chosen. An agent who restructures their systems of possibilities through a process of aspiration (Callard, 2018) is less likely to experience the transformation as a disruption, because they have arrived gradually at their new activities and habits. Similarly for an agent who breaks a transformative choice down into smaller decisions, or who "drifts" into the decision through incremental steps (Ullmann-Margalit, 2006). But, an agent whose systems of possibility change quickly, who has not acclimatized themselves to the transformative experience, may have an experience of global disruption similar to an unchosen transformative experience. For example, in her memoir *A life's work: On becoming a mother*, Rachel Cusk experiences motherhood as a rupture between her old self and her new self (Cusk, 2015, p.56).

I am surprised to discover how easily I have split in two. ... Like a divided stream, the person and the mother pay each other no need, although moments earlier they were indistinguishable: they tumble forwards, each with its separate life, driven by the same source but seeking no longer to correspond.

Motherhood is experienced as a disruption that she agrees to but is very much ambivalent about, and Cusk vacillates between identifying as a mother and experiencing motherhood as an alien condition. She feels sorrow at the loss of her former life and bewilderment at what motherhood actually involves. Over time this conflict is alleviated as Cusk is changed by the work of motherhood into a more relationally attuned person.

We can see a similar pattern in a transformative experience of receiving a cochlear implant (Finlay & Molano-Fisher, 2008). In a phenomenological case study of receiving a cochlear implant, Molano-Fisher, the participant, describes with ambivalence the process of learning to hear (*ibid.*, p.261, emphasis in original):

I don't want to face deafness, disability, implants anymore... I don't like... that I cannot follow things like others do even with the implant. It scares me that I really like my silence and I miss it and I found it hard to cope with the noise even if it helps and makes me *more part of things*. Even if I have progressed, I feel I will never feel 'normal' as I felt before because my bubble has been burst!

The implant simultaneously connects her to the world by allowing her to access new sounds, and disconnects her, as she is expected by those around her to participate in the world of the hearing as they do. For Molano-Fisher, obtaining a cochlear implant thus presents not only the acquisition of novel sensory experiences but also the global disruption of her experience of the world. In addition to learning to recognize sound, the process of transformation involves integrating her newfound abilities (as well as their limitations) into her working life, her social relationships, and her sense of self.

Whether an agent experiences a transformative experience as a disruption depends on how drastic the change in their system of possibilities is and, likely, its emotional valence (though see Parkes, 1971, p.102). However, whether we chose it or not, the significance of a transformative experience is determined through our activities.

2.7 Conclusion

Unchosen transformative experiences highlight a deep problem of agency for transformative experiences: transformative experiences disrupt stable systems of practical meaning that organize an agent's experience and agency. I have given a phenomenological analysis of transformative experience as a reorganization of systems of possibilities that occurs through the agent's sense-making activity. On this analysis, an agent is transformed by making sense of the experience in the many situations they encounter. This analysis emphasizes a different aspect of agency than the rational choice model. Rather than focusing on the one-time decision to undergo the experience, the focus is on how the agent's ongoing activity determines its significance. This analysis has applications to some chosen transformative experiences, in particular, experiences that involve sudden changes to the agent's circumstances.

Chapter 3: Transformative grief

3.1 Introduction

Consider this description of grief from Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2007, pp.26-7):

Grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be. It was not what I felt when my parents died... What I felt in each instance was sadness, loneliness... regret for time gone by, for things unsaid, for my inability to share or even in any real way to acknowledge, at the end, the pain and helplessness and physical humiliation they each endured. I understood the inevitability of each of their deaths. I had been expecting (fearing, dreading, anticipating) those deaths all my life. They remained when they did occur, distanced, at a remove from the ongoing dailiness of my life... My father was dead, my mother was dead, I would need for a while to watch for mines, but I would still get up in the morning and send out the laundry. /I would still plan a menu for Easter lunch. /I would still remember to renew my passport. /Grief is different.

Didion is making, on the face of it, a strange claim, namely, that what she experienced after the death of her parents wasn't grief. Grief obliterates one's daily routines, calls one's life into question, and is something that we cannot understand until it happens. If a loss produces only sadness, loneliness, regret, and reflection, without upsetting the structure of our lives, it does not create genuine grief. For Didion, "grief" is reserved for what I will call "transformative grief." Grief can be transformative in L. A. Paul's sense (2014, 2015): you cannot know what it

is like until you undergo it, and it may radically transform you in ways that you cannot grasp until it has happened. In this chapter, I aim to illuminate this sort of grief experience.

I will argue that profound grief is a transformation of the self and thus can be classified as a kind of transformative experience. Grief transforms the self in the following four ways: (i) cognitively, by altering, or forcing a person to alter, a wide range of their beliefs and desires; (ii) phenomenologically, by disrupting the taken-for-granted background structure of a person's experience; (iii) normatively, by being a loss of an object of practical identity investment, and thus requiring a person to review and/or revise their practical identity; and (iv) existentially, by forcing a practical acquaintance with a structuring condition of one's life.

I will argue that grief is a particular kind of transformative experience, that is, an unchosen transformative experience, or an event-based transformation that is not chosen by the agent (Markovic, 2022). This includes experiences such as illness, accident, or job loss that are not the result of a transformative choice (Paul 2014, 2015; Ullmann-Margalit, 2006). Instead, they are experiences in which an agent is changed by an event that occurs to them (Chang, 2015, p.238), and that they did not choose to experience.

Regarding grief as a transformative experience sharpens our understanding of grief's unique features. It also provides a paradigm for understanding unchosen transformative experiences and thereby deepens our understanding of the concept of transformative experience and its relation to that of agency.

3.2 Grief emotions versus grief experience

Grief is commonly assumed to be an emotion. This approach is reflected in a lot of philosophical theorizing on grief (e.g. Gustafson, 1989; McCracken, 2005; Nussbaum, 2001). On

an emotional approach, grief includes an intentional directedness to the deceased, and cognitive content, for example, that a loved one has died, or that a person who is important to one's well-being has died. It may also include a feeling component, a motivation (e.g., to honor the deceased, McCracken, 2005), or a desire (e.g., for their return, see Gustafson, 1989; Price, 2010).

In relation to paradigmatic emotions such as fear or joy, grief is an oddity. It is long-term, on the order of weeks, months, and years rather than minutes. Moreover, it is necessarily long-term: if someone was upset only briefly in response to a loss, we would doubt that what they felt was grief (Goldie, 2012, p.59). Grief is also dispositional rather than occurrent. One can be said to be grieving in the way one is writing a book—it is happening in an ongoing fashion even when one is not currently engaged in it (Goldie, 2012, pp.61–64). Grief emotions are varied in a way that differs from other, even dispositional, emotions. If one is said to feel guilt or resentment for a period of time, it is assumed that more or less the same feeling arises each time the emotion is occurrent. With grief, however, a person may feel anger, yearning, guilt, and other emotions at varying points in the process (some theories classify these emotions as stages of grief, for example, Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Although grief is most characteristically marked by sadness and yearning, there is not a single emotional quality that permeates the entire grieving process.

Given these challenges, some emotional approaches focus on the cognitive content that unifies these emotional episodes. For example, Martha Nussbaum's cognitivist theory of emotions defines grief as the judgment that someone important to one's well-being has died (2001). This judgment underscores the thoughts that may arise in grief (and, on a cognitivist view, feeling states do not individuate emotions). Others argue that grief is a unique type of emotion, or that it is an emotional process. For example, Maclaren (2011) argues that grief is

an *existential passion*. Whereas some emotions are “clichés,” relying on habitual ways of understanding and experiencing the world, others are existential passions, emotions that unsettle our habitual ways of making sense of things. Existential passions require a “creative” act from the person experiencing them—they have to create a new way of negotiating the world that also redefines them as a subject (p.61). Ratcliffe (2017, 2019b, 2022; Ratcliffe et al., 2023) argues that grief involves the loss of a *system of possibilities*: a body of practical meanings, that is, expectations, thoughts, actions, and so on that sustain the relationship or are intelligible only given the relationship (see Section 3.4.2). For Ratcliffe, grief is an emotional process that is intentionally directed not only at the particular event of the death, but also at the loss, and all the ways in which that manifests in one’s experience (Ratcliffe et al., 2023).

Even broader emotional accounts, however, do not include the active components of grieving. In grief, as Ratcliffe argues, there is the disturbance of a body of expectations about one’s future, oneself, one’s day-to-day life, and so on. This loss requires a sustained, active response from the agent, one that remakes how they experience the world as meaningful and grapples with the normative and existential dimensions of the experience. Grief theorists refer to the active component of grief as a coping or adjustment process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is not a component of grief emotions and occurs across a range of major life changes (Parkes, 1971, 1988).

To capture the activity that occurs in grief and to connect grief to other major life changes, I will adopt a different paradigm and examine grief as a transformative experience. On this perspective, grief is not an emotion but an experience. I am using “experience” in the psychologist’s sense to mean an event, or extended series of events, that is personally and consciously lived through, and typically results in learning. As an experience, grief encompasses

all the ways in which an agent is affected by a loss, including the loss of established meanings and the existential challenge presented by the loss, as well as the active ways in which the agent responds to that challenge. When I use “grief” or “experience of grief,” I am referring to a broad category of experience that comprises not just grief emotions but also the active ways that the agent responds to the loss.

My approach is sympathetic to the “process” camp of grief researchers, who do not reduce grief to an emotion but rather see it as some sort of a process, for example, a narrative process (Goldie, 2012; Higgins, 2013) or a process of attending (Cholbi, 2019, 2021, 2022). My concern here, however, is not that of metaphysically isolating which elements of one’s experience are grief, and therefore identifying how this process should be unified. Rather, it is to shed light on the challenges to identity and agency that happen in severe grief and to connect them to a broader set of major life changes that challenge one’s agency in this transformative manner. I will thus set aside the question of how to individuate the process of transformation, and which mental states or events should and should not be included therein.

3.3 Transformative experience

A transformative experience is an experience that (i) teaches the agent something that they could not have known without having the experience (it is *epistemically transformative*), and (ii) changes the agent’s point of view, and core desires and preferences (it is *personally transformative*) (Paul, 2014, 2015). Examples of transformative experiences include having a child, getting a cochlear implant, undergoing a serious illness, or losing a loved one.

Paul (2014, 2015) argues that transformative experiences pose a problem for the standard model of rational choice. According to rational decision theory, we ought to choose the action

that leads to the outcome with the highest expected value. Paul argues that, if we are deciding whether or not to undergo a transformative experience, we ought to decide based on the *subjective* value of the experience by imaginatively simulating the potential outcomes of our actions (2014, 2015). This is because transformative experiences are personally significant, and people vary in their subjective preferences about these experiences. We should thus decide based on their value to us rather than their objective value. However, because these experiences are epistemically transformative, we lack the ability to imagine them prior to experiencing them ourselves. We are thus unable to use the standard model for rational decision-making when making a transformative choice.

Because of her focus on choice, Paul leaves aside transformative experiences that we do not choose. However, recently, there has been an interest in the challenges for agency posed by unchosen transformative experiences. For example, Carel and Kidd (2020) argue for an expansion of the transformative experience concept to involuntary and nonvoluntary transformative experiences (ones that result from external events and the unintended outcomes of the agent's choice, respectively). They argue that transformative experience research should account for how agents are situated in particular social, economic, and political circumstances, and subject to conditions of vulnerability and dependence on others. Thompson (2020) gives an account of death as a transformative experience, one whose character is shaped by its being unchosen by the agent. A person undergoing the transformative experience of dying exercises their rational agency not by making choices against the background of an open future, but by accepting the experience and re-evaluating other transformative experiences from the retrospective perspective offered by one's dying.

I have argued that unchosen transformative experiences present the agent with the problem of remaking the structure of their agency after a disruption (Markovic, 2022). We have projects and relationships that are important to us, and habitual activities and patterns of attention that sustain them. An unchosen transformative experience involves an event (or series of events) that significantly disrupts core projects and relationships, forcing us to reorganize our activities and ways of attending. Grief is one such unchosen transformative experience. In this chapter, I examine how grief is transformative cognitively, phenomenologically, normatively, and existentially, and how it presents a person with the need to reorganize their practical agency.

3.4 Transformative grief

I will first make two preliminary points. One, I am examining severe or profound grief experiences (see, e.g. Slaby, 2022, p.108). However, I do not believe that *only* transformative grief is grief proper. Not all grief will involve a significant life transition, and not all grief will be transformative (in all likelihood, most grief is not transformative, for example, see Moller, 2007). I examine transformative grief because central features of grief, such as magical thinking, cognitive disorganization, and disruptions to the background structure of one's experience, as described in grief memoirs and research literature, occur only in profound grief. To get at these features we have to limit our inquiry to more serious cases of grief. Moreover, if profound grief comes with a different set of features than those of mild grief, it is worth examining it in its own right. There may be no single account that captures all the important features we want to capture about all grief experiences.

Two, there is some controversy about whether only bereavement gives rise to grief or whether we should use "grief" to refer to a reaction to any significant loss (including, for

example, divorce, illness, cultural loss, or ecological devastation). In keeping with much of the grief literature in psychology, psychiatry, and philosophy, I will focus on bereavement as the basis of grief. However, the account of unchosen transformative experiences that I present here can be applied to other losses, such as divorce or illness. These losses can also be transformative, and I will discuss the extension of my account to illness briefly in Section 3.4.5. However, I will remain neutral on the scope of “grief.” The concept of grief centers prototypically on bereavement, and bereavement-based losses involve a cluster of features—disruption of a significant relationship, yearning, distress, a confrontation with mortality, and a process of adjustment—only some of which transfer over to other losses. I am here arguing for a structural connection between the activity involved in grief and that of other unchosen transformative experiences. But I will not pursue here the implications of this connection for whether and how we should draw the boundaries of “grief.”

3.4.1 Cognitive transformation

Grief transforms the self *cognitively* by altering or forcing a person to alter, a wide range of their beliefs and desires. When a loved one dies, a significant body of one’s beliefs and expectations about the world are now incorrect or unable to be fulfilled. In one sense, a griever can affirm that the death has occurred and can examine and revise their beliefs in light of this fact. But grievers also attest to there being a sense in which they do not “really” believe that the loved one has died. Joan Didion calls this phenomenon “magical thinking”: we “know” (in the sense of being able to affirm) that the loved one has died, but continue to behave and think as though they are still alive. Didion gives the following example:

Of course, I knew that John was dead. Of course I had already delivered the definite news to his brother and to my brother and Quintana's husband... Yet I was myself in no way prepared to accept this news as final: there was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible. That was why I needed to be alone... I needed to be alone so that he could come back. (2007, pp.32-33)

For a significant portion of the grieving process, the habitual expectations we have about the other person coexist with our new beliefs about their death. Because mental states that assume the presence of the deceased person are used automatically in one's reasoning and action, grievors can exhibit moments (or periods) of structural irrationality. The revision of habitual expectations is a protracted process and constitutes what I call a "cognitive transformation."

All transformative experiences are cognitively transformative insofar as they involve a change in the agent's core desires and preferences. However, other unchosen transformative experiences involve cognitive transformations that are similar to grief. A sudden change such as a serious illness, war, or accident disrupts established patterns of activity and, in so doing, disrupts the cognitive framework that sustains them. Individuals undergoing an unchosen transformative experience need to revise automatically deployed beliefs that are now false and desires that can no longer be fulfilled.

My claim about cognitive transformation is supported by Colin Murray Parkes' notion of the assumptive world (1971, 1988). Parkes classifies grief as a type of psychosocial transition on the grounds that it affects a large portion of one's "assumptive world." One's assumptive world consists in the models that we use to navigate the world, from the day-to-day scale of getting out of bed, to global assumptions such as the trustworthiness of others. Psychosocial transitions

require a person to revise a large part of their assumptive world. For instance, a person undergoing a serious illness may need to revise their understanding of their body (e.g., of their bodily condition as stable, their assumptions about their energy levels, etc.). They may also alter their assumptions about the social world—e.g., the role of friendship and family in their lives, or how they appear to others as a social subject. And there may be very high-level assumptions that are altered—how one should react in the face of suffering, what it means to have a “good death,” and so on.

Parkes claims that in grief, the mind works to revise itself (“the mind that is doing the reviewing is also the object that is being reviewed,” Parkes, 1988, p.57). While Parkes couches this claim in a remark about the Freudian grief work model (Freud 1917/1999), the idea that the mind revises itself connects to a defining feature of transformative experiences, namely, that they change our beliefs and desires, that is, the “cognitive and evaluative systems” (Ullmann-Margalit, 2006, p.158) that we use to reason. The problem of transformative choice arises because transformative experiences alter not only what we reason about, but also how we reason, in the sense of the cognitive systems that we use to understand and evaluate our experiences. Grief and other transformative experiences involve this dual or thoroughgoing revision of our cognitive systems: they not only add to our body of beliefs and desires, but they also substantially alter how we reason and evaluate.

3.4.2 Phenomenological transformation

Grief transforms the self *phenomenologically* by disrupting the taken-for-granted background of a person’s experience. Matthew Ratcliffe argues that there is a “two-sidedness” to the intentionality of grief (Ratcliffe, 2017, p.162). Grief includes intentional states directed at the

deceased and the relationship, but it also has a diffuse structure, not localized to a specific intentional object. Grief involves a breakdown of systems of expectation that structure one's experience in a global way.

Phenomenologically, the background structure of our experience includes expectations about how our interactions with an object or situation can unfold. These expectations are shaped by our bodily capacities and organization, as well as our habits—that is, our history with this situation or type of situation. In the case of grief, we build up both very specific and detailed and far-ranging expectations tied to our relationship with another person. If this person dies, much of how we navigate the world has to be renegotiated.

Phenomenologically, we experience this as a global or diffuse change in our experience. Because a significant part of how we navigate the world depends on our relationship with the other person—our shared life and projects, the way we support each other, what we know to be important to them—and the understanding that we employ is in part embodied and not fully accessible to us, we are left without clear means to navigate a large portion of our lived world. This can be experienced as a global sense of disorientation, of things feeling overall different, or of our feeling disconnected from reality. For example, Joyce Carol Oates writes about inhabiting a world of “things” that have been stripped of their meaning and now feel like mere objects (Oates, 2011, p.63, quoted in Ratcliffe et al., 2023, p.324). C.S. Lewis writes of his wife that, “her absence is like the sky, spread over everything,” and that even when he is not thinking about her death, there remains something pervasively different, and wrong, in his experience: “I see the rowan berries reddening and don't know for a moment why they, of all things, should be depressing. I hear a clock strike and some quality it always had before has gone out of the sound. What's wrong with the world to make it so flat, shabby, worn-out looking?” (Lewis, 1961/2013).

Unchosen transformative experiences involve this sort of “dual” intentionality, and alteration to the background structure of one’s experience. Significant projects or bodily skills can play a similar role that Ratcliffe assigns to relationships in structuring one’s experience. For example, an illness or accident can also involve a breakdown in habitual structures. Grief has been compared to a phantom limb, in which the potentialities for using it, and ways of experiencing things as significant that presume it, remain for a period of time, requiring revision (Parkes, 1975; Ratcliffe, 2019a). The rapid changes that occur in unchosen transformative experiences affect the way we navigate the world to a far-ranging extent, which we can experience (similarly to bereavement) as disorientation, disconnection from our surroundings, and other diffuse states.

Recognizing this diffuse phenomenological change is significant for transformative experience research because, so far, the literature has focused on the new information acquired by the agent, or the two different sets of values and preferences that the agent has before and after the transformation respectively. Grief research, on the other hand, has focused on the conflict between the agent’s habitual expectations and their present circumstances. Recognizing that a similar experience occurs in other transformations provides phenomenological richness to our understanding of transformative experiences—an agent does not simply acquire new information, they habituate themselves in new circumstances.

3.4.3 Normative transformation

Grief transforms the self *normatively* by requiring a person to review and/or revise their practical identity. We grieve for those in whom we have a “practical identity investment,” those who form part of our conception of what makes our lives worth living, and our actions worth

undertaking (Korsgaard, 1996, p.101; Cholbi, 2019, pp.500–501; Cholbi, 2021, pp.30–33).

Losing such a person requires us to “reconfigure” our practical identities (Cholbi, 2021, p.58)—to re-examine our commitments and values so that we can better understand them, and re-affirm or revise them (Cholbi, 2019, p.501, 2021, pp.82-86).

Our practical identities depend on some of our relationships. How we understand ourselves as practical agents and orient ourselves normatively can depend on another person, for example, as the one who encouraged us to pursue certain projects, or as our model of a person with a particular type of social identity. If someone in whom we have invested our practical identity dies, we have to confront that our identity is built upon people who are contingent and deal with the normative consequences of their loss. Cholbi argues that death presents a normative “threat” (2019, p.500). It shows us how our commitments depend on contingent facts, and it allows us to re-articulate or re-examine these commitments.

Cholbi argues that the process of reviewing our identities after a loss allows us to gain self-knowledge. Through observing how our attention fluctuates over the course of the grieving process, what we focus on or return to, and what we feel intense emotion about, we learn which cares and values have been threatened by the loss, and we gain a more precise picture of what we value.

Significant or profound grief, however, will involve not only a normative threat but also a normative reconfiguration. Cholbi argues that grief shows us how our cares and commitments have a contingent basis, that it is like “hearing the creaking floorboards in an aging building” (2019, p.501). In profound grief, we not only hear the floorboards creak, but we need to replace them. In other words, we not only become aware that what we value rests upon a contingent basis; but it also becomes impossible to pursue our projects and live according to what we value

as we formerly did. This can be because the deceased person or lost entity was deeply integrated into our understanding of ourselves, our values, and why we are doing as we do. This is in part why the loss of a loved one is so devastating—the meaningfulness of our activities was wrapped up in that relationship. Our activities do not simply carry on, informed by the knowledge of their contingency. They might change or cease entirely; their meaning may now be lost.

Grieving teaches us new things, not just about ourselves, but also alters our evaluative perspective on the relationship and on our lives. The transformative experience literature emphasizes the importance of having an experience in order to learn about its phenomenology and subjective value (Paul, 2014, 2015). When we have a transformative experience, we are epistemically and personally transformed. We discover what it is like to have that experience and we come to know the value (for us) of having that experience. And, our values and preferences change. But a particular intersection of these changes remains to be fully articulated, namely, that when we shift from one set of values and preferences, phenomenologically, we feel we have discovered something new and important about the world normatively. This learning experience has the character of learning a new “what it’s like,” a new way the world seems subjectively and qualitatively.

3.4.4 Existential transformation

Significant grief might also require a reconfiguration of our identity because knowledge of the contingency of our practical identity may itself change it. In familiarizing us first-personally with the finitude of our loved ones and the contingency of our relationships and projects, serious grief is also *existentially* transformative. An existential transformation is an experience that teaches us something about the existential conditions of our lives. For example, Evan Thompson

(2020) argues that dying is an existentially transformative experience because it is partially constitutive of our finitude, and reveals our finitude to us in new ways (2020, p.281). Because death, in Heideggerian terms (Heidegger, 1962), is our “ownmost” experience, in the sense that our deaths are only our own and no one else can stand in for us in death, it provides a meta-perspective from which we can evaluate the meaning of our other transformative experiences.

Philosophers of death and grief identify a problem in our understanding of these experiences based on the gap between a third-personal, theoretical way of grasping death and finitude, and a first-personal way of grasping them (e.g., Nagel, 1986, p.225). We know, from an objective, third-personal perspective that we, like everyone else, are mortal. However, we have trouble grasping our own deaths from the first-personal perspective. Our deaths involve the cessation of our experienced world and the ending of our perspective, which is something we cannot understand from within that perspective. Grief may involve a similar problem. Although we can grasp third-personally that our relationship and loved ones are finite and based on contingent features, this is not part of our first-personal approach to the other person until we start grieving. Our first-person perspective as a practical agent presumes the continued existence of the other person as a condition of the meaningfulness of many of our activities. While we grasp that they are finite in some abstract sense before they are gone, we begin to understand the practical significance of their finitude when the relationship is ending. Another way we might (roughly) put this distinction is that the agent comes to grasp a new element of their facticity, or is affected in a new way by some element of their facticity, and has to grapple with its significance.

In each of these cases, an agent is affected in a new way by some element of their facticity: they learn what the process of dying is like or what the finitude of their relationships means. We

can think about an existentially transformative experience as one in which an agent comes to grasp, from their first-person perspective, something new about a structuring feature (death, finitude, etc.) that they formerly grasped only from the third-person perspective. So, our first-person perspective comes to incorporate new features of this structuring condition.

This definition might be too narrow. Berislav Marušić (2018) gives an example of an experience that might be existentially transformative but in which we do not exactly come to grasp a structuring condition from the first-person perspective, namely, the cessation of grief. Marušić examines the following problem: why does our grief diminish when, seemingly, our reasons for grief do not? If our grief is a rational response to a death, the death does not change over time, so it seems that, rationally, our grief ought not to diminish either. Marušić argues that our reasons for grief do, in fact, diminish, but that this is a fact about our reasons that we cannot grasp from our perspective as rational agents deploying those reasons. It is the “backside” of our reasons (2018, p.17). The explanation of our reasons for grief diminishing can only be given in terms of our facticity, for instance, that we are evolved to be resilient in the face of major losses.

In this case, an agent learns something new about a structuring condition of their lives (here, the psychological capacity for resilience, and its effect on grief, and, perhaps, our reasons), but not by taking it up into their first-person perspective. If Marušić is right, we never really come to grasp as practical agents why our reasons for grief diminish (though see, for example, Na’aman, 2021a, 2021b). If the cessation of grief is accurately described in this way, or there are other cases like this, then an existential transformation may also involve grappling with the significance for us as practical agents through, for example, reflection, narrative, or discussion, of a structuring condition of our lives, but one that we never fully get into view from that perspective.

3.4.5 Application to other transformations

I have aimed to situate grief in a larger framework of transformative experiences to highlight the alteration to one's agency that occurs in the grieving process. In keeping with the majority of philosophical and psychological literature on grief, I have focused on the experience of bereavement. However, my account need not be limited to bereavement. My account of unchosen transformation can be applied to other experiences, including experiences of loss such as the loss of a friendship, divorce, or illness.

For example, consider an unchosen transformative experience of serious illness and/or disability. (For an examination of illness as a transformative experience, see Carel et al., 2016; see also Carel & Kidd, 2020. For phenomenological accounts of illness see Carel, 2016; Toombs, 1987.) This experience is examinable within the framework I give here. It can transform the agent *cognitively*: there is a massive revision in beliefs and expectations about one's body that in turn affects the expectations, preferences, and so on that one has about one's projects, activities, and relationships. These cognitive changes are accompanied by a *phenomenological* transformation, which has the sort of dual intentionality present in grief. Assumptions about one's bodily abilities underlie how one experiences one's surroundings as meaningful, and serious illness or disability alters not only one's sense of one's body but also one's sense of the world around them. Illness and disability can transform the agent *normatively*. As our practical identities depend on contingent facts about our relationships, they also depend on contingent facts about our bodies. An agent undergoing a serious illness, or who is newly disabled, has to review and revise their practical identity in light of changes to their physical condition. Finally, illness and disability can transform the agent *existentially* by putting them in

touch with the finitude and vulnerability of their body—both its temporal finitude and the finitude of its capacities.

A further question is, what, if anything, of this experience is *grief*? In examining grief through a transformative experience framework, I want to highlight the structural parallels between the grieving process—a process of resituating oneself in new circumstances after an unchosen event—and the process of transformation in response to other major life changes. I do not thereby commit myself regarding the scope of “grief.” (For instance, I am not claiming that all—or, for that matter, only—unchosen transformative experiences are or involve grieving processes.) Although many unchosen transformative experiences involve losses, what makes an experience grief is a separate question from what makes it an unchosen transformation. I will not give a criterion for distinguishing grief from unchosen transformative experiences here. However, I would venture that, to be grief, an experience must be more than an adjustment to a loss. The loss must be valuable—this can be captured by the notion, for instance, of an investment of one’s practical identity (Cholbi, 2019, 2021), importance to one’s flourishing (Nussbaum, 2001), inclusion in one’s orientation to the future (Mehmel, 2021) or the presence of a system of possibilities associated with the lost object (Ratcliffe, 2019b, 2022, Ch. 2). Moreover, grieving involves not only an adjustment to a loss but an avowal of its value. There is a component of dedication or honoring of the lost object (McCracken, 2005). For example, let us assume a liberal view on which we can grieve past selves or phases of life. My acquiring a disability might involve grief for my former self: how I acted, made decisions, and thought of myself prior to becoming disabled is a state I still value and feel affinity for. My grieving process involves not only adjusting to the relevant losses but an active avowal of their significance to me.

I would thus suggest that, even on a more capacious view of grief, these additional features are needed for me to be not only transformed by a loss but also to grieve that loss.

3.5 Activity in grief

Bereavement results in the loss of or disruption to habitual thoughts, actions, patterns of attention, and, more generally, ways of finding things to be significant that rely on the relationship (Ratcliffe, 2017, 2019b, 2022, Ch. 2). If the relationship is an important one, this disruption will be transformative, altering one's identity as an agent. I have characterized the disruption to one's identity in terms of cognitive, phenomenological, normative, and existential transformations.

Grief involves a type of activity that is also present in other unchosen transformative experiences, that is, the activity of making sense of the world after the loss. A person has to re-situate themselves in an unfamiliar world—a world without the loved one. I call the activity of the griever re-situating themselves in the post-loss world “sense-making.” Sense-making is a term from the enactivist literature referring to how an organism creates a meaningful world through its interactions with the environment (Di Paolo & Thompson, 2014; Thompson, 2007). On the enactivist picture, cognitive beings are autonomous agents that maintain their own structural integrity in precarious conditions. That conditions are “precarious” means that the constitutive processes of that agent are mutually enabling and would run down in the absence of the agent's own activity. Given that a cognitive agent sustains its own identity in precarious conditions—conditions that are changing and vary in their hospitability—an agent has a perspective that is structured by the norms determined by its self-maintaining activity. That is,

the agent's continued activity brings with it a way of evaluating what is good or bad for it, namely, in relation to what would allow for its existence and flourishing.

With the notion of sense-making for an agent in a precarious environment, I am envisioning a transformative experience as a perturbation that requires the agent to re-establish a body of meaningful possibilities in new circumstances. Attig (2011) describes grief as the activity of "relearning the world." The griever has to relearn their physical surroundings, their commitments and projects, and their relationship with the deceased, family members, and others in their social world. The activity of relearning is, over time, directed to the many changes and losses that have occurred due to the loss of the other person (Ratcliffe et al., 2023, S.2).

Both "sense-making" and "learning" are relatively neutrally valenced terms. We can make sense of a subway map and we can learn about the St. Lawrence River basin or how to speak French. Relearning the world in the face of a profound loss is not neutrally valenced, however. There is a deep sense of confusion, disorientation, and disorganization that a person experiences in grief. It is not a learning process that occurs from a stable, established cognitive and experiential setting; it is learning in the context of a destabilized self. Although I am here focusing on the process of sense-making, the alterations in self-experience and salience that occur in transformative grief explain some of the character and intensity of grief emotions such as shock and sadness.

Destabilizations to self-experience and alterations to salience permeate the grieving process and can take general or localized forms. Grief memoirs and research literature point to the initial phase of grieving as involving a sense of shock and numbness, in which the griever does not really take in what is happening (Bowlby, 1980, p.85). For example, Joan Didion's description of finding out about her husband's death reflects many grievers' initial responses to

the loss: ““He’s dead isn’t he.” I hear myself say to the doctor. The doctor looked at the social worker. “It’s okay,” the social worker said. “She’s a pretty cool customer.”” (2007, p.15) The experience of numbness may be better described as dissociation—an awareness of one’s surroundings that feels neutral, calm, or objective because it is stripped of its normal affective significance (giving one a sense of being insulated or protected, for example, Køster, 2022).

An altered sense of how things are salient can also show up in our experience of particular objects. For example, C.S. Lewis describes the absence of his wife as most keenly felt in his body, “It had such a different importance while it was the body of H.’s lover. Now it’s like an empty house.” (1961/2013, p.12). But the object need not be so obviously altered in its significance as it is in Lewis’s case. A griever may also wonder about the significance of a kitchen tile or of brushing their hair. Even things that normally fit clearly into our projects or that are unchanged in their purpose by the loss can be brought into question. Sense-making is the process of stumbling through these questions, some of which seem nonsensical or mundane, to re-determine the world in the face of the loss.

Sense-making does not proceed inexorably forwards toward adjustment. It can stall or break down. The most common example is the phenomenon of “waves” of grief (Lindemann, 1944). For example, Joan Didion writes, “Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life.” (2007, p.27). Affectively, a wave of grief is characterized by intense emotions that include sadness, anger, shock, despair, helplessness, and yearning (Zisook & Shear, 2009). Physically, it is characterized by tightness in the throat, needing to sigh, muscle weakness, and distress (Lindemann, 1944). For some grievers, the experience is overwhelming and described in terms of breaking, tearing, or “obliterat[ing],” as Didion says. There are points

in the grieving process, especially in earlier grief, where there is little room for sophisticated sense-making such as taking a stance on our situation or adopting a strategy to manage our emotions.

The powerful emotions of grief that serve as paradigm illustrations of passion views of the emotions—in which emotions are construed as forces that assail a person and to which they are helplessly enthralled—can be explained in part by the transformative nature of the experience. Prior to their death, we are relatively absorbed in pursuing the projects and commitments we share with the other (Ratcliffe, 2019b). The affective dimension of this experience is partly constituted by dispositional emotions about the other, such as love or the enjoyment of their company. But the other person's presence in our life is also taken for granted in such a way that allows us to be emotionally attuned to other things—for example, we are frustrated that they did not do the dishes, excited that we get to visit them, or worried about their upcoming treatment.

If the other person dies, the continuity of a shared life is broken. The emotional responses we have in grief—sadness, yearning, rage, and so on—are about a localized event, the death, but also about the breakdown of one's meaningful world (Maclaren, 2011; Ratcliffe, 2019b, 2022). There is a rupture in the “fabric” (Nussbaum, 2001, p.80) of beliefs, desires, expectations, values, etc. with which we orient ourselves. For instance, Didion gives the example of walking in Central Park every day with her husband, “We did not always walk together because we liked different routes but we would keep the other's route in mind and intersect before we left the park.” (2007, p.36) What would it be to go for one's daily walk after the other person died? Or, we might ask, is this still “our” house? (e.g., Ratcliffe, 2017, p.164) Am I still going “home” for the holidays? Our emotional responses—beginning with shock and numbness, then turning to sadness, yearning, guilt, and other emotions—are part of our coming to understand this rupture

(Cholbi, 2019, 2021, pp.71-82; Ratcliffe, 2017). The intensity and depth of grief emotions stem in part from their arising in the context of an altered and destabilized experience of self and world (Maclaren, 2011). Because of how pervasively the other person and the relationship figure in our lives, and our ways of finding the world significant, we lack a ready way to construe what is happening and of positioning ourselves in relation to it. So while we can feel sadness about the loss and yearning for the deceased in milder experiences of grief, the “undone”-ness of intense grief stems in part from the transformative nature of the experience.

The activity of sense-making in grief is a transformative activity in Agnes Callard’s sense. Callard (2020) distinguishes between transformative revelations and transformative activities. In a *transformative revelation*, one’s agency and one’s learning correspond to different components of the experience; in other words, what the agent does to obtain the new knowledge (the agent’s activity) is not the same as the process of learning. For example, if we take having a child to be a transformative revelation, having unprotected sex is distinct from learning what being a parent is like. The former is what the agent *did* to facilitate the epistemic transformation, and the latter is the epistemic transformation itself. On the other hand, becoming a wine or music connoisseur is a transformative activity: tasting wine or listening to music is the same activity that teaches one what it is like to appreciate wine or music.

Grief is a transformative activity because the agent’s activity of making sense of the world after the loss is the same process that teaches them what it is like to experience grief. Although Callard means for her definitions to apply only to chosen transformative experiences (thus the formulation of “what the agent does to *facilitate* the learning” [2020, p.153, my emphasis]), an agent engages in intentional activity in unchosen transformative experiences as well. Callard herself provides the example of John Hull who learns to be “deeply blind,” that is, think and

experience the world in a way that does not rely on visual imagery and concepts. While pursuing deep blindness is in a sense chosen by Hull (he could approach his blindness differently, for example, by cultivating visual imagination), being blind was not itself chosen.

Grief is also a transformative revelation. Some of what the agent learns in grief is not identical to their intentional activity. Experiences of disorientation, shock, intense feeling, or emotion are common examples of revelation in grief. Callard is agnostic on whether a transformative experience can be both an activity and a revelation (though she sometimes writes as though they are different kinds of experiences). It is plausible, however, that most transformative experiences will involve both transformative activity and revelation (aside from, perhaps, aspiration, see Callard, 2018).

An alternative view is that grief is simply active. For example, Cholbi (2019, 2021, 2022) argues that grief is an activity, specifically, the activity of attending to the change in the relationship following the death of someone in whom we have invested our practical identity. The grieving process includes passive experiences such as feelings of sadness that the griever exerts little control over. However, these experiences are contained in an active process of attention that is guided by the griever. Like a musician who receives a score that they perform and makes their own by selecting the tempo, key, and other features, griever undergo a series of emotions that they do not choose but that they guide in an attentional process (2021, p.45).

However, that the overarching process of grief is active, and that experiences in which the griever is passive are subsumed in the active process, is a judgment that can only be made at a later stage of a successful grieving process (“successful” in the sense that the griever acquires or retains guidance and control over their attention or actions). In early grief, experiences of intentional activity alternate with experiences of disorientation in which the griever is largely

passive. That the former sort of experiences predominate (i) is not a given in any particular grieving process and (ii) does not imply that grief is always something the agent does.

Another way of framing the distinction is to say that grief is an activity, and sometimes that activity is actively guided, whereas at other times it is guided passively (Watzl, 2017). For example, if grief is a process of attending, that process can be actively guided, say by one's conscious goals and plans, or it can be guided passively by, for example, what one finds salient in one's environment. However, in either case, grief is an activity because it is guided by the subject's mental state. In this framing, activity is not intentional activity, but guidance by subject-level states (even though these are not always conscious).

However, it is still worth drawing the line between activity and passivity with intentional activity (rather than subject-level states), and not including all components of grief as active, because keeping the notions of transformative activity and transformative revelation has explanatory value. By keeping both the notions of transformative activity and transformative revelation, without subsuming the latter into the former, we can capture what grievers gloss with the phrase “you work on grief, and grief works on you.” During some of the grieving process, the griever is “at the helm” of the transformation (Callard, 2020, p.152), and experiences themselves as active—intentionally choosing how to honor the deceased, move forward in their lives, and so on. At other points, however, the griever feels directed by the demands of the grieving process. Grief asks us for solitude, reflection, time, rest, and more. It has its own timing and intensity that, even though we can modulate it, makes demands on us. Cholbi describes the combination of constraint and freedom in grief as improvising on a score,¹⁸ but an alternative metaphor is a

¹⁸ In an article published after his monograph, Cholbi (2022, p.75) develops the improvisation metaphor as well as noting some of the more passive elements in grief: “On any given occasion, we are to some measure able to decide whether we sing or play a musical instrument. But sometimes the urge to perform, including to sing along to a song already underway, seems irresistible.” This latter description is more akin to the dance metaphor I give here.

dance in which the griever is sometimes leading, and other times being led by grief. Genuinely acknowledging the revelatory elements of grief makes sense of why grievers sometimes attest to being taught by grief.

3.6 Conclusion

I have argued that profound grief is a transformative experience, altering the agent cognitively, phenomenologically, normatively, and existentially. Profound grief involves a destabilization of the self that the agent responds to through a process of sense-making. I have emphasized both the active and revelatory components of the grieving process.

I want to flag two limitations of my account. First, my account does not capture the distinctive ways in which changes to a relationship, as opposed to other objects of practical identity investment, affect our identity. My account illuminates how an agent responds to the loss of an object of identity investment by making sense of the world after the loss. In doing so, it explains some central components of grief, particularly features of the adjustment or learning process that occurs after death. However, a relationship will play a different role in our cognitive and practical identity structures than a career or other project. Some features of grief will be best explained by grief being a transformation (a “psychosocial transition,” as Parkes says in 1971, 1988), whereas other features will be best explained by appeal to the relationship between the bereaved and deceased. My account does not focus on the unique features of the latter.

Second, in the recent philosophical literature on grief, there is a debate about whether grief is agent- or object-centered. Agent-centered views take the object of grief to be the loss from the perspective of the bereaved (Atkins, 2022). Object-centered views take the loss to be the objective loss of the deceased person’s life. (This distinction is also made in the form of self- and

other-regarding views on the object of grief, that is, the object of grief is the loss to oneself versus the loss to the deceased person.) My account examines the loss in terms of the change to one's identity as an agent and is thus an agent-centered view. These views are criticized (e.g., Atkins, 2022) for being egocentric, that is, failing to make grief about the person for whom we grieve. This criticism is not apt for the account I have given here. Some of the changes I discuss cross-cut the distinction between self- and other-regarding losses. For example, the cognitive and practical structures associated with the relationship include beliefs, commitments, and meaningful possibilities that have to do with the other person and their aims and interests (Ratcliffe et al., 2023, p.331). Furthermore, while I articulate the change in values that occurs in grief using Cholbi's account of grief as altering an agent's practical identity, I aim to give an account of that change in a way that goes beyond its effect or significance for the self. Nonetheless, in connecting grief to other transformative experiences, I have given an account of grief that focuses on its effect on the grieving agent.

Chapter 4: Loving, recovering: The resilience problem for grief

...To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

—Mary Oliver

Tired of loving, recovering
Loving, recovering
Loving, recovering
Loving, recovering

—The Tragically Hip

4.1 Introduction

Literary and autobiographical depictions of grief often focus on intense and painful grieving processes. For instance, Joan Didion's (2007) memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, describes her first year of bereavement as one in which she has trouble really believing her husband has died. She can't eat; she can't give away his shoes lest he be shoeless when he comes

back; she is repeatedly drawn into a painful “vortex” of memories about him (p.107). The loss of her husband confronts her with the loss of her own identity, and a confusion regarding the significance of a large part of her own history. C.S. Lewis, too, describes the crisis of faith he experiences when his wife dies: “Apparently the faith... which enables me to pray for the other dead only seems strong because I have never really cared, not desperately, whether they existed or not.” (1961/2013, p.21) Lewis describes his immense fatigue, his disinterest in others, and his yearning for the presence of his wife, as she really is and not “patheticized and solemnized by my miseries” (1961/2013, p.47).

The status of these stories in popular consciousness may lead us to expect a devastating experience when we lose someone we love. But, as it turns out, for many of us, grief ends faster than we expect. About half of griever experience what is called a “resilient grief” trajectory, in which the painful emotions of grieving resolve after a relatively brief period of time (e.g. in a matter of weeks rather than several months) and one returns to one’s emotional baseline (Bonanno, 2005; Arizmendi & O’Connor, 2015).¹⁹ I am defining ‘grief’ in this context as experiences of distress, negative emotions such as sadness, yearning, and anger, physiological changes, and disruptions to normal functioning. In this sense of ‘grief,’ it is common for grief to resolve after a matter of weeks or a few months.

Resilient grief may come as a surprise to the griever themselves. For example, in his article on resilient grief, Berislav Marušić describes his experience after the death of his mother as follows (Marušić, 2018, p.2):

¹⁹ Scientific literature conceptualizes resilient grief such that it includes both grief that resolves quickly and grief that is of low intensity (in which there is less intense negative affect and disruption of day-to-day functioning) in the first place. The philosophical literature is concerned with the former and not the latter. I will follow the philosophical literature in this regard.

When my mother died and I initially felt intense grief, it seemed to me that I would never fully recover. I was convinced, perhaps naïvely, that my life would always be infused with pain over her death.

However, I did recover. ...I was surprised that only a few weeks after my mother's death, I could lead my life more or less exactly as I did before her death: I hardly missed a beat! I was also surprised that my grief seemed to disappear almost completely...

This leads to a problem for our understanding of grief. It seems that the object of our grief is the loss of someone immensely valuable to us. This loss is what gives us reasons for grief. But our grief response diminishes much faster than our reasons for grief. In fact, if they are about a valuable loss in the past, we may always retain these reasons.²⁰

One way of articulating the problem is in terms of fittingness. 'Fittingness' is often glossed as an emotion being *appropriate* to or *merited* by its object. An emotion is fitting when it correctly presents evaluative features of its object. For example, sadness is fitting when its object is sad, envy is fitting when its object is enviable, and so on. With respect to grief, the problem of resilience can be articulated as a problem about the continued fittingness of grief. The basis for fitting grief is stable; in other words, there continues to be a loss of something valuable. But our emotional responses are not stable. We cease to grieve fairly quickly. If, as seems to be the case, grief remains fitting, then we stop grieving for non-fit-based or "wrong" reasons such as prudential reasons.

²⁰ See Schönherr (2021) for a relevant distinction in this regard.

In this chapter, I will give an account of how grief fittingly diminishes through a change in the griever. This explanation employs a transformative experience perspective on grief in that it highlights the change to the identity of the griever through the course of grief. Bereavement and other losses alter a person's identity and perspective in a way that may constitute a transformative experience in L. A. Paul's sense (Markovic, 2023; Paul, 2014, 2015). Resilient grief may not be transformative (e.g. it may not alter one's core preferences and values), but even if a particular instance of grief is not transformative, we can still adopt a transformative experience perspective insofar as we think of grief as involving a change to one's cognitive and evaluative systems.²¹ Grieving involves a revision of one's assumptions, plans, habits, and so on in order to integrate the loss practically and epistemically. I will argue that this change in the agent explains the fitting diminution of their grief. That the other person is no longer a central part of one's life and projects reduces the fitting intensity of grief. The descriptive component of this account explains the diminution of grief through changes in the griever's patterns of attention as they alter their projects. In active grief, our attention is fixed on the loss, helping us to grasp how we and the world have changed. As we integrate the loss, our patterns of attention shift along with our projects. Attention is thus a throughline in the process of altering one's projects and expectations that explains the temporal trajectory of grief.

Given that we change to accommodate the loss, we may ask a further question about the diminution of grief: Is such a change regrettable? Moller (2007) argues that we have reason to regret resilient grief because it prevents us from fully grasping the significance of the loss. I will argue against Moller's claim that the end of grief is epistemically skewed or delusional.

²¹ I do not have a criterion for demarcating when an experience is transformative. Paul (2014, 2015) defines personally transformative experiences as experiences that change the core desires and preferences of the agent, but what constitutes such change can be fuzzy.

Nonetheless, the end of grief is, in a sense, another loss suffered by the griever, and we may regret suffering this additional loss.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In Section 4.2, I will describe the problem of resilience, formulated in terms of fittingness. The problem is that the reasons we have to grieve are stable—perhaps eternal—yet our grief is short-lived. This asymmetry calls for an explanation. In Section 4.3, I will give a descriptive account of the diminishment of our grief. This account posits that attention to the loss in active grief allows us to learn about the post-loss world and revise our projects. As a result, our attention shifts to other projects and commitments. In sections 4.4-4.5, I will fill in the normative side of the picture, arguing that our grief diminishes for both fit-based and extraneous reasons. I will argue that the diminution of grief is an instance of a more general normative pressure faced by our emotions, to respond not only to evaluative properties that are possessed by the objects of our emotions, but to respond to relevant evaluative properties. In sections 4.6-4.8, I will address the question of whether our changing to accommodate the loss warrants regret, focusing on Moller’s argument that the end of grief prevents us from grasping the significance of the loss. I will argue that the end of grief gives us a reason for regret but this is because it *does* allow us to grasp—at least one aspect of—the significance of the loss. The end of grief allows us to grasp the ordinariness of the loss. An experience of the loss as ordinary is both accurate and regrettable.

4.2 Fitting grief

Fittingness is an evaluation of the appropriateness or suitability of an emotion to its object. It is fitting to admire an admirable object, feel joy at something joyful, fear something scary, and so on. On what I will call the “standard” view of fittingness, the fittingness of an

attitude is fully determined by features pertaining to the evaluative property that corresponds to that attitude. For instance, the fittingness of admiration is determined by whether and to what extent the object of one's admiration is admirable. The standard view implies that the fittingness of an attitude can't change without a change to the corresponding evaluative property. So, there can't be a change in the fittingness of admiration without a change in the admirability of the object. Fittingness depends not only on facts about the object of the attitude but also on background conditions. For instance, that we are both members of the moral community is a background condition that, in combination with your having wronged me, makes it fitting for me to be angry at you. However, on the standard view, these background conditions only bear on fittingness to the extent that they also bear on the evaluative property possessed by the object.

The problem of resilience, construed in terms of fittingness, is that fit-making facts seem to last forever. Our reason for grief is the valuable loss, and the valuable loss does not change. Yet our grief is far shorter than the duration of these facts about the loss. It thus appears that grief ceases even though our fit-based reasons for grieving remain. Another way of putting this point is that we stop grieving for the "wrong" reasons. The distinction between right and wrong reasons tracks reasons that bear on the correctness of the attitude vs. reasons that make the attitude good to have (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2000). In this context, the right kind of reasons are fit-based reasons, and the wrong kind of reasons are prudential, moral, or other reasons to have the attitude. Most people do not cease to grieve because they cease to love or value the deceased person. So it seems that the fit-based reasons remain, and grief ends for the wrong reasons. One's view about the duration of our fit-based reasons determines whether one adopts a "diminishing fittingness" or "forever fitting" view of grief. On the "forever fitting" view, our fit-based reasons for grief last forever and, when we stop grieving, it is necessarily for extraneous or "wrong"

reasons. On a view whereby grief fittingly diminishes, we stop grieving not due to wrong reasons but because our fit-based reasons for grief change. The challenge for diminishing fittingness views is to explain why this change occurs given that our reasons for grief seem to be grounded in facts that remain the same (that is, facts about a valuable loss in the past).

The problem of resilient grief is an instance of a more general problem, that of the asymmetry between the stability of an evaluative property and the instability of our emotional response. Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson refer to this as the problem of the "instability of affect" (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2009; Na'aman, 2021a, p.533).²² While the evaluative properties that fitting emotions track are stable, our actual emotional responses are unstable and quickly fade. D'Arms & Jacobson use the example of amusement—we tend to think of amusement as inhering in the joke, but, as we retell the joke, our amusement diminishes. This poses a problem for our understanding of amusement. (Did the joke cease to be funny or did you cease to appreciate the joke?) Another instance is anger at moral wrongdoing. If my anger is about a wrongdoing that happened in the past, then it seems that the object of my anger is unchanging and that anger is forever fitting (Callard, 2017; see also Na'aman, 2020). There are a variety of such cases, including anger, regret, amusement, and grief, in which the variability of our responses clashes with the stability of the evaluative properties they are meant to track.

Note that the problem is keener for some emotions than others. While we may be happy to accept that jokes get less funny or that anger becomes less appropriate the more time goes by, we would be less comfortable with adopting this view for admiration or regret. It continues to be

²² D'Arms and Jacobson (2009) articulate the problem as a problem for "sentimentalism," a theory that explains some set of values in terms of response-dependent properties. Na'aman (2021a) frames the problem as a problem for our understanding of fittingness: "To maintain that our emotions are fitting to the evaluative properties of their objects, we must be able to make sense of the normal divergence between the instability of emotions and the stability of the properties they purportedly track." (p.533)

appropriate to admire an admirable person even if one has known them for a while, and we would not consider it apt that, after some terrible wrongdoing, a person ceased to regret it just because the emotion ran its course physiologically. Grief is more like admiration and regret in this regard. It seems that our reasons for grieving do not change with the passage of time and our diminished response calls for an explanation.

4.3 Attention and the diminishment of grief

In this section, I will give a descriptive account of how grief ceases when we shift our attention to other objects. I am not aiming to give an account of grief as a process of attending to the loss (see Cholbi, 2021, 2022), but rather to show how an attentional shift underwrites the diminishment of grief. This attention account will support a normative explanation, given in Section 4.5, for how grief rationally diminishes according to both fit-based and extraneous reasons. It will also open up a systematic explanation for the variability of our emotions both at a time and across time (Section 4.4).

I want to start with a gloss on attention, and by highlighting some features of attention that are important for my account. A defining feature of attention is selectivity. Out of all the things in our environment that we could perceive, think about, and act on, we engage only with a limited subset of these things. There is some debate about whether selectivity is the result of processing limitations (that is, a “bottleneck” in information processing—e.g. Broadbent, 1958), or whether it arises for other reasons (for instance, in order to prepare for action execution, see Wu, 2019, 2011a,b). However, in either case, there is a widespread understanding that attention centrally involves selecting, out of the possible stimuli in our environment or possible trains of thought, which of these we engage with. Psychological research on attention aims to explain how

this selectivity takes place, for instance, through which neural processes, according to what criteria, and so on.

Another central feature of attention is that attended stimuli receive elaborated processing relative to unattended stimuli. This feature is a development of the previous one. The selection of an item allocates mental resources to that item—this is what its being selected for consists in. Directing our attention to something allows us to perceive it, act on it, remember it, and so on. This feature is important because it underlies the fact that attention is connected with the rest of mental life. Attention has a central explanatory role in consciousness, perception, memory, action, and other mental phenomena (see e.g. Watzl, 2022, S.4 for a review).

A third feature that is particularly important to my account is that attention guides mental life according to several criteria by which a stimulus can be important. Since attention involves a selection of a limited set of items for further processing, it matters what these items are and why. Psychologists delineate different types of attention in part according to their different criteria for selection. A common distinction in the psychology of attention is between “top-down” or “goal-directed” attention and “bottom-up” or “stimulus-directed” attention (Corbetta & Shulman, 2002). Top-down attention is directed by the agent’s occurrent and explicit, or “task-related” goals. For instance, we employ goal-directed attention when we’re looking for our friend in the midst of a crowd of people, or when trying to focus on a lecture. “Bottom-up” or “stimulus-driven” attention is guided by salient features of attended objects. The paradigmatic example is attention to stimuli that are salient for their low-level sensory features such as brightness, motion, loudness, and so on. Another example is affect-biased attention, attention to stimuli that are salient in virtue of an association with rewarding or punishing experiences. While affect-biased attention is not goal-directed in the same manner as top-down attention, it is nonetheless thought

to serve long-term and largely implicit goals of approaching pleasure and avoiding pain (Todd & Manaligod, 2018). So our attention can also be guided by the emotional meaning of objects, or by their significance given our evolutionary history. The various psychological processes that instantiate (or, depending on one's account, constitute) attention, do so according to these different criteria (see also Awh et al., 2012; Todd & Manaligod, 2018). Part of the role of attention in our mental life is to flexibly direct mental resources according to the multiple ways in which things in our dynamic environment might be significant to us.

Finally I want to briefly highlight some aspects of the interconnection between attention and emotion. For one, as mentioned, the emotional significance of a stimulus serves as source of attentional guidance. Our perceptual and cognitive activity is biased towards things that are salient in virtue of associations with previously rewarding or punishing experiences. Affect-biased attention can also serve a modulatory role on downstream emotion. Affect-biased attention is instantiated in the “tuning” or biasing of visual or cognitive activity to certain sorts of stimuli (Todd & Manaligod, 2018). This means that, in a particular situation, we have dispositions to attend to certain things based on our past experience. This in turn affects the development of emotional responses. For example, having an attentional bias towards negatively valenced stimuli increases one's emotional response to a stressful scenario (Todd et al., 2012). Our emotional responses can also be influenced by top-down attention (Gross, 2001). Intentionally directing our attention can modulate emotional responses (e.g. increase or decrease the intensity of an emotion). Finally, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which unattended stimuli are processed at all. There is evidence that attention is necessary for all sorts of perceptual processing, such as feature binding (Treisman, 1998), detection of changes (Rensink, 2002), etc. Emotional stimuli were thought to be an exception to this idea, in that they

could be processed automatically. However, some research indicates that emotional stimuli are like neutral stimuli in that they require at least some attention in order to be processed (Pessoa, 2008).

When we are actively grieving, the loss is foregrounded in our attention. The loss grips us as we seek to understand how we and the world have changed. A relationship forms part of one's identity in a number of ways: as (i) the cognitive "fabric" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 80) of beliefs, assumptions, expectations, desires, and so on that involve the other person, (ii) the "system" of practical meanings, that is, habitual thoughts and actions, patterns of attention, and, more generally, ways of finding the world to be meaningful that presumes their presence (Ratcliffe, 2019b), and (iii) one's practical identity, that is, one's description of how one finds one's life to be worth living and actions to be worth undertaking (Cholbi, 2021). Grieving has a "direction" (Ratcliffe & Byrne, 2022, p.322) insofar as we move towards integrating the loss into our understanding and how we are practically oriented to the world. We might also think of this as a process of "relearning" oneself and the world after the loss (Attig, 2011). For example, in early grief, the death of the loved one is shocking and inchoate. As C. S. Lewis says, it is "like the sky, spread over everything" in that it affects our entire directedness to the world in a mood-like way (2013/1961, p.12). As grief matures, the loss becomes more localized. For instance, the griever may come to feel grief most in the bedroom they shared with the deceased, or during the holidays, and so on.

Attending to how the world has changed after the loss allows us to adjust our projects so as to no longer incorporate the relationship in the same way. But, insofar as we do that, the loss becomes less salient and our attention redirects to other projects and commitments. Such a change is commensurate with the role of attention to direct cognitive resources to salient and

goal-relevant stimuli. As we have noted, the objects of our attention are significant for several reasons, including being relevant to our goals, having features that have proven motivationally relevant over the course of evolutionary history, being associated with painful or pleasurable experiences in our lives, and so on. Our attention is sensitive and dynamically shifting in response to these different sources of significance. The revision of our beliefs, practical engagement, and so on to accommodate the loss means that it no longer presents to us as a shocking event. It thus becomes less salient or backgrounded in our attention. Other projects and commitments shift to the foreground.

The shift in our attention away from the loss involves the diminishment of grief emotions, as well as the diminishment of other mental states involved in grief, for example, memories, imaginative states, and so on. The diminishment of grief emotions and of attention may occur at different times. For example, intense grief emotions may diminish before our attention shifts away from the loss. Nonetheless, I'm using the backgrounding of the loss to explain the end of grief, as directing attention to the loss supports our having grief emotions. The shift in our attention to other objects is the beginning of our emotional engagement and occupation with them and the end of our opportunity to emotionally engage the loss.

I think of the diminishment of grief as a backgrounding rather than a permanent cessation. Grief emotions can still return well after the death (and after the loss has been backgrounded for a while). We might be reminded of the other person by a particular location, a dream, a special date, or a relevant threshold in our lives. In these instances, the loss can once again become salient and grief emotions can return in full force. For example, a colleague described to me how, after feeling guilty last fall because she grieved the loss of a friend only briefly, she surprisingly found her grief returning in the spring. When it became warm and sunny

again, she thought of him routinely and found her sadness over his death coming back. Or grief may return simply because we draw our own attention back to the loss. For instance, I sometimes feel grief when I think about the fact that my grandfather, in his final years of life, planted strawberries in his garden for me because he wanted me to have them when I visited. When this fact becomes salient, I suddenly reflect on a whole host of other important facts: that my grandfather took the bus in to the city market twice a week and went to church on Sundays, that he had coffee with his neighbours every day, that he kept geese on his property and shooed them into a shed at night so they wouldn't flee, that he could somehow walk around outside in the pitch dark of a Bosnian village, and so on... When I think about these facts, I once again feel active, fresh, grief about his death, a grief that can open out to other losses—my grandfathers', my parents', my family's, my culture's... These are losses I don't grieve all the time. For the most part I don't think about them. But they are available to be grieved.

Michael Cholbi (2022) argues that an attentional account of grief can resolve or at least reframe the problem of resilience. He notes that the problem is based on construing grief as an emotion “grounded in judgments or perceptions of the loss,” rather than an “attentional phenomenon” (p.80). He gives an account of grief as a process of emotionally attending to the loss, where attention is construed, following Sebastian Watzl (2017), as the activity of regulating the relative priority of mental states. Grief begins when mental states about the loss occupy positions of priority in one's mental structure (2022, p.72), and ends when the loss ceases to be prioritized and is displaced by other concerns. Cholbi argues that his attentional account can reframe the problem of resilience for two reasons. One, it can reject the assumption that grief ends along with grief emotions, since we can continue to attend to the loss even after grief emotions have subsided. We may then have less reason to regret resilient grief, since the duration

of grief is longer than previously supposed. Two, we can evaluate the process of attention in ways that are distinct from the fittingness of the emotions in that process. Cholbi offers three ways to rationally appraise grief as attention: duration, quality, and relation to other priorities (p.79). We can appraise a person's grief for its duration relative to what is merited by the loss. We can appraise grief for the nature of the states that are included in the attentional process—for example, if they are based on false beliefs or emotions that are not intelligible given the loss (*ibid.*). Or we can appraise grief for the allocation of attention to the loss vs. other concerns had by the griever—in other words, do other objects occupy too much or too little of their attention?

Cholbi notes that there is the possibility of the problem re-arising in the form of an attentional problem of resilience. This problem is that we systematically devote less attention to the loss than we ought to. But not only can the problem of resilience re-arise, a form of the problem in which we stop grieving for the wrong kind of reasons can re-arise. This is because the tension that generates the fit-based version of the problem is still present in the attention-based version. There is no guarantee that the three criteria for evaluating the rationality of our attentional process of grief will cohere. The loss may merit a lengthy duration of emotional attention, but I may have other important concerns that would make lengthy grief inapt. Again, we may not be able to devote as much attention to the loss as it merits for extraneous reasons. Furthermore, the original problem remains insofar as we do still construe grief as at least involving emotions with correctness conditions. We may still ask about the fittingness of these emotions. For these reasons, I will not seek to reframe the problem by replacing evaluating grief emotions with evaluating the attention process involved in grieving. Rather I will examine what construing grief as involving attention can tell us about the problem viewed in terms of fittingness.

4.4 The relevance-sensitivity of affect

Before describing what the attention account I've given implies about the fittingness of the cessation of grief, I want to articulate a more general problem that this account brings into view. The problem of resilience is couched as an instance of the problem of the instability of affect. I have argued that the temporal trajectory of grief can be explained by changes in attentional patterns as the griever's projects change. This way of construing the problem of resilience can also be situated in a more general problem, that of the context-sensitivity of emotion. This problem is that, although many evaluative properties remain stable, our emotional responses to these properties vary by context. We emotionally respond not to evaluative properties per se but relevant evaluative properties. These responses are rational, but they are not captured by norms of fittingness.

Let us consider an example. Say that you are hiking in the woods and see a bear. You feel afraid of the bear. It is fitting for you to feel afraid, as the bear is indeed scary. Moreover, the scariness of the bear is, and is correctly, salient to you. Your fear locks onto what, of the many potentially relevant features in your environment, is important for you to apprehend and respond to. But if you are hiking in the woods and see a bear and, instead of feeling fear, you attend to a nearby leaf glinting with dew and feel awe at the beauty of nature, such an emotional response would be inappropriate. Your awe tracks an evaluative property that is present but irrelevant to your current circumstances.

The problem of the relevance-sensitivity of affect is a more general problem than that of the instability of affect (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2009; Na'aman, 2021a, p.533). In both cases, the problem is one of articulating how our emotions are meant to track evaluative properties when

they are in fact so variable in their tracking of these properties. The problem of context-sensitivity is more general because it applies both across time and at a time. As we see in the above example, evaluative properties vary in their relevance at a single time. While both the scariness of the bear and the beauty of nature are present in one's environment, only one of these evaluative properties is relevant to the agent. The relevance of an evaluative property also varies across time. While some evaluative properties may remain stable, say the joyfulness of my cousin's marriage to a nice woman, this property will vary in its relevance across time. It will be relevant when I attend his wedding, making joy both fitting and rationally appropriate, but irrelevant at other times, in which joy would be fitting but may or may not be rationally appropriate.

The problem of the relevance-sensitivity of affect is overlooked by the fittingness literature because of the atomistic manner in which evaluations of fittingness and rationality are made. Much of the time, when we consider examples of fitting or rational emotions, we have already isolated the relevant evaluative properties in question: someone has made a funny but unethical joke and you have fit-based reasons to be amused but moral reasons not to be amused, it is fitting to admire the admirable but you may have prudential reasons to admire someone who is unadmirable, and so on. These examples obscure the fact that we have emotional responses to these properties rather than others and our emotions can be assessed for rationality on those grounds.

The attention account points us to an explanation of why our emotional responses don't match the evaluative properties in our environment. We can give a systematic normative explanation of this mismatch in terms of extraneous reasons, namely, the variability of our emotional responses is explained by our attending to locally relevant objects. Authors in the

normative literature on attention argue that attention can be assessed for its object, that is, that we are attending to this object (rather than something else) in the first place (e.g. Watzl, 2022, pp.100-101). Assessing attention in terms of relevance falls out naturally from the role that attention has in our mental life, to direct further processing resources to some stimuli rather than others. Given that attention has a structure by which some stimuli receive more elaborate and coordinated perceptual and cognitive resources than others, it matters very much what these stimuli are. Emotions face similar pressures. To the extent that we believe that emotions have a close connection with motivation (in other words, that they in some sense prepare us for acting on their objects), that they have physiological and behavioural components that are instantiated in the body, or that they are typically occurrent and conscious experiences, we ought to recognize that there are limitations on the instantiation of an emotion that justify evaluating our emotional response to some object rather than another. And these evaluations can be captured with norms of relevance.

Relevance is not a different source of normativity akin to fit-based, prudential, and moral sources of reasons to have an emotion. It is a holistic assessment of an emotion deriving from these reasons in the agent's context. For example, an emotion may be most relevant because of strong moral reasons, or we may have greater prudential reasons to have one emotion than another although both are fitting. What, then, does the discussion of relevance add to the reasons we already have? Introducing considerations of relevance allows us to make an epistemic evaluation of an emotion that cannot be made using only fittingness norms. Namely, it allows us to say that an emotion, even if it is not outright incorrect, offers a distorted view or experience of a situation when it highlights irrelevant properties. For instance, in the example made earlier, it is not that nature isn't awe-inspiring. But to feel awe in that moment would be to distort one's

situation, to do something that is epistemically and not just prudentially flawed. There is something epistemically wrong in dedicating limited cognitive and motivational resources to an irrelevant property. We are failing to correctly represent what is important about our present situation. To grieve forever, even if fitting, would similarly distort one's situation. We would continue to represent the loss as most important to the eventual neglect of other things in our lives.

4.5 Fittingly diminished grief

Let us return to the fittingness of the cessation of grief. On my view, grief fittingly diminishes as we alter our identity and projects to adjust to the loss. One of the roles served by grief in our mental life is to allow us to “relearn” the world after the loss (Attig, 2011), that is, re-establish a meaningful identity and relationship to the world. This revision in us—specifically, our expectations and projects—changes some of our fit-making facts. I take the embeddedness of the other person in our fabric of projects and expectations to be a fit-making fact that licenses intense grief. This fact is agent-relative in that it applies only to some agents and not others. There are other such agent-relative fit-making facts. For instance, it is fitting for me to be proud of my friend Mel for graduating from medical school while also becoming an award-winning poet, but it is not fitting for you to be proud of Mel if you do not know her or are not part of her community. Fitting pride requires some personal connection to the object of the emotion, and so fit-making facts for pride are agent-relative. (Another way to formulate this point is that having a personal connection to the object of the emotion serves as a background condition that enables certain facts to be fit-making facts for pride.) As they are for pride, enabling facts for grief are

agent-relative. We do not grieve all losses everywhere, but only the ones that are losses to us.²³ Grief also has intensifying conditions that are agent-relative. That the other person is deeply woven into my projects and goals gives me reason to grieve intensely.

Given that some fit-making facts are agent relative, they can change if the agent changes. For instance, if you were to befriend Mel, you could then feel fittingly proud to have such a versatile and talented friend. In the case of grief, I change as an agent by revising my projects and expectations. This change in me, one that may be transformative in the sense of the transformative experience literature (Paul, 2014, 2015; Markovic, 2023), makes it such that the facts that license intense grief no longer hold. The other person ceases to be a central part of my life; I cease to have the same body of expectations about them and how they fit into my projects. My grief can thus fittingly diminish in response to this change in me as a subject.

My account adopts features of Martha Nussbaum's account of the diminishment of grief, in that it explains the fitting diminishment of grief by a change to the griever. Nussbaum (2001, 1.9) argues that grieving involves a "reweaving" of our cognitive fabric as we revise our expectations and plans to integrate the loss.

When I receive the knowledge of my mother's death, the wrenching character of that knowledge comes in part from the fact that it violently tears the fabric of hope, planning, and expectation that I have built up around her all my life. But when the knowledge of her death has been with me for a long time, I reorganize my other beliefs about the present and future to accord with it. ...Indeed the experience of

²³ Some authors (McCracken, 2005; Atkins, 2023) argue that we grieve an objective loss, the loss to the other person, and not the loss to ourselves. However, even if the loss we grieve is objective, we typically require a closeness to the other person to access the objective value of the other in a way that enables fitting grief.

mourning is in great part an experience of repeatedly encountering cognitive frustration and reweaving one's cognitive fabric in consequence. (Nussbaum, 2001, p.80)

Nussbaum develops a neo-Stoic theory of the emotions according to which emotions are judgments about things that are important to our flourishing and beyond our control. For Nussbaum, the cognitive reorganization that occurs in grief amounts to an emotional change because the other person becomes genuinely less important to our flourishing. Our judgments about the importance of the other to our flourishing are made from within our personal perspective but, as we grieve, that perspective changes. The place of the deceased person in our lives changes and commensurately, their eudaimonic significance changes. In my account, attention plays the role of facilitating the cognitive and evaluative reorganization, and modulating grief emotions.

In most cases, the diminution of the fitting intensity of grief never amounts to a fitting cessation. Compare, for instance, adjusting to a bad break-up vs. adjusting to a death. Our torrid break-up healing may terminate in a severing of our attachment to the other person and the cessation of any desire for them to be in our lives. This is rarely the case for recovering from the death of a loved one. So, as long as we continue to love the other and value the relationship, some amount of grief remains fitting.²⁴ There are thus typically “wrong reasons” involved in the cessation of our grief. Grief becomes backgrounded when norms of relevance push us to attend predominantly to other objects. (Lest this be seen as callous, these are important objects: our own

²⁴ I hold the assumptions underlying what Schönherr (2021) calls the “psychological” argument, in that I take grief to be warranted by our present love for the deceased rather than our having loved the deceased.

health, our children, and so on.) And, when we once again turn our attention to the loss, it is still fitting to grieve. For example, when I grieve my grandfather's death a decade later, or when I grieve the war over twenty years after it ended, it is still fitting.

Christopher Howard (2022), in response to Nussbaum's account, argues that the altered role of the other person in our lives may not serve to explain either the cessation or the diminishment of grief. I follow Howard in taking some amount of grief to remain fitting. Nonetheless I do take grief to fittingly *diminish* on account of the reorganization of our cognitive and evaluative systems. Howard objects to this claim, arguing that persisting facts about the loss—e.g. that I love this person, that she is my mother—could be sufficient to ground a high degree of grief and thus that it may remain “fitting forever for me to grieve the loss to an equally high degree.” (Howard, 2022, p.7) I find this implausible. Our love for and relationship to another person are not independent entities from how that person is woven into our lives, nor do they ground grief in a completely independent way. We in general think that those who form a central part of our lives are more grievable than those who are in our lives peripherally. For instance, Nussbaum explains not only the diminution of her own grief but the divergence in intensity and duration between her grief and that of her sister's with the notion of centrality in one's life (2001, p.83). To assume that one's love for and relationship to another person ground grief in a way that is independent of how that love and relationship are manifested in one's life makes it difficult to explain variance in the fittingness of active grief on grounds we ordinarily employ.

My account explains the fitting diminishment of grief in a way that retains the standard view of fittingness. That the other is less a part of my projects and goals diminishes my grief by diminishing the grievability of the loss. Experiencing the loss as a loss happens against a

background of assumptions, desires, and ways of investing in the relationship that can be revised. When we, to some extent, accommodate the death and its implications, the loss diminishes in its impact on us as a loss.

4.6 Change and regret

I have given an explanation of the diminishment of grief in virtue of changes to attentional patterns that occur as the griever's projects change. This account adopts a transformative experience perspective on grief insofar as it grounds the change in grief's fittingness in a change to the agent. That being said, many of us, especially while actively grieving, don't want to change in this manner. We may dread becoming someone for whom the death of our loved one is no longer devastating. In the novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust expresses such a worry (1919/1998, p.340):

Our dread of a future in which we must forego the sight of faces and the sound of voices which we love and from which today we derive our dearest joy, this dread, far from being dissipated, is intensified, if to the pain of such a privation we feel that there will be added what seems to us now in anticipation more painful still: not to feel it as a pain at all — to remain indifferent. ...it would be in a real sense the death of the self, a death followed, it is true, by resurrection, but in a different self, to the love of which the elements of the old self that are condemned to die cannot bring themselves to aspire.

Nussbaum, in conversation with Proust, notes this worry given her own account of the diminishment of grief (2001, p.83):

For as one reweaves the fabric of one's life after a loss, and as the thoughts around which one has defined one's aims and aspirations change tense, one becomes to that extent a different person. This explains why the shift itself does not take place without a struggle: for it is a loss of self, and the self sees forgetfulness and calm as threatening to its very being.

To the extent that one's projects, commitments, and relationships define one's identity, there is a change to the self as one integrates the loss. The prospect of becoming this future self may be alienating to one's present self, for whom having the other as an active partner in engagement is central to their life. There is thus a question in relation to one's transformation through grief: What attitude should we have towards this change? Much of the transformative experience literature addresses the question of how we can rationally and authentically choose to have a transformative experience (Paul 2014, 2015). Grief is an unchosen transformative experience in that the loss is unchosen, and, to some extent, our recovery from the loss is unchosen (Markovic, 2022, 2023). In this case, there are other questions we may ask about the relation to oneself across the transformative divide, for instance: Can we welcome such a change? Do we have reason to regret it?

4.7 The cessation of grief as delusional

Dan Moller (2007) formulates the problem retrospectively, arguing that we have reason to regret resilient grief because it prevents us from grasping the significance of the loss.²⁵ The basis of Moller's (2007) argument is the claim that emotions are necessary to apprehend evaluative features. Moller uses a perceptual metaphor to develop this point: emotions allow us to perceive value in a way that goes beyond belief or understanding. For example, grasping that one has received a thoughtful gift is partly constituted by feeling gratitude. If I believe that I received a nice gift, but feel nothing, I am not fully apprehending the good features of the event. Equally, the pain of grief allows us to register the value of what we have lost. In resilient grief, our emotional response is not commensurate with the severity of the loss, and we fail to fully register the significance of what has happened. We may agree that we have lost something of great importance, but without the accompanying emotions there is a way in which we are failing to truly register the loss. Moller puts it this way (2007, pp.312-313):

...the fact that what ought (in virtue of its disvalue) to make a massive and traumatic impact on us leaves only a comparatively minor dent, while obviously advantageous, suggests that most of us lack the kind of emotional depth that accompanies deep insight into one's condition and which concomitantly enables deep suffering.

²⁵ Moller (2007) makes two arguments that the end of grief merits regret: (i) bereavement's relatively minor impact on well-being indicates that we are not as important to each other as we believe ourselves to be and (ii) resilience prevents us from fully registering the significance of the loss. I am focusing on the second argument here. For discussion of the first argument, see Vitrano (2013), and Preston-Roedder and Preston-Roedder (2017).

Moller remarks that we fail to appreciate our condition as “vulnerable victims of loss” when we stop grieving (*ibid.* p.315). Because of this, we lack insight into our situation and are, as Moller puts it, suffering from a benign delusion (p.312).

4.8 The cessation of grief as providing insight on the loss

Moller takes our adaptive response to grief indicate a shallowness in our emotional capacity to register the loss. Because we have evolved psychological capacities that return us to emotional baseline after a major disturbance, we are unable to be deeply affected by the loss. We thus fail to see “how things really are, value-wise” (p.312). I interpret our situation differently. Our capacity for resilience, and the perspective we occupy upon the diminution of grief, does allow us to experience how things really are. But what they allow us to experience is regrettable. The cessation of grief reveals to us the ordinariness of the loss, and it is regrettable that the loss comes to be experienced as ordinary.

What do I mean by ‘ordinariness’? This passage from the podcast *This American Life* gives a gloss on the sort of ordinariness I am referring to (Ep. 738, Act 2):

Losing a parent can make you think the biggest thoughts. Like, for instance, this one—when someone dies, they don’t just die. It’s like they keep dying in pieces as time wears on, the moment of their demise drifting farther and farther away from you, like a raft heading for the horizon. It happened with my mom. I found I didn’t want to leave that early temporal orbit of her death before it became just another thing that happened to me.

The death becomes “just another thing that happened.” It becomes another event in a long string of events, no longer having the world-disrupting impact it formerly had. When the loss first happens, it upends taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and ourselves. It is horrifying, disorienting, and alienating. Our grief in that time is intense and reflects the breach in our experiential world created by the loss. There comes to be something sacred about our grief at this time, as it marks the damage and horror of the loss. But, as we grieve, we accommodate the loss. We come to understand its boundaries—what we have lost, and where the loss strikes us most intensely. We map the terrain of the loss by integrating it into our lives epistemically and practically. This constitutes a change to our perspective and our identity as an agent, and hence may constitute a transformative experience. In that sense, there is something to Proust’s claim that we dread the person we will become when we heal from grief: that the loss comes (at least sometimes) to be a normal and taken-for-granted aspect of the world can be concerning to grievers, who remember the initial stage in which it was devastating. There is a symmetry between the beginning and end of grief, in that the normalization of the death through the loss of intense emotions is itself another loss. And we may regret suffering this second loss, the giving way of the death’s horror to its mundanity.

Nonetheless, our transforming to accommodate the loss is not regrettable because it is inaccurate. The experience of the loss as normal is also accurately presenting a state of affairs, that our loss, and loss more generally, is a normal part of life. Our experience of the loss as ordinary reveals to us a basic condition of human existence, that of the impermanence of all of our objects of care and attachment.

We live in conditions of impermanence. This is a basic condition of existence that we all share. We and every individual we care about are contingent and mortal. More broadly, the

environment we act in is continually changing such that objects we value change or are lost—material objects run down, we fail to achieve goals, that which we do acquire changes its significance over time, and so on. My point is that loss is pervasive and arises from a basic existential condition. The condition of impermanence underwrites grief since, grief, in its basic structure, is the loss of something we care about. Impermanence also grounds resilience. Loss is so common that we have an evolved psychological process which allows us to continue on in the face of even major losses. The end of grief offers the possibility of an existential revelation insofar as we realize that our deeply personal loss is connected with a structuring condition on all of our lives (Thompson, 2020, pp.281-286).²⁶

Emer O’Hagan (2021) argues that resilience need not be regrettable. She argues that a Buddhist style of resilience, characterized by equanimity and a recognition of impermanence, is epistemically valuable. Resilience allows us to grasp the impermanent nature of all beings, including our loved one, and grasping this fact is part of having a clear view of our situation. Moreover, resilience is morally valuable because understanding the impermanence of our loved ones can motivate treating our living loved ones well rather than taking them for granted. While I agree with O’Hagan that resilience is epistemically valuable, that a griever comes to be able to situate their loved one in a larger world of things that are also contingent and will arise and pass away is one of the sad and scary aspects of healing from grief. In grief, the condition of impermanence has come home to us, and taken away something that we really care about. At the end of grief, the mundanity of impermanence has come home to us, and we accept loss even

²⁶ See Thompson (2020, pp.281-286) for a discussion, through the Indian Buddhist story “Kisā Gotamī and the Mustard Seed,” of how bereavement can be existentially transformative insofar as it provides a window onto impermanence as a law “[f]or the whole world” (Elbaum Jootla 1994, quoted in Thompson 2020, p.283). This transformative experience has a social element insofar as it empathically connects us to others through our shared condition.

where it is closest. Unlike O'Hagan, I take the apprehension of the ordinariness of loss to merit regret.

4.9 Conclusion

We only grieve some people in the first place. The death of most people makes little emotional impact on us. Yet our adaptability is so great that we are able to adjust—perhaps quicker than we'd like—even to these losses. Our resilience begs questions that intersect with transformative experience research, regarding what meta-attitudes we may take towards transformation in general, and towards particular transformations such as grief. Is our capacity for change, seemingly greater than we'd expect, indicative of a shallowness in our commitments? Does the end of grief prevent us from registering the significance of the loss? I have argued that the window onto the world provided by the diminishment of grief is accurate and, to that extent, has epistemic value, but that we may nonetheless regret losing the motivational structure that grounds grief.

With respect to the fittingness of our grief response, I have argued that grief fittingly diminishes because we change in our projects to integrate the loss. In my account, attention serves the role of facilitating the change in our cognitive and evaluative structures and modulating grief emotions. Some have argued that such an approach is insufficient to explain the fitting cessation of grief, and I agree. I have argued that grief ends in part for “wrong” reasons, as the loss becomes less salient amidst the ongoing operation of our other projects. This scenario is not unique to the end of grief, but rather indicative of a more general pressure on our emotions, to pick out and direct cognitive and motivational resources to relevant objects. Meeting relevance norms makes our emotions variably responsive to stable evaluative properties.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

My dissertation examined alterations to agency and identity that occur in unchosen transformative experiences, focusing on the experience of grief. Grief research examines phenomena and questions that intersect fruitfully with those of transformative experience research. My dissertation has aimed to bring these two hitherto largely separate fields into conversation by situating grief as a transformative experience that profoundly alters the griever and calls on them to reorganize their identity as an agent.

In Chapter 2, I gave a phenomenological account of agency and transformation in unchosen transformative experience. I proposed that a person undergoing this experience faces the problem of rebuilding their identity as an agent in light of the disruption to their established patterns of thought and action. In a transformative choice, a person is faced with whether or not to undergo an experience that would change their identity as an agent. In an unchosen transformative experience, it becomes no longer possible to pursue projects that are part of this identity due to an external event. This puts the agent in a position of having to rebuild their projects in the wake of the disruption.

To describe the phenomenology of unchosen transformative experience, I employed Matthew Ratcliffe's (2019b) notion of a system of possibilities. This concept is aimed at capturing ways in which we experience the world as practically significant in light of our commitments and projects, and thus connects our identity as an agent to our experience of the world. Ratcliffe argues that profound grief involves the loss of a system of possibilities, that is, all of the actions, thoughts, and ways of finding things in the world to be significant in light of the relationship are lost or called into question. I take there to be something similar that occurs in other unchosen transformative experiences. I have drawn on William James' (1917) account of

religious conversion to develop an account of transformation for unchosen experiences. James theorizes conversion as the reorganization of a system of ideas, that is, the alteration of a set of ideas such that certain ones are more accessible and emotionally significant. Drawing on Ratcliffe's phenomenological account and James' notion of transformation, I have given an account of unchosen transformative experiences as the reorganization of systems of possibility.

With respect to the problem of how an agent rebuilds the structure of their agency after an unchosen event, I argued that the agent engages in a process of sense-making in the enactivist sense. The enactivist account of mind puts forward the idea that an organism's perspective emerges out of its interaction with the world in light of its self-maintaining activity. I used this idea as a lens on unchosen transformative experiences, arguing that an agent undergoing an unchosen transformative experience interacts with their new circumstances to determine their significance and form a new structure for their agency.

This approach contributes to transformative experience research by emphasizing the agent's activity as catalyzing transformation and allowing them to learn what the experience is like. On L. A. Paul's presentation of the transformative choice problem, having an epistemically transformative experience oneself is necessary for knowing what it's like and determining its subjective value (2014, pp.8-19). Paul frames the revelation of having a personally transformative experience as akin to the revelation of a (merely) epistemically transformative experience in that it is revealed to the agent upon having the experience—like Mary the vision scientist when she first has the experience of seeing red for herself (Jackson, 1986). However, there are differences in my coming to know what it is like to lose a loved one and my coming to know what it is like to taste ouzo, in that the latter is more or less revealed to me right away when I have the experience whereas the former requires a longer, active process to determine

what it is like with respect to various domains of my life. Personally transformative experiences are such because they affect one's core values and preferences, but for a person to determine the subjective character of an experience that has such a profound effect requires them actively investigating and living through the implications of that experience in various situations of their life. Considering the process of sense-making in transformation adds to our understanding of what I call the "interim" period of transformation between the two relatively stable identities that the agent occupies pre- and post-transformation.

In Chapter 3, I applied the concept of unchosen transformative experiences developed in Chapter 2 to grief. I gave a framework for thinking about grief as an unchosen experience that transforms the agent in four ways: (i) cognitively, by altering the body of beliefs, expectations, desires, and so on premised on the relationship, (ii) phenomenologically, by altering one's experiential background in a mood-like way, (iii) normatively, by changing one's practical identity, and (iv) existentially, by confronting the agent with a structuring existential condition. This framework groups together existing accounts in grief research of how grief changes the agent, situating them in the concept of unchosen transformative experiences. In doing so, my aim was to give a broader theoretical home in which to situate grief. Although much of the grief literature construes grief primarily as an emotion, the experience of a loss is not only a set of emotions but also a process of learning and adjustment. The experience of loss is a transformative experience in that it is an extended experience that alters one's cognitive and evaluative systems and challenges one's agency. Using a distinction made by Agnes Callard (2020), I argue that grieving is both a transformative activity and a transformative revelation, in that we learn what the experience is like through our intentional activity (as when we are

engaged in grief rituals) and when we passively undergo the experience (as in the phenomenon of waves of grief).

In Chapter 4, I examined the problem of resilience, a problem for our understanding posed by the duration of our grief response relative to our reasons for grief. That is, the object of our grief is the loss of something valuable and this loss does not change, but our response to the loss does change, diminishing faster than we'd expect or even want. That we are adaptable to such a major loss as the death of a loved one is surprising and begs the question of whether our grief response is appropriate to the magnitude of the loss. I engage with the fittingness formulation of the resilience problem, which frames it as a question of whether grief remains "forever" fitting or whether our fit-based reasons for grief diminish. I have argued that it remains, to some extent, always fitting to grieve but that grief fittingly diminishes in accordance with a change to the griever's projects. My account employs a transformative experience perspective insofar as it explains the diminishment of grief in light of changes to one's identity as an agent. I argued that our attending to the loss facilitates the change to our projects and attenuation of our emotional response: attending to the loss allows us to integrate the death of the other person into our lives practically and epistemically and, at a certain point, we are able to switch our attention to other projects. Normatively, the shift in our attention occurs for both fit-based and extraneous reasons.

This account has the advantage that it explains the fitting diminishment of grief while retaining what I call the "standard" view of fittingness, on which a fact affects the fittingness of an attitude only to the extent that it affects the evaluative property possessed by the object of that attitude. However, my account of fitting diminishment does not work as a solution to the broader problem of the instability of affect (D'Arms & Jacobson, 2009), that is, it does not generalize to

other asymmetries between our fit-based reasons and emotional responses. I give a systematic “wrong reasons” response to the more general worry, arguing first that the problem extends past the temporal instability of our emotions to the instability of our emotions at a time. We do not respond to all fitting properties in a given situation, but rather only to relevant properties. If we consider that our emotions are aimed at meeting norms of relevance, we can understand why we systematically don’t respond to some of our fit-making facts. We can also begin to grasp a more general tendency of our emotions to change in attunement with our local context.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I addressed the question of whether we ought to regret transforming in the manner that we do when we recover from grief. I examined Dan Moller’s argument that resilience is regrettable because it prevents us from fully grasping the evaluative significance of the loss. Moller argues that the cessation of our grief emotions prevents us from grasping the badness of the loss, leaving us better off (in terms of our well-being) but epistemically impoverished. I argued that we may indeed regret resilient grief, but not because it prevents us from accurately grasping the loss. The end of grief allows us to apprehend the ordinariness of the loss, that is, that the loss arises from a pervasive existential condition of impermanence that affects all of us. Both grief and its cessation attune us to this condition, but the end of grief involves our acceptance, or at least tolerance, of the impermanence of our loved ones. This perspective is epistemically valuable, insofar as our backgrounding the loss accurately reflects its ordinariness. Nonetheless the end of grief is regrettable, as being able to see even one’s loved one as another transient entity subject to conditions of impermanence belies the special bond with them that allowed us to grieve in the first place.

The question of regretting resilience opens out to broader issues for transformative experience research. One way of framing the question has to do with what meta-attitude we

ought to take towards resilience, a question that is applicable to other transformations and to the problem of transformative choice. For instance, Aaron Smuts (2016) argues that resilience is primarily a prospective worry, in that the ability to welcome a resilient future indicates that one's present cares (for one's loved one) are not genuinely held. Smuts assumes that a griever becomes indifferent to their loved one when they recover from grief, a claim that few grievers would endorse. However, such a worry generalizes to other transformative experiences in a way that is particularly interesting for transformative choice. That is, we may ask: Does a willingness to undergo a transformative experience, which may involve the loss of one's current core desires and preferences, imply an already shaky commitment to these preferences? Elizabeth Barnes (2015) makes a related but more circumscribed argument that an agent may rationally refuse a transformative experience on the basis of their present commitments, but we may also ask if genuinely held commitments should be given more weight than that.

In a separate discussion from the resilience problem, Moller (2005) rejects the notion that one becomes a new self if one loses one's affection for one's present loved ones (see also Moller, 2007, p.312 n.29). Moller places the bar for self-transformation much higher, pointing to, for instance, the loss of deeply held moral values (2005, p.283). Moller's response implies that we are not equally alienated from all possible future versions of ourselves, suggesting that we retain our values across some transformations more so than others. Questions regarding the severity of a given transformation, and its implication for one's meta-attitudes, as well as for transformative choice and agency, can be explored further in transformative experience research. For instance, some transformations, such as bereavement and becoming a parent, are common and have associated social practices and understandings. Whereas other experiences are far beyond the reach of what is understood by one's society, for instance, the experience of losing one's way of

life due to colonization (Lear, 2006). (Lear implies that this isn't even an experience in the ordinary sense, focusing on Plenty Coups' statement that, after the buffalo died, "nothing happened." 2006, p.2) How we come to grasp what these experiences are like, and our agency in these experiences, surely differs from recognized transformations in ways that would be valuable to explore.

There are also outstanding questions about how to consider grief emotions in relation to the process of adjustment that I have theorized as an unchosen transformative experience. Virtually all authors in the grief literature take grief to be an emotion or an emotional process of some kind (e.g. Gustafson, 1989; Nussbaum, 2001; Solomon, 2004; Goldie, 2012; Ratcliffe, 2022; Cholbi, 2022). Considering grief as an emotion or emotional process leads to a question about how to unify its component mental states. That is, we need to give an account of what makes grief a unified whole rather than an assortment of mental states or episodes (see Goldie, 2012, pp.60-61). My approach frames grief quite differently, as being a transformative experience. We don't necessarily think of transformative experiences as being unified wholes in the same way. For example, we don't consider becoming a parent as a single emotional process with typical constituent parts (e.g. the formation of an attachment bond with the child). We may then ask if considering grief as a transformative experience has implications for what we take to be part of the emotion or emotional process. For instance, does it undercut the motivation for a more capacious view of emotion, since some desired elements of grief can be explained as being part of an adjustment process? Are some emotions also transformative experiences, or are they simply parts of a transformative experience?

A final issue I will mention has to do with rational updating in the grieving process. Ratcliffe claims that grief, because it involves revising a large set of practical meanings and

habitual expectations, is bound to take time (e.g. Ratcliffe, 2017, p.166), and, in fact, that it *must* take time (Ratcliffe et al., 2023, p.321). Such a view is in contrast to that of Dan Moller, who, in his paper on resilience, gives an example of super-resilient beings for whom grief takes no time at all (2007, p.313); he thus presents it as contingent that grief is temporally extended. The issue of rational updating intersects with questions of the rationality of grief. Oded Na'aman (2021a) points to the temporal extendedness of emotional attitudes to argue for the existence of process norms of fittingness. He argues that an instantaneous emotional response to an object would be not only impossible but also unfitting. For instance, instantaneous amusement indicates that one isn't amused at the joke but out of, say, nervousness (2021a, p.541). If grief is a process, even more so if grief is necessarily a process (see also Goldie, 2012, pp.57-64), this speaks to a greater motivation for evaluating its fittingness along process norms rather than state norms, for instance, evaluating the fittingness of grief in a way that directly depends on the course of the grieving process (Na'aman, 2021b). A more general problem is about how ecologically valid our notion of fittingness should be. Na'aman (2021b), in aiming to give a more naturalistic account of the fittingness of grief, rejects what others in the literature take to be necessary metaphysical and conceptual truths about fittingness (Howard, 2022, p.12). This indicates that different applications of 'fittingness' (e.g. evaluating emotions vs. analyzing value properties) may favour differing ways of developing the concept.

I have examined grieving as an unchosen transformative experience, aiming to bring together two largely disparate research literatures in a productive way. There are several issues—including the implications of my approach for how we delineate grief as an emotion, and how we grieve for nonparadigmatic objects such as cultural loss—that I have not been able to explore, but that present potential avenues for future research. Perhaps because it is so strange and

challenging, grief has had a peripheral place in philosophy for some time. This has begun to change, particularly in the last decade, with a renewed excitement and philosophical interest in the topic. I hope to have added to this conversation and conveyed that grief merits our attention, touching on core philosophical issues including the self, agency, and rationality.

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