



# Temporal Perspectives and the Phenomenology of Grief

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## Abstract

In first personal accounts of the experience of grief, it is often described as disrupting the experience of time. This aspect of the experience has gained more attention in recent discussions, but it may nonetheless strike some as puzzling. Grieving subjects do, after all, still perceptually experience motion, change, and succession, and they are typically capable of orienting themselves in time and accurately estimating durations. As such, it is not immediately obvious how we ought understand the claim that grief disrupts the experience of time. In the present discussion I suggest that we can shed light on this aspect of the experience of grief by distinguishing between three temporal perspectives that experiencing (human) subjects typically occupy: the perceptual, the agential, and the narrative. Appeal to these three temporal perspectives helps to clarify the phenomenology of grief; it reveals a way in which grief can disrupt the experience of time; and it can also help us to analyse pre-existing issues in the literature on grief.

**Keywords** Grief · Time · Temporal experience · Narrative · Agency

## 1 Temporality in the Experience of Grief

Recounting her grief experience following her son's sudden death from a heart failure, Denise Riley describes an "acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow", leading to a "freezing of time" (2012: 7). In a separate, though thematically similar, account of grief, DuBose writes of his experience following his wife's miscarriage, saying that: "Time, space, and expectations of new ways of being with our child were in disarray" (1997: 367).

Taking the experience of grief, broadly, to be an experiential, emotional response that is focused upon the loss of a particular person, it will be familiar to most that bereaved subjects typically describe feeling an intense pining for the deceased to be

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present. (My analysis focuses on the loss of a loved one – spouse, parent or child – because this is a paradigmatic case; I don't assume this to be a necessary feature of the experience of grief.) Parkes takes such an intense pining or yearning for the deceased to be “the central and pathognomonic feature of grief”, such that “without it grief cannot truly be said to have occurred and when present it is a sure sign of a person grieving” (1970: 451). As the passages from Riley and DuBose demonstrate, in addition to the yearning for the deceased, the bereaved often describes feeling as though they are somehow in a darker, alien world, removed from the ordinary course of time. Fuchs describes how “[t]he mourner... lives in two worlds; one might be inclined to say, in the present and in the past. ...The temporality of grief may be described as a separation of two forms of time, one flowing, one arrested, which become more and more desynchronized” (2018: 50).

Characterising exactly how the experience of grief disrupts the experience of time is a theoretical challenge. Grieving subjects still experience motion, change, and succession, and are typically capable of completing serial actions such as cooking a meal or carrying out a mental calculation. These are aspects of the relationship between time and consciousness that have been central to discussions of temporal experience in recent philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Grief also doesn't typically appear to affect the kinds of empirical measures psychologists often use to measure temporal awareness. The grieving subject seems to maintain most of her orientational abilities in time (e.g. can tell the month, day of the week, date, and so on), meet at various locations at agreed times, and estimate how long they have been kept waiting.<sup>1</sup> If grieving subjects are typically relatively unimpaired in these respects, how is it that their experience of time feels disrupted? This is the overarching question I wish to tackle in the present paper.

All else being equal, I assume that we should take such first personal reports at face value and aim to articulate the way(s) in which bereaved subjects' experience of time is distorted following the loss of a loved one. I demonstrate that we can shed light on this issue by distinguishing between three notions of a typical subject's temporal perspective – the perceptual, the agential, and the narrative – and present the independent motivation for appealing to the three notions (Section 2). (For ease of presentation, I will speak interchangeably of these as three temporal perspectives, or three aspects of a conscious subject's temporal perspective.) I demonstrate how appeal to these three notions can help to reveal different aspects of the phenomenology of grief (Section 3), to signpost: I'll show that all three perspectives

<sup>1</sup> At least, orientational abilities in time are not commonly claimed to be disrupted in first-personal reports, though people are often said to be so absorbed in grief that they lose track of time. It is, of course, possible that some people's everyday actions and orientational abilities may also be impacted in extreme cases. For example, neuropsychological testing has shown that participants with prolonged grief disorder (PGD) performed poorly in cognitive tests, relative to those with non-complicated grief and the non-bereaved (Pérez et al. 2018). (The authors further employ longitudinal research and find that participants with PGD showed greater cognitive decline than matched, non-bereaved participants during seven years of follow-up.) One may predict that reaction times and certain orientational abilities may also decline relative to such overall cognitive decline, but such findings and predictions require further additional investigation and explanation, over and above the analysis provided herein.

may be affected, particularly in relation to the subject's awareness of the absence of the deceased, but that it is primarily the way the narrative perspective is affected that lets us talk about a change in the experience of time. I end by discussing how appeal to the three notions of temporal perspective can also help us to analyse pre-existing issues in the literature on grief, such as the experience of anticipatory grief (Section 4).

Before continuing, a few caveats should precede the analysis to be offered. Firstly, I grant that grief is a heterogeneous process, no doubt subject to variation across cultures, age groups, and other demographic factors; and which – even within a given demographic – no doubt unfolds in multifarious ways across subjects. Secondly, while I propose to discuss some of the temporal disruptions typical of the experience of grief, I don't intend to provide an exhaustive analysis. There can, of course, be other temporal disruptions that may be of interest; and there are, of course, other aspects of the phenomenology of grief that are of interest. To stress, the motivation behind the present discussion is as follows. There is a lot of very interesting but difficult to analyse autobiographical material and qualitative data on the experience of grief. While grief is no doubt a very nebulous process/state, people have not been approaching it with a full theoretical toolbox and thus have a reduced number of useful categories to communicate and deal with their grief. I will demonstrate the value in approaching the topic a little more programmatically, showing that the tripartite account of temporal perspectives to be outlined provides us with a way of approaching these issues regarding the experience of grief that is as of yet underexplored, and that there are interesting implications for how we articulate the phenomenology, how we understand the experience, and how we think about methods for dealing with the experience of grief. (Articulating subjects' temporal perspectives in this way, and demonstrating how such perspectives can interact, will also be relevant to other experiences we care about – such as relief, regret, and perhaps the experience of falling in love.)

Having offered these cautionary points, in what follows I assume that there is a core temporal structure to our ongoing conscious experience and, consequently, to the experience of grief; accepting that there will be many variations and idiosyncrasies, I take it that this core structure may nonetheless be articulated and discussed.

## **2 Temporal Perspectives**

A claim often invoked in discussions of the philosophy of mind, at least since Nagel (1974; 1986), is that the notion of 'a point of view' has a central role to play in articulating the phenomenal character of experience. Yet, appeal to the notion of a point of view can be ambiguous. In the present section I outline how the notion is to be understood in what follows, before explaining and motivating three distinct notions of a temporal point of view in conscious experience.

'A point of view' is a broad notion which can be specified further when it is put to use in a given domain. In the philosophical literature, theorists often appeal to points of view in an effort to single out particular aspects of one's mental life – such as a subject's experiential states, opinions, attitudes, feelings, and so on. In any given

case, points of view are always upon/about something and, plausibly, when points of view are involved our representations are dependent on a perspective (as opposed to a representation from no point of view). To have a point of view upon/about something is therefore to have a perspective from a location upon/about that thing. Hence, I will treat viewpoints/perspectives as anchors to locations (which could be spatial, logical, or cultural locations, though my interest will remain upon the temporal) from which some information is presented/received/interpreted. In any given case, how we think of a point of view being anchored to a location, and what we take it to be a point of view upon, will depend on fleshing out the type of point of view that we are concerned with.

The notion of an experiential point of view is of general interest in discussions of phenomenology and the philosophy of mind. Many theorists find themselves in broad agreement with Nagel's claim that "...not all reality is better understood the more objectively it is viewed. Appearance and perspective are essential parts of what there is, and in some respects they are best understood from a less detached standpoint" (1986: 4). Nagel suggests that occupying a given (type of) point of view is essential to how things are for an experiencing subject; that "[i]f we try to understand experience from an objective viewpoint that is distinct from that of the subject of the experience, then even if we continue to credit its perspectival nature, we will not be able to grasp its most specific qualities unless we can imagine them subjectively" (1986: 25). One of the thoughts behind Nagel's discussion appears to be that we need to articulate the sense in which we seem to occupy a given type of point of view in conscious experience if we are to characterise the phenomenology, or in Nagel's terms *what it is like* for an experiencing subject. In this spirit, in the present context I am interested in articulating three temporal perspectives that a typical subject occupies in conscious experience: the perceptual perspective, the agential perspective, and the narrative perspective.

## 2.1 Perspective and Perceptual Awareness

Visual perceptual experience in space is manifestly viewpointed. A subject can mark out the apparent spatial locations of objects she is visually aware of as distinct from the spatial location of her perceptual point of view on them, as visual experience presents its objects as external – distally located in space – and relative to the region of the eyes.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, perceptual experience is temporally transparent. While temporal transparency has been appealed to under a number of guises,<sup>3</sup> for current purposes it can be presented simply as

<sup>2</sup> This is not meant to imply that the region of the eyes is presented in experience. For discussion of precisely how visual experience is relative to your position but doesn't reduce to a representation of the relationship between your position and that of the objects seen, see, e.g., Brewer (2011: 99); Campbell (2009: 657); and Peacocke (1992: 62).

<sup>3</sup> For variations on the claim that perceptual experience is temporally transparent, see Phillips (2014); Rashbrook (2013); Richardson (2014); Soteriou (2013). For critical discussion of temporal transparency, see Hoerl (2018). On Hoerl's view, the negative claim I make in the text holds.

the claim that, from reflecting on the perceptual phenomenology, the experiencing subject cannot distinguish between the temporal location from which she perceptually experiences a given occurrence and the temporal location of that occurrence which she seems to perceive. (This is a phenomenological claim, and it is entirely consistent with the distinction one can draw in psychophysics between the time at which light leaves the object and the time at which the subject perceives that object.) The temporal transparency of perceptual experience can be contrasted with memory. When we recall an event, through reflection on the phenomenology we are (typically) aware that the event being recalled occurred at an earlier time than the time at which we are engaged in recollecting. We are not so aware of any such distinction in reflecting upon the phenomenology of perceptual experience.

It need not follow that we simply do not seem to have a temporal perceptual perspective. While a subject's temporal perspective in perceptual experience does not have a felt temporal location that is manifestly distinct from the temporal location of that which is presented in experience, the subject of perceptual experience nonetheless seems to occupy some temporal location from which various occurrences are perceptually presented. This is the sense in which perceptual experience is temporally transparent and can seem, to the subject, to be a bare presentation of one's environment, since the temporal location of one's perceptual perspective does not seem to be independent of the temporal location of the occurrences presented in perceptual experience. (This can again be contrasted with how the spatial location of one's visual perceptual perspective does seem to be broadly independent of the spatial location of the object seen, as the latter can typically be viewed from a variety of perspectives in space.) Taking for granted that perceptual experience is temporally transparent, as outlined above, we can proceed to a typical subject's agential temporal awareness.

## 2.2 Perspective and Agential Awareness

The temporal location of a typical subject's perceptual point of view is transparent to the apparent temporal location of that which is being perceived; yet how things are for the subject is not completely transparent to the time she is perceptually aware of. A typical subject's agential temporal awareness can be distinguished from her perceptual awareness by dint of the fact that the former is **not** temporally transparent. As a subject carries out some serial activity – such as writing a sentence of prose or performing a particular dance – the successful performance of that activity, and the subject's awareness of what it is that she is doing at any time during, depends upon her having an awareness not only of what is occurring *now* – i.e., the time presented in perceptual experience – but also of what occurred immediately previously and what she anticipates occurring immediately subsequently. We can take perceptual experience to be temporally transparent to that which seems to be occurring *now* and nonetheless recognise that a subject's experiential awareness of that which is

perceptually presented – *as occurring now* – irreducibly depends on her psychological orientation towards immediately preceding and subsequent times.<sup>4</sup>

Consider the example of a subject who is salsa dancing. At a given time, the subject is stood with her left foot forwards, and she then shifts her weight from front to back in the course of moving her body. If we supposed that this activity-part is all that the subject is aware of – if we weren't to include how she is aware of her stepping forward with her left foot as that which occurred immediately previously, nor her stepping back with her left foot as what she expects (and intends) to occur immediately subsequently – we can scarcely take her to be aware of what she is doing as salsa dancing. Yet, we do want to grant that such a subject is typically aware of what she is doing as salsa dancing; she does have such a psychological orientation towards her immediate past and future. This example thus provides an illustration of a subject's agential perspective: a subject is typically aware not only of what she *now* perceiving (that which her perceptual perspective is temporally transparent to), she is also aware that this is a part of something temporally greater.

An experiencing subject, at least while conscious and experiencing, is typically aware of what she is doing – though perhaps not *everything* that she is doing, however described – where enjoying such an awareness depends upon a tripartite temporal structure of awareness: an awareness of what seems to be occurring *now* and of what one recalls occurring immediately previously and of what one anticipates occurring immediately subsequently. This is what is distinctive of the subject's agential temporal point of view. In ongoing experience the subject is, in this sense, psychologically oriented to those times immediately preceding and subsequent to that which she is perceptually presented with; as a result, she seems to occupy a vantage point in time upon a time given as 'now' or 'temporally present'. In addition to having a greater temporal span than the perceptual, this agential awareness is also plausibly richer, insofar as there is, for example, an affective dimension to our orientation to the future – i.e., from hope and excitement to dread and anxiety, or to more affectively neutral states.

Above I appealed to an example of intentional bodily action as an illustration of the tripartite temporal structure of awareness in consciousness; to be clear, this is not because I take *overtly bodily* action to be necessary for this structure. For instance, the deployment of attention can be something that the subject actively engages in, where such deployment of attention is one thing that is crucial to (most) consciousness; yet this requires little – if any – overtly bodily action. We would plausibly be deploying attention in this sense, and so occupying an agential perspective, simply in watching or listening to something – see, e.g., Crowther (2009a, b, 2010) – or in reasoning and carrying out mental calculations. In each case, the subject remains psychologically oriented to those times immediately preceding and subsequent to

<sup>4</sup> Though the context and terminology vary, many theorists make such an appeal to a temporal perspective that affords a psychological orientation to one's immediate past and future in conscious experience. For representative passages, see James (1890: 609); Husserl (1991: 35); Russell (1992: 66); O'Shaughnessy (2000: 49–63). Some role for a psychological orientation to the immediate future is also made in quite different frameworks – e.g., see the role of efferent copies in motor control (Wolpert and Flanagan 2001) and of active inferences within the predictive processing framework (Hohwy 2013).

that which she is oriented towards as temporally present, where occupying such a temporal perspective is plausibly required for the awareness that she enjoys of the very activity that she is engaged in. And it is plausible that much of what holds great emotional import for subjects concerns times stretching even further into the past and future.

### 2.3 Perspective and Narrative Awareness

During the 1980s many social scientists began to emphasise the role of narrative understanding in subjects' sense of self and agency. Ricoeur (1984) describes the role of narrative in providing our lives with unity over time; MacIntyre (1981) focuses on how narratives can provide us with moral direction; while McAdams (1985) writes about a sense in which one's notion of identity itself might be conceived of as a narrative that an individual begins to formulate in adolescence. On the latter, McAdams says that if we were to give the notion of identity a visual representative: "it would look like a story—an internalized and evolving tale with main characters, intersecting plots, key scenes, and an imagined ending, representing how the person reconstructs the personal past (chapters gone by) and anticipates the future (chapters yet to come)" (2011: 99).<sup>5</sup>

An exercise of narrative understanding, so understood, is broadly an activity that provides a selective reconstruction of one's past and/or an imagined course of one's future, with (perhaps overlapping) causal and thematic connections, in the service of providing some form of continuity and meaning. The narrative one arrives at will plausibly be heavily influenced by the culture within which one was raised (and, if different, the culture one is currently in), and the people with which one has interacted. This leads McAdams to say that "any person's particular narrative identity is a co-authored, psychosocial construction, a joint product of the person him/herself and the culture wherein the person acts, strives, and narrates" (2011: 112).<sup>6</sup>

In what follows I don't wish to tie the notion of a narrative perspective (to be outlined) to any particular view of narrative understanding, nor to the latter's role, if it has one, in subjects arriving at a sense of self. For present interests, I take a narrative to be a story one constructs that is concerned with particular facts, events and individuals over time, and with how things happening one after another hold

<sup>5</sup> Many other theorists also began to suggest that people tend to use narratives to understand goal-directed behaviour – see, e.g., Cohler (1982); Spence (1982); Bruner (1986); Sarbin (1986); Polkinghorne (1988). Strawson (2004) provides a dissenting voice, giving reasons to be sceptical of the importance of narratives for a sense of self, where such narratives are understood as the activity of relatively large-scale coherence/unity/pattern-seeking in one's life, or relatively large-scale parts of one's life. In response, Hardt (2018) argues that narrative understanding may not be best understood in the terms that Strawson understands it; it need not be construed as explicitly referring to one's whole life. Velleman (2006) also appeals to narrative understanding without holding that all our actions depend on a continuation of one over-arching story; for Velleman we can tell many short stories that we act out.

<sup>6</sup> I don't wish to put too much weight on the idea that this narrative is 'co-authored'. As a colleague points out to me, while it is plausible that my philosophical research is a product of culture and environment, there is an important sense in which it is (mostly) nonetheless single-authored; the same might be said about one's particular personal narrative.

together in some way (revealing a certain causal or thematic coherence in what happened). Such narratable episodes may be of long or short duration (be it on the scale of a ‘whole’ life, a few weeks, or even a few hours); a narrative can be more or less coherent; and a narrative can be thought through or said aloud to others.

Such narrative understanding is presently of interest because of the kind of *temporal* narrative perspective that it affords us. Our narrative awareness allows for a perspective on other perspectives, insofar as it is a (selective) reconstruction, at a time, on other perspectives at other times. (Episodic memory plausibly plays a fairly important role in this narrative awareness, providing the nodes/junctures of the narrative.) As a result of this structure, narrative awareness is a central, and in some ways dominant, feature of our temporal perspective – dominant in the sense that one’s present knowledge and emotions often infect what is being recalled. Such emotional contagion can, for example, result in a once pleasant romantic memory later becoming soured by the deterioration of a relationship, with that memory then only being recalled with bitterness. This is importantly related to the sense in which one’s narrative awareness is a *selective* reconstruction, rather than a forensic retelling, as outlined below.

It is important to distinguish between two kinds of perspective relevant to such narratives. There are internal perspectives, those perspectives of individuals who fall within the narrative time, such as the perspective of one’s past self (or others) at some recalled time and the perspective of one’s future self (or others) at an anticipated time. There is also the external perspective, the perspective of the narrator, who, for present purposes, I will take to be the creator/author of the narrative – i.e., the subject engaging in an exercise of narrative understanding. (Hereafter, appeal to ‘the narrative perspective’ should be read as an appeal to this external perspective.) The internal/external distinction being used here is **not** to be understood as a distinction between biographical self-understanding and a biographical understanding of another. The idea is **not** that it is an external perspective on another’s internal perspective; it is understanding that in episodic recall (and perhaps in anticipation) one can, in the relevant sense, enter/represent a perspective that one once occupied previously (or anticipates occupying in the future). To this extent, the distinction is to be understood broadly phenomenologically: that I am – from an external perspective – presently recalling occupying a(n internal) perspective on what, at the time at which this perspective was previously occupied, then seemed to be present, but which I am now – from the external perspective – aware of as past.<sup>7</sup>

In adopting a narrative perspective, the subject is typically anchored in the present – where this is the point of external engagement with the narrative – and represents events and individuals spread over a greater temporal extent. Hence, the narrative perspective one enjoys has a much greater range than the agential and perceptual perspectives (both having a greater temporal reach into the past/future and also being concerned with not just perceptible phenomena or the actions one

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps you can take an external perspective on another’s internal perspective, *if* you can imagine that you are someone else, as opposed to merely imagining things about yourself changing. This is not something I wish to take a stand on.



is presently engaged in, but one's self and life more generally, plausibly with greater evaluative and emotional content). In its emotional import, and in providing meaning to the various activities, projects, and roles that the subject is undertaking, such a perspective is appropriately thought of as experiential – not merely in Hinton's (1973) very general biographical notion of experience, but in terms of capturing *what it is like* for the experiencing subject. In this context, two further points should be emphasised.

First, as said above, since narrative understanding is not merely a faithful and forensic retelling of past events, the stories we construct can change over time. The narrative perspective is typically anchored in the present and as time passes people accumulate new experiences; some of these may prove more or less important to the subject's ongoing and evolving narrative understanding. As people's motivations, roles, values, and goals change over time, the memories they place more meaning and weight upon may change – and details associated with the particular events recalled may change too. Such a change, over time, is not merely a function of those details of one's past that the subject presently affords more weight; in narrative thinking about one's past the internal and external perspectives can become intertwined – for example, as outlined previously, events that gave one joy in the moment (and even when recalled at earlier times) may now be recalled with bitterness. After infidelity comes to light, you might remember the last time you kissed your spouse, not knowing, as you do now, that it preceded their running into the arms of their lover. This knowledge will infect the way you remember the kiss. Once a pleasant memory, but now decidedly unpleasant.

Second, it is important to recognise that we often tell ourselves stories – about our lives and how they will unfold – in which others play crucial roles. I don't presently imagine 'marrying some  $x$ ' – though I may have, at one time – where that  $x$  is a variable simply to be filled by some suitable referent. I imagine marrying *my fiancé*. Without my fiancé, that one particular individual, the story cannot be completed. Implicitly or explicitly, I have devised plans – and/or *we* have devised plans – that rely upon joint agency, plans which make ineliminable reference to other individuals and plans with great emotional import.

The theoretical framework being proposed within the present section can be summarised as follows. We human subjects occupy a temporal perspective in ongoing experience that is an aggregate of the three forms of awareness outlined above: the perceptual, the agentive, and the narrative. Importantly for present concerns, each form of awareness is distinctively temporal: an awareness of the present (i.e., perceptual); an awareness of the present as juxtaposed between the immediate past and future (i.e., agentive); and an awareness of past and future perspectives and of ways in which our occupying them is thematically linked over time (i.e., narrative). While distinguishing between perceptual, agentive, and narrative perspectives is, I believe, useful, the distinction could mislead if it is taken to suggest a reading on which the 'narrative' is not at all agential. These types of awareness are not exclusive but overlap and interact. One suggestion of the present paper is that through a better understanding of how these interact, we can better articulate the phenomenology and better understand the experience of complex emotions, such as grief.

### 3 The Temporal Perspectives in Grief

Having distinguished between three notions of a typical subject's temporal perspective, I will now turn to discuss how these notions can help to elucidate some aspects of the phenomenology of grief; particularly in relation to the subject's awareness of absence and disruptions in the experience of time.

#### 3.1 Experienced Absence and Grief

Many discussions of grief are dominated by appeal to how the grieving subject orients herself to her past and future. Colloquially, grieving subjects are often said to dwell in memories of the past, or in hypothetical thoughts of the future that they had desired to come to fruition but now cannot as a result of their loss. Less is said about the subject's conscious encounter with the present. Yet, in first-personal accounts of the experience of grief subjects report a profound difference in their experiential encounter with the world. Focusing solely upon the subject's perceptual perspective, we can articulate one way in which the bereaved subject's experience of the world contributes to the experience of grief, without yet appealing to the subject explicitly entertaining any memories of the past or frustrated anticipations of the future.

Saint Augustine writes of his grief following the death of his childhood friend. In what might be viewed as a metaphorical choice of words, he says: "Whatever I looked upon had the air of death. ... The things we had done together became sheer torment without him. ... I hated all places because he was not in them" (Augustine 2006: book IV, chapter iv, 59–60). It can be tempting to read Augustine as recalling the activities he used to engage in with his friend, yearning for such activities to take place again with his friend, while recognising that this is no longer possible. However, such an interpretation obscures the non-metaphorical sense in which we can understand the experience of grief to include what one looks upon as 'having the air of death'. One's experiential confrontation with one's present environment can involve the awareness of the absence of the loved one (whether perceived or otherwise experienced, I'm not currently concerned with making any strong claims about the perception of absences), even when there was no expectation – implicit or explicit – that the deceased should be present.<sup>8</sup>

Kelly describes just such an aspect of the experience of grief, saying: "If, in grieving, I get out of my memories and face the world in which X is no longer, I see an absence of a different kind—an absence not reducible to or about the past but caused by the past" (Kelly 2016: 167). In such a case, the bereaved has previously perceived regularities in her environment that are no longer there to be perceived. Certain artefacts or activities may, for the subject, be irreducibly tied to other artefacts or to particular individuals. Being presented with such artefacts or activities in isolation thereby gives rise to a sense of absence in one's experience. This sense of

<sup>8</sup> For a recent discussion of the implications of grief for philosophical theorising about absence experience, which suggests a pluralistic approach to explaining absence experience, see Richardson (2022).

absence can and does exist outside of the experience of grief, but it can also contribute to the experience of grief when combined with the realisation of loss.

This aspect of grief, and the experienced absence of the deceased, is also captured well by Nussbaum's description of her experience following the death of her mother. Recounting her experience as she left the hospital with some of her mother's belongings, Nussbaum says that these objects were "strange relics that seemed to me not to belong in the world anymore, as if they should have vanished with her life" (Nussbaum 2008: 20). Such objects are, we might say, experienced by Nussbaum as belonging to her mother; now that her mother has passed away, in experiencing these objects Nussbaum is experiencing objects that are irreducibly tied to a woman who is not, and no longer can be, present. This experience also appears to be captured in Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of her mother's death, where she describes some of her mother's remaining possessions as "orphaned, useless, waiting to turn into rubbish or to find another identity..." (de Beauvoir 1965: 98).

We need not suppose that when Nussbaum looks over her mother's belongings she has any expectations of her mother coming to collect them in the near future, nor need she be lost in memories of times past when she saw her mother with these objects. Rather, this aspect of the phenomenology of grief may appear to be temporally-bare. The objects that previously gained their meaning and emotional import from their relation to that individual now make that individual's absence apparent. While this sense of absence may be experienced without loss, its role in the experience of grief is only made possible by the recognition of loss. It may be that one thinks of such cases as also involving one's present sense of the past, and of something that was once present but now is not; more will be said about this in what follows.

### 3.2 Habitual Expectations and Grief

The above demonstrates that we can articulate one sense in which the bereaved subject's experience of the world contributes to the experience of grief without yet appealing to the subject explicitly entertaining any memories of the past or frustrated anticipations of the future (though some role for memory, perhaps semantic memory, may be implied). This is not to belittle the role that such memories and anticipations play in the experience of grief. As experiencing subjects we have learned to manoeuvre the world with certain expectations, including interpersonal expectations, and these expectations can be violated because of the absence of the loved one. Again, such violated expectations can be part of our experiential lives quite outside the experience of grief – entire experimental paradigms in psychology depend upon this – but upon recognising the loss of a loved one such violated expectations can become focused on the absence of the deceased.

Attig describes how bereavement "takes us away from the shape of life where we have come to experience ourselves at home, and it makes us aware of how much we have taken for granted. ... It disrupts the life patterns within which we have found meaning, it confronts us with an unexpected future" (2004: 350). Offering what appears to be a description of this aspect of the experience of grief, Lewis

says: “I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense... It comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone.” (1966: 41). In such cases, habitual memory and anticipation continues to manifest itself, but the bereaved continues to anticipate the deceased in various activities within which they have been implicated over time only to have such expectations violated.

Many of the actions we perform each day, whether they are explicitly joint actions or not, implicate a role for others. (Setting a place at the table for one’s spouse might not be a joint action, but it implicates a role for one’s spouse to perform in the near future – i.e., to sit and have a meal.) These patterns of activity have been learned and adopted over a long period of time and cannot simply be stopped at a moment’s notice when the subject explicitly recognises that these activities have lost their target and can no longer be successfully carried to fruition. As a result, as Ratcliffe describes it: “The bereaved person continues to anticipate things in a habitual, practical way, drifting into patterns of activity and thought that somehow implicate the deceased. These are then disrupted by the dawning recognition of loss.... [O]ne habitually anticipates certain things and is then confronted by the impossibility of one’s expectations ever being fulfilled.” (2019: 545).

What I have said, so far, has simply been to demonstrate that habitual expectations may be violated following loss, but we can disentangle two aspects of grief here. We can have expectations about the presence of another subject just as we can have habitual expectations about the presence and behaviour of inanimate objects, learned from repeated experience of regularities in the world around us. It is plausible that theorists such as Attig are appealing to something that goes a lot deeper than this, insofar as such theorists appeal specifically to a meaning dimension to life which has become disrupted. One way in which we might make sense of this further disruption goes via consideration of joint attention and joint action.

Joint attention is a remarkably common phenomenon which – with the exception of hermits and social recluses – probably occurs for each of us many times in a single day. Take a characterisation of an episode of joint attention as follows: there is an object that two subjects each attend to; each subject exploits some (perhaps minimal) understanding of attention; and further there is an awareness by each subject that each is attending to the object – i.e., in an episode of joint attention there is mutual awareness among the participants that they are jointly attending. As put by Call and Tomasello: “Joint attention requires that each of the individuals knows that the other is attending to the same thing as they are attending to; this is what makes it a joint, rather than merely a simultaneous, activity” (2005: 45).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Up until this point I characterise the phenomenon in a way that most researchers would find unobjectionable. It can be granted that the question of what mechanisms are responsible for the achievement of joint attention is not independent of the question of what joint attention is, but to define it as above is not yet to commit to a particular account of the causal mechanisms responsible – theorists can maintain this account of joint attention and still disagree about the psychological complexity attributed to the agents engaged in episodes of joint attention. However, from this point I appeal to one understanding of joint attention in particular; an understanding that some theorists may take issue with – see, e.g., Peacocke (2005).

An analogy with joint attention is useful in the present context because it allows us to acknowledge how, for one subject, another subject can be both an object of thought (which, in bereavement, is now no longer there), but also a partner in a form of extended joint attention (and joint action). For example, Campbell (2005; 2011) offers a relational analysis of joint attention, on which it is taken to be a primitive phenomenon of consciousness. On Campbell's proposal, the co-attender is a constituent of one's experience – in episodes of joint attention – without being presented as the object of experience (2005: 288). If we find it plausible that there can be such three-place experiential relations, in which another subject is a constituent of one's experience as a co-attender, rather than as a mere object of attention, we can acknowledge that this is one way in which experiences are shared with others. It is also plausible that much of the meaning that people attach to events in their own lives has to do with the way they are shared with the other person, as a partner in a form of extended joint attention or action. As a consequence, with the recognition of loss one recognises that one can no longer share such experiences with the other; hence, that which gave meaning to many events in one's life has been lost.

In cases such as those described above, the subject need not be entertaining any experiential memories concerning the deceased, nor any once desired plans about her future with the deceased. The subject need not be entertaining a narrative perspective upon her life, or any significant period of it. Yet the subject is exploiting more than a mere perceptual perspective on her environment; this aspect of the experience of grief depends upon subjects occupying agential perspectives where they are, at any time, anticipating various activities unfolding in their immediate future. As Ryle demonstrates, occupying such a perspective on one's immediate future need not be supposed to take the form of explicit judgements, but is rather characterised by the fact that the subject will be surprised if and/or when things go otherwise (1949: 158). This is plausibly related to what, within the phenomenological tradition, is more typically thought of as a feeling of being 'at home' in the world. In this sense, the subject occupies an agential perspective within which she has developed many habitual expectations that implicate the deceased – both as an object of one's attention and actions, and as a partner of joint attention and joint action – and, upon each expectation being violated, the subject is confronted with the absence of the deceased and with the impossibility of the particular expectations ever being fulfilled again.<sup>10</sup>

In some discussions, the experience of grief (and trauma) is also said to lead to disruptions of the experience of time passing, the latter being something that is often

<sup>10</sup> To stress, the temporal structure of experience being teased out is not supposed to be sufficient for grief, and the whole package – perceptual, agential, and narrative perspectives – is not supposed to be necessary either (as I suggest below in connection with young children and non-human animals). Regarding the former, one could imagine that a death (say of a tormentor, or of one who has imprisoned you) may precipitate a vivid sense of such absence, while one was not grieving their death but filled with relief. Regarding the latter, one can surely grieve for someone who one has been estranged from, where one doesn't have such evidence of the 'gappiness' of actions that used to be joint (and the grief, in such a case, may be best understood with reference to the narrative perspective alone).

said to be one of the most persistent and immediately given aspects of experience.<sup>11</sup> For example, Ratcliffe et al. (2014) suggest that the sense of foreshortened future in subjects experiencing trauma is not (always) simply a cluster of judgements – such as ‘I will die young’ – but that there is some effect on the subjects’ experience of time. In this context they appeal to Husserlian protentions (i.e., anticipations/expectations that concern one’s immediate future) in experience and say that, in such cases of trauma experience, there is a shift in the structure of protention; that one’s anticipations of the future are bereft of certain possibilities. They suggest that, as a result, there is a change in subjects’ experience of temporal flow/passage. This appears to follow from the authors’ view that, in addition to the content expected, and the mode of expectation (i.e., certainty or uncertainty), there can be an affective style of anticipation (i.e., hope, dread, curiosity). The suggestion appears to be that there is a change in the affective style of anticipation for subjects experiencing trauma and that this results in an altered sense of time’s passage.

It is not, however, clear why such a lack of positivity/affect should alter one’s sense of temporal passage. Insofar as a subject retains the agential perspective and the overall structure of anticipation, she continues to anticipate things coming and going and is, as a result, still able to successfully carry out serial actions. It therefore seems plausible that the subject continues to experience time passing, in this sense, even if the affective style of anticipation is altered. However, this is not to say that there is no sense in which the subject’s experience of time passing is disrupted. We can reveal the nature of this disruption when we turn to consider the subject’s narrative perspective.

### 3.3 A Stalled Narrative and Grief

Recall that in occupying a narrative perspective, the subject is (typically) anchored in the present, at the point of external engagement with the narrative, and represents events and individuals spread over a greater temporal extent. While such a narrative may be centred on the subject, it typically implicates and depends upon other individuals playing particular roles. Such narratives are typically built upon shared memories and a future that is planned with particular others (a spouse, children, siblings, and so on). Hence the future of the narrative is a future that is both planned with the ‘other(s)’ and a plan that includes that ‘other(s)’ as an integral part. With the recognition of loss following bereavement there is a recognition that such a plan cannot come to fruition; this gives rise to further aspects of the experience of grief.<sup>12</sup>

The overall narrative structure that the subject has developed is thrown into disarray by the loss of the loved one in the sense that, as described by Parkes

<sup>11</sup> On the experience of time passing see, e.g., Paul (2010); Torrenco (2017); Schlesinger (1991).

<sup>12</sup> In appealing to one’s narrative perspective in articulating the phenomenology of grief, I don’t mean to suggest – or dispute – that the experience of grieving can itself seem to follow a narrative pattern, as Goldie can be read as suggesting (2012: 62); nor do I mean to suggest – or dispute – that one resorts to narratives in order to make sense of one’s experiences in responding to bereavement, as Ratcliffe suggests (2017: 160). Rather, the suggestion is that mature human subjects typically occupy a narrative perspective in their day-to-day lives and this perspective is disrupted in grief, as outlined in what follows.

and Prigerson: “When someone dies a whole set of assumptions about the world that relied upon the other person for their validity are suddenly invalidated” (2010: 101). One such aspect of the experience of grief is found in how the emotional import of parts of the narrative can change. Regarding the past, once happy memories may become tinged with sadness; this is captured by Ratcliffe, who says: “When recalling time spent with the deceased, memories are infected with the present” (2019: 545). Regarding the future, hypothetical plans – that the bereavement has made impossible – cannot simply be shrugged off; so while recognised as impossible, they may still be melancholically entertained. Even when a subject is able to update their narrative understanding, this does not mean that all previous ‘drafts’ and hypothetical plans are forgotten. Whether in counterfactual thought, or in the form of unbidden imaginings, such hypothetical plans are not simply jettisoned and can be one source of the bereaved’s pining for the lost future with the deceased; these are salient aspects of the experience of grief.

A further aspect of the experience of grief which is revealed on the level of the subject’s narrative perspective is the distorted sense of time and time’s passage. In first-personal accounts of grieving, subjects don’t merely report memories – and hypothetical thinking – that are now tinged with sadness. Subjects often report feeling that they are “stuck in the present”, or “between an irretrievable past and unattainable future” (Keeping 2014: 247-8). This is similar to how Steinbock says that, in despair, “[p]ast and future are constricted to an overwhelming experience of a fixed present” (2007: 449). In a particularly poignant description, in her discussion of Proust and Merleau-Ponty, Locke says: “These moments [disruptions in the field of being, such as death, grief, or violence] seem to stop time’s flow in a jarring way, to fix it as a butterfly pinned to a board. Nothing happens afterwards, since that which made sense or gave meaning to things no longer coheres from the perspective of the heart. Even if the world continues apace for others in the surrounding field, for the grieving person the event cannot be brought into relation with memories that made life have a narrative shape and flow.” (2010: 148).

Focusing on a subject’s narrative perspective, and juxtaposing this with her agential and perceptual perspectives, we can make sense of the above descriptions and one way in which her experience of time is disrupted. Following the bereavement, the grieving subject can fail to update their narrative understanding of events – and the subject may think that there is an important sense in which she *shouldn’t* update her narrative understanding or plans<sup>13</sup> – and her narrative perspective may, in this way, be said to have stalled. Having lost a person whose presence was integral to the future portions of the narrative that

<sup>13</sup> In the present section I focus primarily on certain things happening to the subject and her narrative perspective, and the sense in which the experience of grief may lead to a disruption in her experience of time – the account I offer here is not supposed to be exhaustive. For a more comprehensive account one would also have to consider important normative elements relative to the subject’s narrative perspective – i.e., that the individual does not want to adjust their narrative, or feels that there would be something wrong about adjusting their narrative, because of the value assigned to the deceased. While I take these issues to be of great import and interest, I do not have the space to consider them further in the current paper.



had been crafted, the grieving subject does not swiftly amend the narrative and so the point of engagement with the narrative remains at that time before the loved one passed away. Thus, with respect to this perspective, the bereaved subject may seem to be stuck at a fixed present time, as if (to use Keeping's turn of phrase) they are between an irretrievable past – i.e., those times when the bereaved had been with and related to the deceased, which are now recalled in recognition of the bereavement – and unattainable future – those future times and activities that the bereaved had planned with, or planned to involve, the deceased.

As time passes following the death of a loved one, as the bereaved subject continues on, there is also a sense in which time seems to be passing in ongoing experience, with respect to the subject's agential perspective. As said previously, the grieving subject is, for example, typically still able to perform serial actions, meet at various locations at agreed times, and estimate how long they have been kept waiting. In this way, relative to the subject's agential perspective, the event of the deceased's death moves further into the past, but the agential perspective and narrative perspectives have become uncoupled. This is one way of understanding DuBose, who says that: "Grief gazes at an ever-receding present as it moves further and further into the past" (1997: 368). That is, the bereaved can seem to be stuck in the present *and* the present can seem to be receding into the past.

The sense in which one can feel stuck in the present, and yet the present can seem to be receding into the past, is revealed by drawing attention to the different temporal perspectives that we experiencing subjects typically occupy. We can describe the grieving subject as 'stuck' occupying the present, but 'the present' here is that of the narrative, which remains anchored at a time before the loved one passed away. Yet, since the bereavement, the subject's life continues on; so does her agential perspective. (This can be read as one way of developing Fuchs' description – quoted previously – of the temporality of grief as a separation of two forms of time, where one is flowing and the other is arrested.) While both the agential and narrative perspectives previously seemed to share a temporal anchor in the present, the anchor of the narrative perspective, which may fail to update following the bereavement, may thereby become increasingly temporally separated from the anchor of the agential perspective; hence it may seem to be receding into the past. This separation may also impact upon the extent to which the narrative perspective is thought of as being, in a sense, agential. The 'I' whose history is being recalled, projected, and made intelligible, is typically thought of as someone who can actively shape their life; as the temporal anchor of narrative perspective seems to recede into the past, from the perspective of the anchor of the agential perspective in the present, perhaps the sense that this narrative perspective is the perspective of someone who can *actively* shape their life also fades somewhat, as the anticipated future portions of the narrative can no longer come to pass.

### 3.4 Temporal Perspectives and Grief Experience

To summarise, in this section (Section 3), and the one that precedes it (Section 2), I've distinguished between three temporal perspectives that mature, conscious subjects typically occupy: the perceptual, the agential, and the narrative. In brief, the



perceptual perspective is temporally transparent – a seemingly temporally bare awareness of one’s environment. Focusing on the perceptual perspective, I said that grief can be manifest in experience in a way which need not invoke a role for anticipation, or recollection of the past, though it is dependent upon past experience and previously perceived regularities. For example, the bereaved may have previously perceived regularities in her environment between the now deceased individual and certain artefacts; such artefacts may now, for the subject, be irreducibly tied to that particular individual. Hence, even though the bereaved subject may have no expectation that the deceased be present, being perceptually presented with such artefacts and not the deceased may give rise to a sense of the absence of that particular individual.

The subject’s agential perspective is a perspective upon a greater temporal extent than the perceptual, because in addition to an awareness of what seems to be occurring *now* – i.e., the time perceptual experience is transparent to – the subject’s agential temporal point of view also encompasses what she recalls occurring immediately previously and anticipates occurring immediately subsequently. As such, the agential perspective subsumes habitual expectations, including interpersonal expectations. This is relevant to the experience of grief because such expectations may continue to manifest following bereavement. In such cases, and even when the subject recognises that such particular expectations can never be fulfilled again, she may nonetheless continue to anticipate the deceased in various activities within which they have been implicated over time, only to have such expectations violated and making the absence of the deceased apparent.

The subject’s narrative perspective is a perspective upon a greater temporal extent again, and typically such narratives implicate and depend upon other individuals playing particular roles. With the recognition of loss following bereavement, there is a recognition that such a narrative cannot unfold as planned, where this may give rise to further aspects of the experience of grief, including one way in which bereaved subjects can feel as though they are stuck in the present. Typically, both the agential and narrative perspectives seem to share a temporal anchor – i.e., the present – from which the subject is aware of a given temporal extent (and typically a much greater extent in the latter than the former). Following the bereavement, the grieving subject may fail to update their narrative understanding of events and her narrative perspective may, in this way, stall – hence feeling stuck in the present. The agential perspective, however, seems to continue to progress in time, even while the anchor of the narrative perspective fails to update following the bereavement; hence the two become increasingly desynchronised, and, relative to the agential perspective, the narrative perspective can seem to be receding into the past.

In addition to helping us to articulate different aspects of the experience of grief, the distinction between these temporal perspectives can help to shed light on methods for coping and coming to terms with loss. Thomas Attig says that “the process of coming to terms with loss, i.e. grieving, may be understood best as a process of relearning the world” (1990: 54). What the discussion above demonstrates is that there is not merely one process of relearning at play here. There is, at a minimum, learning new regularities perceived in the world in the absence of the deceased; the re-adjustment of one’s habitual expectations as one navigates the world without the

deceased; and the updating of one's narrative. In achieving the latter one can become 'unstuck' from the narrative present that seemed to be receding into the past, raising the anchor of the narrative perspective from the past so it can once again share its location with the agential perspective in the present; and so the subject may, in this way, begin to again feel 'at home in the world'.

#### 4 Further Implications: Anticipatory Grief

I will end by drawing attention to how appeal to the temporal perspectives, outlined above, can also help us to analyse pre-existing issues in the literature on grief. In particular, I will explain how all three perspectives may, in different ways, be affected when the loss of a loved one is anticipated but has not yet occurred. It is sometimes suggested that, in longitudinal studies, post-bereavement responses from caregivers, compared and contrasted with the pre-bereavement responses, demonstrate what is typical of grief. There are obvious methodological constraints in such studies. In order to collect pre-bereavement data, researchers have to focus on subjects who are expecting a loved one to die in the near future, and the data collected is therefore focused upon the grief of participants whose loved ones have died gradually and, to an extent, not wholly unexpectedly. (There would also be obvious drawbacks to focusing upon only those subjects whose loved ones have died suddenly and unexpectedly, such as the lack of reliable pre-bereavement data from these individuals.) This seems to ride roughshod over the possibility of anticipatory grief.<sup>14</sup>

Insofar as grief is tied to the recognition of loss, it can be experienced when its object is an impending loss as well as in those cases where the loss has already occurred. This may seem least likely to be manifest on the level of one's perceptual perspective, as the loved one is not yet absent. However, depending on the condition of the loved one, for some time preceding death they may not be present in one's life (nor, for example, in one's house) as they were previously. In such cases, those objects that gained their meaning and emotional import from their relation to that individual can nonetheless make that individual's current absence – and soon to be permanent absence – apparent. While this aspect of the experience of grief is only made possible by the recognition of loss, the loss need not (in all cases) have yet occurred, and so this may contribute to the experience of anticipatory grief. In a similar manner, anticipatory grief can be experienced on the level of one's agential perspective when its object is an impending loss.

The experience of grief on the level of one's agential perspective depends upon subjects anticipating various activities unfolding in their immediate future. The subject occupies an agential perspective from which she has developed many habitual expectations that implicate the loved one. While these expectations are most obviously violated following loss, such violations may also precede loss. For example,

<sup>14</sup> I discuss anticipatory grief as the experiential, predominantly emotional, response to the immanent loss of a loved one. I don't here say anything about anticipatory-vicarious grief, which is triggered by pondering the inevitability of one's own death. For more on the latter, see Varga and Gallagher (2020).

knowing that her spouse, now in a hospice, will never return home, the subject may nonetheless habitually expect him to be in bed beside her upon waking and these expectations will be violated when she is confronted with the empty side of the bed. She may recognise that she cannot now share experiences with her spouse as she used to – and that she will not be able to continue sharing experiences with her spouse in the future – though the very sharing of such experiences may be what gave those events much of their value for the subject. However, in such cases any new associations and habitual expectations that the subject forms are not completely without the loved one. The loved one's role is transforming, where this is tied to the impending loss and recognition of the impossibility of the particular expectations ever being fulfilled again, even though the loved one is not yet completely absent.

Perhaps the clearest aspect of anticipatory grief can be found on the level of one's narrative perspective. To paraphrase Parkes (quoted previously), upon learning that a loved one will soon die one learns that a whole set of assumptions about the world that relied upon the other person for their validity are soon to be invalidated. Because of the intertwined internal and external perspectives, earlier memories and previously entertained plans for the future may become tinged with sadness. Upon learning of the impending loss – and not only following the bereavement – the subject's narrative perspective may stall as she fails to update her narrative, or update her future plans. Any uncertainty regarding the course of a loved one's illness may only serve to exacerbate this, making the subject unable to reliably adjust the course of the content of their own narrative. In such cases, the point of engagement with the narrative might remain at that time before one learned of the impending loss. As with grief following bereavement, upon learning that one's loved one is expecting to die in the near future, there is a sense in which life goes on and time seems to be passing, while there may also be a sense in which time seems to stop. One's agential perspective and narrative perspective may become uncoupled; relative to the former time continues to be experienced as passing, and relative to the latter time seems to become arrested. Such disruptions in one's experience of time can plausibly occur within anticipatory grief as well as in grief following bereavement.

Distinguishing between one's temporal perspectives in the experience of grief is especially relevant when we turn to consider the experience of grief in young children (and even, perhaps, other non-human animals). A young infant may not yet have the capacity to fully engage in narrative understanding; yet the infant may still experience grief and have to adjust on the level of her perceptual and agential perspectives. Even if the infant does not harbour any hypothetical plans of a future with the deceased, she may have still enjoyed sharing experiences and have developed habitual expectations that implicate the deceased – expectations that are violated following the recognition of loss. In some anecdotal cases, people who lost parents as infants also describe retrospectively working through something like the experience of grief on the level of one's narrative perspective as adults. In such cases it doesn't seem to be true to say that they had prior long-term plans with the loved one, but they may nonetheless come to realise at a later date that they have been deprived of such plans and may yearn for a hypothetical future with the deceased; this may fairly be called a part of the grieving process.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

In first personal accounts of grief, it is often described as disrupting the experience of time. The bereaved subject often describes feeling as though they are somehow removed from the ordinary course of time. I suggested that such reports might initially strike one as puzzling; yet I have assumed that we should take such first personal reports at face value and offered a phenomenological analysis of how bereaved subjects' experience of time may become distorted following the loss of a loved one. I suggested that we can shed light on this aspect of the experience of grief by distinguishing between three temporal perspectives that mature human subjects typically occupy; where this can also help us to analyse pre-existing issues in the literature on grief.

Distinguishing between a subject's perceptual, agential, and narrative perspectives, I demonstrated how these three notions can help to reveal different aspects to the phenomenology of grief. In particular, I demonstrated that though these perspectives are typically anchored to the same temporal location – i.e., the present – the narrative perspective may stall following the loss of a loved one (or in learning of the impending loss of a loved one), where this can lead to subjects feeling 'stuck' in time, or as though the present – i.e., of the narrative – is somehow receding into the past. I ended by demonstrating how appeal to these three temporal perspectives can also be of use in clarifying the experience of anticipatory grief; that both agential and narrative awareness can be severely disrupted when recognising loss, even when it is impending and has not yet formally occurred.

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