

Jan Slaby<sup>1</sup>

# *Intentionality's Breaking Point*

## *A Lesson from Grief*

**Abstract:** *This paper develops elements of a phenomenological account of how interpersonal care contributes to the structure of intentionality. It does so by reflecting on a first-person account of parental grief by the poet and thinker Denise Riley. Her autobiographical notes on the aftermath of the death of her adult son revolve around a marked experience of altered temporal flow. By relating what she considers to be an almost unspeakable alteration in her experience of time, Riley unearths a level of nuanced phenomenological reflection that can inform philosophical studies of lived time and intentionality. The paper will build on Riley's observations on altered temporal experience in grief to explore the entanglement of temporality and intersubjectivity in the constitution of intentionality. By doing so, the paper demonstrates that and how a phenomenological study of grief can directly speak to key concerns of the philosophy of mind and of interdisciplinary consciousness studies.*

### **1. Introduction**

After losing her adult son to unexpected, sudden death, Denise Riley describes the immediate aftermath as follows:

Correspondence:  
Email: [jan.slaby@fu-berlin.de](mailto:jan.slaby@fu-berlin.de)

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Philosophy, Free University Berlin, Germany.

The plainest simplest horror from which the mind flinches away: never to see that person again. The purely *cognitive* violence of it. Now you understand those ideas of the migration of spirits, or of reincarnation: to try to soften that blow. Or no, not to soften it — but to provide something for baffled cognition to grasp at. (Riley, 2019, p. 28)

Besides conveying the unrefined horror of her situation, Riley here approaches a theme that is common in discussions of the topic: the inability to take in, to ‘get’, to grasp the death of a loved one. The definiteness, the infinity, the absoluteness of the phrase ‘He is dead’ marks a vast gap between the processing of a bit of information, a propositional truth, and the existential reality of what that dreaded phrase implies. With her considerations on the disruptive, uprooting character of grief, Riley’s autobiographical reflections align with an important strand of theoretical work on grief that likewise emphasizes its destructive impact on the overall experiential perspective — the lived reality — of the mourner. But over and above this more general, and by and large familiar, theme of grief’s disruptive character, there is a specific theme that surfaces in Riley’s reflections: at the centre of what she reports stands her radically altered experience of time.

Strikingly, she observes a near total cessation of temporal flow. In the months after she learned of her son’s demise, time for her seemed to stand still. Riley, no doubt also against the background of her familiarity with the phenomenological tradition, takes this as a starting point for reflections on the centrality of parental love — or more abstractly put, interpersonal care — for the temporal integrity of experience. What she tentatively calls a ‘maternal temporality’ — an intertwining of the lived temporalities of mother and child — can thus form the basis of a consideration on the interpersonal and essentially temporal foundations of experience.

In this paper, I will assemble elements of a phenomenological account of the temporal foundation of intentionality — the ‘directedness’ of experience at both world and self — by drawing closely on Riley’s observations. Her considerations point to a so far underappreciated connection between parental care, the emerging integrity of a child’s experiential perspective, and the lived time at the base of the adult’s own perspective on self and world. By reconstructing these interrelations, I begin to explore the possibility that the temporal attunement of parent and child might reveal important structural features of an account of intentionality as socially shared lived time and thus help advance the phenomenological elucidation of the conditions of human experience.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I will briefly consider aspects of the phenomenological literature on grief to focus especially on the way grief shatters the mourner's default sense of world-relatedness and practical coping capacities. This provides the first general invocation of intentionality as orientation to and in the world — hence, the title of this text: intentionality's breaking point. In Section 3, I will turn to Denise Riley's observations of altered temporal experience in grief and offer an interpretation of it in terms of interpersonally shared existential temporality: the temporality of interpersonal care or love. In Section 4, I relate these considerations to the wider context of phenomenological debates about the temporal character of intentionality, drawing on ideas from Bergson, Heidegger, and Levinas. I argue that the altered temporality in experiences of profound parental grief provides a new and important perspective on the temporal structure of intentionality as such. In Section 5, I take up a proposal by Line Ingerslev to illuminate the agentive dimension of the grieving process — what is sometimes called 'grief work' — in relation to the ideas about temporality developed before. Section 6 is a brief conclusion and outlook.

## 2. How Grief Breaks It: Loss of a World

For a start, it helps to recount some themes from the phenomenological literature on grief, to get a sense of the significance of experiences of grief for the broader project of elucidating human experience. The focus in the following will be on grief's intentionality, as the orientation to emotional intentionality has been the guiding thread in most work in the philosophy of emotion over the past decades.

That grief is an emotional response to a significant loss, usually the loss of a loved one, is clear. In the common parlance of the philosophy of emotion, 'loss' is understood to be the formal object of grief. More interesting is what this most parsimonious characterization of grief as a 'response to significant loss' does not yet convey. It fails to get at the potential depth and significance of profound grief, and it provides little to make sense of the longer-term unfolding of what might have started as a shock-like response. In order to get a discussion of affective intentionality to a level where significant insights might be gleaned, we have to ensure that a phenomenological characterization reaches the full extent of the existential devastation that grief might

bring.<sup>2</sup> The focus from the outset is on particularly profound instances of bereavement-related grief, where grief is the dominant, almost all-consuming experience for a significant amount of time. Empirically, many instances of grief will certainly be less profound, more short-lived, and not as disruptive or ‘shattering’ as those instances that are of particular interest to phenomenologists. I note this here to make sure the following is understood correctly: I do not try to make claims about the character of many or most actual manifestations of grief, but rather get at a structural feature that is most clearly on display in the profound cases.

Grief is obviously different from short flashes of affect or bouts of emotion. While there might indeed be ‘pangs of grief’, these are only intelligible as elements occurring within longer lasting sequences of emotional engagement, of grappling with loss. Grief is the *process of grieving*, which is to say it is temporally extended and changeable: ‘there is no single, constant, essential ingredient that we can track across its whole course’ (Ratcliffe, 2017, p. 158). I won’t go into details about the arguments against a simplistic ‘mental state’ account of grief and in favour of complex process perspective (see Goldie, 2012; Rinofner-Kreidl, 2016; Ratcliffe, 2017). I agree with Goldie, Ratcliffe, Rinofner-Kreidl, and other scholars in or close to the phenomenological tradition that considerations in favour of grief’s longer-term processual character should be tied to an understanding of its affective intentionality. This is a simple way to make the point: what profound grief is about is a personal loss suffered in the full thrall of its ramifications and consequences for the emoter’s existence. The loss suffered is so significant that it is impossible to take in its facticity and impacts *instantaneously*, let alone understand and accommodate it. Rather, such loss requires a gradual, longer-lasting process of grasping it bit by bit, which likely will occasion time-consuming learning and adjustment phases (see Rinofner-Kreidl, 2016). Grieving involves an enduring episode of ‘coming to terms’ with the loss and what it means to one. Accordingly, we can assume that grief is a process of encompassing engagement with existential loss, likely involving much in the way of confusion, disarray, and

---

<sup>2</sup> I am skipping a discussion of the character of grief as an extended process instead of a supposedly short-term internally homogeneous mental state. See Goldie (2012, chapter 3) and especially Fuchs (2018), Rinofner-Kreidl (2016), and Ratcliffe (2017) for valuable illuminations of these points.

disorientation in its course, especially early on. It is an enduring affective sequence consisting of heterogeneous elements united by their being jointly oriented towards the gradual realization and 'processing' of catastrophic existential loss (*cf.* Ratcliffe, 2017).

A field-defining insight of phenomenology is that experience presupposes a basic sense of reality which provides the framework in which things matter to us in specific ways (Ratcliffe, 2008, chapter 2). In other words, intentional world-directedness has (at least) two distinct layers. When we relate to certain objects, events, states of affairs — for instance by perceiving them, thinking about them, or being angered by them — such mundane experiences unfold against the backdrop of a more encompassing sense of experiential possibility. In many of our routine dealings with our surroundings, this pervasive sense of possibility remains in the background as something we unthinkingly rely on. But on certain occasions, what we are facing within the world is such that it reveals cracks within that background framework, and potentially more than just cracks. Traumatic experiences, bereavement, potentially severe ramifications of the loss of a job or career, serious illness, and other happenings of a similar magnitude can occasion a change in the otherwise seamless background structure of experience. What emotional experiences respond to in these cases is not some mundane matter of concern, but something that exceeds — or threatens to exceed — the bounds of paramount reality as hitherto established.<sup>3</sup>

In her reflections on her condition, Denise Riley provides a stark image of how worldly significance has been disrupted in the wake of her son's death:

An unanticipated and irrevocable vanishing smashes through your habitual cognitive assumptions that objects and people will continue to exist, to reappear. The person who says, 'I keep expecting to hear his key in the door at any moment,' isn't merely falling back on a well-worn trope. She's issuing a factual report. Once so ferociously shaken up, cognition can't readily regroup its forces to reassemble with its old

---

<sup>3</sup> I think that ultimately *all* emotions touch upon that background framework of significance in some way, but some do it in a particularly profound manner in so far as their objects are such that they perturb the presupposed background framework. This sometimes leads to a characteristic choice on part of the emoter: gloss over and effectively 'deny' this existential depth and its ramifications (for instance when we instinctively block out emotions pertaining to our own mortality or bodily fragility) or 'face up to' them and begin a process of adjusting the background orientation on which one has tacitly relied.

anticipation intact. The entire stance inside which you'd previously lived is changed. Not by any disfiguring melancholia on your part, or even by simple reflective sadness — but by an upheaval of that pre-conscious topography through which your old apprehension of the world had once quietly moved. (Riley, 2019, pp. 59f.)

While Riley directs her attention somewhat more to the cognitive side of the person–world mutuality, phenomenologists tend to foreground the way in which the world itself seems to change in relation to such traumatic disruption. But it seems clear that both speak of different aspects of the same fundamental predicament. Where the very integrity of the experiential world is concerned, the *capacity* for cognition seems to be impaired, not just its exercises on this or that occasion. This is what Riley speaks of and phenomenologists likewise assume. Ratcliffe proposes the following elucidation of what may be the focal point of such disruption:

The person who has died was not only an object within one's world but also a condition of intelligibility for that world. Complete acknowledgement of loss therefore involves a disturbance of the world within which the loss is initially experienced as occurring. (Ratcliffe, 2019a, p. 660)

In fact, as Riley's observations suggest, 'complete acknowledgement' of the loss may not even be necessary for such a wide-ranging disturbance or breakdown of the familiar world. It is not a neat two-step process of first taking in the loss of the loved one and its irrevocability and then, second, finding one's familiar experiential reality in a shambles. The breakdown in the structure of presupposed significance can well occur instantly, while the bereaved still very much struggles with grasping what has happened.

The upshot is clear: the lost loved one had been an integral part of the structure of intelligibility that had heretofore made up the practical and experiential world of the mourner, their homely sphere of everyday understanding. The assumption behind this is that the realm of a person's practical significance is co-constructed in close social interaction, especially in forms of enduring modes of living together, and that intimate relationships are particularly relevant in establishing shared ways of inhabiting the world. Death of a child, a parent, or an intimate partner can thus occasion a partial or near-encompassing breakdown of this realm of substantive mutuality, this jointly enacted 'we-space' of shared significance (*cf.* Krueger, 2011). In light of the breadth and depth of this shared realm, it is not surprising that the 'uptake' of its breakdown in emotive comportment can take so many different forms. Speaking of 'experience' here is also somewhat

inadequate, given the difficulty, the struggle involved in processing what has occurred. We seem to lack the terms to relate this condition at the verge of breakdown or, as Riley has put it, of both 'knowing and not knowing that he's dead' (2019, p. 23). Ratcliffe, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, characterized what goes on in the following terms:

Grief... affects systems of anticipation that both shape perceptual experience and provide guidance for action, disrupting what was once presupposed... [I]t is the practically meaningful connections between things that are eroded — one's sense of the overall situation in which things are experienced as appearing and changing. Determinate arrangements give way to haziness. What is lacking here is not merely epistemic in nature. It is not just that one cannot find a path to follow; the paths have gone. (Ratcliffe, 2019a, p. 661)

This helps us see clearer that and how many cases of bereavement imply that the grieving person's life as such, with its many cares, concerns, meanings, and possibilities, has been uprooted. With the deceased partner, parent, child, or friend, a universe of meaning has been washed away. In light of this, the intentional object of grief could as accurately be construed as the *loss of a world* than as the loss of a person;<sup>4</sup> but the point is of course that the person lost just has been 'the world', or a key dimension of the world, to the grieving subject.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Denise Riley: Time Without Its Flow

Riley's account revolves around the experience of lived time coming to a halt: *time without its flow*. At the core of Riley's condition, beginning upon her learning of her son's death and continuing for a period of nearly three years, lies a near-total cessation of experienced temporal flow. I will take Riley's observations as phenomenological evidence and her own reflections on her experience as informing an interpretation of the temporal dimension of bereavement, upon which I will then elaborate. Implications for an understanding of intentionality will become visible along the way.

<sup>4</sup> Ratcliffe construes it thus: 'the unity of grief instead consists in what it recognizes, reacts to, and responds to: an all-enveloping, dynamic disturbance of life possibility' (2017, p. 157).

<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, when people in throes of grief claim the bottom has been knocked out from under their feet or that the world has collapsed for them, these remarks can be taken at face value. That is indeed what has happened. In his meditation on his grieving the death of his wife, C.S. Lewis wrote: 'Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything' (Lewis, 1966, p. xx).

Riley reports finding herself sealed in a perpetual present. With the passage of time halted, there is no transition forward, no anticipation of what's to come, no sense of futurity. Riley speaks of this as a 'freezing of time' (2019, p. 13); as the 'extraordinary feeling of atemporality' (p. 14); as a 'private non-time of pure stasis' (p. 15); as a 'condition of being "outside time"' (p. 17). She moreover ponders that the dead 'give us... a grip on the present instant in which we're now relentlessly inserted. Not in a contemplative sense, but vigorously. A carnal sensation' (p. 29). And furthermore, she expounds: 'Simply, you are no longer *in* time. Only from your freshly removed perspective can you fully understand how our habitual intuitions of time are not without their limits, and can falter' (p. 42).

There are several things to unpack and reflect about here. The first thing to note is how this dramatic change to lived temporality is related to the experience of practical significance. The capacity to navigate one's world as a sphere of familiar objects and projects relies on temporal structures of anticipation and recollection. A sense for the regular passing of time, sequences of past, present, and future in their concrete entwinement, is required for everyday practical coping. This is the temporality of habit. Riley points this out herself when she links the alteration in lived time to a breakdown of routine induction:

Unanticipated death does such violence to your ordinary suppositions, as if the whole inductive faculty by which you'd previously lived has faltered. Its textbook illustration was always 'Will the sun rise tomorrow?' But now that induction itself is no more, the sun can't any longer be relied on to rise. (*ibid.*, p. 33)

A central part of Riley's account concerns how she herself attempts to make sense of her condition of arrested temporality. Her initial gloss sounds somewhat fantastic. Riley speculates that this peculiar atemporality might be a kind of sharing in the condition of the dead. Death, after all, could be thought of as a form of falling out of time:

You share the death of your child, in that you approach it so closely that you sense that a part of you, too, has died that instant. At the same time, you feel that the spirit of the child has leaped into you. So you are both partly dead and yet more alive. You are cut down, and yet you burn with life. (*ibid.*, p. 20)

This appears less fantastic when we consider the full interpretation of the condition that Riley presents. Her son was integral to her own world-orientation, an active partner in her elementary engagement with worldly significance. Upon his death, this pole of her world-

orientation ceases to be active and recedes into the past. Continued attachment to her son then 'drags' Riley into a realm of temporal stasis: 'For if timelessness is the time of your dead, you will go with them in their timelessness... They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them on your side' (*ibid.*, p. 46). Riley now basically inhabits two separate worlds, where the atemporal, futureless 'world' she shares with her son dominates her sense of time (see Fuchs, 2018, pp. 50f., for elaboration).

This points to a temporal reinterpretation of attachment, here especially in the context of the mother-child relationship. Somewhat reluctantly but with a clear purpose, Riley invokes the notion of a 'maternal temporality' (2019, p. 83). Besides this focus on the maternal, which requires a separate discussion, Riley's interpretation brings out how lived time is at the root of sustained affectionate relatedness to another person. Attachment to another, caring for them, requires 'making time' for the other person, and this is only possible on condition of an intact capacity to, as it were, *give time* — in the sense of devoting a portion of one's own lifetime to the other. Caring for someone means, at its practical minimum, to spend one's own time *with and for the other*: giving time — a (ful)filled phase of co-existence that will thereby become the other's lifetime, while it thereby also changes one's own temporal experience from solitarily spent or 'endured' time to shared time. It is clear that not 'any time' will do here. Merely going through the motions with another, just 'hanging in there', or nervously busying oneself with other things will not count as giving time in this rich sense. What is required is attentive, engaged 'lived' life time — time that is spent with and for the other, in which one's 'being together' with the other takes precedence over one's own individual matters and manners of engagement. It is what the trivializing lore of our day, but in this case rather aptly, would designate as 'quality time'.

Especially in its connection with interpersonal relatedness, this mode of existential temporality has received little attention on part of phenomenologists. For instance, Heidegger's reflections, in *Being and Time* (1927), on the original temporality of *Dasein* as 'ekstatic' come across as a rather solitary affair, although they are likewise built on a notion of devotional co-temporalizing. That lived time can be 'ekstatic', that is, that in temporalizing one is driven 'out of oneself' and towards something worth one's while, is of course a helpful gloss on interpersonal co-temporalizing in the sense of giving and sharing time with another. Yet Heidegger's account of shared time is a far cry from

privileging *interpersonal* relatedness, as for him there is no privileged role for the other: *anything* that might ‘fulfil one’ will do, as long as one’s commitment to it is deep enough.

Presenting its negative mirror image of fulfilled existential temporality, namely the disrupted temporality of grieving, Riley’s observations bring the temporality of profound interpersonal care into view. What is thereby brought into relief are two closely connected insights into the structure of experience. First, that devotional interpersonal care is a matter of ‘giving’ another time and thus of a co-temporality, practically enacted, so that lived time becomes essentially shared time. And second, as evidenced by cases of breakdown, that is, loss of the loved one, the centrality of this intimately lived co-temporality for the integrity of the subject’s own temporal perspective, the temporal coherence of one’s individual outlook on the world and self. This very temporal coherence of subjective experience gets shattered in and through parental bereavement. Riley contends that, ‘with the death of your child, your own experience of time might be especially prone to disturbance because the lost life had, so to speak, previously unfurled itself inside your own life’ (2019, pp. 49f.). It is worth quoting from this passage at some length:

If you had once sensed the time of your child as quietly uncoiling inside your own, then when that child is cut away by its death, your doubled inner time is also ‘untimely ripped’. Yours, and the child’s. The severance of the child’s life makes a cut through your own. You as its mother can no longer be present to yourself in the old temporal way. A sculptural imagination rises to grip you; the hollow of the old shelter for the living child has now been gouged out of you. It was the space of the child’s past, which used to lie like an inner shell enveloped by your own time. That child you had, alone, when you were young yourself, a child you grew up with, nested like a Russian doll whose shorter years sat within yours, gave you a time that was always layered. Then you held times, in the plural. (*ibid.*, p. 50)

I have called this a temporal reinterpretation of attachment; one could also say it outlines the temporality of care, of which the mother’s care for her child is a pronounced instance. Yet I think the main point expands to other forms of interpersonal care-giving, especially in child-rearing contexts. It would be misleading to read Riley’s textual emphasis on her own position as a grieving mother as a naturalization of a culturally specific form of motherhood. In fact, it would be more to the point to read it the other way around: a substantive notion of care has been culturally realized in a certain conception of the

mother–child relationship; this is compatible with a broad range of different childcare arrangements across epochs and cultures, and it allows for people other than biological mothers to assume the position of caregiver (accordingly, I favour speaking of ‘caregiver’ rather than ‘mother’). The emphasis here lies on the relational and generous aspect of ‘giving’ — on the endowing and sheltering nature of care, in the temporally rich sense expounded above, not on a specific concept of motherhood.<sup>6</sup>

Riley’s interpretation is not finished with the act of untimely severance of the two nested temporalities of mother and child. Indeed, their temporal bond continues after death:

Yet after this scooping-out by the death, a fresh incorporation arrives: the child gets reanimated in your effort to embody its qualities and carry them onwards. Perhaps this is the peculiar fate of mothers of dead children: still to contain that other life, and to shelter it twice over. Once before the child’s birth, and once after the death when you’re left with an impression of a spirit internalized. (Riley, 2019, pp. 50f.)

Arrested time, time without its flow: that might indeed be construed as a sharing in the dead’s temporality, a sharing conditioned by care or love. What used to be a living flow entangled with your own lived time is now an eternal temporal block, a ruptured flow, a suddenly frozen ‘past tense’ that continues to be nested within the endogenous temporality of the grieving parent. In view of this, it indeed rings true that ‘a part of me has died’, as many a bereaved is prone to exclaim. We can see what this means in terms of lived time: the other’s life has abruptly ceased, yet it is still ‘contained’, in its altered condition, as a salient residue within my own expanded temporal existence. My lived time, the qualitative, existential time that ‘I am’, and that used to be so

---

<sup>6</sup> These considerations could be the beginning of a discussion on the status and reach of Riley’s reflections. While she herself is silent on these matters, one may read her analysis of the entangled temporalities in the mother–child dyad as an outline of a feminist existential analytic. This would provide a counter-image to Heidegger’s tacitly masculinist approach in *Being and Time*, which seems to be modelled after heroic individuals bravely facing their own death (modelled, that is, after soldiers fighting at the front lines, bravely facing death at each instant). It would be problematic to assume that Heidegger’s approach was universally applicable while blaming Riley’s for cultural parochialism. Indeed, the interesting meta-thought here is that there is no universality to be had, not even at the most general ontological level, just culturally specific models of existence that might be ‘put on offer’ through philosophical elaboration (see *Being and Time*, 1927, pp. 266f. and 313–16 for brief passages on methodology where Heidegger seems to come close to admitting as much).

thoroughly absorbed in my co-existence with the child, continues to ‘make time’ for the dead child. This highlights again the temporal core of care as making, giving, and sharing time. The caring still goes on, the grieving person continues to share their time with the other who himself has fallen out of that temporal conjunction. No longer alive, the other has ceased to drive on the flow of jointly lived time, and has instead turned into a frozen, static element within the joint sphere of intimate relatedness. This might stand behind the experience of a ruptured flow, a blockade in one’s sense of temporal unfolding. The more the bereaved individual tries to ‘stay with’ the lost loved one, in the sense of continuing to share time with them, the more lived time might come to a halt.

Riley’s ‘sculptural’ metaphors, even outside the obvious context of the physicality of birth, seem apt. Such ways of speaking are familiar from many reports of grief, where those afflicted claim that something has been ripped from their own flesh, that a part of themselves has been cut away.<sup>7</sup> Riley insists on a sense in which the dead come to re-inhabit their old position within the existential temporality of those left behind: ‘the dead one, although now sheared away from your old conjoined temporality, now comes to re-inhabit your newly arrested time vividly, as an incorporated presence’ (Riely, 2019, pp. 82f.). Thereby, the grieving subject’s lived time appears ‘augmented’ (*ibid.*, p. 83), enhanced by a shadowy presence that is sometimes quite vividly felt.

With these reflections, Riley sketches a way to expand her nested temporalities account of affectionate attachment into a ‘continued bonds’ perspective on grief and bereavement (*cf.* Klass and Steffen, 2018). For as long as the altered condition of lived time endures, this peculiar temporal fusion between mother and child is ongoing, if in a form very different from the previous relatedness of the two interwoven but autonomous lifelines.

Yet at some point, even the most intense, most enduring existential alteration occasioned by bereavement begins to wane. At the end of her account, about three years after her son’s death, Riley observes her ‘re-entry to a communicable social life and its familiar chronology’. And as one might expect, this moment arrives with much sadness of its own, because it marks yet a further separation from the dead: ‘The

---

<sup>7</sup> Resemblances between the pain of grief and the experience of a phantom limb have been discussed quite a bit (see, for example, Fuchs, 2018; Ratcliffe, 2019b).

cost of recovering your conventional apprehension of flowing time is intolerably high. The dead slip away, as we realize that we have unwillingly left them behind us in their timelessness' (Riley, 2019, p. 80).

Riley's contention that 'the dead slip away' should not be misunderstood: while it might reflect the experiential sense of losing one's formerly firm grip on the dead loved one, this is likely not an all-or-nothing affair. There is a more complex story to be told about possibilities of holding onto the dead after the primal experience of altered temporal flow has subsided. This is the point of commemoration practices and grieving rituals that aim to re-establish a livable bond with the dead while acknowledging the loss, and here it might help to focus attention on the worldliness of intimate co-temporalizing: as attachment is never to the other person in isolation, but to the other as co-embedded in a shared lifeworld, the residual relations, contexts, possessions of the deceased might be harnessed to prevent the slipping away of the dead to be both total and inevitable. I will come back to this in Section 5 below. But first, let us venture into the analysis of the temporal and interpersonal structure of intentionality.

#### **4. How Love Makes It: Intentionality Reassembled**

Some of the perplexity that surrounds the philosophical debates on intentionality is evoked by the utter simplicity of its predominant characterization as *directedness* or *aboutness* — terms bordering on lexical malformation. To describe the mind, or a mental state, as *directed* to an object is painfully coarse, given that in practice we are not punctually focused on isolated objects, but engaged episodically or near continually with broader segments of reality. And the term 'aboutness' really doesn't give us much more than a bad word. We have to do better in glossing what is meant, as even a merely verbal starting point orients enquiry and prefigures the questions we ask of a topic.

In fact, we are in touch with the matters around us by way of enduring modes of practical engagement, and so whatever acts or compartments we are picking out for analytical purposes is part of an expanded sequence of world- and self-relatedness. This more natural way of construing what is meant by intentionality is different from simplistic ideas of 'directedness' or 'aboutness' in virtue of the fact that it adds a temporal dimension. Instead of hinting at a timeless or

instantaneous link between subject and object, as if two snapshots were conjoined by a mysterious beam or ‘noetic ray’, as Husserl suggestively called it, what terms such as ‘involvement’, ‘engagement’, ‘coping’, ‘dwelling’, or ‘care’ denote makes sense only if understood as temporally extended sequences. Abstractly, these terms denote processes; concretely, they evoke an experienced duration, qualitative time that unfolds in one’s *being (engaged) with* some matter or some person. Accordingly, approaches to intentionality construed in a way that foregrounds the role of lived time seem phenomenologically appealing.

In this section, I tentatively assemble elements for a perspective on intentionality as lived time, an approach that culminates in an attempt to interpret the substance of Riley’s reflections on grieving and her notion of a ‘maternal temporality’.

Henri Bergson’s reflections on *durée* provide a fitting starting point. According to Bergson (1907/1944), human consciousness is at root the transpiring of existential temporality — a lived duration — yet it is near-impossible to apprehend this experiential immediacy of time’s unfolding as such. In our routine comportment we tend to objectify lived time by projecting bits of our experience onto items placed within an external spatial framework. Such engagement with spatially located ‘things’ taken as individually enduring bits of stuff makes us gloss over the characteristic experience of *durée*, at least for the most part. Lived time is thereby consumed by tangible objects that occupy our attentive engagement and impose their own temporal order of linear, objective time. Only on rare occasions — some forms of leisurely relaxation, certainly boredom, or the dreamy condition between wakefulness and sleep — will we get a more immediate sense of the unique ‘melody of duration’, if only fleetingly (see Schweitzer, 2008). The part of Bergson’s proto-phenomenology of lived time that is relevant for present purposes is the idea of a dynamic mutuality between experienced time and the endogenous temporality of whatever we are currently dealing with. The term ‘attunement’, later mainly associated with Heidegger as the English translation of his term-of-art *Befindlichkeit*, seems to capture this idea well: there is a dynamic entwinement between lived time and various dimensions of ‘world’ time, where such worldly time is not yet socially imposed clock time, but so many endogenous temporalities of entities in their native surroundings (‘everything has its own time’). To use one of Bergson’s (1907/1944) own examples: waiting for a lump of sugar to dissolve in a glass of water, we are for a phase of our own time *in the*

*thrall of* that object's temporal unfolding. The sugar's dissolving imposes a characteristic, if in this case unremarkable, sequence upon our own temporal awareness. For as long as the process lasts, the dissolving lump 'attunes' us to its own temporality, which, as Bergson suggestively writes, 'coincides with my own impatience' (*ibid.*).<sup>8</sup> More complex examples are provided by Heidegger (1929–30/2008) in his analysis of boredom: waiting for the train to arrive, we are stuck with the mind-numbing routines at the village train station (here, certainly, much determined by schedules and their delays). Absorbed by such goings-on, 'our' time is wrapped up in — and at the mercy of — that barren place with its monotonous routines (*cf.* Slaby, 2017). What this gives us is the idea that intentionality is *temporal attunement*, a coming to 'share time', to resonate with something other than oneself, in the form of being absorbed and fulfilled or left empty by whatever happens to 'be there'. In a situation of waiting, this can be rendered salient to reflective awareness, sometimes painfully so.

Waiting is a state of suspension occasioned by something we want or need having not yet materialized. Because of this we are temporarily stalled and thereby brought back upon our own, now conspicuously empty and thus potentially obtrusive, time. What harasses us in waiting is the very time, as it then may dawn on us, that we ourselves are: a bit of our lifetime. And this annoyingly conspicuous time is so exactly because it is 'empty' — the absence of what we wait for, the interval that marks its delayed arrival, reveals the condition that lived time is usually *filled* time, time that we in some way or other *spend* through our being engaged, busy, occupied, involved. Situations in which we are bored, nervously seek distractions, are thus limit cases of intentionality, as a notable emptiness now occupies the place of a proper temporal 'something' — of something that, as we tend to say on such occasions, would be 'worth our while'. Thus, crudely put, our lived time provides a dynamic 'slot', so to speak, for intentional objects to occupy, or rather: to temporalize.

---

<sup>8</sup> Bergson writes: 'If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something *thought*, it is something *lived*' (Bergson, 1907/1944, pp. 12–13).

What is — or, at any rate, should be — *always* worth our while are the lives of those we love. This is where the present considerations go, and it here where they link up with Denise Riley's reflection on grief's conspicuous temporality.

With Bergson and Heidegger we can say that the temporality at the core of our awareness and engagement amounts to a temporal construal of selfhood: the self *coincides* with its time — and this means a temporal entwinement of self-relatedness, endogenous rhythmic or arrhythmic sequence, with extant temporalities — those inherent dynamics of what the self is involved in and engaged with. What Riley adds, or makes explicit, in her recounting of her experience of bereavement is the way that parental love is a paradigmatic form of this temporal entwinement of self with non-self: the attunement between caregiver and child, self and other, is constitutive not only of the child's (or infant's) own emerging sense of self (this much is a staple in developmental psychology: think of Daniel Stern's, 2010, work on affect attunement in the infant-caregiver dyad), but it is also constitutive of *the caregiver's own* sense of temporal coherence and self-presence. Parental love, according to Riley, amounts to the enactment of nested temporalities, those of caregiver and child. And this is not just a matter of corporeal attunement, as if two partners joined to perform a unique song or melody. Rather, parental love immediately encompasses historical time, as it relates as much, and as intimately, to the child's biographical life: 'it's historical time, the times of the child are contained and sheltered within your own' (Riley, 2019, p. 81).

What Riley calls 'maternal temporality' is a sharing or joining of historical lifelines, the affectionate incorporation of another's lifetime into one's own sense of time. Riley calls this entwinement of lifetimes *affective history*, invoking the double sense of, first, the shared history of mother and child, and second, the maternal investment in the child's own historical existence. Accordingly, it is an expanded, world-involving sense of time that does not curtail the child's independent existence while it is still entwined with it. With this, we can once more appreciate Riley's interpretation of her radically altered sense of time after her son's death:

This affective history will extend your usual scope of felt time well beyond your own skin. In the past you had sensed your living child's time, including the physically interior time of its gestation as well as its early growing and independent life, as if it were internal to your own. You had aged in tandem with it. But now the time of the vanished child

has been cut away from your impression of your interior time. As I'd noted, it's as if, from a set of nested Russian wooden dolls, the innermost one's had fallen out. (*ibid.*, p. 82)

I read this as an expanded explication of the temporality of care, as a paradigmatic articulation of the entwinement of two temporal beings. Parental love is dedicated co-temporalizing with the child. This process not only endows the child with a temporal sense of self anchoring their own composed perspective on the world, but it also reconfigures the caregiver's own temporal existence, providing coherence and fulfilment: relatedness towards meaningful matters whose significance comes about only in so far as it is jointly lived through in a shared sequence of being-together. What is called for, in the light of these considerations, is a more detailed development of a conception of affective intentionality as essentially temporal and as essentially intersubjective. This will help the present debate on the nature of intentionality catch up with the important considerations by Emmanuel Levinas (1961/1969). He attempted to derive an account of the conditions of intentionality from an ethics of alterity, thereby reversing the philosophical order of priority between the practical/ethical and the theoretical. Riley's considerations on grief invoke a similar reversal of priorities in the personal sphere of motherhood or parenthood: it is the child that crucially partakes in providing and sustaining the experiential coherence of the caregiver's perspective, the child's initially tenuous, fleeting, unstable temporal perspective joins a temporal *entre-deux* from which both the parent's and the child's mature experiential capacities emerge. Obviously, these hints towards what might revive a rigorously interpersonal existential analytic can only be a starting point for what has to become a much more thorough investigation.

### 5. Relearning to Be Alone

Riley's account of her grief is, among much else, also meant to provide an alternative to the familiar discussions of grief focused on grief work, readjustment, and recovery, of 'getting back on track' or 'moving on'. Likewise, it is not interested in putative 'stages of grief' and the like. However, to connect with somewhat more coping-oriented approaches, it makes sense to consider work that focuses on the practices, rituals, and discursive elaborations that attempt to render grief livable, while steering clear of the facile tropes of self-help literature. Riley, for her part, flips the social world's directive that

‘you should be moving on’ into an idea of continued companionship: ‘If there is ever to be any movement again, that moving will not be “on”. It will be “with”. With the carried-again child’ (2019, p. 42).

Within the recent philosophical work on grief, there are approaches that try to outline complex perspectives on the continued bonds idea. I single out one such account that I find particularly helpful. It is by Line Ingerslev, and revolves around the following proposal: ‘grief can be understood as an open-ended rehearsal of our capacity to be alone in the company of an absent other’ (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 343).<sup>9</sup> Among the many ideas this single phrase crystallizes, three deserve particular attention in the context of the present discussion. First, Ingerslev considers grief to be an existential crisis in so far as the death of another puts the subject radically in question, in an existential or vocational sense: ‘a mode of existing while not knowing how to go on.’ In this manner, the experience pushes the individual to the limit of their responsiveness, occasioning a profound existential reorientation. Second, Ingerslev invokes the ‘capacity to be alone’ as discussed in some currents of psychoanalytic thought, for instance by Donald Winnicott (1958). And third, that this capacity has to be calibrated anew in relation to the now absent other. Especially this last aspect, if properly developed, distinguishes Ingerslev’s proposal from an individualistic orientation towards coping and adjustment. The deceased remains in the picture, as an active pole of affective relatedness and as the ongoing source of ethical and existential demands. The absent other is at the centre of the process of grieving both practically and normatively. But let us unpack these three aspects successively.

That a loved one’s death, as responded to by grief, amounts to an existential crisis is not in question. Yet in terms of understanding the actual unfolding of grieving it helps to get at the exceptional, unresolvable, catastrophic, and often utterly incoherent character of this mode of emotional comportment:

[T]he vocational aspect involved in grief is not one that you master, *it makes the death of the other the active voice in grief while not allowing*

<sup>9</sup> I chose Ingerslev’s account not only because it is so generally convincing but because it fits so well to the specific considerations on the temporality of attachment offered here. I also learned a lot from Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl’s careful considerations on grief’s ambiguous nature, and especially from her comprehensive rebuttal of coping-oriented approaches to ‘overcoming grief’ (see Rinofner-Kreidl, 2016, especially pp. 191–202). Fuchs (2018) likewise develops a noteworthy perspective on the gradual reorganization of the bereaved’s identity in relation to the lost loved one.

*you to find neither words nor narratives and while fundamentally not allowing me to enter into a meaningful future.* (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 353)

Ingerslev is adamant that grief cannot well be captured by narrative accounts of emotion, as narrative evokes and requires too much in the way of coherence, sequence, emplotment, and that it presupposes an auctorial perspective that is usually more resolved and collected than anyone will likely be in the throes of acute grief. At best, she holds, narrative gets a foothold towards the end of the grieving process, when the chaos and incomprehension of the condition have by and large given way to more composed modes of comportment.<sup>10</sup>

The second important aspect in Ingerslev's 'grief formula' is her invocation of the capacity to be alone. The background to this is a psychoanalytic understanding of childhood emotional development. The point is that a child's capacity to be alone, understood as a stage in emotional maturation, is a relational capacity that is both developed and mainly exercised in relation to a primary caregiver. I spare us the details of the classic psychoanalytic account (reductive and sexist as they are) and only state the upshot: the capacity to be alone depends on an 'internalized' relation to a caregiver, whose sheltering presence continues to affectively imbue the child's comportment in the physical absence of that significant other. In the context of the interpersonal constitution of intentionality, this capacity can be glossed as a self-sustained comportment, a sufficiently oriented and coherent self-pole in the self-world dynamic. It is a capacity for ongoing engagement with the world in the absence of the stability-providing, calm- and coherence-enabling caregiver, whose lived temporality had initially scaffolded the child's. In effect, it is about 'finding one's flow' amidst the dynamics of the surrounding world: one's own rhythm of awareness and engagement as it develops out of the initially shared synchronicity with the caregiver. This capacity to be alone has to be learned during early childhood, and in the case of death of the caregiver (or death of whomever had occupied a position of comparable affectionate attachment later in life), its mature iteration will have to be relearned, reconstituted, often painstakingly — a process that will encompass a retrieval of that original joint sense-making capacity that has been lost with the death of the other. But it is more than that. At any rate, this is what Ingerslev means by her idea of 'rehearsal': the

---

<sup>10</sup> Like Ratcliffe (2017), Ingerslev devotes a lot of space to a critique of Peter Goldie's (2012) narrative approach to grief.

capacity to be alone is *practised* — rehearsed — as a form of attempted togetherness with the deceased other. This is what *grief work*, on Ingerslev's account, mainly consists in. This fits quite well to what was developed so far: intentionality as scaffolded through an intimate caring relationship, where the capacity to *individually* and *autonomously* engage with world and self, in the manner of an integrated orientation in and to the world, is derivative, both structurally and developmentally, from a primary mode of togetherness, of a span of time — an affectively imbued duration or 'lived time' — *jointly* lived through with another.

What is particularly interesting is how the relationship to the absent other figures in this process of relearning:

In our rehearsal of being alone, the other is neither animated, internalized nor brought back to life by certain rituals or objects. Rather, the mode of relatedness can be understood as a form of lived dedication or evocation. (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 356)

Evocation and dedication are ways in which the survivor's life remains oriented towards the deceased in projecting a newfound future. One could say that it is about continuing 'the legacy' of the deceased, which might take many different forms. One could also say, as Ingerslev does, that this orientation to the absent other is the form that love takes when the loved one no longer dwells among the living: 'grief as a work of love' (*ibid.*, p. 358).<sup>11</sup> It is a form of ongoing care in the sense of continuing to heed the other's demands, respond to the other's concerns. Love, as long as it holds, is open-ended, in fact, infinite — which belies accounts that construe unresolved, ongoing grieving as pathological. It might be a triviality that grieving for loved ones can be a continuation of love, but it is a triviality that is often forgotten, glossed over, misconstrued, and certainly fallen short of in practice. It is fitting that Ingerslev at this point also invokes Denise Riley:

What Riley described... as the arrested flow of time can equally be understood as an ongoing repetition of remembering one dead, however only if we accept that in grieving as an ongoing activity we can find a way of not moving 'on', but moving 'with' the absent other. (Ingerslev, 2018, p. 357)

---

<sup>11</sup> As Michael Cholbi (2021) has convincingly argued, not all forms of grief presuppose a loving relation to another person.

This 'moving with' the absent other, the continuing affectionate bond that grounds it and, in particular, the temporality of these interpersonal entwinements, helps us to better understand human world- and self-relatedness as an essentially interpersonal engagement. If it is true that profound grief might *break* intentionality, as we have seen it does, this is so on the grounds that the affectionate interpersonal bond at its base had enabled human-level intentionality in the first place: *if grief can break it, love has made it.*

## 6. Conclusion and Outlook

The aim of this paper was to begin an exploration of the interpersonal conditions of intentionality by starting from the marked breakdown of world-relatedness in parental grief. The main point was to take Denise Riley's observations of arrested temporal flow that she experienced when grieving her son as a basis for probing into the possibility that human intentionality might depend in part, both constitutively and developmentally, on interpersonally shared temporality. While the considerations offered on this highly complex theme had to remain provisional and sketchy, they have connected the phenomenology of bereavement with the long-standing philosophical endeavour of analysing the conceptual foundations of the mind's capacity to relate to the world. In particular, the line of thought that I took from Riley's book has inspired a partial transformation of phenomenological considerations on the role of temporality as a condition of experience, by suggesting that intimate interpersonal relatedness is more fundamental to the temporal coherence of experience than the groundworks of Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger suggest.

By *making time* for the child, the caregiver establishes and upholds a jointly lived temporality that contributes to the temporal coherence of both the child's and the parent's experiential perspectives, rendering them mutually dependent. Thus, devotional care, in the sense of 'giving' one's time to and sharing it with a loved one, is among the enabling conditions of intentionality. With this result — that is more reflective of insights by Emmanuel Levinas than of those by the founding fathers of phenomenology — the analysis offered here confirms and reinvigorates John Haugeland's rendering of the upshot of his interpretation of Heidegger on intentionality, namely that 'love is the mark of the human' (Haugeland, 1998, p. 2). While Haugeland arrived at this by way of considerations that do not give pride of place to intimate interpersonal relations, his choice of the

term ‘love’ for what Heidegger calls *authentic care* or *resoluteness* seems all the more convincing in the light of the reflections offered here. Haugeland’s settling on ‘love’ as a designator for original intentionality, a term he tellingly places alongside ‘faith’ as another conceptual option, is supposed to emphasize the existential depth of commitment — a devotional mode of staking oneself unreservedly on an endeavour or project that will thereby come to define, condition, and orient one’s life, so that failing at that endeavour, or losing one’s grip on it, would threaten to undermine or even bring to an end one’s personal existence and the whole framework of intelligibility it rests on (indeed, this would be a kind of ‘death’, see Rouse, 2017).

If considered alongside Riley’s reflections on the temporality of attachment between mother and child, one’s inchoate sense that there is something amiss with Haugeland’s proposal finds a clearer articulation. While Haugeland follows Heidegger in an essentially individualistic construal of existential commitment, Riley’s account suggests a profoundly interpersonal perspective on the foundational dimension of human experience. What Riley reluctantly calls a ‘maternal temporality’ could thus anchor a robust alternative to the influential account of authentic *Dasein* as individual being-towards-death. Not so much one’s own looming death provides the orienting horizon for a devoted existence enabled by authentic care, but the potential death of — or profound peril suffered by — a significant other, notably one’s child.

I hope this article has succeeded in showing that a resolutely interpersonal existential analytic and its integration with contemporary consciousness studies is an endeavour worth pursuing further.

### *Acknowledgments*

I thank Fabian Bernhardt, Laura Candiotta, Millicent Churcher, Carol A. Kidron, Matthew Ratcliffe, and two anonymous reviewers for a host of helpful comments and suggestions in response to earlier versions of this paper.

### **References**

- Bergson, H. (1907/1944) *Creative Evolution*, Mitchell, A. (trans.), New York: Random House.
- Cholbi, M. (2021) Grieving our way back to meaningfulness, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, **90**, pp. 235–251.
- Fuchs, T. (2018) Presence in absence: The ambiguous phenomenology of grief, *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, **17**, pp. 43–63.
- Goldie, P. (2012) *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, & the Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Haugeland, J. (1998) *Having Thought: Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1929–30/2008) *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann. (English translation (2008) *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World — Finitude — Solitude*, McNeill, W. & Walker, N. (trans.), Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.)
- Heidegger, M. (1927) *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer.
- Ingerslev, L. (2018) Ongoing: On grief's open-ended rehearsal, *Continental Philosophy Review*, **51**, pp. 343–360.
- Klass, D. & Steffen, E.M. (2018) *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice*, London: Routledge.
- Krueger, J. (2011) Extended cognition and the space of social interaction, *Consciousness and Cognition*, **20** (3), pp. 643–657.
- Levinas, E. (1961/1969) *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Lingis, A. (trans.), Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Lewis, C.S. (1966) *A Grief Observed*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Ratcliffe, M.J. (2008) *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M.J. (2017) Grief and the unity of emotion, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, **41**, pp. 154–174.
- Ratcliffe, M.J. (2019a) Towards a phenomenology of grief: Insights from Merleau-Ponty, *European Journal of Philosophy*, **28** (3), pp. 657–669.
- Ratcliffe, M.J. (2019b) Grief and phantom limbs: A phenomenological comparison, in Hopkins, B. & Crowell, S. (eds.) *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 4, New York: Routledge.
- Rinofner-Kreidl, S. (2016) On grief's ambiguous nature, *Quaestiones Disputatae*, **7** (1), pp. 178–207.
- Riley, D. (2019) *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, London: Picador.
- Rouse, J. (2017) Love and death, in Adams, Z. & Browning, J. (eds.) *Giving a Damn: John Haugeland's Philosophy*, pp. 131–157, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schweizer, H. (2008) *On Waiting (Thinking in Action Series)*, London: Routledge.
- Slaby, J. (2017). Living in the moment: Boredom and the meaning of existence in Heidegger and Pessoa, in Feger, H., Dikun, X. & Ge, W. (eds.) *Yearbook for Eastern and Western Philosophy*, vol. 2, pp. 235–256, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.
- Stern, D.N. (2010) *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1958) The capacity to be alone, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, **39**, pp. 416–420.