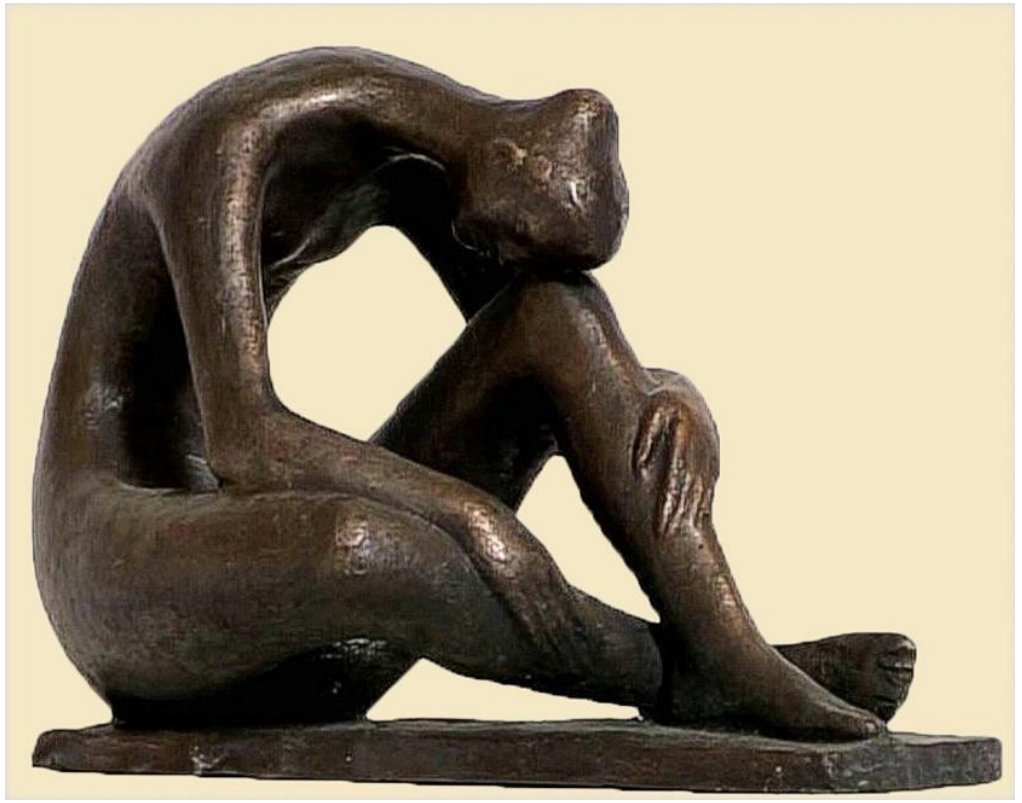
‘Heavier, and less mine’: grief and the ambiguity of bodily experience

Dr Emily Hughes
Department of Philosophy
University of York
emily.hughes@york.ac.uk



‘Grief’ by János Andrássy Kurta

’Sorrowing Old Man’ by Vincent Van Gogh

‘Analagous Colors’ by Titus Kaphar

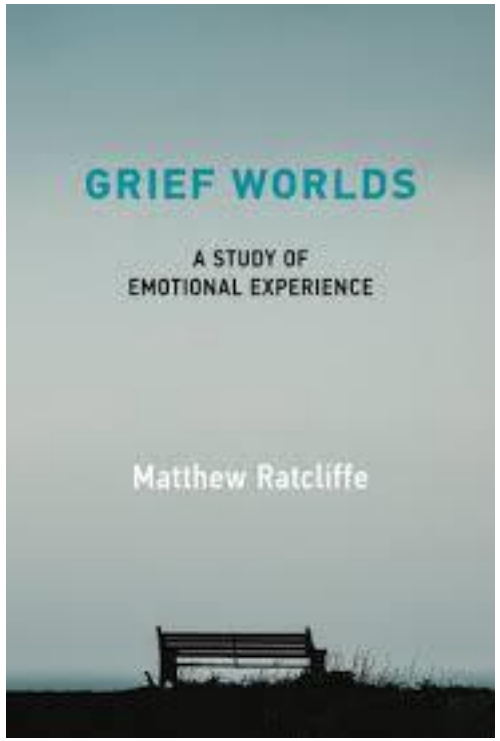
‘Self Portrait 1947’ by Käthe Kollwitz

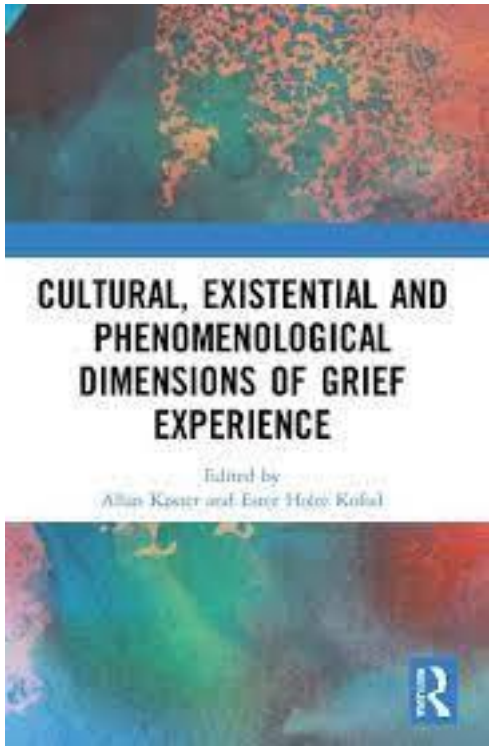
‘

‘Weeping nude’ by Edvard Munch

‘Triptych 1974-77’ by Francis Bacon

The phenomenology of bodily experience in grief





Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences (2021) 20:57–73
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09657-3

The felt sense of the other: contours of a sensorium

Allan Køster[1]

Published online: 22 January 2020

Abstract
In this paper, I explore the phenomenon of a felt sense of the concrete other. Although the importance of this phenomenon is recognised in the contemporary discussion on intercorporeality, it has not been subjected to systematic phenomenological analysis. I argue that the felt sense of the other is an aspect of intercorporeal body memory in so far as it is a habituation to something like the concrete other's expressive style. Because it is inherently a sensory phenomenon, I speak of an embodied sensorium of the other. I illustrate the phenomenon through contrasting case-vignettes taken from research in early parental bereavement. Based on this, I identify five modalities that outline the fundamental contours of a sensorium and specify that in their intermodal and synesthetic concretion they account for the felt sense of the other. Finally, I argue that the existential importance of the phenomenon is rooted in the distributed nature of my sense of self and self-familiarity. To illustrate this, I draw parallels between the felt sense of the concrete other and the felt sense of home and suggest that though there are also distinct differences between the two phenomena, they are rooted in the same underlying existential need for feeling-at-home in the world.

Keywords Intercorporeality · Sensorium · Body memory · Expressive style · Embodiment · Grief · Bereavement · Sense of self

1 Introduction

In this paper, I explore a phenomenon that has been largely neglected in the phenomenological literature: how we develop a habituated felt sense of concrete others as part of embodied selfhood. I expect the phenomenon is recognisable to most of us. It's the particular way a specific other makes us feel familiar or at home: How this feeling of familiarity may be evoked by, for example, the characteristic sound of that person's

✉ Allan Køster
allankoester@gmail.com; akos@hum.aau.dk

[1] Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Kroghstræde, 39220 Aalborg, Denmark

Phenom Cogn Sci (2018) 17:43–63
DOI 10.1007/s11097-017-9506-2

Presence in absence. The ambiguous phenomenology of grief

Thomas Fuchs[1]

Published online: 11 April 2017

Abstract Despite its complex experiential structure, the phenomenon of grief following bereavement has not been a major topic of phenomenological research. The paper investigates its basic structures, elaborating as its core characteristic a conflict between a presentifying and a 'de-presentifying' intention: In grief, the subject experiences a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence of the deceased, between the present and the past, indeed between two worlds he lives in. This phenomenological structure will be analyzed under several aspects: (1) regarding bodily experience, as disruption of a shared intercorporeality; (2) as a loss of the shared world and shared habitualities, leaving the bereaved person with ubiquitous indications of absence and with a contraction of their own self; (3) regarding temporality, as a separation of two strands of time, namely a still ongoing past and an alienated present which become more and more desynchronized; (4) finally, as an "as-if presence" of the deceased which the bereaved continue to feel and sometimes to perceive, leading to a cognitive-affective conflict between two experienced realities. The transforming process of grief is then analyzed as a gradual adjustment to the loss, finally enabling a re-integration of the conflicting realities. This is achieved through an incorporation and identification with the deceased on the one hand, and through various forms of representation on the other hand, in particular by recollection and symbolization.

Keywords Grief · Bereavement · Phenomenology · Ambiguity · Intercorporeality · Grief work · Identification · Representation

✉ Thomas Fuchs
thomas.fuchs@urz.uni-heidelberg.de

[1] Psychiatric Department, University of Heidelberg, Voss-Str.4, D-69115 Heidelberg, Germany

Important phenomenological questions:

How does the ambiguity of grief manifest in bodily *experience*?

What is it that is lost in grief, such that the death of a particular person might come to dis-assemble one's entire world?

Such that one finds oneself alienated, disconnected and estranged from the other, from oneself and from the world?

Embodied Human Existence: the ‘split self’

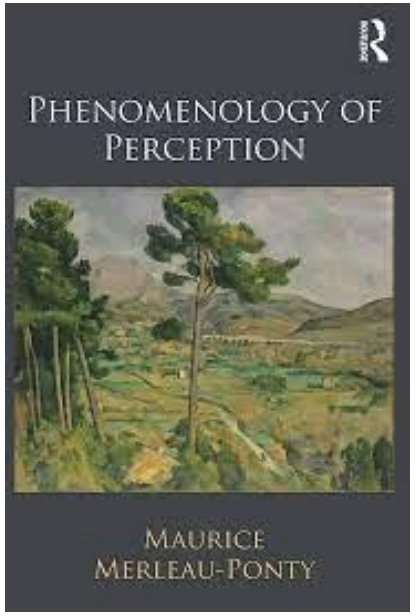
Embodied experience involves both:

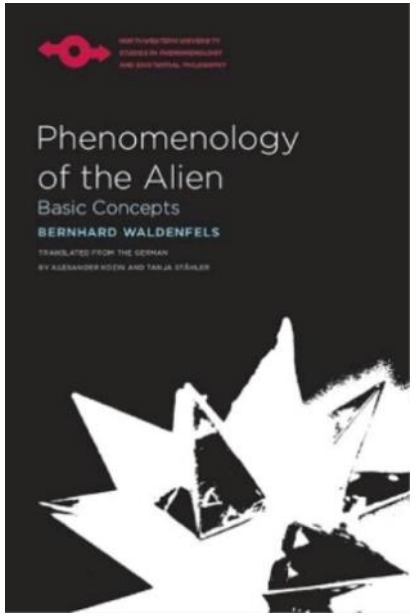
- *having* a body that is passively affected objective body
  corporeal body
  pre-personal body

- *being* a body that actively understands subjective body
  lived body
  personal body

- In ordinary, everyday life, the pre-personal corporeal body is incorporated into a more or less unified experience of the personal lived body

- But the non-coincidence of the split self means embodied human existence is inherently ambiguous and underpinned by alterity or otherness





griefyork.com

HOME ABOUT OUTPUTS GRIEF SURVEY COVID-19 & GRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY EVENTS

Grief: A Study of Human Emotional Experience

Welcome

The overarching aim of this four-year AHRC-funded project is to develop a detailed, wide-ranging, and integrated account of what it is to experience grief, focusing on aspects of grief that are of considerable theoretical and practical importance but remain poorly understood.

UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council

University of York

Survey Questions

1. What was the nature of your relationship with the person who died?
2. Please can you tell us about the circumstances of the bereavement, including when it occurred.
3. How has the person's death affected you during the hours, days, and weeks that followed?
4. How, if at all, have your relationships with other people (particular individuals and other people in general) been affected by the bereavement?
5. Does the surrounding world seem any different to you while grieving? If so, how?
6. Has your experience of time changed in any way?
7. Has your body felt any different during grief?
8. Has grief interfered in any way with your ability and motivation to perform various tasks, including paid work?
9. Is your experience of grief changing over time? If so, how?
10. Have you ever found yourself looking for the person who died or expecting that person to appear?

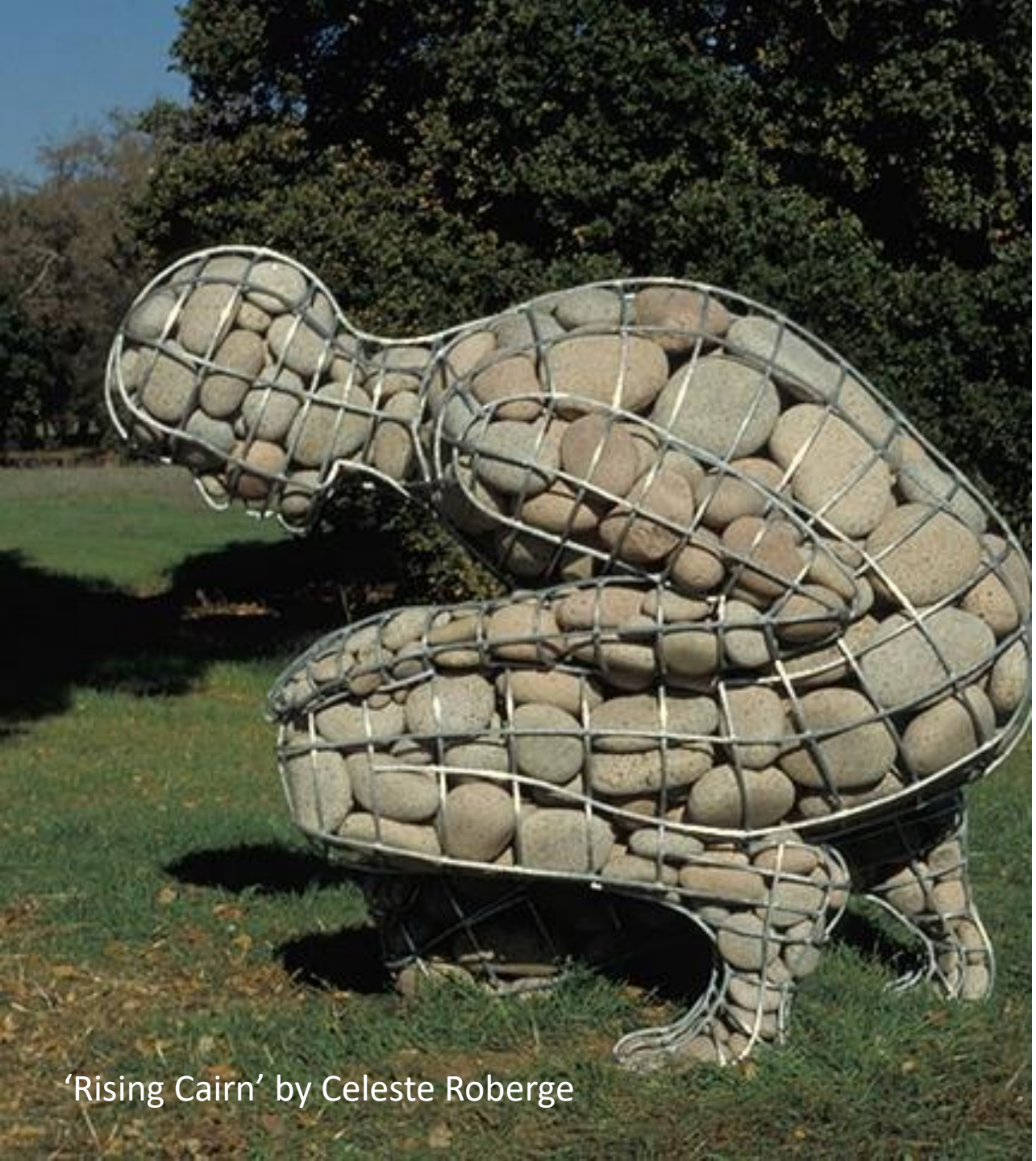
Survey Questions

11. Are there times, places, and occasions that have made you especially aware of the person's absence?
12. People who are grieving often report experiencing the presence of the person who died. Have you had any experiences that you would describe in those terms?
13. Do you still feel a sense of connection with the person? If so, could you say something about when you feel this and what the experience is like.
14. Since the person died, is there anything that you have been doing in order to feel close to them?
15. Is there anything that you do in order to avoid being reminded of the person or of their death?
16. Has anything in particular helped you to cope with grief? Has anything made you feel better or worse?
17. How understanding have other people been? Have others said or done anything that you've found especially helpful or unhelpful?
18. How, if at all, has your experience of bereavement changed you as a person?
19. How, if at all, does grief over the death of a person differ from other forms of loss that you have experienced?
20. Are there any aspects of grief that you find particularly puzzling or difficult to put into words?
21. Are there any important aspects of your experience that we have not addressed?

The phenomenology of the grieving body

- I have suffered from insomnia, migraines and lots of stomach problems. My body also aches most of the time (#21).
- Yes totally. Headaches; nausea; aches and pains; shaking; confusion; anxiety; spaced out at times; no control of emotions; unable to do simple tasks efficiently (#45).
- Yes more headaches; trembly; pain in chest; feel nauseous (#72).
- Tired, aching, listless, stiff (#109).
- Completely. Tight chest, heavy heart, anxiety, exhaustion, hyper-focusing, the need to move or be engaged constantly (#114).

Photograph by Farhad Ahmadi



‘Rising Cairn’ by Celeste Roberge

Heaviness

- It feels like my body is covered in weights, and just walking to the other side of the room is incredibly hard (#10).
- It’s a feeling you can’t really describe, a downward heavy drag (#77).
- Yes. Grief weighs. It is heavy. It sits in your joints and limbs. Grief sits in your chest like a stone, it stops you from taking deep enough breaths (#246).

‘Melancholy’ by Albert Gyorgy

Emptiness and Hollowness

- Sometimes it feels hollow, sometimes wrecked by grief. Sometimes aches and pains, sometimes I’m hungry for the wrong things, sometimes it’s hard to eat anything (#84).
- Yes, empty and useless. Very panicky, regular tremors. Unable to concentrate on simple tasks (#94).
- I felt hollow; depleted; at times ‘wired’ (#252).

Numbness

- Numb, times like it felt like my body didn't belong to me, felt sometimes like I was watching myself doing things but not really experiencing the 'doing.'
- Everything is numb. It's like a dark and heavy blanket shrouds everything. Life is going on, but everything I look at is transformed by my experience of loss (#48).

'Femme Assise' by Pablo Picasso

Disembodiment

- I felt very detached from my surroundings (#57).
- Sometimes I felt almost like I was outside my body, looking at all that was going on, as if it wasn't happening. It just felt almost too much to bear (#61).
- Heavier, and less mine (#139).

'Still Life with Skull, Leeks and Pitcher' by Pablo Picasso

Interpreting bodily ambiguity in grief: the phantom limb

To have a phantom limb is to remain open to all of the actions of which the arm alone is capable and to stay within the practical field that one had prior to the mutilation. The body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein. In the evidentness of this complete world in which manipulable objects still figure, in the impulse of movement that goes toward it and where the project of writing or of playing the piano still figures, the patient finds the certainty of his [bodily] integrity. But at the very moment that the world hides his deficiency from him, the world cannot help but to reveal it to him. … At the same moment that my usual world gives rise to habitual intentions in me, I can no longer actually unite with it if I have lost a limb. Manipulable objects, precisely insofar as they appear as manipulable, appeal to a hand that I no longer have (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 84).

‘Phantom Limb’ by Diana Al-Hadid

What is lost in grief?

- Loss of concreteness?
- Loss of possibilities?
- Loss of the personal/ collapse into the pre-personal

‘Die Gelbe Hand’ by Maria Lassnig

Mourning otherness in life

This carrying of the mortal other "in me outside me" instructs or institutes my "self" and my relation to "myself" already before the death of the other. . . . Even before the death of the other, the inscription in me of her or his mortality constitutes me. I mourn therefore I am, I am—dead with the death of the other, my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning (Derrida, 1995, p. 321).

'Two Figures' by Barbara Hepworth

Re-learning the world

In the early moments of grief, I was a ghost in the world, and my sense of isolation was almost total. The truth, however, is that the process of grieving and the long, slow winter of mourning dissolved that separateness in unexpected ways. After the winter passes, after the ice around the heart, broken in grief, has melted, a new sense of intimacy with the world appears, an intimacy whose boundaries explode the usual parameters not only of space but also of time. In these moments, I have felt myself attached to others, with a compassion which I have not known before and drawn, too, beyond myself to the green brilliance of the world…(Romanyshyn, 1999, p. 151).