

On feeling unable to continue as oneself

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Abstract

This paper sets out a phenomenological account of what it is to *feel unable to continue as oneself*. I distinguish the feeling that a particular identity has become unsustainable from a sense that the world has ceased to offer the kinds of possibilities required to sustain any such identity. In feeling unable to continue as oneself, possibilities may remain for carrying on in practically meaningful ways but not as *who one is or was*. I reflect on the kinds of *self* and *feeling* involved in such experiences, emphasizing the essential openness of self-experience to transformative possibilities and the dynamic structure of feeling. To illustrate and further develop my approach, I turn to experiences of grief.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many different kinds of emotional experiences can be directed at or somehow implicate the self. However, those affective experiences that relate most intimately to the self and its integrity tend not to feature in standard inventories of emotions. Instead, we find references to the likes of “self-feeling” or “Selbstgefühl” (Rzesnitsek, 2014; Kreuch, 2019), “existential feeling” (Ratcliffe, 2005, 2008), feelings of “being alive” (Fingerhut & Marienberg, 2012), “forms of vitality” (Stern, 2010), and the “existential texture of self-familiarity” (Køster, 2020). Such terms do not always identify quite the same aspects of experience. Instead, they encompass a range of overlapping phenomena. But a common theme is that certain *feelings* contribute to or even constitute a non-localized experience of relating to the world as a whole, something that is either presupposed by or integral to self-experience. The task remains of clarifying the nature of these feelings, along with the kind—or kinds—of self at stake. My aim in this paper is to address one piece of this larger puzzle, by identifying and describing a distinctive form of self-experience or self-feeling that lacks an established name. Although I will refer to it as feeling unable to continue *being oneself* or to continue *as oneself*, it could also be articulated in a variety of other ways—I don't feel like myself anymore; I don't know who I am; I am no longer me.

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I will distinguish feeling unable to continue as who we are from a form of experience with which it is easily confused—feeling unable to go on in any way, to be anyone. The two admit of varying degrees and are not mutually exclusive. Hence, seemingly paradoxical remarks such as “I am no longer me” can concern one, the other, or both. I will propose that what distinguishes feeling unable to continue as *this particular self* is the combination of (a) an enduring openness to significant possibilities, and (b) the realization that no such possibilities can sustain a specific, established arrangement of projects, relationships, commitments, roles, habits, and expectations. I will further suggest that such experiences are—to a large extent—pre-reflective, bodily, dynamic, and felt, as opposed to being primarily a matter of reflective thought or self-narrative. To illustrate and further develop my approach, I will turn to experiences of grief.

In reflecting on feelings of this kind, I also seek to make explicit a more general feature of self-experience. The sense of who we are has a dynamic structure—it involves a way of anticipating and experiencing unfolding possibilities. We are essentially open to new possibilities, including those that might undermine and reconfigure the organized, practically engaged perspective *through which* they are encountered.

2 | FEELING UNABLE TO BE ONESELF

In everyday English, it is commonplace to report “not feeling oneself” and sometimes “feeling unable to be oneself.” For the most part, such talk concerns particular times or situations. We might not feel ourselves when we are ill, tired, in an unusual mood, or when placed in a challenging or unfamiliar situation. And we might feel unable to be ourselves when we are expected to perform in accordance with certain norms and roles, as when attending a formal event. The common theme is that we engage with our surroundings, and are sometimes obliged to do so, in ways that run counter to our established inclinations and values—to what we care about and are accustomed to. Sometimes, this involves acting, thinking, relating to others, and experiencing things in ways that are detached from or in conflict with *who* we are, or at least who we take ourselves to be. Hence, not feeling oneself is closely related to what has been termed “self-ambiguity,” a predicament of uncertainty or tension over what emanates from oneself and what is attributable to extrinsic, interfering factors (Dings & de Bruin, 2022).¹ I take it that *not feeling oneself*, in this sense at least, is a frequent aspect of our lives, something that varies considerably in its emotional valence and phenomenological conspicuousness. What I am concerned with similarly involves tension and ambiguity, but it is more specific in nature and also restricted to more exceptional situations. Its contrary, a sense of being *able* to continue as oneself, is something that only becomes phenomenologically conspicuous when it is disrupted or lacking.

Talk of no longer being *the same person* or *who we once were* often relates to gradual life changes that occur over many years, following which we look back and remark on the gulf between who we were then and who we are now. However, in other circumstances, people report having lost a certain sense of self or identity without having established a new one. For instance, first-person accounts of traumatic experiences often convey the swift and disorienting loss of something fundamental to who one was, something that was once taken for granted. In reflecting on her own experience and also more widely, the philosopher Susan Brison asks how it is that certain events can be “experienced as self-annihilating” and how we should think of the “self” that endures and remembers those events (Brison, 2002, p. 38). Although Brison also refers to no longer being the same person, this is not a simple matter of having been Person A and then become Person B. Something has also been lost:

For the first several months after my attack, I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world. [...] I felt as though I'd somehow outlived myself. (Brison, 2002, p. 9)

We can distinguish two aspects of this “spectral existence,” which should not be conflated. There is an experience of loss and transition, which is sometimes described in terms of ceasing to be a certain person and—over a

period of time—coming to be someone else. In addition, there is an enduring change in the overall structure of experience. The person who remains is not only different but—for a time at least—diminished. Brison (2002, p. 50) refers more specifically to an altered “emotional repertoire,” characterized by a pervasive loss of pre-reflective trust or security. This, I suggest, can be construed as a shift in the *kinds* of significant possibilities that one is able to experience, contemplate, and pursue. With a loss of trust in other people, the interpersonal world as a whole appears menacing and unpredictable. This impedes any attempt to reorient oneself, to depend upon anything or anyone in order to establish and develop new projects, pastimes, and relationships. One’s sense of the immediate and longer-term future does not include the same kinds of possibilities as before; the prospect of sustained, positive development in one’s life is lacking (Ratcliffe, 2017). There is more to this than the inability to sustain a particular self; it further impedes the ability to become someone else, to experience and engage with future possibilities in new ways.

More generally, this distinction aids us in interpreting first-person accounts of a diminished or lost self, which can relate to one aspect of experience, the other, or both. For example, consider Jean Améry’s description of what it is to feel suicidal (Améry, 1976/1999). According to Améry, the common, underlying theme is a sense of defeat or failure that involves being unable to continue as oneself. We might conceive of this as the inability to sustain a specific identity. However, Améry seems instead to be saying that there is no prospect of continuing as oneself because there is no prospect of continuing as anyone. In fact, he adds that living a human life involves the constant possibility of becoming someone new, as when an architect has “liberated himself” by becoming a writer. It is when these “liberations” appear irrevocably out of reach that “existence is unbearable” (Améry, 1976/1999, pp. 125, 126).² Experiences of being unable to continue as a particular self can therefore be distinguished from both (a) a more general openness to self-transformative possibilities, which sustains rather than disrupts or diminishes who we are, and (b) losses of such possibilities, which prevent us from being who we are and from becoming someone else.³ Somewhere between these two scenarios is another form of experience: we continue to experience the kinds of possibilities required to sustain a sense of self, but *who* we are now is experienced as no longer viable.

3 | SELF AND FEELING

To understand what it is to feel unable to continue as oneself, we need to identify what “self” and “feeling” refer to in this context. The relevant experience is concerned with a sense of *who* one is—with what Schechtman (1996) refers to as “characterization” (and, more specifically, the associated phenomenology), as opposed to that whereby a specific entity is “reidentified” over time. For current purposes, this “who” is not to be construed primarily as an object of experience or thought, or in terms of the contents of explicit self-narratives. Feelings of being unable to continue as oneself concern something that is more usually taken for granted, something that becomes phenomenologically conspicuous only when undermined. To be more specific, I will suggest that they involve the disruption of a multi-faceted, variably integrated orientation *through which* we experience and engage with our surroundings.⁴

Emotional experiences of various different kinds can be said to implicate or concern the self in this sense. As Glas (2017, 2023) has observed, there is a way in which much of our emotional repertoire is tacitly self-referential. How we respond emotionally to events and situations reveals something about our “values” (in a broad sense of the term). In finding something threatening, annoying, exciting, or boring, we gauge its significance relative to what we already care about. Our values and the extent to which they hang together are thus reflected in the emotional significance that situations and events have for us (Helm, 2009). It can be added that these values appear mostly in the guise of our practically significant surroundings, rather being experienced as internal to us or taking the form of evaluative judgments directed at pre-established objects of experience. This also applies more widely—to all of our experiences of significance or mattering, not just those associated with pronounced episodic emotions (Ratcliffe, 2015).

What I have in mind here bears some similarity to what Christine Korsgaard (1996, 2009) terms “practical identity.” As Korsgaard observes, we belong to many different categories and roles, such as teacher, religious practitioner, football supporter, parent, and partner. Each of these “practical identities” specifies norms, values, activities,

and ways of relating to others. According to Korsgaard, our various practical identities are integrated, together comprising a dynamic, unified sense of who we are that is presupposed by our activities but also sustained and reconstituted by those activities.

However, if the self is to be construed as a largely integrated perspective through which we experience, think about, and act upon our surroundings, it is broader in scope than this. Who we are is not limited to conceptualized roles and associated norms. It equally encompasses cares, commitments, concerns, inclinations, habits, and expectations that may never have been conceptualized or at least articulated. Instead, they are manifest primarily or solely in our pre-reflective emotional and wider experiences of things. Hence, the self is not something that we experience as localized, internal to us, or clearly defined. Self-experience consists largely in a more diffuse sense of how things matter. As Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*, the world appears to us as an “enormous outline” of our possible actions, which embodies the many different ways in which things matter to us in light of interrelated projects that we are continually committed to (Sartre, 1943/2018, p. 433).

It is by incorporating the distinctive structure of our lives in this manner that self-experience amounts to a sense of *who* we are. It can thus be distinguished from the bare sense of being a singular locus of experience or “minimal self” (Zahavi, 2014). At the same time, though, it is not primarily a matter of reflective, articulate self-understanding or self-narrative, given that it also encompasses various ways of experiencing and responding to our surroundings. We have varying degrees of conceptual insight into the values implicit in our experiences, how they relate to one another, and where they originate.⁵

Self-experience is also essentially dynamic; our various projects and relationships include an openness to new possibilities—to development, change, disruption, erosion, and loss. Importantly, certain eventualities harbor the potential to transform the very framework of values through which we encounter them. They possess a distinctive kind of significance, which can be experienced and grasped emotionally: the possibility of disrupting and altering established ways in which things matter to us. Hence, experienced possibilities both reflect the structure of one's life and point to its fragility and malleability (Ratcliffe, 2017; 2022).

Of course, talk of “self,” “identity,” “person,” and “who one is” can also refer to numerous other phenomena (both inside and outside of academic philosophy). Nevertheless, the conception that I have sketched corresponds to certain everyday talk of self, identity, and who we are, including talk of being unable to continue as oneself.⁶ And, I will show, it is this conception that we require in order to understand various tension-riddled experiences of no longer being oneself or feeling unable to continue as oneself. Indeed, when “self” is construed in this way, we come to see that such experiences are inevitable in some circumstances. Certain forms of self-experience are not concerned with the significance that events and situations have for us relative to a background of established values but with the incoherence or unsustainability of that very background.

This further accommodates the way in which we might be said to “feel” unable to continue as who we are. Talk of feeling does not commit us to the position that an internal, episodic, bodily occurrence of some description embodies the content “I cannot go on being me.” For current purposes, feeling is to be construed in terms of dynamic qualities of experience. Wittgenstein (1966, p. 33) remarks that there is sometimes no better way of describing a feeling than describing the way in which someone said or did something: “all other descriptions are crude compared with a description of the gesture he made, the tone of voice with which he made it.” There is something right about this. Whatever Wittgenstein's position might have been, one reason is that many feelings consist in experiencing unfolding patterns of significant possibilities as we engage with our surroundings. Descriptions of our conduct can capture both how things matter to us and how our experiences of mattering change over time.

One might question whether all of this really amounts to “feeling,” in any informative sense of the term. After all, how we comprehend and respond to possibilities often involves explicit reflection and sustained thought. However, it is also important to acknowledge the extent to which felt, bodily expectation is sensitive to different kinds of significant possibilities. There are different ways of anticipating things, such as unwavering confidence, uncertainty, and doubt. These also discriminate between various different kinds of mattering. For instance, a felt doubt could be laced with fear, excitement, or urgency. In this pre-reflective, bodily manner, we also experience the fulfillment or

otherwise of what was anticipated. I might reach for a cup and feel immediate surprise at its absence or experience negated expectation as I open the front door to find nobody there. Indeed, it is arguable that the different modalities of pre-reflective bodily anticipation and fulfillment are ubiquitous throughout the course of our lives.⁷

It should be added that our immediate, pre-reflective experience of unfolding possibilities has a longer-term organization too. What matters to me right now might only matter as it does relative to the aims of much longer-term projects. And my current sense of its longer-term significance may be more or less determinate. Thus, it is possible to *feel*—in a variably specific way—the significance of something for the structure of one's life without having to catalogue the full details.⁸ We can experience paths through life as inaccessible, whole systems of possibilities as undermined, negated, or discordant. It is in this manner, I will now suggest, that we can *feel* unable to continue as who we are.

4 | THE SELF UNDERMINED

I have proposed that self-experience (in one sense of the term, at least) consists in a multi-faceted, variably integrated, and dynamic life structure, which is manifested in our ongoing, bodily experiences of significant possibilities. To understand what it is to feel unable to continue as oneself, this is the conception we require. On occasion, the structure of a life is undermined to such an extent by events that it is experienced as unsustainable—we can no longer go on in that way. At the same time, we retain a sense that other ways of going on remain possible.

Many different events and situations have the potential to undermine projects, relationships, and commitments that are central to the organization of a life, and they can do so in different ways. For instance, a project can be rendered unintelligible, physically impossible, too dangerous, or pointless. Its disruption may also impact on many other aspects of one's life. Sometimes, we lack insight into *how* an aspect of our life has been undermined, why exactly it appears unsustainable. For instance, we might stop seeing the worth in something that has been the focus of our activities for decades, without being able to articulate why. And it need not stem from our moving on to something new. Sometimes, we become disengaged from a life we have lived while having nowhere else to go.

One might wonder how any such scenario could involve the seemingly paradoxical predicament of experiencing one's current self as no longer viable, lost, or no more. Talk of *no longer being me* or *feeling unable to go on being me* does not refer to the complete, unambiguous loss of something but to a lack of self-integration. It encompasses a range of experiences, which share in common a form of disorientation. A cohesive, dynamic, and idiosyncratic perspective *through which* we relate to the social world has been profoundly disrupted, cannot be recovered, and requires reorganization.⁹ As I will show, this enables us to appreciate how a particular self might at the same time be experienced as current, absent, present in absence, and enduring but unsustainable. These seemingly conflicting experiences can all be integral to how one experiences the possible at a given time.

To make all of this more concrete, let us consider experiences of bereavement. It is uncontroversial that the death of someone we love, with whom we may have shared a great deal, can undermine the organization of our own life in numerous different ways. Expectations and habits require revision, shared pastimes are lost, projects may cease to be intelligible (as when something was done for them or for us), home may cease to be *our* home, shared commitments and values become unsustainable, and how we relate to others in general may also change. In Thomas Attig's terms, we are tasked with "relearning the world" (Attig, 2011).

At least some talk of "having died with them" and "no longer being the same person" is to be understood in these terms (Ratcliffe, 2022a). It is not simply a matter of having been Person A and subsequently become Person B. The organization of a life is lost before an alternative organization can be established. In addressing her own experience of spousal bereavement, neurologist Lisa Shulman (2018, xiv) writes of how grief involves the "loss of personal identity," which is a matter of its undermining the established structure of a life. For a time, one encounters "an unfamiliar world where all rules are scrambled" (Shulman, 2018, p. 45). Shulman's account is also sensitive to the distinction between being unable to sustain a particular identity and being unable to contemplate any such identity.

In the context of bereavement, she remarks on the importance of being able to “envision new possibilities,” of the kind that are required to “redefine ourselves” by making “fundamental changes in our daily lives and future plans” (Shulman, 2018, p. 122).

That our lives can integrate others, to such a degree that another person's death confronts us with our own impossibility, is conveyed frequently and consistently by literary fiction, autobiographical accounts of bereavement, and also everyday discourse. For example, there is a well-known passage in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine is asked to consider her impending marriage to Edgar Linton and its implications for her relationship with Heathcliff. She responds as follows:

If all else perished, and *he* remained, *I* should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, *I am* Heathcliff! (Brontë, 1847/1987, p. 88)

Without certain relational possibilities involving Heathcliff, Catherine could not be who she is. This sentiment is later reciprocated by Heathcliff, when confronted with Catherine's death: “*I cannot* live without my life! *I cannot* live without my soul!” (Brontë, 1847/1987, p. 183). Granted, this is a fictional narrative involving an exceptional relationship. Even so, it exemplifies something more general. When we are faced with the loss of a person or relationship that defines us, there can be a sense of persisting in the face of our own impossibility. Consider the following passage from Helen Humphreys' memoir *True Story: The Life and Death of My Brother*:

Death feels a bit like the vanished city, like wandering through a landscape I used to recognize but that has now been radically altered. It was a mistake to think that life was solid ground under my feet, and that every day I would be able to step back down onto the same earth. To have you gone—you, who went clear to the bottom of my world—has thrown everything off balance, has left me wandering like a ghost in my own life. (Humphreys, 2013, p. 58)

What Humphreys describes is challenging to interpret. However, it can be understood in terms of how one experiences significant possibilities. During the course of everyday life, events and situations matter to us in a variety of ways, which reflect what we care about—who we are. To be more specific, we experience our surroundings as imbued with a range of practically significant possibilities.¹⁰ Importantly, a token possibility (the possibility of *p* or the possibility that *q*) can be experienced in different ways. When we are no longer able to actualize that possibility, it need not be consigned unambiguously to the past. After someone has died, for a time we may continue to experience our surroundings in ways that we previously did, even though the significant possibilities that we encounter reflect an organization of projects and relationships has been rendered unsustainable. At the same time, we realize—sometimes through explicit, propositional thought—that our current experience is deceptive in certain respects. In this manner, what is past continues to be experienced as integral to what is present. Hence, to the extent that the organization of our world reflects who we are, we currently look upon who we once were. Other possibilities may be experienced in the form of expectations that are repeatedly negated or experienced as unfulfilled—he will be there when I open the door; she is coming home. There are also possibilities that endure, but for *them* rather than for *me*—they can still go out together, go about their daily business, interact with the world in the usual ways. Furthermore, in lacking certain other significant possibilities, our surroundings do not appear neutral but instead *bereft* of something, contrary to habitual patterns of expectation. Hence, the *absence* of a certain life organization can itself be very much present.

It is the combination of these various configurations of possibilities that constitutes the experience of “wandering like a ghost.” The distinctive organization of a life endures to some extent, but it is estranged from the unfolding

of a consensus world. It is experienced as no longer offering possibilities for growth and development, as conflicting with the realities of a current situation. One occupies a perspective that is reflected—at least partly—in how the surrounding world continues to appear but is at the same time undermined: this cannot be, and, by implication, I cannot be. As the “me” that has been disrupted is neither unambiguously present nor past, the same form of experience is describable in terms of no longer being me and being unable to continue as me.

More generally, first-person accounts of significant bereavements are suggestive of a predicament where a certain sense of who we are continues to be experienced for a time but *as lost*; it is not straightforwardly consigned to the past and replaced with something else. As part of a qualitative survey conducted in 2020, my colleagues and I asked the question “how, if at all, has your experience of bereavement changed you as a person?”¹¹ Responses varied considerably. Not all participants reported losing who they once were or becoming a different person, but many did. Some participants described *having become* someone different: “I know I’m not the same person and never will be” (#20); “I’m definitely a different person” (#113); “I feel a completely different person afterwards” (#230). There was also an emphasis on the *extent* to which one is changed by bereavement—damaged and diminished: “I will never be the same person again—how can I be? A part of me is missing” (#21); “Changed me beyond anything I’ve ever known. Whole world torn apart forever” (#86); “It’s broken me, but I will put myself back together in time. [...] I will never be the same as I was before he died” (#89). We could think of this in terms of having been Person A and become Person B. However, others described a form of experience that lies somewhere between the two. One experiences *who one is now* as lost, unfamiliar, fragmented, indeterminate, unsustainable, or uncertain:

It’s changed everything totally. I don’t recognize myself physically and emotionally. I don’t know who I am anymore. (#45)

I am not the same physically or emotionally. What I believed to be important before doesn’t seem so important but at the same time I also feel lost as a person. I feel like I am having to start again and figure life out again even now after over three years. I feel like it’s starting a new life and what fitted before doesn’t fit anymore. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces don’t fit any longer. (#110)

At the moment I am feeling a bit scared of the future. I don’t know what I want or who I am any more. I think I am still processing what has happened and I am sure it is going to have an effect on the way I see things moving forward. (#168)

A certain identity remains phenomenologically salient but *as lost*, something that can involve various different, concurrent ways of experiencing possibilities. This is what it is to be a “ghost in one’s own life.” Who we were is not fully consigned to the past; it *haunts* the present but in a way that no longer points to future possibilities or facilitates ongoing engagement with a consensus world.¹² This complicates the commonplace assumption that the experience of being a self or subject of experience involves the sense of being a particular self. Although it might be clear that one remains the same subject of experience, self-experience can involve a sense of indeterminacy and ambiguity over who one is. In other words, characterization and reidentification come apart phenomenologically.

5 | LOSS AND BECOMING

The kind of experience that I have described makes salient an aspect of selfhood that is ubiquitous but ordinarily less pronounced. Sustaining who we are essentially involves being open to new possibilities, including self-transformative possibilities. As Di Paolo (2020, p. 230) remarks, we are essentially “unfinished creatures.”¹³ When change is experienced in terms of being unable to continue as oneself, it is characterized by the absence of certain possibilities—we can no longer pursue certain paths, change, and develop in certain ways. Thus, in distinguishing between those

transitions that involve loss or inability and those that are experienced in other ways, we should not think of self-experience in terms of a rigid arrangement of projects, relationships, pastimes, and habits. Our lives routinely involve integrating significant changes, which may be gradual and subtle or swift and more conspicuous. Even the latter need not amount to feelings of loss or inability concerning who we are or were. It can be added that people live different kinds of lives, which involve experiencing and responding to change in different ways.

In an important discussion, Bateson (1990) reflects on the dynamic, ongoing composition of human lives, and how this involves active, creative processes of reinvention. She focuses on the lives of five women, all of whom were required to repeatedly reinvent themselves due to circumstances such as geographical relocation and motherhood. Bateson observes how women, in particular, are more likely to be faced with certain significant life changes, due to enculturated expectations and norms. Consequently, their lives are often characterized not by progress along a singular trajectory, but by changes that lead them “repeatedly” to “pose the question of who we are” (Bateson, 1990, p. 213). Central to these lives, Bateson observes, is a “fluidity and discontinuity,” as well as a creative process of “improvisation” that involves reorganizing ongoing projects and autobiographical narratives (Bateson, 1990, p. 13).

Similar observations apply to a variety of other circumstances. For instance, De Miranda et al. (2023) interviewed eight people with chronic spinal cord injuries. A consistent theme, they observe, is the “reinvention” of who these people were, involving a change in who and what they cared about. The new self, comprised of new values, projects, and relationships, is not limited by bodily constraints in quite the same ways as the old one.¹⁴ Thus, some circumstances open up possibilities for reinvention, while others demand it by rendering a certain life organization untenable. The latter make salient an important aspect of self-experience more generally: the potential for a certain kind of “transformative experience” is essential rather than incidental to being someone in particular.¹⁵ What sustains a sense of self at the same time implies its malleability and fragility. To be open to practically meaningful possibilities at all is also to be open to those possibilities that might shatter and transform the orientation through which things matter to us as they do.

In distinguishing the inability to continue as oneself from wider experiences of transition and becoming, an important consideration is how attached we are to ourselves—the kinds of emotional attitudes we have towards self-transformative possibilities. The organization of a life can vary markedly in its rigidity and receptiveness to change, and it is an open question as to when, exactly, the loss of a certain project or role also amounts to a loss of who one is.¹⁶ I have suggested that *no longer being me or being unable to continue as me* involves a disorganized, conflicted experience of possibilities rather than the complete removal of something from experience. Consistent with this, even when we later talk of becoming someone different or new, various aspects of life-organization may remain. So, there is a fine line between being unable to continue as oneself and being unable to continue in a more specific way. Furthermore, whether life-changes are conceived of and narrated in one or the other way may well have implications for how they are negotiated over time.

How we experience the inability to go on in a certain way further depends on the extent to which our future continues to include certain *types* of possibilities. Even without an arrangement of projects, pastimes, and relationships that renders things significant in particular ways, we might retain the sense that things could matter in those kinds of ways, that new projects and relationships remain possible. Construing this in terms of Bergson's *élan vital*, Minkowski (1933/1970, p. 157) describes how our sense of the immediate and longer-term future incorporates possibilities that draw us in: “We have before us a past which is concentrated, gathered together, from which our *élan* surges anew to carry us toward the future.”¹⁷ What, in particular, engages us will depend on what we care about, what we have invested ourselves in, and thus upon our personal past. However, a sense of there being such possibilities can endure even when a specific arrangement of possibilities becomes unsustainable. There remains the prospect of going on in *some* way, which is continually presupposed as a condition of possibility for having any projects. It is not something that we experience as emanating from ourselves, from who we are, but instead a condition for establishing, sustaining, and transforming a sense of who we are.¹⁸ When we feel unable to continue as who we are, this underlying orientation may also be diminished to varying degrees. Hence, experiences that are described in these terms can involve a disruption of who we are, a diminished ability to sustain any sense of self, or some

combination of the two. They encompass considerable variety, comprising an important but neglected aspect of human emotional life.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Schechtman (2022, p. 291) points out that not feeling like oneself is in fact wider-ranging than self-ambiguity, as one can feel adrift or detached from things without there being two or more “clearly defined options.”
- ² I am not suggesting here that we endorse Améry’s account, in full or in part. The point is that, in order to interpret what he is saying, we need to distinguish between being able to sustain a particular self and being able to sustain any self. Only with an adequate interpretation can we go on to evaluate his claims.
- ³ Clancy Martin (2023, xix) makes the complementary observation that feeling suicidal can involve a sense of certainty; no other possibilities present themselves: “the most negative emotions are also the most sure of themselves.” Changes in the *kinds* of possibilities that we can experience and contemplate are characteristic of various psychiatric diagnoses, including forms of depression where the prospect of positive change is diminished or absent (Ratcliffe, 2015).
- ⁴ See also Ricoeur (1992) for discussion of the distinction between “who” and “what” we are, and of how the two are sometimes conflated in philosophical discussions of self and identity.
- ⁵ As Schechtman comes to acknowledge, who we are is not to be conceived of in specifically *narrative* terms. Although a person or self, in this sense, is “held together by the form of its unfolding,” a dynamic, temporally extended life structure is not exhausted by narrative structure (Schechtman, 2014, p. 109). Any conception of narrative that accommodated it fully would be too permissive to be informative.
- ⁶ See Gallagher (2013) for a good summary of various different conceptions of “self” in philosophy and science. Gallagher attempts to reconcile many of these by appealing to the notion of a broader “self-pattern,” different aspects of which are emphasized by different accounts of self. What I have set out here could be construed as a sort of pattern, rather than as something singular and nearly circumscribed. By also conceiving of it as part of a larger pattern, we could integrate it into the kind approach that Gallagher sets out (although I am not committed to doing so). The sense of being someone in particular straddles several aspects of self that are distinguished by Gallagher: affective; intersubjective; psychological / cognitive; narrative; and situated.
- ⁷ For a sophisticated phenomenological treatment of the modalities of bodily expectation and fulfillment, see Husserl (1948/1973; 2001). For further discussion and development of these ideas, see Ratcliffe (2015, 2017).
- ⁸ Such experiences are not to be thought of solely in episodic terms. The implications of significant events for the structure of one’s life often take time to *sink in*. Our initial grasp of their significance is incomplete and sometimes recognized as such. An immediate felt sense of significance can also point to something longer-term, to the undermining and transformation of the distinctive, practically engaged perspective through which that significance is encountered (Ratcliffe, 2022b).
- ⁹ For more general discussions of the phenomenology of “disorientation,” see Harbin (2016), Stegmaier (2019) Fernández Velasco et al. (2021), and Mehmel (2023).
- ¹⁰ That we encounter possibilities as integral to the pre-reflectively experienced world is a consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition of philosophy. For further discussion, see Ratcliffe (2008, 2015, 2017).
- ¹¹ This survey was part of the AHRC-funded project Grief: A Study of Human Emotional Experience. Participants were invited to provide free-text responses of any length to twenty-one questions about their experiences of grief. For further details of the survey, see Ratcliffe (2022a, Chapter 1). Anonymised testimonies are publicly accessible via the UK Data Service, ReShare (<https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856067>).
- ¹² See also Mehmel (2023) for the complementary point that grief involves being unable to press into the future in a certain way.
- ¹³ Hence, it is arguable that who we are is better construed in terms of a perduring process with a certain degree and kind of consistency than in terms of endurance. Consistent with this, Schechtman (2014) takes the unit of analysis to be a “person-life” rather than an individual that exists fully at a particular time.

- ¹⁴ See also Cole (2004) for a detailed discussion of people's differing responses to chronic spinal injuries.
- ¹⁵ For the concept of “transformative experience” (an experience that changes us epistemically and personally in ways that we cannot fully envisage beforehand), see Paul (2014).
- ¹⁶ Acknowledgement of how human lives are malleable and involve responding to—and experiencing—circumstances in different ways also raises normative issues. Is one type of life structure somehow more appropriate to the human predicament than another? Certain general claims may be defensible here. For example, it is arguable that sustaining an open future requires that we also care for others' possibilities rather than just our own (Beauvoir, 1947/2018, pp. 76–78). But I am doubtful of more specific, confident prescriptions concerning the right way to live a human life and to meet the prospect of change.
- ¹⁷ Fuchs (2013) refers to this same aspect of experience as “conative” drive or momentum, an underlying orientation toward the future that is presupposed by more specifically focused desires, intentions, or motivations. For further discussion, see also Ratcliffe (2015, Chapter 7).
- ¹⁸ I think this is also what Sartre (1943/2018, p. 797) has in mind when he writes that “man is a useless Passion.” Sustaining a sense of self, construed as an arrangement of values relative to which things matter to us as they do, requires a diffuse, underlying motivation or drive that is not directed at any specific goal or embedded in any project, however general. It amounts to a groundless orientation, a way of experiencing possibilities that is presupposed by all instrumental or “useful” activities. See Beauvoir (1947/2018) for some complementary remarks on what it is for one to be a “useless passion.”

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