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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# Emotional sinking in

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**ABSTRACT**

In reflecting on events of considerable significance, it is commonplace to remark that 'it hasn't sunk in yet' or 'it's still sinking in'. Such talk is sometimes associated with things seeming unreal, surreal, unfathomable, or somehow impossible. In this paper, I develop an account of what these experiences consist of. First of all, I suggest that they involve explicitly acknowledging the reality of one's situation, while at the same time experiencing it as inconsistent with the organization of one's life. I go on to show how this tension is experienced dynamically, through disturbances of unfolding patterns of anticipation. I suggest that these patterns contribute to our grasp of what is and is not the case, thus accommodating the manner in which things can seem 'unbelievable' or 'unreal'.

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## 1. Introduction

What is it for something to sink in emotionally over a period of days, weeks, months, or even years? To my knowledge, this aspect of human emotional experience has not received a detailed philosophical treatment. Nevertheless, talk of things sinking in is commonplace, spanning many different situations. For instance, upon winning the US Open in 2021 at the age of 18, Emma Raducanu is widely reported as saying that it had been a 'whirlwind', which was 'still sinking in' and then 'gradually sinking in a bit more'.[1] Major sporting successes are often followed by such talk, as are various other events and situations, including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, lottery wins, relationship breakups, offers and losses of employment, pregnancies,

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[1]See, for example, the following news reports (both last accessed 20th May 2022): https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/av/tennis/58595328; https://www.tennis365.com/news/emma-raducanu-watched-her-us-open-final-win-on-her-first-night-back-in-the-uk/.

births, marriages, medical diagnoses, and bereavements.[2] The common theme is that what sinks in is a matter of considerable significance. It may affect one's own life specifically or the lives of others as well – family, friends, colleagues, a community, a country, a culture, even much of the world. What sinks in can be experienced as *mattering* in very different ways; it might involve the realization of something that we desperately wanted to happen, or quite the opposite.

I will focus for the most part on one situation where talk of sinking in arises frequently – that of bereavement. However, the account that I develop also applies to emotional sinking in more generally (hereafter, SI). What it is for something to sink in has been neglected by philosophers, despite a continuing resurgence of philosophical interest in emotion. One reason for this is a widespread tendency to focus on brief, episodic emotions. Moreover, these often concern matters that are of little or no consequence for the longer-term course of a human life, as when 'Bob is scared of the dog', 'Sue is happy to see Tim', 'John is angry about the delayed train', and so on. In contrast, SI can take place over a lengthy period of time and concern matters that will ultimately transform one's life. Another reason for the neglect of SI is that it does not fit into established categories of affective experience. It is not an episodic emotion or an enduring mood, and it spans a range of otherwise quite different emotional experiences, from guilt to relief to elation. Thus, SI is not to be identified with any particular emotional quality. I will suggest instead that it is a structural feature of certain temporally extended emotional processes that relate to matters of importance. Some of these processes are themselves classified as emotions, as in the case of grief, while others lack established names.[3]

One philosopher who has explicitly considered what it is for something to sink in emotionally is Furtak (2018, 78), who suggests that *feeling* is

[2]I do not wish to suggest that this is *always* so. For instance, not every major sporting success is described as sinking in or taking time to do so. As the rower Paul O'Donovan remarked, 'To be honest, you don't feel much about it at all, people ask 'has it sunk in yet', but I don't think they ever do really': https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210729-history-making-irish-rowers-won-t-be-bringing-the-house-down (last accessed 20th May 2022). Often, we do not feel as we expect to feel. Indeed, there will be cases where what has to sink in is the realization that an achievement that was expected to change one's life has not made much of a difference. (Thanks to Mary Leng for the example.)

[3]Neither should SI be classified as an 'existential feeling', conceived of as a changeable, felt sense of reality and belonging (Ratcliffe 2008, 2015). It can involve emotions, moods, and existential feelings, but is not itself to be identified with any of them. Rather, it is integral to a temporal process in which they participate. SI can relate to existential feelings in various ways, which include playing a role in their transformation. If the account I develop here is broadly correct, SI could involve the variably determinate anticipation of a shift in existential feeling, which itself contributes to one's current existential feeling.

required for something to have the 'force of a profound conviction'. Hence, it is through certain kinds of feeling that we eventually come to fully grasp the significance of events.[4] Although I do not seek to challenge this conception, I will suggest that it is importantly incomplete. Drawing on themes in the phenomenological tradition and in later work by William James, I will set out how the experience of SI involves reconciling, over time, the realities of one's situation with an aspect of experience that eludes familiar distinctions between cognition and affect or belief and feeling. SI is not merely a matter of two types of intentional states having conflicting contents that are ultimately reconciled. Rather, it involves a much wider-ranging experience of tension and incongruity, which at the same time amounts to a distinctive form of *anticipation*. What has to change in order to accommodate the impact of events is not an intentional state with a circumscribed content. Neither is it something that is integral to or associated with any particular modality of intentionality (such as belief, memory, or perception). Rather, it amounts to a network of intra- and cross-modal associations that together comprise the organization of one's life. This is something that we experience through changing patterns of anticipation, thus accounting for the *dynamic* structure of SI.

## 2. What sinks into what?

SI does not always relate to what *has happened*. It can equally involve something that was once thought possible and is no longer possible, as with 'I will never be able to have children'. It can also relate to something that was not considered likely but now looms large: 'it is probable that I have a serious illness;' 'the threat of nuclear war has not gone away'. So, what sinks in can be something that one takes to be the case, no longer the case, potentially the case, or no longer potentially the case. These alternatives are not mutually exclusive. As we respond to bereavement, what has to sink in encompasses what has happened, our resultant situation, and what the future holds. The object of emotional experience can therefore be referred to in different ways. However, the common theme is that an actual or potential event or situation has especially significant implications for one's own life, the lives of others whom one cares about, *our* lives, or even the lives of people in general.[5] In the case of

[4]See also Ratcliffe (2017b, 2022) for some reflections on the experience of SI.

[5]What sinks in often has very different implications for different people, as when *we* won and *they* lost or when *my* life is profoundly altered while *all of them* carry on as before. However, the experience does

*potential* events, those implications fall into two categories: (a) what applies already in light of *p*'s possibility, and (b) what will apply if *p* comes to pass.

SI cannot be accommodated by observing simply that it takes time to acknowledge the truth of certain things. The sinking in of *p* is not just a matter of coming to believe that *p* (at least not where the 'belief that *p*' is construed in terms of assenting to the truth of a proposition, acknowledging that there is no prospect of its falsehood, and acting in a largely consistent way). One can endorse that proposition with full confidence while at the same time recognizing that *p* has not yet sunk in. Something still has to sink in because a kind of cognition that might be referred to as 'knowing' or 'believing' is somehow inadequate to it. One can *know* full well that a person has died, while conceding that the reality of this has not really sunk in at all. The same applies to other things that take time to sink in, such as 'I no longer have a job;' 'two planes have hit the Twin Towers;' 'we won the World Cup;' and 'they have been found alive'.

Granted, people often talk of *not quite believing* things, but this need not involve doubting the truth of the relevant propositions. Take the utterance, 'I know it's true, but I just can't believe it'. In this context, 'knowing' is to be identified with taking something to be the case in the form of a propositional belief, whereas 'not believing' it relates to a qualitatively different form of conviction or lack thereof (the nature of which remains to be clarified). Of course, we could include both of these under the category 'belief' by adopting a sufficiently permissive conception of belief, one that is capable of accommodating qualitatively different phenomena (e.g. Schwitzgebel 2002). However, that would be to sidestep the task of understanding *how* they conflict with one another, leaving us only with the – perhaps unhelpful – acknowledgement that we sometimes concurrently believe that *p* and believe that *not p*. One important aspect of this conflict is the way in which what has happened, failed to happen, or now looms large can appear somehow unreal, impossible, incomprehensible. For example, consider Roland Barthes' description of how the reality of his mother's death seemed intermittently unfathomable:

> Now, from time to time, there unexpectedly rises within me, like a bursting bubble: the realization that *she no longer exists*, *she no longer exists*, totally

not always include such contrasts. For instance, it could be *the world* rather than *my world* or *our world* that seems forever different now, as when the Twin Towers were destroyed, lockdowns were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia invaded Ukraine.

> and forever. This is a flat contradiction, utterly unadjectival – dizzying because *meaningless* (without any possible interpretation). (Barthes [2009] 2010, 78)

How are we to understand this? The tension is *experienced* with immediacy, as opposed to being something that one explicitly infers from experience, and my task here is to clarify the relevant phenomenology.[6] At a first approximation, we might say that things still *appear* as they did before, at least in certain respects; one's experiences, thoughts, and habitual inclinations have somehow failed to accommodate the change. At the same time, they are experienced *as* somehow discrepant with the reality of one's situation. An especially protracted and pervasive experience of this nature is described in Sonali Deraniyagala's memoir *Wave*, which documents the profound grief she experienced following the deaths of both her children, her husband, and her parents in the 26 December 2004 tsunami. As her account conveys vividly, the realities of what had happened and of her ongoing situation were not merely in tension with specific habits, beliefs, memories, expectations, or perceptual experiences. Rather, the entire structure of her life was undermined and rendered unsustainable. Fully acknowledging their deaths therefore required a radical reorientation: 'They are my world. How do I make them dead? My mind toppled' (Deraniyagala 2013, 34). As something sinks in, there are also more localized experiences of tension and conflict, sometimes elicited by particular situations. For instance, Deraniyagala describes returning to what was once her family home in the UK after an absence of nearly four years, to find it appearing exactly as it did and yet – at the same time – radically different: 'The house is much as we left it. Here is our debris, but it is all intact. All of it. I am bewildered. I can't join the pieces together. They are dead, my life ruptured, but in here it feels as it always did' (Deraniyagala 2013, 8).

So, it would seem that SI involves gradually acknowledging the widespread *implications* of *p*, rather than just coming to believe that *p*. However, this still does not get us very far. Suppose one were to spend several days documenting all the implications of a possible or actual situation propositionally and then to explicitly endorse all of these propositions with complete confidence. The sense of having failed to grasp things fully or properly could still remain. SI involves a process whereby

[6]However, this is not to imply that *all* aspects of SI are phenomenological in nature. It could also be taken to encompass patterns of unthinking activities that are only subsequently interpreted in terms of something's having not sunk in at an earlier time. The acknowledgment that something is still sinking in could further involve reflecting on one's current behaviour, perhaps along with the contrasting behaviour of others, and inferring that something is amiss.

the implications of something are rendered consistent with the overall organization of one's life, where the latter is not exhausted by propositional beliefs and how they interrelate. In response, one could maintain that the tension is between propositions that we reflectively endorse and others that we habitually accept. After all, contemplating the truth of a proposition in a detached way is quite different from integrating it into our practical engagement with the world. But, although this is along the right lines, an account is still needed of how conflict between the two is structured and why it is experienced in a certain, distinctive way. It is not simply a matter of forgetting something that one explicitly contemplates, lapsing back into habitual patterns of thought, and then remembering it again. The experience of tension arises even as one explicitly acknowledges that *p*; one's conviction is experienced *as* somehow lacking and conflicted. Furthermore, this conflict is not limited to reflective and pre-reflective thought. As we will see, it also encompasses memories, patterns of activity, feelings of anticipation, and much else. So, it will not suffice to limit our considerations to different ways of accepting propositions and the discrepancies between them. What also requires acknowledgement is a pervasive aspect of experience that cannot be characterized in terms of any number of intentional states and their contents.

The notion of SI can be helpfully related to that of 'emotional depth', conceived of in terms of the extent to which emotionally experienced situations and events impact upon the organization of one's life. Pugmire (2005) has developed an account of depth or profundity along such lines, which distinguishes an emotion's depth from its intensity. For instance, my recent emotional experience of being shot up into the air in a bungee catapult was certainly intense, but it was not deep. Pugmire recognizes that a human life has an 'architecture', which varies in its complexity and degree of unity, over time and also interpersonally. To the extent that a life is organized, it is affected by emotionally significant events in different ways and to differing degrees: 'depth depends at least on how much of a person's life is affected by what evokes the emotion' (Pugmire 2005, 43). Certain types of emotion are deeper than others – it seems plausible to maintain that grief over the death of a loved one is deeper than mere sadness. In addition, certain tokens of a given type of emotion are deeper than others – being afraid of an injection is, ordinarily at least, a less profound emotional experience than being afraid of receiving a terminal diagnosis. Pugmire adds that, for an emotion to qualify as genuinely deep, the events it concerns must

actually have the implications for one's life that one takes them to have. For current purposes, however, I am concerned with the *experience of depth*, regardless of whether or not it is veridical.

Pugmire also considers depth experiences that involve a sense of one's emotional experience being irrevocably inadequate to its object, as with certain mystical or spiritual experiences. However, where SI is concerned, what should be emphasized is a sense of *contingent inadequacy*. A current emotional experience itself incorporates the recognition that one has not yet fully grasped the significance of an event or situation, that there is more to come, and that one's emotions are set to unfold in a certain way.

The architecture of a life is not homogeneous or seamlessly integrated. Its ingredients include numerous long- and shorter-term projects, which shape how one thinks, acts, and experiences one's surroundings. These are interconnected in various ways and are often interdependent, as when one project is embedded in another and depends on the latter for its intelligibility. In addition, a life structure includes enduring commitments and relationships, as well as established pastime, and habitual expectations. Another aspect of it is the organization of autobiographical memory – how past events relate to one another and remain significant in light of what happened subsequently, where one is now, and where one's life is heading. As this might suggest, a life structure also incorporates, or at least depends upon, a range of narratives that bind significant events together in coherent ways.[7] When something has to sink in, it can have implications for various different aspects of this structure.

A life structure includes much that is *shared* in one or another way with other people – with a family, friendship group, professional organization, community, society, or culture. The destruction of the Twin Towers affected *our* world, what we took for granted as shared, whereas a bereavement might be experienced as specific to *my* world or to that of a small number of people. Where the implications of an event are especially profound, there is the dawning realization that *my world*, *our world,* or even *the world* will never be quite the same again, even though the details may be unclear. SI thus involves coming to appreciate the significance of things relative to a backdrop of *values* (where 'value' is construed permissively, to encompass all those aspects of life structure relative to which events and situations matter.) Importantly, this significance points to an alteration of the very context within which the relevant

[7]For further discussion of various different ways in which narratives and narration can contribute to and also sometimes disrupt life structure, see Ratcliffe and Byrne (2022).

situation is contemplated (the framework of values relative to which it appears significant).[8] In colloquial terms, it pulls the rug out from under our feet.

Sometimes, we look back on earlier times and only then recognize that something had not sunk in – perhaps we behaved like that because we were not thinking straight at the time. Nevertheless, there are other occasions when we recognize at the time that something has not yet sunk in. Moreover, we do not first reflect explicitly upon the relevant experiences and only then come to the conclusion that something is lacking. Instead, the sense of lack is pre-reflective and immediate. Without recourse to inference or interpretation, it already *seems* or *feels* as though one's current recognition or comprehension is somehow inadequate, that there is more to come, that an emotional process is only just beginning. It thus makes sense to say, 'it *feels* as though it's still sinking in' or 'it *feels* as though it hasn't sunk in yet'. But this poses a problem: how could one recognize that *p* has *not* sunk in without comprehending the very thing, *p*, that we claim not to have grasped yet? Even if this problem can be solved, there is a further problem to consider: why should having to work through the implications of something be associated with its seeming somehow *unreal* or with a sense of one's thought contents as *lacking*? After all, one might know full well what has happened and have a perfectly good understanding of the relevant propositions. In what follows, I will develop an account of the phenomenology of SI by proposing solutions to these two problems. This will involve emphasizing the way in which certain *dynamic* qualities of experience are central to SI.

## 3. A sense of what's coming

How can we recognize that *p* has not sunk in without understanding the very thing that we fail to understand? By analogy, statements such as 'I have not yet recognized that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris' appear self-

[8]In considering how things sink in, it is also important to distinguish two different but interdependent aspects of integration. One of these concerns the relationship between a situation and the organization of one's own life, while the other relates to the integration of one's life into a larger social world. As something begins to sink in and the patterns of a life fall into disarray, one may experience a sense of being dislodged from familiar, shared norms and practices. One is not only tasked with reorganizing one's own life in a coherent way, so as to take account of the situation, but also with doing so in a manner that enables one to reconnect with shared practices. Although this applies most naturally to distressing life events such as bereavements, it can equally concern life changes that are initially viewed in a positive light, such as a lottery win that disrupts an established network of professional and personal relationships.

contradictory. The only way to accommodate the relevant experience, I suggest, is to adopt a sufficiently liberal conception of experiential content, one that acknowledges the manner in which we anticipate things with varying degrees of determinacy. This aspect of experience has been emphasized by philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition and also, in a largely complementary way, by William James. In developing a position that he calls 'radical empiricism', James criticizes established formulations of empiricism for promoting conceptions of experiential content that are far too sparse. They are motivated, he claims, by a 'tendency to do away with the connections of things' (James 1912, 42–43).[9] In contrast, he proposes that human experience is replete with relations of various kinds. For instance, experiences of temporal transition include a sense of continuity: 'though they are two moments, the transition from one to the other is *continuous*' (1912, 49). In line with James's own position, I suggest that this sense of continuity is partly a matter of pre-reflective anticipation, which accommodates varying degrees of determinacy. Thus, when we sense the coming of *p* rather than *q*, the anticipation of *p* can remain compatible with a host of more specific scenarios.

This theme is also prominent in the phenomenological tradition (e.g. Husserl [1948] 1973; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2012). We might listen to a melody for the first time and experience a sequence of notes as consistent with what came before. However, this is not to say that we anticipated exactly those notes; other arrangements would have been equally compatible with our expectations. Similarly, it is proposed that visual perceptual experience includes a pre-reflective appreciation of what will be revealed as we turn an object so as to reveal its hidden sides.[10] Again, this involves varying degrees of determinacy: it will be a picture of a cat; it will be uniformly green and smooth; it will have some colour or texture. The anticipatory structure is also intermodal; in seeing the cup, we might anticipate how it feels to the touch, whether and how we will be able to move it, how it will sound as it is moved, and how its contents will smell as it is brought closer. Perceptual experience thus involves the

[9] I will neither set out in full nor attempt to defend the doctrine that James calls 'radical empiricism'. Instead, I focus specifically on two claims that he makes: (a) experience incorporates a sense of temporal continuity, constituted partly by anticipation; (b) patterns of indeterminate anticipation are responsible for experiences of what we might call 'meaning' or 'truth'.

[10] In Husserl's terms, the experience has a 'horizonal' structure; one's sense of *what something is* and also one's sense *that it is* are constituted not just by what actually appears, but also by an organized 'horizon' of possibilities, many but not all of which take the more specific form of anticipation (e.g. Husserl [1952] 1989, Section One, Chapter 2).

unfolding of indeterminate patterns of anticipation, in ways that are, for the most part, consistent with pre-reflective expectations.[11]

One could maintain that what I have just described is limited to the *contents* of experience. In other words, it is only properties of the melody or of the cup that we take to be continuous, not our *experiencing of* a perduring process or enduring object. However, in order to understand experiences of SI, it is important to recognize that the phenomenology of anticipation spans both the intentional act and its object. We can do so by first acknowledging that the relevant phenomenology is not exclusive to perceptual experiences of currently unfolding events; it also applies to intentional experiences of other kinds, such as the flow of practically oriented thoughts or autobiographical reminiscing. Suppose we anticipate the path of our recollections – how one memory leads into another – in a comparable way. If that is so, then we do not anticipate and then experience the relevant *events* as though they were occurring right now. Instead, they are experienced *as* remembered and therefore *as* past. If the experience of anticipation distinguishes between kinds of intentionality in this way, then what we anticipate cannot be limited to the contents of experiences. What is anticipated is the flow of events *as remembered* and thus the flow of our remembering. The point applies equally to our perceptions, imaginings, and linguistic thoughts. This opens up the possibility of emotional experiences having a similar structure, incorporating a sense that further emotional engagement with one's situation is on the way.

But why accept that intentional experiences in general do have this kind of temporal organization? Its ubiquity becomes apparent when we reflect on those occasional experiences that involve its disruption. In the case of perceptual experience, Husserl ([1948] 1973) contrasts the ordinarily unproblematic way in which we anticipate things with occasions when they do not go as expected. Sometimes we experience surprise, which can take the more specific form of *negated* anticipation, as when seeing a glass fall to the floor, expecting it to make a loud noise and shatter into pieces, and then seeing it bounce silently. However, there are also other ways in which a state of affairs might fail to unfold as anticipated. An object, property, event, or situation could be unexpected, run directly contrary to what was expected, or conflict

[11] See Ratcliffe (2015, 2017a) for a more detailed discussion and defence of this position. Complementary claims are also made by sensory-motor enactivists such as Noë (2004). However, we can accept that experience has the kind of anticipatory character sketched here without endorsing the specifics of one or another enactivist approach.

with expectations in some ways but not others. Some experiences of anomaly are preceded by perturbations of the anticipatory process itself. There may be a general air of uncertainty over what is coming, a nonspecific sense of doubt over an outcome that was previously expected with confidence, or a form of doubt that involves two or more competing possibilities: is that Bob approaching or is it Sue? Insofar as unfolding events *matter* to us, uncertainty, doubt, and negation can take on different affective qualities too, as with experiences of dread, excitement, pleasant surprise, relief, and disappointment.[12]

How we experience disrupted and disappointed anticipation varies across modalities. For instance, imagination does not ordinarily involve anything like the stunned surprise and momentary disorientation sometimes associated with negated perceptual expectations. Nevertheless, there remain other ways in which the content of an imagining, memory, or deliberative thought can appear unanticipated or at odds with what came before. For instance, in remembering a sequence of significant events, one might find that one's recollections falter at a particular point and cease to unfold as anticipated. Alternatively, certain memory contents might be experienced as incongruous – even as wholly irrelevant and thus as disrupting an unfolding sequence. Similar points apply to linguistic thought – patterns of thought can be experienced as fumbling and lacking in temporal structure. Furthermore, thoughts are occasionally experienced as intrusive and incongruous due to their thematic content or emotional tone.[13] Sometimes, although not always, experiences of incongruity involve the appearance of something that is unexpected and even surprising, such as a thought or memory content that appears seemingly out of nowhere. It can be added that intermodal anticipation is not limited to intersensory experience; we also move seamlessly between perceptual experiences, activities, deliberative thoughts, recollections, and imaginings.

Construed as a whole, this network of dynamically experienced associations amounts to a sort of map for finding our way around the world and

[12]See also Ratcliffe (2017a) for more detailed discussion of this aspect of experience.

[13]These considerations can be applied to the topic of thought insertion in psychiatric illness, which is said to involve experiencing one's own thoughts as emanating from another thinker. A common theme in accounts of thought insertion is that it involves a disruption of anticipatory processes that relate in some way to the phenomenology of thought (e.g. Frith 1992, 2012). However, a familiar objection is that predicting a thought with the content *p* requires having a thought with the content *p*, leading to an infinite regress. This problem can be avoided by appealing to a form of anticipation with a less determinate content. Nevertheless, even if thought insertion can be accounted for in such terms, the *type* of disturbance it involves will still need to be distinguished from other ways in which the anticipatory structure of thought might be disrupted (Ratcliffe 2017a).

around the organization of our own lives, as well as for connecting and integrating the two. SI can be thought of in terms of this map. Although we might describe it in terms of recognizing that there is more to come and experiencing one's current comprehension as falling short, it is not primarily a reflective phenomenon that involves the 'metacognitive' evaluation of one's own emotional states. Instead, experiences of tension, incongruity, and inadequacy are comparable to immediate experiences of surprise, negation, disorientation, and felt doubt that arise in our practical affairs – as we reach for something to find that it is not there, enter a room expecting to see someone and find it empty, or try to open a door and find it locked. My proposal is that a more widespread experience of this nature, involving the flow of one's various intentional states and their contents, can constitute an experience of tension and lack that also amounts to a form of anticipation. There are conflicts in the organization of one's life that are *yet to be* resolved; one's emotional experience is set to follow a certain path.

Consistent with this position, how emotional experiences and their contents unfold is something that we often anticipate pre-reflectively, with differing degrees of determinacy. Consider the realization of having forgotten something important: something's wrong; something's missing; my passport; I've left it on the plane. There is an experience of dawning recognition and, although what we have done or neglected to do might be initially unclear, there is already a sense of how it matters and also how our experience will develop over the ensuing moments – a more specific revelation with a certain kind of significance is *coming*. Although this example might be described in terms of something sinking in, it is to be distinguished from the kinds of experiences I am concerned with here. Unlike the swift realization that one's passport is still on the plane, what I seek to understand involves already endorsing the relevant proposition, but without having reconciled its implications with the structure of one's life. Even so, it is to be conceived of in similar terms. Experiences of SI involve complex mixtures of anticipation, its disruption, and its negation, which concern the relations between the contents of experiences, as well as between the experiences themselves. In responding emotionally to a situation, we recognize at least something of its significance, its implications for what we value. But there is still *more to come* – we anticipate, with varying degrees of determinacy, how the implications of events point to the reorganization of a life structure that serves as the backdrop to one's current emotional experience. And, given that one's propositional belief is acknowledged to be true,

this tension cannot simply be resolved by dismissing the proposition and carrying on as before. Instead, SI can involve explicitly, actively reasserting the truth of relevant propositions over a period of time – it will not go away and so the reality of one's situation remains at odds with the organization of one's experience. This also allows for the possibility of a form of denial, which involves actively preserving a life structure in the face of events that undermine it.

These experiences can be further analyzed by distinguishing more specific ways in which anticipation is disrupted. For example, as one contemplates a death and begins to recognize its implications, emotional engagement with what has happened comes into repeated conflict with many different aspects of one's life – with practical expectations, habitual patterns of practically oriented thought, established interpersonal relationships, the significance of remembered events, and one's future plans. Various patterns of anticipation that flow from one's engagement with a current situation are experienced as conflicting with a broader life structure, as yet to be integrated. Hence, even though a current emotional response to events might well be exceptionally intense and also appropriate in kind, it still appears inadequate to the full reality of a situation. The organization of one's life is yet to change so as to accommodate what has happened. Integral to the widespread disruption of habitual patterns of anticipation is the sense that more is on the way.

Hence, SI does not involve a straightforward conflict between intentional states of two different types with overlapping contents, such as *believing* that someone is dead while still *feeling* as though they are alive. The explicit acknowledgement of what has happened is in tension with something more diffuse, which does not originate in any one intentional modality and does not have a circumscribed intentional content: a host of habitual associations that span the structure of one's life and are experienced dynamically. In contemplating the fact that someone is dead, all sorts of discrepancies are encountered, encompassing bodily habits, perceptual experiences, goal-directed activities, patterns of thought, and memories. What we anticipate being further affected by a situation is something that binds our intentional states together into a coherent whole, enabling us to move in a coherent way from seeing *p* to thinking about *q* to remembering *r* to anticipating *s*. SI thus involves an aspect of experience so pervasive that we seldom notice it, an intra- and inter-modal glue that holds everything together, enabling us to find our way around our lives – to practically engage with our surroundings in cohesive, organized ways and to move

seamlessly between perceptual experiences, patterns of linguistic thought, recollections, and imaginings.[14] This accounts for the dynamic, tension-riddled, and temporally protracted nature of profound emotional experiences. Consider, for example, Martha Nussbaum's account of the grief she experienced over her mother's death:

> When I receive the knowledge of my mother's death, the wrenching character of that knowledge comes in part from the fact that it violently tears the fabric of hope, planning, and expectation that I have built up around her all my life. But when the knowledge of her death has been with me for a long time, I reorganize my other beliefs about the present and future to accord with it. (Nussbaum 2001, 80)

Emotional comprehension is experienced *as* dynamic and, furthermore, as something that encompasses one's whole life – one's hopes, expectations, and plans. But it will not suffice to refer to the reorganization of 'beliefs', as Nussbaum does. Rather, there is a conflict between qualitatively different forms of cognition. One of these is not a matter of belief or any other kind of intentional state and does not have a circumscribed content; it consists in the dynamic organization of one's life and how it relates to matters of importance.[15]

## 4. Experiences of meaning and reality

SI should not be thought of as a matter of comprehending the implications of events and situations for an enduring, context-independent life structure. Much of that structure, I suggest, is irreducibly dynamic; certain associations are *constituted* by patterns of anticipation and fulfilment. Some such patterns may be elicited by particular environments and then further shaped by how one proceeds to interact with those environments.[16] Thus, as James (1912) proposes, life structure – or at least certain aspects of it – may well amount to a changeable patchwork of associations, rather than a singular, cohesive framework. That being so, it is plausible to suggest that some things never sink in fully, that they fail

[14]Hence, it will not help to introduce a technical term such as 'alief', in order to identify a previously uncategorized intentional state that does the relevant work (Gendler 2008). What the reality of one's situation conflicts with is not an intentional state with a specific content or any number of such states.

[15]It is arguable that what distinguishes emotional experience from other forms of intentionality is the distinctive way in which it concerns how anticipated and actual events relate to the structure of one's life and elicit changes in it (Ratcliffe 2017b, 2022).

[16]A further consideration is the extent to which we rely confidently on other people for epistemic, moral, and practical guidance when the organization of our own lives falls short. Forms of trust have an important role to play here (Ratcliffe in press).

to elicit the reorganization of parts of this patchwork. So, it is not a simple matter of something either ultimately sinking in or failing to do so. Certain life events may be associated indefinitely with various inchoate feelings that point to tensions and gaps in the organization of one's life and in how one experiences and engages with various situations. We *feel* our own lack of coherence, in ways that vary in determinacy and valence. Furthermore, it is possible to have differing degrees of insight into the nature and content of these feelings.

By emphasizing the dynamic structure of SI, we can solve the second of the two problems identified earlier. Why is talk of something not having sunk in so often associated with its seeming somehow unreal, incomprehensible, bereft of meaning, or even impossible? After all, we often fully recognize what is meant by the relevant propositions and also accept their truth. However, even when we might be said to understand the meaning of something and recognize its truth, there is another sense in which 'meaning' is sometimes said to be lacking. When something has not yet sunk in, our words can seem strangely hollow; they fail to connect with the world and our grip on them somehow falters. With this, the relevant situation continues to seem somehow unreal, impossible. Hence, even if our appreciation of 'meaning' and 'truth' is to be attributed squarely to propositional cognition, there remains something else to account for, which is also often referred to in terms of 'meaning' or 'believing' something. And the question remains as to why this is sometimes experienced as lacking when habitual patterns of anticipation are profoundly disrupted. My answer is that a certain kind (or, if you prefer, aspect) of meaning is not *fully present* at any given time. Our sense of what it is for *p* to be the case consists in a form of pre-reflective confidence, involving a variably determinate sense of where our words and thoughts *lead*. Again, the theme of anticipation is central. In asserting 'they are dead' and somehow not *believing* it, what one lacks are patterns of anticipation that integrate one's words and linguistic thoughts into the larger organization of one's life.

A position of this nature is set out by James (1912) and can be understood in terms of the following distinctions: (1) taking something to be 'true' by anticipating, with varying degrees of determinacy, a route to follow that terminates in perceptual experience and practice; (2) experiencing the 'truth' of something by actually following a route that has been set out; and (3) appreciating what an utterance 'means' by recognizing the route to which it points, without necessarily accepting that it can be followed. James offers the example of thinking about Memorial Hall

at Harvard. When he does so, then sets off there, and finally arrives, the sight of Memorial Hall seems to correspond to what he meant all along. So, it appears as though the contents of earlier thoughts about the hall were *fully present* at that time. However, James challenges that intuition. He instead proposes that our grasp of relevant utterances and linguistic thoughts as meaningful and true is constituted by a pattern of anticipation associated with them, involving activities that culminate in perceptual experience of the hall. His seeing Memorial Hall is akin to the conclusion of a melody (in this particular case, a very familiar melody), involving a similarly harmonious pattern of anticipation flowing from thought to percept. It is this, he suggests, that constitutes the sense of *having meant that all along*: 'that percept was what I *meant*, for into it my idea has passed by conjunctive experiences of sameness and fulfilled intention' (James 1912, 56).

In the majority of instances, however, James says that we do not experience 'truth' in this direct way. Instead, we take utterances to be true without actually following the routes to which they point. Our experiences of meaning and endorsing *p* consist in a kind of practical confidence – the sense that an anticipated path *could* be followed. At least where anticipatory patterns are habitually engrained, this confidence is unreflective and unwavering. Hence, meaning something is not a matter of somehow holding it in mind. It involves a pre-reflective confidence concerning one's ability to navigate around the structure of one's own life and relate it to a changing world – being able to follow the paths between memories, perceptual experiences, expectations, and activities.[17]

So, in place of determinate meanings that are grasped in their entirety at a particular moment, James proposes that what he calls 'meaning' and 'truth' are constituted dynamically by patterns of anticipation and fulfilment. My proposal is that, when we experience something as sinking in or not having sunk in yet, it is precisely these patterns of anticipation that are incomplete and disrupted. We say the words and – in some sense, at least – we *know* them to be true. Yet they continue to seem somehow hollow, unbelievable, cut off from life structure. The anticipatory profile attaching to them does not progress in a coherent way

[17]This position could be further supported through a consideration of experiences associated with certain psychiatric conditions that involve a pervasive sense of practical detachment. That such experiences are often accompanied by talk of strangeness, loss of meaning, and unreality indicates that a certain *experience of meaning* is closely tied to actual and potential practice (Ratcliffe 2015, 2017a).

through one's life. Instead, it conflicts at multiple points with a larger network of associations.

Although James refers to 'meaning' and 'truth', it would be implausible to suggest that what he has in mind encompasses all uses of those terms. Indeed, one could object that, even before something has sunk in, the meaning and truth of relevant propositions have been fully understood. It is thus misleading to refer to what is lacking in these terms. Nevertheless, it is arguable that what James identifies here amounts to an important *aspect* of our grasp of meaning and truth, at least where practical engagement with significant situations is concerned. His discussion perhaps points to an enrichment of other conceptions of meaning and truth, rather than a wholly distinct use of those terms. Furthermore, it might well be that, with a *complete absence* of anticipatory structure, certain utterances would indeed appear wholly bereft of meaning. For example, saying your name repeatedly can involve an experience of defamiliarization that leaves you only with a sound. And this, one might suggest, is the result of its complete extrication from familiar associations. In contrast to this, 'they are dead' might be uttered repeatedly in such a way that what seemed initially hollow is integrated to some degree into one's life. Thus, repetition can serve to familiarize and, on other occasions, to defamiliarize. Perhaps the words 'he is dead', if bereft of *all* significant implications, all coherent patterns of anticipation, would also be experienced as a mere sequence of sounds, devoid of meaning. If that is right, then James has identified a necessary but not sufficient condition for the comprehension of meaning and truth, at least where practically significant utterances and linguistic thoughts are concerned.

However, one might further object that experiences of anticipation and fulfilment in fact depend on already established beliefs and other mental states. After all, how could you experience the percept as consistent with the thought, if the original thought did not contain a determinate representation of what is perceived *before* the transition from one to the other? What I find especially interesting about James's approach, and also especially relevant to understanding the phenomenon of SI, is his insistence that it does not. It is this that enables us to account for the incomprehension, meaninglessness, and unreality often associated with SI. There is *only* the dynamic experience of anticipation and completion: 'unions by continuous transition are the only ones we know of' (James 1912, 59). So, it is *through* the experience of temporal transition that one's grasp of things is revealed to be somehow lacking. If what James refers to in terms of meaning and truth were established independently

of that process, then the kind of experience that I am concerned with here would not occur. For James, this is where things stop; experiences of meaning and truth are not parasitic on something stable and enduring that underlies them. Ultimately, all there is to go on is the confident feeling that where we end up is or will be consistent with where we started from.[18] That is why disruption of this feeling can constitute a sense of meaninglessness and unreality.

As something sinks in, what we anticipate is a wide-ranging reorganization of anticipatory structure. Hence, it is often associated with talk of bewilderment, disorientation, or having one's life turned upside down. In ordinary circumstances, the indeterminacy of thought is not merely tolerated but overlooked, due to the absence of any experienced or anticipated conflict: 'as each experience runs by cognitive transition into the next one, and we nowhere feel a collision with what we elsewhere count as truth or fact, we commit ourselves to the current as if the port were sure' (James 1912, 69). In contrast, with a thought such as 'this person is dead', there is pervasive disruption of habitual patterns, which makes salient an indeterminacy integral to experience and thought more generally: 'so much of our experience comes as an insufficient and consists of process and transition' (James 1912, 71).

In reflecting upon what it is for matters to sink in, we therefore discover something that is integral to the temporal structure of more profound emotional experiences, something that is obscured by an overemphasis on brief, shallow emotional episodes. Emotions are not simply perceptions, feelings, beliefs, judgments, or any combination of intentional states. Emotional experiences, or – at any rate – certain forms of emotional experience, incorporate a distinctive kind of comprehension that envelops one's whole life structure and occurs over varying periods of time. The process is neither straightforwardly cognitive nor noncognitive, and can include all manner of thoughts, experiences, feelings, and activities – it is with our whole being that we grasp how things matter to us.[19] SI is an essential aspect of what it is to think through and negotiate the implications of significant events. It involves comprehending and revising networks of associations that extend far beyond propositional thought, in a manner that is essentially dynamic. The aspect of

[18] James's discussion could be related in potentially illuminating ways to similar themes in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where again things seem to end with our practice rather than with an instruction manual upon which it is based (Wittgenstein 1953).

[19] Nussbaum (2001, 25) is therefore right to observe that 'we are not left with a choice between regarding emotions as ghostly spiritual energies and taking them to be obtuse nonseeing bodily movements, such as a leap of the heart, or the boiling of the blood'.

experience that changes as something sinks in is elusive; it cannot be captured in terms of any number of intentional states or their contents. Furthermore, it does not involve any particular experiential qualities that are present at a moment in time or endure over time. Rather, it involves a dynamically constituted, ever-changing network of associations via which we navigate the structure of our lives. Although this lacks an established name, it is something that any adequate conception of human experience and thought needs to accommodate.

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