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When the past becomes future-like: A phenomenological study of memory, time, and self-familiarity

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Abstract
This paper sets out a phenomenological account of how the autobiographical past can, on occasion, assume certain future-like qualities. I begin by reflecting on the analogy of a bore wave, as employed in a novel by Julian Barnes. Building on this, I turn to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in order to address how our memories are revised in light of our current concerns and vice versa. Then, by adapting Edmund Husserl's conception of temporal "protention," I show how acts of remembering are integral to a process of ongoing reconciliation between our current orientation towards the future and the autobiographical past. They sustain, disrupt, and reconsolidate a non-localized, dynamic sense of *who* we are, in ways that are inseparable from how we experience time.

Keywords Anticipation · Indeterminacy · Horizon · Memory · Protention · Self · Significance · Temporal experience

1 Time's bore waves

A central theme of Julian Barnes' 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, is how our experience of time can shift, such that the autobiographical past becomes somehow future-like.[1] To convey and evoke the experience, Barnes draws on the analogy of a

[1] Barnes did not draw his title from a collection of talks by the literary critic Kermode (1967), also entitled *The Sense of an Ending*. He arrived at it independently (see, for example, Barnes' comments in *The Guardian*, 14th June 2021: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/14/julian-barnes-on-the-sense-of-an-ending-i-learned-to-do-more-by-saying-less). Nevertheless, there are thematic overlaps that relate to my discussion in this paper, concerning how the significance of events depends on their place in a whole that is yet to be completed.

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"bore wave" or "tidal bore." Upon watching the Severn Bore for the first time, the novel's protagonist and narrator, Tony Webster, remarks on the strangeness of a wave moving up the estuary against its flow, as though time were reversed. Throughout the remainder of the narrative, a revelation gradually coalesces, involving a "chain of responsibility" traceable to an unpleasant, drunken letter written many years ago. When presented with this letter, Webster both identifies with and feels estranged from its author, unsettled by who he once was and what he had been capable of (Barnes 2011, p.36, pp. 97–8, p.149). In this paper, I develop a phenomenological account of what it is to encounter one's past in this way. The structure and content of Barnes' narrative are suggestive of a distinctive way of experiencing time. My question is this: assuming he identifies a genuine form of experience, what exactly does it consist of?

A superficial reading of the bore wave analogy would be that autobiographical time reverses—it *flows* from past to present to future: "So when this strange thing happened – when these new memories suddenly came upon me – it was as if, for that moment, time had been placed in reverse. As if, for that moment, the river ran upstream" (Barnes 2011, p.122). To be more specific, the process of obtaining new knowledge about past actions and events resembles the anticipation of what is to come; the truth about one's past unfolds like the immediate future. However, matters are not so straightforward. In what follows, I will set out how we can indeed experience the past as *changing*, in a way that resembles—in certain specific respects—the unfolding of the immediate future. There is a change in the organization of one's *significant* past, of a kind that undermines one's current concerns and orientation towards the future. As this new organization becomes more determinate over time, we experience the coming of something *from* the past, something that stands to affect the organization of our life. I will suggest that such experiences involve a form of anticipation that is more typical of, and also integral to, our sense of the immediate and long-term future. More usually, changes in the significance of the remembered past are attributable to what happens later, which recontextualizes preceding events in the light of current cares and concerns. What distinguishes the kind of experience conveyed by Barnes is that ongoing change is experienced concurrently, as driven by the past. As we will see, the shifting past can undermine a sense of who we are, disrupting what I will refer to as *self-familiarity*. This complicates talk of time's flow and also draws attention to an important role played by autobiographical remembering—sustaining our own coherence over time.

2 Choosing our past

It is widely acknowledged that autobiographical recollection involves reconstruction and reorganization, rather than simply retrieving a single, unchanging token representation of a past event on multiple occasions. Our memories are shaped and reshaped by a range of factors, including what concerns us in the present. Their contents can be nonveridical in various respects, while also lacking specificity (Sutton 1998; Rowlands 2017). The unreliability, malleability, incompleteness, vagueness, and disruption of autobiographical memory are all pervasive themes of Barnes' nar-

rative, as is how we experience our past differently with age. In what follows, I will focus on a more specific aspect of shifting memory: how remembered events appear *significant* to us or *matter to us* over time. This, I will suggest, is inextricable from our experiences of both time and self.

The significance of past events depends in part on what we care about now, what we seek to accomplish, and who we strive to be. It thus changes over time, in ways that reflect our changing orientation towards the future. We find this theme in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (1947/2018) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/2018), both of whom identify a sense in which we continually *choose* our past. How we experience and evaluate life events depends on our current projects and associated possibilities that we strive to actualize. Events in our biography can be consistent or inconsistent with our current values, and relevant or irrelevant to what we care about and seek to achieve now. They present themselves as successes, failures, accomplishments to be built upon, pivotal moments that have established or changed our trajectory through life, lapses to be rectified, and so forth.

As our projects and values shift over time, so does our relationship with the past. The significance of a particular past event may well appear to be intrinsic to it. Nevertheless, it continues to depend on us. As Sartre (1943/2018, p. 650) writes, "the whole of my past is there, insistent, urgent and imperious, but I choose its meaning and the orders that it gives me through the very project of my end." Hence, although we are constrained by the irrevocability of our past, its continuing importance—how it limits and even compels us—stems from ourselves. A range of current cares and concerns (or "values," broadly construed) together distinguish the living past from aspects of our past that appear static, distant, and irrelevant. According to Beauvoir and Sartre, these underlying values can always be made explicit and brought into question. And, insofar as we might be said to "choose" them, we also choose our past.[2] We do not make such choices reflectively or effortfully at particular moments, at least not for the most part. Rather, our choice of the past is inseparable from the temporally extended activity of continually affirming certain values through our ongoing projects:

> If I leave behind an act which I have accomplished, it becomes a thing by falling into the past. It is no longer anything but a stupid and opaque fact. In order to prevent this metamorphosis, I must ceaselessly return to it and justify it in the unity of the project in which I am engaged. (Beauvoir, 1947/2018, p.27)

Setting aside talk of choice, these various remarks point to a fairly straightforward and plausible position. Remembered events often (although not always) matter to us in some way and to some degree. Phenomenologically speaking, this does not ordinarily involve first remembering *p* and only subsequently evaluating *p*. An analogy can be drawn with pre-reflective perceptual experience. Regardless of what we might take the content of specifically *perceptual* experience to incorporate, our pre-reflective experiences of the surrounding world do not consist of neutral perceptions followed by separate evaluative acts. Instead, things appear immediately significant

[2] See also Casey (2000; Ch.12) for some remarks on how we might be said to "choose" the organization of our past and how this contributes to self-coherence.

to us in organized ways that tend to reflect what we already care about. This is most salient in the case of a pronounced emotional episode. For instance, what frightens us is often something that *appears* or *looks* threatening. However, the point generalizes to all experiences of the surrounding world. Things appear immediately relevant or irrelevant to our activities, and they matter in a range of different ways. It can be added that much the same applies to our memories. What we remember often strikes us as immediately significant—the awful thing that happened that day; the moment I read the letter and finally understood; the last time I saw her. We do not first remember *q* and subsequently evaluate *q* through a phenomenologically distinct intentional act. Our projects and values shift throughout the course of our lives, due to the consequences of contingent events and also changes that we take to emanate from ourselves, sometimes from our choices. For example, "the day I first met you" has a very different significance during a happy marriage and shortly after a messy divorce. That special moment spent with a friend matters differently after their death. And all of one's professional achievements seem distant and less important after a radical career change; they no longer serve as a basis for what one does now, something to be built upon. How things matter to us thus depends on their place within a temporally extended, organized, and dynamic whole.[3]

To be more specific, there are at least three ways in which the experienced past might be said to *change*. First, current values determine whether and how past events matter. Granted, we might also recollect how something mattered at the time, but this is contextualized by how it matters now. Second, the current organization of our life contributes to how past events are *arranged*—whether and how they comprise a cohesive, significant, temporally extended whole. Third, our values partly determine what we continue to identify with and attribute to ourselves. While joyful reminiscence may involve "how it all began that day," other past events seem distant or even detached from who we are now; perhaps we were "a different person back then" (Ratcliffe 2024). There is a further distinction to be drawn between past events that do not matter at all and others that matter insofar as they run contrary to where we are heading. The latter might remain a source of regret or remind us of the need to make amends. In these respects, the experienced past is variably determinate and also malleable. Of course, what happened cannot be undone, but its meaning and place in our life are yet to be finalized and may never be finalized. They are contextualized and recontextualized by a current evaluative perspective, which remains in flux.[4]

[3] Such observations are not limited to the writings of existential phenomenologists. For instance, David Velleman (1991) makes complementary points in addressing how the significance of a particular moment depends on its place in a changing whole with a narrative structure. This is illustrated by contrasting stories of improvement and decline that begin from the same events but lead to quite different evaluations of those events. As Velleman says, what happens later can "alter the meaning" of earlier events, along with their "place" in a life. He also maintains that there can be irresolvable tensions between synchronic and diachronic perspectives on the value of a moment. To this, we can add the more general point that the significance of past events is often unclear or equivocal—the same events matter to us in different and even conflicting ways.

[4] This also applies to our memories of past emotional experiences, which are more plausibly construed as current emotions relating to past experiences and situations than as past emotional experiences that are revived in the present (Debus 2007). Of course, we might remember that we had certain emotions back then. As we do so, we might also have current experiences that resemble those emotions. On other

So far, all of this remains consistent with the position that temporal experience incorporates a singular, unambiguous sense of direction and movement. What is happening now, what we seek to accomplish, and what we anticipate shape and reshape our experienced past. The significance of past life events thus remains open to revision in light of subsequent developments. However, the bore wave analogy points to a structurally different form of temporal experience. Here, the changing significance of the remembered past is experienced as a source of potential and actual disruption. It is in this respect, I suggest, that remembering comes to resemble the anticipation of future events. Both have the potential—and are experienced as having the potential—to undermine how our lives are currently organized. So, our continuing "choice" of the past is not the only way of experiencing the interplay between who we are and who we were.

3 The unchosen past

When the past becomes future-like, it is no longer subordinate to the course of subsequent events or to what concerns us now. Instead, its ongoing reorganization is experienced as emanating *from* the past. With this, our own identity (in at least one sense of that term) may be experienced as precarious. For Tony Webster, it "bore on the whole of my life, on time and memory" (Barnes 2011, p.130). But what exactly is at stake here? A provisional distinction can be drawn between identity construed as *what* we are (a particular entity, belonging to a certain type, which endures or perdures through time) and identity as characterization or *who* we are (Schechtman 1996). The aspect of experience that I seek to identify and analyze is better construed in terms of the latter.

A sense of who we are could be taken to encompass various characteristics, dispositions, and activities, which individually or collectively distinguish us from others. They include what we care about and seek to achieve, self-evaluations, assumptions about how others regard us, explicit and/or implicit self-narratives, commitments, relationships, projects, pastimes, habitual activities, and patterns of expectation. While this list includes explicit, conceptual understandings of who we are and what matters to us, it also encompasses pre-reflective experience, along with habitual, practical, non-conceptual dispositions and expectations. These aspects of our lives are not to be construed as a heterogeneous bundle of discrete characteristics.[5] They relate to and depend upon one another, and also upon our significant past, in a variety of ways.

occasions, however, our current and past emotions are quite different. Suppose that what you did with joy and confidence led to disaster. Here, the counterfactual remains painfully salient—if only I hadn't…. (Neimeyer et al. 2021). In this scenario, it is not merely difficult but perhaps even psychologically impossible to *feel now* something of the joy you felt back then, let alone that same joy. Even where current and past emotional experiences remain congruent, we continue to experience our past through the evaluative perspective of the present.

[5] One approach to this heterogeneity would be to advocate what Shaun Gallagher calls a "pattern theory" of self, according to which different accounts of self are concerned with different and sometimes overlapping aspects of a larger pattern (e.g., Gallagher 2013). My approach in what follows is compatible with this. However, it also involves emphasizing a singular, unified way in which experience as a whole is structured, amounting to as a sense of *self-familiarity*.

For example, projects build upon what we take ourselves to have already achieved. A project might further consolidate or actively resist certain values that we manifested or explicitly endorsed in the past. Alternatively, it might involve redressing a past wrong. Various habitual activities and associated expectations are inextricable from the interdependent projects that bring organization and routine to our lives, and therefore depend equally on how we relate to the past. Explicit self-conceptions also depend on evaluations of our past actions and assumptions about how others viewed them. And interpersonal relationships often depend upon joint projects as well as shared interpretations of the past.

The changing significance of one's past thus has the potential to disrupt the organization of one's life to differing degrees and in a number of qualitatively different, overlapping ways. Suppose you did not achieve all those things after all, did not act in a coherent manner, were not compassionate back then, did not take account of others, were not in fact cruel to that person, or were not responsible in any way for what happened that day. Such re-evaluations have implications for current projects and values that depend in some way on what happened, what it meant to oneself and others, and where it led. So, just as what happens now and what we expect to happen in the short or longer-term future can be experienced as undermining us, so too can the ongoing reorganization of our past.

In Barnes' novel, a changing past is associated with the gradual acquisition of new knowledge about past events. Given this, one might object to my approach by maintaining that the relevant experience in fact retains an orthodox future-to-past structure. We do not anticipate the effects of a changing past. Instead, we anticipate future revelations about the past, which promise to alter its significance just as other future events might. However, although the expectation of acquiring knowledge about one's past takes this form, the shifting organization of one's life can still emanate from the past, from events *as* remembered. For Webster, the prospect of obtaining a diary promises to "disrupt the banal reiterations of memory" (Barnes 2011, p.77) The disruption is phenomenologically distinct from the knowledge that elicits it; how we anticipate and experience the changing significance of past events is what disorientates and undermines. We anticipate future knowledge and, with this, a change in the remembered past. But we also anticipate how this changing past may disrupt who we are, in a manner structurally similar to an anticipated future event.

Furthermore, such experiences do not always originate in new knowledge about the past. Consider an alternative scenario where the significance and organization of one's past have remained indeterminate for some time, unresolved. In revisiting past events, there is the ever-present prospect of their coalescing into a more determinant arrangement with a corrosive significance. Here, the past might be said to first "haunt" us and then to "come alive." Although we do not know the precise form that it will take on, indeterminate anticipation can still have a distinctive emotional quality—something is taking shape, something with an air of foreboding or threat. The personal past is unstable, indeterminate, and dynamic in ways that are not dictated solely by our current concerns.

One might respond that we continue to experience acts of *remembering* in the usual way. It is not the remembered past that undermines us but what we remember *now* and what we anticipate remembering *next*. So, the source of potential change

remains unambiguously futural. However, the experience of actual and potential transition is not limited to unambiguously present acts of *remembering*. We also experience ongoing change in the contents of memory—in *events as remembered*.[6] These concern how past events matter, relate to one another, and relate to the present.[7]

It should be added that the past's potential to undermine us depends equally on the way in which relevant events *do* remain fixed and irreversible. Drawing again on Sartre, our past could be said to shape our possibilities in a similar way to our own body. Having a contingent body with limited capacities restricts our possibilities in quite specific ways. In short, there are certain things we just cannot do. Consequently, we cannot take up projects that require us to do those things. But having a contingent set of bodily capacities is at the same time a prerequisite for having any possibilities at all. Without bodily limitations, our capacities would be unconstrained; there could be no phenomenological distinction between wanting, trying, and obtaining. With this, the structure of experience would break down altogether. As Sartre (1943/2018, p.440) puts it, the body is thus the "contingent form taken by the necessity of my contingency." Through the projects we pursue and continually re-affirm, we are responsible for determining the more specific ways in which our bodily limitations matter. Whether we encounter a mountain as impossible to climb or a locked door as an obstruction depends not only on our bodily capacities but also on whether we contemplate or commit to pursuing relevant projects in the first place. In this fashion, we continually "choose" how to "constitute" our bodily limitations. The same applies to the autobiographical past. It has a contingent and unalterable form which constrains but does not fully determine how past events can matter and how they might relate to who we are now. Nevertheless, like bodily illness and injury, our contingent past has the potential to undermine our projects, rendering some of them unsustainable. A life can be organized in all sorts of ways and integrate all manner of events. Nevertheless, there will always be things that cannot be reconciled with a certain sense of where we have come from, what we care about, and where we are heading.

Our past, present, and anticipated future are thus aligned and realigned in an ongoing way.[8] One might assume that this process is limited to a certain *type* of memory: episodic memory and, more specifically, episodic autobiographical memory. Remembering *that* something occurred in a propositional way, seemingly reliving it in the first-person, and adopting an external viewpoint upon a past experience could all involve a sense of past events as significant. Autobiographical memories in general could be distinguished from the likes of "semantic" memory (encompassing word meanings and general knowledge) and "procedural" memory (of a kind that is inarticulate, nonconceptual, and practical in nature).[9] However, where the phenom-

[6] See, for example, Rowlands (2017) for discussion of the distinction between acts of remembering and memory contents.

[7] Consistent with these observations, Gallagher (1998; Ch, 6) proposes that temporal experience is messier and more complicated than often acknowledged; it is not simply "linear."

[8] As Ismael (2011, p.471) writes, we are continually "reexamining, reevaluating, and reorganizing" our past in an "ongoing process of self-definition."

[9] Distinctions between subtypes such as episodic, semantic, and procedural forms of memory are well-established. For a classic account of the episodic/semantic distinction, see Tulving (1972). For discussion of the distinction between procedural and declarative memory, see, for example, Ullman (2004).

enology is concerned, there is a risk of abstracting from and dividing up experiences that are unitary and do not respect such distinctions. Take the distinction between autobiographical episodes and historical facts. Remembering that a major world event happened at a particular time need not relate to our biography. Yet we may also remember where we were at that time, how we were affected by the news, and how it fitted into a larger personal situation that continues to matter. Seemingly detached facts about places and locations can also play a role in these experiences, given that our memories of events are almost always contextualized by a sense of place (Casey 2000; Ch. 9).

Something else that can fit into our biographies without being episodic is what a specific novel, poem, play, film, piece of music, or artwork "meant" and continues to "mean" to us. The memory of how Birnam Wood moved towards Dunsinane Hill is not episodic or historical; it concerns facts about the content of a play that existed back then and still exists now. We might also recall seeing *Macbeth* at the theatre on a specific occasion, and a special meaning that it has for us could relate to the play, a particular performance, or both. Where it is the content of the play itself that has shaped the direction and course of our life, this is not an episodic memory. Even so, there may be episodic autobiographical memories involving how it influenced us at particular times and continues to do so. And, as with the contents of episodic memories, the personal significance of a linguistic or non-linguistic artefact can shift in ways that move between present and past. Suppose the content of a particular novel profoundly influenced what we value and strive to achieve. Then, one day, it dawns on us that the novel is dreadful (according to any criteria we might entertain). Our changing evaluation of its content might then ripple back, transforming how we evaluate the trajectory of our life insofar as it drew and continues to draw inspiration from that source. Thus, even seemingly detached, factual or "semantic" memories can be integral to our biographies.

Procedural memories can also feature in disruptive experiences of our past. There could be a significance attached to what we used to do and to our remembering how to do it again, which shifts in ways that emanate from or reshape our past. Hence, whatever the merits of classifying memory into subtypes, and whichever classification we might endorse, I am doubtful that it is informative for current purposes. The only criterion required here is that the relevant memories (whether episodic, semantic, procedural, experiential, linguistic, specific to one's own biography, or more general in scope) relate in some way to the ongoing organization and reorganization of one's life—to one's projects, values, relationships, habits, and expectations. Furthermore, memories of episodes, facts, and abilities comprise an integrated whole—a sense of one's situation.[10]

Another reason why such distinctions are unhelpful here is that when the past threatens who we are, the act of remembering does not consist in a single brief episode with a circumscribed content. The crystallization of Webster's past involves a lengthy series of interconnected recollections (or perhaps a temporally extended act

[10] Aspects of the experience could also be construed in terms of a nonconceptual, nonlocalized, practical form of "body memory" See, for example, Casey (2000; Ch.8) and Fuchs (2012) for recent phenomenological discussions of aspects and variants of body memory.

of recollection distributed across several activities and interpersonal relationships), spanning and integrating various different types or aspects of memory. Acts of recollection gravitate around a common object, which takes on an increasingly determinate form as the narrative progresses. In this way, the living past becomes a source of disruption and change. As Barnes (2011, p.63) writes, "time doesn't act as a fixative, rather as a solvent."

Explicit narratives frequently present time in ways that are neither linear nor unidirectional. For example, Jopling (2000, p.54) remarks how narrated events are not constrained by "temporal anisotropy." Instead, "time's arrow is crossed backward and forward at will." Events are reinterpreted in light of what was not known at the time and integrated into temporally extended patterns that would not have been evident when those events occurred.[11] Given this, Jopling suggests that narration "distorts the phenomenology." Although that is often the case, I want to suggest that departures from time's "anisotropy" are not exclusive to narrative; they also feature in the pre-reflective experience of time. More specifically, past and future can both be experienced as sources of significant, ongoing change, sometimes concurrently. This could be conveyed and evoked through a variety of narrative structures and techniques, including ironic perspective-shifting and free indirect style that blends the perspectives of narrator and character (Goldie 2012). How we construe the relationship between temporal experience and narrative hinges on whether or not we adopt a permissive account of narrative, according to which pre-reflective, inarticulate experience itself has varying degrees of narrative structure. Given this, seemingly distinct claims such as the following can amount to different ways of saying the same thing: (a) pre-reflective temporal experience itself has a narrative structure; (b) certain narratives presuppose and convey the pre-narrative structure of experience. Whether we couch the point in one way or the other depends on how we conceive of narrative.[12] Either way, I seek to show how the structure in question is inseparable from how we experience time.

[11] Although I have emphasized autobiographical events, this point applies equally to our appreciation of *any* explicit narrative that incorporates significant change and temporal development. A bad ending (which may be bad for any number of reasons) transforms our interpretation of the whole and of the value of its various parts. The same can be said of certain temporally extended aesthetic artefacts that do not have a narrative structure.

[12] My position is thus potentially compatible with the experience of a vehemently non-narrative self, such as Strawson (2004). If we are to speak of narrative at all here, it consists in the dynamic, pre-reflective structure of temporal experience. Even if experience is said to have a specifically "narrative" organization, this remains compatible with one's not being explicitly preoccupied in any way with the diachronic structure and narrative organization of one's life. That said, it is also plausible that, for many of us, explicit stories "scaffold" how our current values shape the significance of memories and vice versa. See Herman (2013) for an interesting and much broader discussion how "storyworlds" and their development can scaffold our "sense-making" practices.

4 Directions of flow

It is often said that we experience (or at least take ourselves to experience) subjective time as involving a unilateral movement or flow from future to present to past. For example, Dainton (2011, p.408) writes, "if much of our experience has a flowing character, different in precise nature for different forms of consciousness, it is undeniable that all our experience seems to flow in a single direction: away from the present towards the past." Even if it is indeed an everyday consensus view that time "flows" unambiguously in a single direction, it does not apply to our everyday temporal *experience*. Time's bore waves are suggestive of a more complex, differentiated, and variable phenomenology (not just during exceptional moments, I will suggest, but also more generally). So, for current purposes, we can remain neutral over the metaphysical status of "flow," "passage," and the like, as well as the "direction" in which things are said to move. I am concerned exclusively with the task of conceptualizing temporal experience and, more specifically, with the need for something more nuanced than a singular direction of experienced change. We can find this, I suggest, by drawing upon Edmund Husserl's conception of "protention" (Husserl, 1948/1973; 1991; 2001).

According to Husserl, our perceptual experiences of entities in the surrounding environment are imbued with possibilities for ongoing perceptual experience. For instance, the glass in front of me appears *as* something that I could view from another angle so as to reveal certain features. My experience of the glass further includes possibilities for access through other sensory modalities—I could reach out and touch the glass in ways that also have implications for ongoing visual perception. Thus, the various possibilities I experience are organised in a coherent and cohesive way, together comprising what Husserl calls an object's "horizon." Some experienced possibilities involve a sense of what I *would* perceive by acting in certain ways, but others involve anticipating what *will* come next as I engage with my surroundings. Perceptual anticipation is variably determinate, and many different outcomes can be consistent with the same anticipatory structure. This form of anticipation, which Husserl terms "protention," is integral to how we experience the present rather than attributable to a phenomenologically separate intentional act. Husserl appeals to the example of a falling glass, where the inevitability of its shattering is experienced during the preceding moment; other possibilities are not ruled out, but only one outcome is salient (Husserl 2001, p.91). The phenomenological ubiquity of pre-reflective anticipation also becomes conspicuous on occasions when things unfold in ways that are contrary to what we anticipated, where there is a sense of anomaly and surprise.

For Husserl, perceptual experience involves an ongoing, intricately structured flow of anticipation and fulfilment, peppered with occasional anomalies. To this analysis, we can add that protentional experience also incorporates a sense of how unfolding events *matter*. Possibilities do not appear to us as salient and, in addition, as significant. Their salience often just is their standing out as important to us in one way or another (Ratcliffe and Broome 2022). Similarly, unexpected outcomes do not appear to us merely as anomalous but, in certain instances, as impacting our projects and values in significant ways. The inclusion of mattering within protentional experience further implies that it is not concerned solely with the immediate future. What

we anticipate protentionally is indeed what is coming next. However, to the extent that anticipated events matter to us, they also relate to a longer-term future that is organized in terms of our cares and concerns. We thus experience the current unfolding *of* an extended, structured future. Sometimes, we experience what is coming next as having the potential to disrupt the longer-term organization of our life. Consider, for instance, opening a letter that we know to contain important news. We anticipate one or more scenarios that are likely to unfold right now, but our anticipation further includes some appreciation of their importance—their potential to transform our longer-term possibilities. Hence, what is experienced protentionally can have a significance stretching way beyond the next moment, into our future and also back into our past.[13]

For current purposes, I will accept that a phenomenological analysis along these general lines is plausible in the case of ongoing perceptual experience.[14] That being so, I propose that it is equally applicable to memory. According to Husserl, just as our experience of the present is structured by a variably determinate sense of what is coming next, it includes a present experience of what has just happened. Husserl initially called the latter "primary memory" but later adopted the term "retention" (Husserl 1991). He distinguishes retention from recollection of the kind I am concerned with here. Unlike retention, remembering events in our past involves an additional intentional act, one that is phenomenologically distinct from our current perceptual experience. It is a matter of "re-presenting" a former now that has already been consigned to the past and, in so doing, experiencing it *as* past (Zahavi 2003, p.83). To accommodate the past's coming alive to disrupt the present, we can start by extending the following points from perceptual experience to remembering the following:

(1) Both the act and content of experience have an anticipatory structure.[15]
(2) The short- and long-term anticipatory structure of experience involve varying degrees of determinacy.

The act of remembering and its content both have a horizonal structure—we anticipate what is coming next. For instance, there is the commonplace experience of "expansion," where one memory branches out unsurprisingly and naturally into others (Casey 2000, p.39). The protentional structure of our remembering becomes phenomenologically salient when it is disrupted, as when the flow of recollection is impeded by unrelated memories from other times or by something imagined, when

[13] Thus, the protentional-retentional structure described by Husserl is inextricable from a longer-term sense of relating to the future in light of one's past, from what Heidegger (1927/1962) refers to as *gewor-fener Entwurf* or "thrown projection."

[14] For detailed discussion and defence of the position, see, for example, Ratcliffe (2015; 2017).

[15] One might object to (1) by maintaining that perceptual experience is *transparent*. In other words, there is no act-phenomenology at all, just what is experienced. Even if that claim were defensible in the case of perception, it does not apply to memory for the simple reason that we experience our remembering as occurring in the present while the contents of our memories appear to us as past. Hence, there must be more to the experience of remembering than what it is that we remember. See, for example, Feyaerts et al. (2024) for a recent phenomenological discussion that takes seriously the prospect of perceptual transparency.

we fail to remember a vital detail, and when a flow of memories becomes fragmented and disjointed. However, to appreciate how the remembered past could appear future-like, we need to focus more specifically on the *contents* of memory. Sometimes, I suggest, our dynamic experience of what is remembered incorporates a sense of transition resembling perceptual protention. It is not merely a matter of revisiting what came before and led us to where we are now. Our sense of the past includes its ongoing potential to reshape who we are now, just as anticipated future events might.

Unlike perceptual experience, remembering need not respect the temporal order of events. It moves between times in our lives, connecting events that are temporally distant from one another. Nevertheless, we generally retain some sense of events not only as past but as occurring at certain times in our lives, and as earlier or later than other past events. For example, I do not remember merely how Huxley the cat once brought home a headless parakeet. I remember where my partner and I were living at the time, while I was still studying for a Ph.D., before a second cat joined us, before we were married, and long before we had our two children. In this way, autobiographical memories bring something of their context with them.[16] How our remembering moves from one thing to another also reflects, to some extent, the current and past significance of events. Two events that were far apart historically could be relevant in similar ways to a current situation and, in this respect at least, appear similarly *close* to who we are now. Past events also relate to one another in ways that reflect how they matter—how one thing led to another, which prevented something else, leaving us in our current predicament.

Hence, our remembering is not temporally constrained to the same extent as perceptual experience. Even so, its wanderings are restricted in ways that our imaginings are not, by the irrevocability of past events and the approximate order in which they fell (Ratcliffe 2017; Ch.6). In his writings on time-consciousness, Husserl indicates that these distinctive constraints are constitutive of our *sense* that we are remembering something, as opposed to—say—imagining or perceiving it. For instance, experiencing something as a memory involves at least some sense of its location relative to the present. To be more specific, integral to the horizonal structure of recollection is an appreciation of being able, at least in principle, to trace a structured, pre-established path back to the present (Husserl 1991, p.54). This partly constitutes our experiencing something *as past*; we encounter it as already there. If we then proceed to follow a path towards the present (to the extent that we are able to in any particular instance), we experience it as already laid down for us as an integrated series of retentions (Brough 1975, p.58).

One might assume that an experience of remembering further involves the sense that such paths will always return us to the *same* present, to where and who we are now. Future possibilities are actualized in the present and then experienced as retentions, which relate to and reorganize earlier retentions, and so forth. As Husserl (1991, p.31) writes, "a fixed continuum of retention arises in such a way that each later point is retention for every earlier point." In tracing a route from our past

[16] Casey (2000) provides a detailed and compelling account of the importance of place in contextualizing episodic memories. We don't just remember what happened. As remembered, past events are already situated.

through to our present, we can thus utilize the retentional organization inherited from perceptual experience: "the whole process is a re-presentational modification of the perceptual process with all of the latter's phases and stages right down to and including the retentions" (Husserl 1991, p.39). That being the case, the experienced unfolding of memories, although not fully determinate in structure, lacks the openness to new possibilities that characterizes our protentional orientation towards the future and also partly constitutes our sense of something *as* future. However, I suggest remembering can also involve a form of protentional anticipation that is not limited to the anticipated unfolding of already established retentional paths.[17] When the past becomes future-like, our remembering does not incorporate the sense that all routes from our past will arrive at the same present. Rather, the reconfiguration of our past is anticipated and experienced as a transformation of our present. Our remembering remains structurally distinct from the unfolding of perceptual experiences, subject to different constraints. Nevertheless, our past is malleable in ways that are not dictated wholly by our current concerns. The following aspects of temporal experience can thus be distinguished:

a. What lies in the immediate future is experienced as becoming present and receding into the past, as possibilities are actualized.
b. The movement from present to past continually reconstitutes the longer-term past, by changing how things matter.
c. Actual and anticipated changes in the significance of things, emanating from the past, affect what matters now and what the future might hold.

In the case of (c), our sense of what is coming from the past is not limited to how our current recollections stand to affect us in the present. We may also anticipate the longer-term significance of the past's ongoing reorganization—where it is heading or may be heading. Although both short and long-term anticipation are to varying degrees indeterminate, there is a sense not only of how past events matter but also of how the process of reorganization itself matters, what is at stake for us. In other words, we protentionally anticipate the reconstitution of memory and its implications for the larger organization of our life. The past thus harbours the potential to disrupt our values and projects, to change who we are and where we are heading. In this respect at least, the past becomes future-like; it incorporates—but is not exhausted by—a type of *significance* that is future-like.[18] With this, emotions that are more usu-

[17] It is therefore misleading to suggest, as Husserl does at one point, that recollection "merely offers us re-presentation" (Husserl 1991, p.43).

[18] Even here, it can be added that we continue to experience the past as unequivocally *past* rather than as present or future. However, we do not always experience the relationships between past, present, and future in quite the same way. It would therefore be wrong to suggest that there is a singular, univocal "feeling of pastness" or, more specifically, of our own past. Certain broadly *phenomenological* approaches to episodic memory do sometimes appeal to a distinctive experience of "pastness." For recent discussion of *the* feeling of pastness see, for example, Perrin et al. (2020).

ally future-oriented (such as fear, dread, and a sense of foreboding) may now feature in our experiences of the past.[19]

It can be added that the past is not experienced as possessing a merely *future-like* significance. In fact, it is experienced in a more specific way, which resembles the anticipation of important events that have the potential to reshape our lives. So, it is not comparable to the anticipation of mechanical activities and cyclic processes that offer only more of the same. Indeed, the anticipation of monotonous routines and indistinguishable days (none of which offer significant possibilities to distinguish them from others or even the potential for such possibilities) could involve a sense of having been here before, a memory-like experience of an unfolding present.

When the past comes alive in this way, it is especially salient as a source of self-change. However, the form of experience I have identified also serves to make explicit an aspect of memory that is at work much more widely. Even when the changing significance of past events is driven by what happens in the present and what we anticipate from the future, our changing past may then have implications for *other* aspects of the current organization of our lives. Change therefore moves in both directions, from present to past and back again.[20] Hence, temporal experience should not be thought of in terms of a homogeneous, unidirectional movement or flow. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, our sense of time involves a "movement that harmonizes with itself in all of its parts" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p.442). This harmonizing is not limited to the short-term interplay between protention and retention. The significance of the longer-term past also continues to shape the present; "my day weighs upon me with all of its weight, it is still there" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p.439). Similarly, what we anticipate from the longer-term future shapes our present and our past. In addition, I have proposed, we anticipate and experience the changing of our past in ways that flow back to the present and the anticipated future.

In this manner, certain forms of temporal experience include the disruption and reorganization of networks of habitual paths that run through our lives, via which we move between memories and current concerns in ways that more usually involve familiarity, predictability, and consistency. For the most part, we navigate the organization of our lives with unthinking confidence. As Barnes (2011, p.120) writes, "for years you survive with the same loops." Integral to this is a pervasive experience of what might be termed *self-familiarity*. This does not consist in being acquainted with however many specific, concrete characteristics. Rather, it is an overarching sense that the various facets of our lives *do* hang together as a coherent, diachronically organized whole. It involves being able to move along familiar routes through our biographies, anticipating that our memories will unfold in familiar ways, and evaluating our past in ways that are congruent with our current concerns.

[19] It is further arguable that such emotions partly *constitute* a sense of our past as distinct from our future. They are neither necessary nor sufficient for experiencing something as future. Nevertheless, once it is acknowledged that temporal experience varies in structure and that we do not always experience past and future in exactly the same way, it can be maintained that they contribute to at least some experiences of past and future.

[20] In light of this, certain forms of psychotherapeutic intervention could be construed in terms of a movement whereby an interpersonal process occurring in the present serves to change the organization and significance of one's past in order to change one's sense of what the future holds.

Self-familiarity is comparable to the experience of a familiar place; we move confidently along habitual trails, where experience unfolds in consistent, unproblematic ways and offers few surprises. But an important difference is that self-familiarity is essentially intermodal—it involves being able to move harmoniously between our remembering, our perceptual experiences, our other intentional attitudes, and their various contents.[21] The contents of our recollections, perceptual experiences, and thoughts include varying degrees of indeterminacy. However, this remains compatible with experience as a whole being infused with pre-reflective confidence—a non-localized sense that we will find our way around and that what we encounter next will not be anomalous or troublesome. To use Husserl's term, self-familiarity amounts to a kind of dynamic *horizonal* structure, one that is experienced as unfolding, and also anticipated to unfold, in unproblematic ways that sustain its structure. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012, p.439) puts it, "my world is carried along by intentional lines that trace out in advance at least the style of what is about to arrive."[22]

More usually, the changing significance of our past is integral to the sustenance of this diffuse, multi-modal sense of self-familiarity; it enables us to continue experiencing our present and past as coherently integrated. However, time's bore waves involve its disruption. This contrast is illustrated by the structure of Barnes' narrative. In Part I, the protagonist recounts a stable personal past that relates to his current predicament in well-established, uncontested, and integrated ways. However, in Part II, this style of recollection is disrupted. The routes through life become tenuous and unfamiliar, offering new possibilities that bring its overall organization into question.

5 Experiences of past

The significance of a changing past can vary markedly. I have focused on an example where it disrupts and undermines, but structurally similar experiences could involve being relieved of a burden, absolved of a grief we have carried, no longer being encumbered by something that shaped the course of our lives up to now, even undergoing some form of conversion experience. Sometimes, such shifts are attributable to reinterpreting and reevaluating our past from the perspective of the present. However, I have proposed that they sometimes originate in a reconfiguration of the past, and this can arise in different ways. It might involve actively seeking something or being confronted by it, and it might involve interacting with others as we search,

[21] This conception of self-familiarity complements Allan Køster's discussion of what he calls the "existential texture of self-familiarity" (Køster2020, 2022). However, Køster focuses primarily on aspects of how we experience and engage with our current surroundings. To fully accommodate the sense of self-familiarity, I suggest, it is also crucial to acknowledge its dynamic intermodal structure—how we move in unproblematic ways *between* our thoughts, perceptions, memories, imaginings, anticipatory experiences, and activities.

[22] See Mazis (1992) for a wider-ranging discussion of Merleau-Ponty on time, which addresses the non-linearity and "reversibility" of time in some of the later writings, as well as the extent of Merleau-Ponty's departure from Husserl.

recollect together, interpret, and reinterpret.[23] It can also relate in different ways to what we *know* about our past. The past's reconfiguration could be elicited by something we discover, perhaps relating to the consequences of our actions. Alternatively, the changing past could involve the integration, dis-integration, or reorganization of what was already known.

It also seems plausible that some such experiences involve confronting what one sought to avoid. By emphasizing how anticipation involves differing degrees of determinacy, we can conceive of avoidance in terms of steering away from certain routes, due to an indeterminate but affectively valenced sense of what might lie further along them. Nevertheless, a past that remains indeterminate and disconnected from our present can still "haunt" us—we sense intermittently the prospect of its shifting possibilities undermining who we are. Indeed, being haunted in this manner may well be a ubiquitous aspect of human life; it *feels* as though certain things remain unsettled and continue to undermine us.[24]

What I have described here is the inverse of what Rowlands (2017) terms "Rilkean memory." According to Rowlands, sustaining our self-coherence requires "mutated" acts of remembering, which outlive their contents and are manifest in the guise of behavioural dispositions and affective experiences such as moods. They contribute to an overarching "style" of experience and agency that lends coherence to what would otherwise be a fragmented patchwork of recollections.[25] In contrast, a memory bore involves something indeterminate and disorganized taking on a more determinate shape, which in turn undermines our coherence. Memory moves in both directions—from indeterminate style to determinate content and vice versa.

More generally, the notion of a *style* is helpful here. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) proposes that our experience of the surrounding world consists similarly in a sort of all-enveloping, dynamic style. Ordinarily, this involves the cohesive unfolding of possibilities, whereby anticipation is followed predominantly by fulfilment. Similarly, he suggests, we can speak of the distinctive style of a particular person. In both cases, style involves something unitary and singular but also nonspecific and nonlocalized. Self-familiarity can also be construed in these terms—as a distinctive style of experiencing our various intentional attitudes, their contents, and the relationships between them. It is not attributable to something more specific, which could be isolated and labelled as conceptual, nonconceptual, habitual, affective, reflective, or non-reflective. Instead, it is a certain *way of moving* between the contents of our intentional attitudes—how our experience flows between perceiving, remembering, thinking, imagining, acting, and expecting in ways that involve confident anticipation and unproblematic fulfilment rather than a pervasive sense of anomaly, discrepancy,

[23] Michaelian and Sutton (2019) consider certain ways in which memories and acts of recollection are *shared*. If the acts and contents of memory can be distributed between people, then the kind of experience I have identified could also be shared by two or more people. Indeed, maybe an entire culture questioning its history could be thought of as analogous to an individual experiencing a temporal bore.

[24] Of course, an obvious candidate here would be traumatic memories or certain forms of traumatic memory. However, in referring to being "haunted" by our past, I also have in mind more commonplace forms of experience.

[25] See also Ratcliffe (2017) for a discussion of the overall "style" of experience that draws on Merleau-Ponty's writings.

or surprise. We routinely trace familiar paths through our lives, spanning the past, present, and anticipated future. Self-familiarity consists not in following however many specific routes but in the ongoing sense that *we will be able* to continue moving around our lives in this fashion, that things will remain integrated as they continue to unfold. But certain experiences disrupt this overarching style of self-experience. We lose ways of moving between acts and contents of memory, perceptual experience, thought, practical anticipation, and imagination, such that the integrity of the whole is brought into question.

Although I have focused on only one form of experience here, I have also indicated that the sense of temporal flow and direction is complex and variable, thus accommodating many subtly different forms of temporal experience. For example, a related phenomenon involves actively seeking to render the past determinate in order to bring organization and purpose to the present. In his memoir of depression and grief, *The Scent of Dried Roses*, Lott (1996) writes of needing a narrative, needing a clear, coherent sense of the past to mitigate the disorder of the present. Here, instead of experiencing the past as a source of potential or actual disorientation, it appears as a source of possibilities for recovering and sustaining an orientation that is currently lacking. In contrast, W. G. Sebald's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Rings of Saturn*, describes a form of experience where the anticipated future includes no prospect of significant departure from a past that reveals itself as an endless and inescapable cycle of suffering. The past comes alive, not to reconfigure one's orientation towards the future but instead to extinguish it (Sebald 2002). Similarly, various forms of experience associated with diagnoses of major, severe, or clinical depression include changes in the experienced relationships between past, present, and future. For instance, a future that offers nothing of significance may come to resemble the fixed, irrelevant past, such that the phenomenological distinction between them is less pronounced. Alternatively, continually reconstituting one's past could take the place of engaging with the present, in a scenario where one is faced with a future bereft of possibilities for positive development (Ratcliffe 2015; Ch.7).

Other experiences involve the fragmentation of past and present. The protentional structure of experience points in two or more conflicting directions at once; what has been consigned to the past in some areas of one's life sometimes persists in others as a competing present. Consider the following passage from Simone de Beauvoir's memoir, *A Very Easy Death*, which describes encountering her mother's knitting materials not long after her mother's death:

> As we looked at her straw bag, filled with balls of wool and an unfinished piece of knitting, and at her blotting-pad, her scissors, her thimble, emotion rose up and drowned us. Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants. They lay there on my table, orphaned, useless, waiting to turn into rubbish or to find another identity…. (Beauvoir, 1964/1965, p.98)

Here, there is an intermingling of possibilities past and present. Many of the possibilities integral to the experienced present are consistent with the reality of her mother's death. However, certain conflicting possibilities have yet to be reconstituted

as past. The knitting materials remain animated, embodying a system of possibilities that continues to implicate her mother's potential presence. But this is estranged from other arrangements of possibilities offered by the surrounding world. There are overlapping patterns, both of which are experienced as present-like even though one implies the pastness of the other.

Time's bore waves thus lead us to a larger perspective on autobiographical remembering, one that acknowledges various subtly different forms of temporal experience. Remembering in general is not merely a *past-oriented* activity. It also participates in the process of sustaining our coherence over time by continually reorganizing the past and reconciling it with the ongoing structure of our lives. For the most part, this is something that proceeds pre-reflectively and without effort. Sometimes, though, the shifting significance of the past puts our identity in question—we become unfamiliar to ourselves. Hence, in an ongoing fashion, we choose a past that has the potential to disrupt who we are.

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