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Feeling Haunted by Loss: Reflections on the Phenomenology of Possibility

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Abstract: Descriptions of feeling haunted in an emotional way are widespread. It is doubtful that the relevant experiences are reducible to any combination of established emotion categories, such as regret, remorse, or guilt. Nevertheless, what it is to feel haunted has been neglected by philosophers of emotion and by emotion theorists more generally. In this paper, I focus more specifically on what it is to feel haunted by *loss*. Here, I suggest, talk of haunting spans a range of experiences. However, the majority of these share a common phenomenological structure. Being haunted by loss involves continuing to experience certain possibilities as foreclosed, in a way that is inextricable from how we experience our current situation and orient ourselves towards the future. This unsettles and undermines us.

1. INTRODUCTION

Talk of feeling emotionally haunted is commonplace, appearing in historic and contemporary literature, popular culture, and everyday discourse. We are said to be haunted by our past, specific events in our past, what might have been, what the future holds for us, certain places and times in our lives, and people alive or dead. We can be haunted by events in our own biographies and by a shared past, sometimes a national or cultural past. Where shared histories are concerned, both individuals and collectives are said to be haunted.

It is doubtful that these experiences are satisfactorily accommodated by established inventories of emotions and moods, which emphasize discrete episodes and enduring states of different types, with more or less specific objects. Feeling haunted is neither a matter of experiencing an emotional episode nor of having a longer-term mood. Instead, it tends to involve intermittently glimpsing something that has the character of having been there all along, something that is not straightforwardly present or absent. Feeling haunted also has a

dynamic structure—it often involves a sense that something remains unsettled and, as such, still harbours the potential to disrupt and undermine us.

There has been much recent discussion of haunting in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary theory, inspired for the most part by Derrida's introduction of the term "hauntology" (Derrida, 1994; Wolfreys, 2002; Gordon, 2008; Hollan, 2020). There are also numerous references to hauntings and feeling haunted in the context of trauma theory and psychotherapy, especially in the psychoanalytic tradition (Davis, 2005; Phillips, 2013; Harris, Kalb, and Klebanoff, 2016). Recurring themes across these literatures include the ubiquity of haunting and its inherent ambiguity—how it straddles the boundaries between real and unreal, present and past. However, the majority of this work is not concerned specifically with *feeling haunted* in an emotional way; it is broader in scope and often has a different emphasis. For instance, Derrida construes haunting as a ubiquitous feature of textuality that evades conceptualization.

What it is to *feel* haunted has been neglected almost entirely by philosophers of emotion and by emotion theorists working in other disciplines.[1] My aim in this paper is to take some steps towards addressing this lacuna. I will focus more specifically on what it is to be haunted by *loss*, so as to restrict the scope of discussion and make the task of phenomenological clarification more tractable. One might think that experiences of being haunted by loss belong to the broader category of feeling haunted by the past—we are haunted by our *past losses*. However, I will show that that the phenomenology of loss is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of relating to our past in a certain way. Although talk of feeling haunted by loss most likely spans a variety of experiences, a theme common to many of them is that we experience certain significant *possibilities* as foreclosed, in ways that need not relate to particular past events. When our losses haunt us, these possibilities remain salient in a distinctive way. They are inextricable from how we experience the surrounding world and from our sense of what the future holds, in ways that diminish and unsettle us.

2. LOSSES THAT HAUNT US

Talk of feeling haunted by loss spans a range of situations and ways of being affected by them. For example, first-person accounts of bereavement often refer to feeling haunted, sometimes over periods of many years. In this context, feeling haunted by loss is to be distinguished from perceptual or perception-like experiences of the person who has died. A sense or feeling of personal presence need not involve feeling haunted in the relevant way. For instance, it is often reported to be comforting rather than unsettling (Rees, 1971).

Furthermore, references to feeling haunted more often concern the event or fact of the death, how it occurred, and/or the circumstances leading up to it than they do the continuing appearance of a person who has died. Consider the following first-person accounts:

> #113. It haunts me even now, six years later, as if it was yesterday!
> #215. It is still early days, but I am less tearful than I was initially, although the horror of seeing him with Covid haunts me regularly.
> #240. It haunted me because I felt traumatised from caring for my mum and being with her whilst she passed. I felt like I couldn't and didn't want to function normally, I struggled to remember anything positive and felt like my mind locked up, I just wanted the whole world to stop.[2]

Talk of feeling haunted by loss can also relate to a range of other circumstances, including serious illness and injury, relationship breakups, sporting defeats, loss of a career, the ongoing impact of traumatic events, and cultural upheaval. In all instances, what haunts us is something that continues to affect us in the present. So, in some sense, it is *there* now. However, even where the loss relates to specific past events and their effects, our feeling haunted is not simply a matter of something from our past appearing to us in a present-like way. Although what haunts us somehow intrudes upon the present, we neither mistake it for something present nor experience it as unequivocally present.

Feeling haunted by loss encompasses a host of subtly and sometimes markedly different experiences. For instance, feeling sporadically haunted by our own actions in the time leading up to someone's death differs from feeling continually haunted by that person's absence from our life. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is a unifying theme. Feeling haunted by loss involves experiencing possibilities that were central to the organization and course of one's life *as* negated or foreclosed, in ways that continue to shape how one currently experiences and relates to the world. This undermines and/or disrupts one's pursuit of other possibilities. What haunts us can thus impede or threaten to impede our ability to carry on in certain ways. This emphasis on enduring disruption is illustrated by the likes of sporting defeats and political losses. News articles with titles such as the following are commonplace: "Novak Djokovic still haunted by loss to Alexander Zverev"; "Fury Still Haunted by Usyk Losses".[3] A past loss continues to affect one's engagement or anticipated engagement with relevant situations.

It is important to distinguish between experiencing *a sense of loss* and recognizing a concrete change in one's situation as one of deprivation, even though the two frequently co-occur. Take this example: "Some COVID-19 survivors haunted by loss of smell and taste".[4] Recognizing that one has lost a sensory capacity is distinct from having a feeling *of* loss concerning this sensory deprivation. When we are deprived of a sensory capacity or suffer a sporting defeat, talk of loss can refer to an associated emotional experience or to the object of that experience—sensory deprivation or defeat. Sometimes, the term *loss* refers to both indiscriminately. My concern here is with a distinctive kind of emotional experience, which—as we will see—is often but not always associated with specific, concrete, historical losses.

Although the objects of loss and the kind/s of emotional experience involved require further clarification, the subject of emotional haunting might seem straightforward enough—we experience *ourselves* as haunted. However, life-events can also be described as haunted. For example, in September 2022 it was reported that "Prince Harry's birthday" will be "haunted" by "loss of Queen".[5] Recurring events such as anniversaries, as experienced by individuals and collectives, are also described as haunted by loss or associated with our feeling haunted. When we describe ourselves or others as haunted, this can concern specific times or longer periods. Whole lives are sometimes said to be haunted by loss. For instance, one news story begins, "cultural icon, fashion muse and celebrated beauty Audrey Hepburn left an indelible mark on the world. But despite her outward success, her life was haunted by loss".[6] The subject of haunting can thus be an individual, that individual's life, a collective, or a life-event. Places and times in our lives are also said to be haunted.

So, when the various circumstances associated with talk of *feeling haunted by loss* are described in specific, concrete terms, we find considerable variety both in what haunts us and in who or what is haunted. Nevertheless, I propose that, at a certain level of abstraction, many of these experiences share a common phenomenological structure. To approach this, I will first set out why feelings of loss should *not* be construed principally in terms of our lacking something concrete that we once had. Building on this, I will sketch an account of what it is for such losses to continue haunting us.

3. EXPERIENCING LOSS

There is a widespread tendency in emotion theory to emphasize experiences that are episodic in nature, belong to established categories such as sadness and happiness, and have clearly defined intentional objects, as with "Sarah is happy to have won the tennis match" and "John

is sad about not getting the job". There are also moods, construed as longer-term states with a very general object or perhaps no object at all: "Ben is in an angry mood about nothing in particular"; "Brenda feels constantly sad about the state of the world". This very general conception of moods and emotions can be adopted regardless of whether we take emotions and/or moods to be judgements, perceptions, perception-like experiences, appraisals, patterns of attention, feelings of one or another kind, hybrid states with a consistent set of ingredients, or all sorts of different things.

However, thinking of human emotional life in these terms is not conducive to understanding what it is to feel loss or, for that matter, the ways in which losses can haunt us. A singular feeling of loss might be identified in terms of a specific intentional object, such as the death of a person or the loss of a career. At the same time, though, it is also a diffuse way of experiencing everything. For instance, grief over the death of a person clearly concerns that particular person, what has happened, and what is now the case. Yet the whole world often seems different too—strange, lacking, disorganized, distant, or even unreal. Furthermore, the experience of a significant loss is neither episodic nor enduring. More plausibly, the recognition and comprehension of loss, and associated reorganization of one's life, takes the form of a temporally extended process of some description (Goldie, 2012; Cholbi, 2021: Ratcliffe, 2022). Our sense of loss is not something that we experience in full at any given moment; different aspects of loss and how they relate to one another become salient to us at different times, in different situations, and in different ways. Experiencing loss in this manner may involve a variety of pronounced, short-lived emotional episodes, but these are experienced as integral to a sense of loss that is more encompassing and longer-term. This larger, temporally extended phenomenon is not a constant, stable mood. Experiences of loss are dynamic—they unfold and change, often over lengthy periods of time, rather than remaining constant. Hence, to appreciate both (a) what it is to feel haunted and (b) what haunts us, we should set aside certain ways of categorizing and conceptualizing emotional experience that make it difficult to approach emotional haunting at all.

To experience *loss*, in the relevant sense, is not simply to recognize that we no longer possess something that we formerly had. Not all loss-experiences relate to specific past events, but what they do share is the realization over time that certain significant possibilities have been extinguished or placed irrevocably out of reach. To be more specific, feelings of loss concern possibilities that were central to the organization of one's life and to one's sense of what the future held. A career, home, ability, status, or interpersonal relationship can serve as a condition of possibility for all manner of activities, plans, and expectations. Without it,

aspects of one's life may become *unintelligible*, such as achievements that only made sense in the context of one's professional status and projects that had a particular person built into their goal-structure. Other pursuits become *physically* impossible, as with buying a house when a changed financial situation no longer allows it. In addition, certain activities lose their *worth*—what is the value in this without her to share it with? In some instances of profound loss, what has become unsustainable is described as inseparable from who we are or take ourselves to be, from an ability to sustain ourselves—I am no longer the same person; I can't be that person anymore; I have to become someone new (Ratcliffe, 2024).

Such experiences are sometimes but not always referred to as grief. The term *grief* is often employed in a narrow way, to identify a type of emotional experience relating specifically to the death of a person we love (or, in some instances, a nonhuman organism). And I would not want to challenge the view that certain short- and longer-term emotional experiences and processes are more typical of bereavement than of other distressing situations. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that any aspects of grief are *exclusive* to bereavement. More generally, we do not tend to individuate emotional experiences by appealing to characteristic concrete situations in which they occur, identifying the likes of sporting-victory-joy, holiday-happiness, and roller-coaster-fear (though there are exceptions, such as phobias). It is unlikely that the phenomenology of grief is situation-specific in that way either. Given the likelihood that emotional experiences arising in a range of circumstances share a common structure, I will adopt a broader conception of grief or loss here.[7] For current purposes, I refer to the relevant phenomenology exclusively in terms of *loss* rather than *grief*, while allowing that the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Setting aside their considerable diversity, what do these various loss experiences have in common? In a recent discussion of grief and loss, Guldin and Leget (2023, p.739) remark that, "over a lifetime, a person experiences many different types of loss: loss of relationships, functions, roles, status, abilities, possibilities, ambitions, ideals, and much more". They are right to emphasise the diversity and scope of loss, but it is potentially misleading to list *losses of possibilities* alongside losses of other kinds. In fact, what all loss-experiences share in common is a sense of lost possibilities. To describe a loss in more concrete terms is to specify what it is that we experience *as* a loss of possibilities.

This can be illustrated by turning to those feelings of loss that do *not* concern particular life-events, as with some people's experiences of loss over involuntary or circumstantial childlessness. Often, such experiences do relate to specific events, such as miscarriages, abortions, relationship breakups, or the discovery of infertility. But that is not

always the case. A consistent theme in first-person accounts is the loss of possibilities that were central to one's anticipated trajectory through life, possibilities that may have been taken for granted over the course of many years—I will become a parent; we will be parents together. These possibilities were integral in various ways to one's projects, one's relationships, and what one took the future to hold. Given this, their foreclosure is not something neatly circumscribed, set apart from the rest of one's life. Many other possibilities depended upon them and now no longer apply either. With this, one is unable to continue in a more general way, to sustain a certain sense of where one is heading and what to expect from life. This emphasis on future possibilities is conveyed by the following first-person account of loss over circumstantial childlessness, quoted by Tonkin (2012, p.11):

> It's not loss in the sense of something known. You know how if one loses a parent, or loses a sibling. […] It's not loss in that sense, and yet it is loss of [pause] I don't know, a vision or a hope or a dream or an expectation, or [pause], so there is grieving that goes with it.

In many other circumstances, we find this same emphasis on lost possibilities. What characterises a feeling of loss is that those possibilities still appear salient to us but *as* negated or no longer accessible. The distressing sense of lost possibilities is a common theme in first-person accounts of serious, chronic illness. For instance, a memoir by Kate Gross (2014), written while dying, emphasizes all those possibilities that will never be actualized. The sister she hoped her boys would one day have "grows older only in a parallel world", residing "in another life I'm having, somewhere else" (p.87). In thinking of her husband, she grieves "for a future we won't have together" (p.188). These possibilities remain phenomenologically conspicuous, but they have been modified—they are now what could have been rather than what might or will be. It is not that one anticipates their negation and, with this, a future experience of loss. The sense of loss also relates to one's current situation, to possibilities already gone.[8]

Given that feelings of loss concern possibilities that were central to the organization of one's life and to one's sense of what the future holds or held, more profound losses are frequently described in terms of identity or self. For example, in an interview study investigating experiences of loss following brain injury, Mac Conaill et al. (2025) identify loss of "personhood" or "identity" as an overarching theme. In conjunction with this, there is the "dawning" comprehension of the implications of what has happened, something that involves recognizing and adapting to one's changed possibilities over time. The possibilities

most central to our lives are often those that are taken for granted; we base our lives on them rather than subjecting them to explicit scrutiny. Recognizing and comprehending their loss can thus involve a pervasive sense of our current predicament as inconsistent with entrenched patterns of expectation that endure, with what could have been and seemingly *should* have been. As Roos (2018, p.2) remarks, there may be a "shocking perception of this discrepancy". In phenomenological terms, this is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of explicit linguistic thought. We do not first experience the significance of our current situation and then proceed to contemplate a reality that might have been. Rather, *what might have been* is phenomenologically inextricable from *what is*.

How should we understand such experiences? A consistent theme in the phenomenological tradition is that our pre-reflective experiences of the surrounding world incorporate a sense of various different kinds of possibilities (e.g., Husserl, 1948/1973; 1952/1989). There are possibilities for perceptual and practical access, possibilities that are shared, possibilities that are ours alone, and possibilities that are accessible only to others. It should be added that these possibilities are also *significant* to us in a range of ways—they may advance or interfere with our projects, relationships, habits, pastimes, expectations, aspirations, and hopes (see, e.g., Ratcliffe, 2015; 2022).[9] So, we do not first experience an object, event, or situation and only then infer its significance or project some form of significance upon it. Our sense of how unfolding events matter is inextricable from how things appear to us now—as inviting, threatening, useable in the context of a project, and so forth.[10]

Now, one might think that all such possibilities concern the immediate or longer-term future—what will or might happen. However, experiences of loss include the continuing salience of possibilities that once took this form but now appear *as* counterfactual—what was once possible or taken to be possible, which is now something that can never be or will never again be. The significance of one's current situation is inseparable from this sense of what is irrevocably no longer the case; things in general are imbued with a sense of contingency and lack. Indeed, it is arguable that, in more subtle ways, *all* of our experience is shaped by a sense of the possibilities no longer available to us:

> We have an abiding sense, however obscure and obscured, that the lives we do lead are informed by the lives that escape us. That our lives are defined by loss, but loss of what might have been; loss, that is, of things never experienced. (Phillips, 2013, xiii)

Hence, central to feelings of loss is a distinctive way of experiencing, comprehending, and engaging with counterfactual possibilities. Possibilities that have become counterfactual are not consigned to a nonactual realm, fully quarantined from one's present. Instead, they contribute to our larger sense of how things currently *matter*. This is comparable to more localized, episodic experiences of unfulfilled expectation, where something strikes us as surprising, anomalous, or deficient without our first having to reflect upon matters. Similarly, our situation can appear to us as unexpected and also as lacking in certain important respects, but in a way that is more pervasive and enduring.

Feelings of loss should be distinguished from various other combinations of possibilities that might together comprise a sense of *absence*, *lack*, or *disappointment*. A famous example is that of Sartre waiting in a café, where Pierre fails to show up. Pierre's absence, according to Sartre, haunts the café in a diffuse manner; we continue to experience our surroundings in terms of certain possibilities, while experiencing those possibilities as foreclosed (Sartre, 1943/2018). Negation of habitual expectation often involves a sense of absence without amounting to an experience of loss. For instance, if someone removes a large storage box from my lounge, I might enter the room and be struck immediately by the fact that something is missing. What begins as a diffuse sense of unfulfilled expectation is then followed swiftly by my realization "the box is gone". A situation can also be experienced as *lacking* or *disappointing* in certain respects. For example, after we have waited hungrily for an hour in the restaurant, the diminutive, dry, burnt pizza finally arrives. But we experience *loss*—in the sense that I am concerned with here—only when the relevant possibilities were central to the unfolding course of our life. That being the case, their foreclosure is importantly different from localized disappointment; it involves a different degree and kind of significance. Given that many different aspects of our life are affected, the experience of loss is also nonlocalized and often occupies lengthy periods of time. Hence, even if counterfactual possibilities are ubiquitous in our experience, the sense of loss has a more specific structure.

Granted, loss-experiences often do relate to specific past events and situations, but to *feel* loss over something in one's past is always to experience it *as* a loss of possibilities.[11] Hence, the term *loss* is equivocal and potentially misleading. Although it lends itself to a situation where we once had something but no longer have it, *feelings of loss* can equally concern what never was and never will be. The common theme is that certain possibilities, which were integral to the shape and anticipated course of one's life, have been extinguished.

4. FEELING HAUNTED

Central to feelings of loss is the experienced foreclosure of possibilities that played an important part in the organization and ongoing course of one's life. But this is not yet an account of what it is to be *haunted* by loss, as there is more to our *feeling haunted by loss* than just *experiencing loss*. To identify the distinctive character of haunting, we can begin by drawing an over-simplified distinction between ongoing and past experiences of loss. When we currently experience and engage with loss, counterfactual possibilities appear salient in a distinctive way—all of this is no longer possible or will never become possible. Such experiences are integral to larger processes. In the event of a significant bereavement, for instance, the recognition that so many possibilities no longer apply (such as moving to that place together, bringing up our children together, or pursuing this life-project together) involves coming to appreciate that the established organization and course of a life are unsustainable. One faces a disorienting and often lengthy process of comprehension and adaptation, which eventually renders the organization of one's life largely consistent with a changed situation (Ratcliffe, 2017, 2022; Cholbi, 2021). When a loss experience is instead located unambiguously in the past, one continues to recognize that certain possibilities were lost, but one has already undergone this process of reorganization and reorientation. Hence, those possibilities no longer shape one's experience of the present or undermine one's sense of what the future holds, as they once did.

In practice, though, this distinction is far too neat. Many experiences of loss—potentially the majority— do not sit unambiguously within either category. Sometimes, an enduring sense of loss does not involve recognizing and comprehending upheaval in an ongoing way, or reorganizing one's life over a period of time. Nevertheless, the relevant counterfactual possibilities continue to be experienced in ways that impinge upon the life we now lead, diminishing or otherwise altering the significance that things have for us. They can do so in ways that are sporadic or enduring, and localized or more diffuse. Moreover, even when we do undergo protracted processes of comprehension and adjustment, these processes do not follow a common trajectory, proceed in a consistent way over time, or conclude at a determinate endpoint with *comprehensive adjustment* to our new situation. Aspects of how one's life is organized can remain incompatible with what has happened for lengthy, often open-ended periods. As Mac Conaill et al. (2005) rightly observe, the trajectory of grief or loss does not involve a "unidirectional path" of change but something less structured and more varied, where complete integration of what has happened into one's life or complete "acceptance" of a changed situation may never be achieved. It is, I suggest, within this grey

area between adjusting to loss and having already done so that haunting arises. Our feeling haunted concerns something that we are not actively engaging with and adapting to in an ongoing way, which continues to undermine us sporadically or even constantly. This might elicit us to engage with it further at some point, or it might not.

To be more specific, when we are haunted by loss, foreclosed possibilities continue to shape how we experience our present and future in one or more of *three* ways. That the alternative was something we had once hoped for or come close to, which still appears preferable to a current situation, can diminish or detract from the significance of our current pursuits. This is a prominent theme towards the end of Ian McEwan's novel, *On Chesil Beach*, where Edward remains "haunted" by Florence's words on their wedding night and how he responded. There is a general sense of his subsequent life and orientation towards the future as lacking when compared to a counterfactual life spent together: "In later years, whenever Edward thought of her and addressed her in his mind, or imagined writing to her or bumping into her in the street, its seemed to him that an explanation of his existence would take up less than a minute, less than half a page". Edward's life as a whole is imbued with the recognition that, since that moment, he has not met "anyone he loved as much". This is inseparable from the salience of certain counterfactual possibilities: "Perhaps if he had stayed with her, we would have been more focused and ambitious about his own life, he might have written those history books" (McEwan, 2008, pp.157-165).[12]

In addition to diminishing one's sense of what the future does hold, the ongoing salience of alternatives can instil a demoralizing sense of *contingency* and *fragility*—things like this can really happen; something like that could happen again; we live in a world governed by chance, indifference, and cruelty; other people actually do things like that. For example, the death or someone we love might accentuate our sense of those who remain as vulnerable and finite and of the world as unsafe. I do not think it is unusual to be periodically unsettled by a sense of contingency, fragility, and insecurity. However, an especially pronounced, prolonged, and wide-ranging variant of the experience is conveyed by first-person accounts of trauma, which frequently emphasise how traumatic events either *shatter* or continue to obstruct one's orientation towards the future. Amongst other things, purposive activities and relationships are disrupted in enduring ways by a pervasive loss of confidence or trust in people and things (see, e.g., Herman, 1992/1997; Brison, 2002; Ratcliffe, Ruddell, and Smith, 2014).

A third theme is that certain losses continue to *undermine* us insofar as the course of our life remains somehow in tension with the changed reality of our situation. In certain

respects, we might continue to act as though we still have that job, still live in that place, are still part of that relationship. Such tensions can also relate to the coherence of one's biography and explicit self-narrative—how the values that continue to shape one's life are yet to be reconciled with what happened that day, how the trust one now places in that person still jars with what they did. There can thus be enduring incongruities, tensions, or potential conflicts between counterfactual possibilities and other possibilities that we still strive to actualize. Given this, an episodic or more pervasive sense of the counterfactual *unsettles* us. To fully acknowledge the implications of foreclosed possibilities in all areas of our life would be to invite further disruption. Our feeling haunted includes a variably determinate sense that, if our lives *were* to fully integrate the loss, we could not continue in quite the same way.[13]

Haunting possibilities thus serve as intermittent or continuing reminders that our course through life is contingent, precarious, and undermined to varying degrees by lasting tensions with the counterfactual status of possibilities that once shaped us.[14] Lost possibilities are not experienced as *there* in the same way as something physically present, but they do continue contributing to our experience of the present. In this way, what is irrevocably lacking contextualizes what is. For instance, integral to the current significance of living or working in a place may be a sense of not being somewhere else or not being with somebody. Even positive life-developments can be subtly diminished by a lingering sense of what might have been—it is all going really well; it's just not quite what I'd expected or hoped for. Hence, although pronounced experiences of loss stand in contrast to ways in which we more usually experience and relate to the world, it is arguable that subtle feelings of being *haunted by loss* are far more pervasive. They are integral to a larger sense of our personal history and anticipated course through life as contingent, in ways that matter.

Writing of doctors who remain haunted by the deaths of patients, Belling (2020, p.467) notes that haunting a *place* involves "showing up repeatedly even after you're no longer expected or welcome" and how we use the term "haunted" when "something could have been laid to rest, with resolution and closure, but instead it keeps coming back". Our being haunted by loss shares this structure. Something that can never be or will never again be continues to impinge on a current situation, in ways that diminish and disrupt our experienced present and anticipated future. The object of haunting therefore has an ambiguous character; it is neither straightforwardly present nor absent, real nor unreal (Gordon, 2008). Certain possibilities are *there now*, shaping the significance of our current situation in a manner comparable to our awareness of potential actions and anticipated events. However, they do so precisely as counterfactual possibilities. To be haunted by loss is thus to

experience a distinctive configuration of possibilities, involving a localized or more diffuse sense that something remains *unsettled*.[15] A haunting loss is not just a feeling of loss that endures for a prolonged period, sometimes relating to an ongoing situation or sequence of events rather than to the implications of a single event in one's past.[16] It is a distinctive *way* of experiencing loss, which can be short-lived, recurrent, or enduring.

Hence, there are philosophically important distinctions to be drawn between different *ways* of experiencing and comprehending counterfactual possibilities. We might recognize that the possibility of *p* is irrevocably lost, and also that *p* would have been more desirable than *q*, without *p* continuing to structure our experience of and engagement with *q*. Sometimes, though, the loss of *p* is experienced as undermining the pursuit of *q,* in ways that require us to reorganize our lives. And, in other instances, *p* continues to undermine *q* to varying degrees, but not to such an extent that *q* is abandoned. In this third scenario, we continue in ways that are experienced as contingent, precarious, diminished, and/or conflicted—we are haunted by what undermines our course. Perhaps we will ultimately find that we cannot avoid integrating *p* into our life, at which point *q* may no longer be possible. In this way, feeling haunted often involves a sense of *anticipation* and, more specifically, of menace or threat.

A possibility that haunts us can have varying degrees of determinacy. It might involve being with another person rather than alone, or being with that particular person. It might involve having a child now or having a girl of a certain age with certain characteristics. Sometimes, these possibilities do not take the form of unchanging counterfactuals that continue to act upon us. Instead, they have a dynamic, evolving structure, changing with us over time. In our imaginings, an alternate life runs alongside us—he would be eight years old now; I would still be living there; we would be doing this right now; she would have grown old with me; he would have walked me down the aisle; I would have done all those things by now; it could have been me over there. Different situations can also elicit different and more specific counterfactuals—visiting this place with him; laughing about this together right now; sharing this achievement with colleagues. The general sense of being haunted by loss manifests itself in more specific, context-dependent ways.

Feelings of loss can thus integrate various different counterfactual possibilities. Some of these are more context-sensitive than others, and some change over time such that different possibilities haunt us at different times. On occasion, what does not haunt us to begin with comes to do so later, as our situation changes alongside our sense of what would have been a significant alternative to it. For example, having had an abortion at a young age might take on

a new significance and salience later in life, as one faces a future without children (Tonkin, 2012). In this way, counterfactual possibilities can come to haunt us due to a value they acquire in relation to subsequent events.[17] We can also be haunted by a sense that certain possibilities might be or will be foreclosed. What haunts us here are not counterfactuals relating to our past but future counterfactuals and, sometimes, *potential* future counterfactuals. For instance, one could be haunted by the prospect of childlessness—I might have left it too late. The prospect of our own death, involving the inevitable foreclosure of all of our possibilities, can also be said to haunt us. This applies wherever the future counterfactual status of these possibilities contributes to our current experience of the world and orientation towards the future in ways that diminish, disrupt, or unsettle.[18]

The salience and significance of foreclosed possibilities, and how they continue to affect one's life, are often conveyed by talk of "if only"—if only that hadn't happened; if only I had said those things to her at the time; if only we'd seen it coming. Something appears to us as irrevocably nonactual but at the same time as tantalizing close, a salient alternative that shapes our present.[19] However, this "if only" is not exclusive to experiences of loss; it is equally consistent with the likes of regret, guilt, annoyance, frustration, envy, and anger.[20] Feeling haunted by loss is distinguished by the counterfactual situation continuing to undermine us in a distinctive way, which does not exclude regret, guilt, or various other emotions but does not require any one of them either.[21] It situates the current significance of things in relation to who we can never be, those we will never share our lives with, and what we can never obtain or accomplish. Furthermore, regardless of which emotional experiences are involved in a given case, our feeling haunted is not primarily a matter of actively *thinking about* the relevant counterfactual propositions. Explicit reflection and rumination are symptomatic of a pre-reflective and more pervasive experience of the possible. The modal structure of being haunted by loss does not originate in our explicit, propositional acknowledgement of alternative possibilities. It is something we encounter as inherent in objects, events, and situations, which is sometimes but not always expressed through explicit utterances with more specific, determinate contents. The possibilities are *there*; we find ourselves situated in the midst of them.

In considering the contributions made by linguistic thought and more elaborate narratives of loss, we face issues concerning (a) whether and how a core experience of loss might be extricated from its imaginative embellishment, and (b) the reliability and limitations of our counterfactual imaginings. Consider, for instance, the following remarks concerning involuntary childlessness:

> I have often thought about what my child would look like, how it would treat his or her nieces or nephews. I have dreamed about children's parties, the boyfriends or girlfriends. Graduation. The son or daughter-in-law, the marriage of my child and now the grandchildren. (#202)
>
> They're there in dreams. Sometimes I talk to them in the car when I'm (we're) out driving. They've gotten older as the years have passed. They're teenagers or young adults now, they used to be toddlers or children in different ages. (#211)
>
> I often imagine my children, the age they would now be had I had them and what we would be doing, even though they never existed. (#213)[22]

Can we distinguish, in cases such as these, an underlying sense of loss from its more concrete imaginative elaboration and narrative embellishment? In addition, how might we distinguish reliable from deceptive instances of counterfactual imagining? The task of identifying the underlying contents of loss experiences, including those that haunt us, is further complicated by the question of which possibilities, exactly, have been extinguished. Contemplating "what if…." and "if only…." can continue to inform our actions when we have the opportunity to *try again* or embark upon a similar challenge. In the context of a sporting defeat, one might think "if only I hadn't done that, we wouldn't have lost" and, with this, continue to feel haunted by loss. But, although that particular loss cannot be undone, it might well be mitigated by later victory in a competition of the same type at the same level or a higher level. So, the distinction between remediable and irremediable losses is not clear-cut. Moreover, we may be able to mitigate certain aspects of our loss but not others.[23] Hence, under one description, a loss might involve something irrevocable that continues to haunt us whereas, under another description, it might be something we seek to redress or undo.

Any distinctions drawn here will not be sharp. Even so, there are criteria to which we can appeal in order to distinguish an experience of loss from other experiences that involve imagining and continuing to hanker after possibilities despite acknowledging their unobtainability. A sense of *loss* involves a possibility that was integral to the organization of our life. In the face of its foreclosure, we either change the course of our life or remain haunted. The appropriate level of description is one that captures this relationship between a possibility and a life-structure. We can thus exclude possibilities with contents that are either incidental to the impact on a life or more specific in content. At the same time, we should

acknowledge that a feeling of loss can take on more determinate forms in a variety of situations, such as "he will not be there when I get home", "there is nobody to share this experience with", and "this would have been our tenth anniversary". The appropriate level of description captures what it is that permeates, diminishes, and disrupts one's current engagement with a situation, rather than its contingent embellishment.

Nevertheless, it also seems plausible that the kinds of concrete situations we imagine, how we imagine those situations evolving over time, and the level of detail we contemplate can all serve to shape, sustain, and even cultivate our sense of having lost certain possibilities. So, there is the question of how—if at all—we might go about distinguishing possibilities we really have lost from possibilities we never had to begin with (where a sense of loss may have been cultivated by an over-active counterfactual imagination).[24] However, in so far as the two are phenomenologically indistinguishable, a genuine *experience* of loss, and of being haunted by loss, can involve one, the other, or both. It can also involve realizing that we were indeed mistaken about our possibilities. Suppose a life is structured around certain possibilities and that, rather than seeing these possibilities foreclosed by unanticipated events, there is the realisation that they never applied to us in the first place. Maybe our innocence is shattered or we come to see that a view of our own achievements and course in life never aligned with the realities of our situation. Upon acknowledging that we never had those possibilities, we might still experience genuine loss—something that was integral to the organisation and course of our life is now gone. With this, we have lost many other possibilities as well, which depended in various ways on the possibilities we never had. So, although distinctions between loss and other forms of experience are challenging to draw, a sense of loss does not hinge on whether or not we can be said to *really have had* but no longer have certain possibilities. Furthermore, rough distinctions can be drawn between the contents of those foreclosed possibilities that continue to undermine us and those that involve more specific imaginative acts of yearning for unobtainable alternatives. The former constitute a phenomenological context within which the latter arise and change over time.

In summary, then, feeling haunted by loss encompasses considerable complexity and variety. In this paper, I have set out some initial steps towards better understanding these experiences. The common theme, I have proposed, is that foreclosed possibilities continue to shape one's experience in ways that diminish, unsettle, and/or undermine. Counterfactuals that are merely contemplated can be distinguished from those that are experienced as inseparable from one's current possibilities. Among the latter are possibilities that were central to one's life. Where counterfactual possibilities continue to somehow impinge upon

our present but without eliciting a process of ongoing recognition and adaptation, they are said to haunt us. These possibilities relate to one another in many different ways, which change over time and in response to different situations.

Hence, it becomes clearer why feelings of being haunted by loss are challenging to identify and articulate. They have a modally complex structure, spanning an actual past, present, and future, as well as the counterfactual or potentially counterfactual counterparts of all three. Moreover, in seeking to describe a feeling of being haunted, we cannot single out anything concrete that is unequivocally *there*. What haunts us is something nonactual, which shapes how we experience our current situation precisely in virtue of its *not* being part of that situation. It is *there* in one sense precisely because it is not there in another.

Reflecting on what it is to feel haunted by loss thus serves to reveal the complexities of pre-reflective experience, in ways that stand to inform our wider appreciation of human emotional life. Such experiences cannot be captured by appealing to any number of emotional episodes had in response to clearly delineated objects, or to stable, longer-term moods with more general objects. They straddle the boundaries between episodic and enduring, specifically focused and diffuse, and present and absent.

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[1] There are a few exceptions. See, for example, Good, Chiovenda, and Rahimi (2002) who associate talk of haunting with "affective" experience and ask whether there is a "common nucleus". However, they proceed to address the place of haunting within anthropology and ethnographic writing, rather than providing a phenomenological analysis.

[2]These quotations are taken from responses to a survey undertaken as part of the AHRC-funded project "Grief: A Study of Human Emotional Experience". Anonymised responses are accessible in full via the UK Data Service, ReShare (https://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856067).

[3] https://www.tennis365.com/olympics/novak-djokovic-still-haunted-alexander-zverev; https://boxingnews.com/fury-still-haunted. (All links to news stories provided in this paper were last accessed on 12th September 2025.

[4] This article appeared in the *New York Times* and elsewhere: www.nytimes.com/2021/01/02/health/coronavirus-smell-taste.html

[5] https://www.express.co.uk/news/royal/1669758/prince-harry-birthday-duke-of-sussex-queen-death

[6] https://news.sky.com/story/audrey-hepburn-a-hollywood-icon-scarred-by-the-loss-of-her-father-and-baby-girl-12144098

[7] It has been suggested that we need a new and unified field addressing "losses" in all their diversity, many of which are eclipsed by a tendency to focus more specifically on bereavement (Harvey and Miller, 1998). See also Harris, ed. (2000) for discussion of different kinds of losses.

[8] Another context in which we experience losses of various kinds is that of ageing, which can involve experiencing the "progressive reduction of possibilities" (Setiya, 2017, p.26). Once extinguished, these possibilities need not simply disappear from one's life. They can continue to present themselves but as counterfactual, as no longer *my* possibilities.

[9] We find similar claims in some of the recent literature on "affordance", which seeks to accommodate the phenomenology, complexity, and variety of affordances (e.g., Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014).

[10] For current purposes, I remain agnostic over whether the experience of significant possibilities is ever specifically *perceptual* in nature. Our sense of the possible is integral to pre-reflective experience of the surrounding world—possibilities of certain kinds appear inherent in entities and situations. Whether or not we call this *perceptual* may ultimately amount to a terminological choice.

[11] I think it is right to maintain that loss is indeed something that we *feel*, rather than being primarily a matter of judgment, thought, or belief. To a large extent, we experience loss in terms of possibilities that appear integral to our surroundings. To construe these as a matter of feeling, it can be added that a sense of the possible is inextricable from a range of felt bodily dispositions. This is consistent with a conception of the feeling body as an orientation through which we encounter and engage with a world of organized possibilities (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Ratcliffe, 2022).

[12] In contrast, other ways of experiencing counterfactual possibilities involve an *enriched* sense of one's present and future, as when a distressing situation is either over or no longer anticipated. I reserve the term *haunting* for those experiences that diminish, undermine, or unsettle.

[13] In some respects, the phenomenology of being haunted by loss is comparable to that of nostalgia, which can involve a yearning not just to be somewhere from one's past but to recover a past self that is irretrievable. This also shapes how we experience possibilities offered by our current situation, which is diminished by the experienced contrast with a past or imagined past. For an interesting phenomenological discussion of nostalgia, see Geniusas (2025), who argues that nostalgic engagements with possibilities need not be past-directed, given that experiences involving the transience of the present and the anticipated loss of significant possibilities can have a similar structure.

[14] To varying degrees, these counterfactual possibilities could be said to *disorientate* us, continuing to disrupt the practical orientation through which we experience and engage with the world. For further discussion of disorientation, see Harbin (2016), Fernández Velasco, Perroy, and Casati (2021), and Mehmel (2023).

[15] Feeling haunted in this way should not be conceived of solely in terms of the individual, even when the experience is attributed to an individual rather than a collective. That one feels haunted by something can also depend in many ways upon one's social and cultural situation. Perhaps the loss was not acknowledged by a

wider community, in ways that obfuscated one's ability to articulate, interpret, and accommodate it. Hence, certain instances of feeling haunted can be related to the concept of disenfranchised grief, a grief that is disapproved of, ignored, unacknowledged, and/or denied expression by a larger community (Doka, 1999; 2002).

[16] Feeling haunted is thus more specific in nature than an enduring sense of loss that Roos (2018) terms "chronic sorrow". Nevertheless, it is an important aspect of enduring loss. As Roos observes, central to many loss-experiences is a "painful discrepancy between perceived reality and what continues to be dreamed of; the loss is ongoing (a living loss) as it continues to be present" (Roos, 2018, p. 25).

[17] This can involve adopting an ironic perspective upon our past, where the contents of our recollections are infused with a current evaluative perspective (Goldie, 2012).

[18] This conception of feeling haunted by the prospect of one's death complements some of Nagel's remarks concerning death as the deprivation of valued possibilities, something that amounts to a loss regardless of when it occurs. It is inevitable not only that certain possibilities will "remain unrealized" but also that all of our possibilities will eventually "cease even to be possibilities" (Nagel, 1986, p.22).

[19] See Neimeyer, Pitcho-Prelorentzos, and Mahat-Shamir (2021) for discussion of counterfactual thought in grief and how it can interfere with processes of "meaning reconstruction".

[20] See, for example, Osler (2024) for discussion of how experiences of envy also involve a salient sense of counterfactual possibilities.

[21]Experiences of loss and, more specifically, being haunted by loss are similar in structure to at least some forms of regret, which involve relating the present to an actual past and a counterfactual past. However, what distinguishes haunting is that the relevant possibilities do not stay contained within a separate, counterfactual realm. According to Eldridge (2017, p.647), regretful memory involves being "haunted by an alternative version of events". However, being haunted by loss also shapes our sense of present and future. Eldridge associates this with remorse rather than regret, but it is not specific to remorse. Feelings of loss need not involve remorse or regret over what we did or did not do. Instead, we might recognize, unequivocally, our inability to influence the situation at the time. Loss and remorse are often compatible, but loss can also relate to what happened or failed to happen in ways that do not involve our own agency or culpability.

[22] These quotations are from responses to a qualitative survey. See note 2 for details.

[23] See Bagnoli (2000) for some similar suggestions concerning the role of agent-regret, which is not solely past-directed and can also involve identifying reasons for action.

[24] More generally, it has been noted that our affective imaginings routinely fall short in important respects. For example, Carel (2016, p.138) discusses the tendency to imagine counterfactual situations via a "minor modification" of our actual situation rather than by entertaining radical departures from it. This relates to the larger issue of whether norms of loss and haunting can be identified, which specify when and why it is appropriate or inappropriate to have a feeling of being haunted that involves a counterfactual possibility with a specific content. Such norms could include the moral, practical, epistemic, rationale, and medical.