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*‘Rather than Succour,  
My Memories Bring  
Eloquent Stabs of Pain’*

*On the Ambiguous  
Role of Memory in Grief*

**Abstract:** *Memory can play two quite different roles in grief. Memories involving a deceased loved one can make them feel either enjoyably present, or especially and painfully absent. In this paper, we consider what makes it possible for memory to play these two different roles, both in grief and more generally. We answer this question by appeal to the phenomenological nature of vivid remembering, and the context in which such memories occur. We argue that different contexts can make salient different aspects of memory’s phenomenological nature, thus making what is remembered sometimes feel pleasantly ‘present’ again, and sometimes painfully absent.*

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## 1. Introduction

Memory can play two quite different roles in grief.<sup>4</sup> For example, in her *Notes on Grief*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes her experience of grieving for her father who has unexpectedly died; in her account, the ambiguous role of memory in grief is strikingly obvious. First, describing her own situation shortly after the news of her father's death has been broken, Adichie writes:

I wince now at the words I said in the past to grieving friends. 'Find peace in your memories', I used to say. To have love snatched from you, especially unexpectedly, and then to be told to turn to memories. Rather than succour, my memories bring eloquent stabs of pain that say 'This is what you will never again have.' Sometimes they bring laughter, but laughter like [p. 25] glowing coals that soon burst aflame in pain. I hope that it is a question of time — that it is just too soon, too terribly soon, to expect memories to serve only as salve. (Adichie, 2021, pp. 24–5)

Adichie experiences memories of her father as painful, and as making salient her father's absence. But at the same time, she also hopes that memories of him will, maybe at some later stage in the grieving process, serve as a 'salve'. And indeed, as we will see later, towards the end of the book Adichie describes a situation in which she is prompted to remember certain features of her father, and here, these memories are now experienced as helpful and reassuring.

As we will further illustrate below, Adichie's experience is by no means unusual. Sometimes, in grief, remembering a past event or person makes them seem enjoyably present again, while at other times remembering a past event or person makes the relevant past event or person feel especially and painfully absent. But how is it possible for memory to have these two very different roles? Which features of the relevant situation ground the possibility of a subject's memory of one and the same event or person playing one of these two very different roles? This is the core question which stands at the heart of the present paper. One way in which someone might want to answer this question is by appeal to *feelings of absence and presence* that remembering can cause in a subject, on different occasions. However, this is not the answer we favour. Instead, we propose to answer our core question by

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<sup>4</sup> We do not mean by this that there are no other roles that memory can play in grief. Rather, we focus on two roles that memory can play and which generate the puzzle that we will address here.

looking more closely at a *phenomenological feature of remembering itself* on the one hand, and the *context* in which relevant memories occur on the other. In doing so, we will be able to answer our core question in a very straightforward way, appealing to no more than two features which are central not just to answering this particular question, but are, more generally, also central to our wider understanding of memory and the way in which it relates us to the past.

In Section 2, we offer further support for our starting observation about the ambiguous role of memory in grief, and describe in more detail the core question it raises and a more general puzzle. In Section 3, we discuss the *prima facie* compelling suggestion that the core question be answered by appeal to metacognitive features such as feelings of presence and absence. Having raised some difficulties for this kind of solution, we proceed to present the components of our proposed alternative: in Section 4, we introduce a phenomenological feature of remembering which we call the ‘dual phenomenological nature of memory’. Next, in Section 5, we turn to the *context* in which memories occur, and offer some background on the role context might play here. Then, in Section 6, we elucidate the role that the context in which memories are embedded can play for those memories, developing what we call the ‘Context Matters Claim’. We then put the two components of our account together and argue that in virtue of the *context* in which a memory occurs, one or the other of the two aspects of a memory’s *dual phenomenological nature* might be made salient for the subject. We explain how these different contexts might and do arise in grief. This constitutes our answer to the core question of this paper. Finally, in Section 7, we end by briefly considering the impact that the inability to jointly reminisce with the deceased can have on grieving subjects, suggesting that this can also be explained by appeal to the context in which memories occur.

## 2. Two Roles for Vivid Remembering

The point of departure of the present paper can be formulated as follows:

**(Starting Observation)** In grief, sometimes remembering a particular past event or person makes the relevant past event or person seem enjoyably ‘present’ again, while at other times remembering a particular past event or person makes the relevant past event or person feel especially and painfully absent.

In the following, we aim to elucidate this ‘Starting Observation’. But in order to elucidate the phenomena at hand, it might be useful to think first about the role of memory in other contexts, that is, in contexts not especially related to grief. Indeed, it seems that, quite generally, vividly remembering the past can be a source of pleasure and solace. For example, consider Sally’s case:

**(Sally’s Case)** Sally has vivid memories of a trip to visit her old friend Anna who now lives on a farm in the countryside. She has vivid visual experiences as of approaching the farm in the glorious afternoon sunshine, seeing the building on a hill ahead, she has vivid visual memories of seeing her friend Anna approach her on the doorstep, a vivid auditory memory of Anna welcoming her, and so on. Sat at her desk on a drizzly afternoon, entertaining these memories is a genuine pleasure, not just because the memories are of events that she enjoyed at the time, but because in some sense the memories make these past events, and Anna herself, present again for Sally.

Thus, in Sally’s case as described so far, the subject’s memories of the relevant past events involving a particular person make those past events and the relevant particular person seem enjoyably ‘present’ again. There is nothing especially unusual about Sally’s case: it seems plausible to hold, more generally, that vivid memories sometimes can and do make remembered past events and people seem enjoyably ‘present’ again to the remembering subject.<sup>5</sup> This is something we often say when describing our memories of past events: ‘it was as if I could see (or hear, or touch) them again.’

It is therefore unsurprising that this kind of remembering is sometimes also greatly valued by the bereaved in particular. For example, Julian Barnes reports experiencing the inability to remember certain

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<sup>5</sup> As an anonymous referee points out, this claim might have two different meanings — a memory might make a remembered past event ‘present’ again by ‘transporting’ the remembering subject ‘back’ to the time at which the relevant event occurred, or else it might do so by ‘bringing’ the remembered event ‘forwards in time’ from the past to the present time at which the subject is now remembering it. Indeed, it is possible to understand the claim in either or both of these ways; but given that neither events nor people are literally ‘transported’ backwards or forwards in time in relevant cases, talk of their being ‘transported’ backwards or forwards in time will have to be understood as metaphorical, which in turn would suggest that we do not have to choose between either of those two readings here. Rather, both readings might help to elucidate the claim at hand, and both are compatible with the account which we here aim to offer.

events involving his wife as a second loss: ‘it feels as if she is slipping away from me a second time: first I lose her in the present, then I lose her in the past’ (Barnes, 2013, p. 98). It is in fact her presence in his memories that in the end convinces him to keep living:

It took a while, but I remember the moment — or rather, the suddenly arriving argument — which made it less likely that I would kill myself. I realised that, insofar as she was alive at all, she was alive in my memory. Of course, she remained powerfully in other people’s minds as well; but I was her principal rememberer. If she was anywhere, she was in me, internalised. This was normal. And it was equally normal — and irrefutable — that I could not kill myself because then I would be killing her. (*ibid.*, p. 90)

One way of reading Barnes’ autobiographical report as set out here is to say that, in remembering her, Barnes’ wife becomes present (to him) again, and it is this presence that he deems to be worth preserving. According to the now widely-accepted ‘continuing bonds’ approach to grief, grief’s healthy resolution involves finding ways to maintain one’s relationship with the deceased, including by remembering them.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in many cases, remembering a person or a past event can, quite generally and in cases of grief more specifically, be experienced as a solace or as pleasurable, and this seems often linked with the fact that the remembered person or past event is in some way ‘made present again’ by the memory.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, there are also situations in which memories are not experienced in any such positive way. Most obviously, remembering past events that were unpleasant or distressing at the time is rarely a solace, apart from whatever pleasure we may take in the fact that these events took place in the past and are not occurring now.<sup>8</sup> But even when what is remembered is not unpleasant, vivid remembering can be saddening or distressing, and unsatisfying. For example, it might be that daydreaming about her visit with her friend Anna, and

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<sup>6</sup> See Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996). The continuing bonds approach is frequently endorsed in philosophical work on grief including, for instance, Higgins (2013, especially pp. 171–3), Ratcliffe (2019, p. 93; 2020a, p. 665; 2020b, p. 603).

<sup>7</sup> Remembering the dead, even when it makes them ‘present’, might not always be healthy. Frequent preoccupation with thoughts or memories of the deceased person is (in adults, 12 months after the bereavement) one symptom of prolonged grief disorder, newly recognized in the DSM-5-TR (Prigerson *et al.*, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Prior (1959), Hoerl (2015) offers a helpful discussion of the ‘psychology of relief’.

thinking about various recent developments in their respective lives, Sally comes to realize that there is little likelihood of her seeing Anna again any time soon; this in turn makes Sally feel very sad, and she is then also very saddened by these vivid memories of her visit, so much so that she makes herself think about something else and then quite actively tries to avoid evoking those memories for the next few days. Thus, sometimes remembering someone can be saddening, because remembering the relevant person makes us aware of their absence. This less positive role for vivid remembering is also amply evidenced in grieving subjects. Whilst the thought that his wife was alive in his memory was enough to keep Barnes alive, other authors report intense frustration at this suggestion:

‘You have your wonderful memories,’ people said later, as if memories were solace. Memories are not. Memories are by definition of times past, things gone. Memories are the Westlake uniforms in the closet, the faded and cracked photographs, the invitations to the weddings of the people who are no longer married, the mass cards from the funerals of the people whose faces you no longer remember. Memories are what you no longer want to remember. (Didion, 2011, p. 64)

‘Nothing is lost,’ wrote another historian, commenting rightly on how memory survives. I was enraged. Nothing is lost! The *man* himself was gone. The freshly bereaved do not want memory but actuality; not the simpering monument or the brightly lit legacy but the old, used, soiled body, the cage and shell — the trashy flesh, *so* disdained and relegated, the person in their entirety. That dear material, lost for ever. (Light, 2019, p. 180)

As Light puts it, the bereaved ‘do not want memory but actuality’, and memory falls terribly short of this. In so doing, it can make one feel the absence of this ‘actuality’ that is so intensely desired:

What pitiable cant to say ‘She will live forever in my memory!’ *Live?* That’s exactly what she won’t do... It was H I loved. As if I wanted to fall in love with my memory of her, an image in my own mind! It would be a sort of incest. (Lewis, 1961/1996, p. 20)

It seems that, in the situations described in these testimonies, remembering a particular past event or person makes the relevant past event or person feel especially and painfully absent. It is perhaps for this reason that some grieving people actively seek to avoid remembering their loved one, sometimes by avoiding things that will trigger memories. According to criteria introduced in 2021, diagnosis of prolonged grief disorder can involve ‘avoidance of reminders that the person is dead’ (Prigerson *et al.*, 2021, p. 112). If remembering

events involving the deceased makes one painfully aware of their absence then, plausibly, avoiding reminders of the loss might sometimes involve avoiding remembering the deceased altogether. Whilst it may sometimes be partly constitutive of a prolonged or unhealthy grief response, it seems likely that avoiding remembering might in some situations be healthy. For example, on the dual process model, healthy grief can involve oscillation between ‘loss oriented’ and ‘restoration oriented’ coping. The latter can include distraction from, denial and avoidance of loss-oriented stressors, including memories associated with the loss (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). Construed as an aspect of restoration-oriented coping, avoidance of memories — in order to avoid being reminded of the loss — might sometimes help the subject to reorient herself and rebuild her life. Alternatively, it might also sometimes occur when the subject takes time out from both forms of coping (Stroebe and Schut, 2010, p. 278).

In summary, then, vivid remembering can be a pleasurable way of relating to past events and things, bringing them ‘present’ to one again. But, it can also be painful or frustrating, and make it all the more salient to a grieving subject that their loved one is absent.<sup>9</sup> As our starting observation notes, this is evident in grief. From a certain perspective (we might say, the *human* perspective), the fact that memory can have these two roles, both in and out of grief, is not surprising at all. It is a familiar aspect of our mental lives. Furthermore, we have seen that both roles for memory in grief are consistent with current psychological accounts of healthy and unhealthy grieving. Nevertheless, the starting observation raises a philosophical question of a well-known kind, namely, *how is it possible* for it to have these different roles? What is it about remembering of the relevant kind that means it can on the one hand be a pleasant way of relating to the past, a source of solace to the bereaved, and, on the other hand, something that makes us feel, painfully and with frustration, the absence of what is remembered? More specifically, and this is the Core Question of our present paper:

**(Core Question)** How is it possible that, as the Starting Observation puts it, in grief, sometimes remembering a particular past event or person makes the relevant past event or person seem

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<sup>9</sup> Whilst we do not discuss this here, it is plausible and consistent with our account that there are also various ‘mixed’ cases, in which memories are characterized as both pleasurable and painful.

enjoyably ‘present’ again, while at other times remembering a particular past event or person makes the relevant past event or person feel especially and painfully absent?

### 3. Feelings of Presence and Absence?

One answer to the Core Question might be this: sometimes, remembering is accompanied by a pleasant *feeling of presence*, and in other cases, remembering is accompanied by an unpleasant *feeling of absence*. For this solution to be acceptable, we need, firstly, to know more about what these feelings of presence and absence might be. A sensible place to start is by considering relevant contributions to the substantial literature on experiences of presence and absence.

Now, some extant accounts of experiences of presence and absence are tailored to explain why specifically *perceptual* experiences of absence and presence occur and what they consist in. For example, Anya Farennikova and Claire Mac Cumhaill have provided accounts of the perceptual experience of different kinds of absence. Farennikova argues that in some circumstances, such as when one expects some specific object to be present (while it is not), a visual template in working memory that represents this object is activated. Then, when the stimulation one receives from the environment conflicts with this template, one visually experiences the absence of the relevant object (Farennikova, 2013). Alternatively, Mac Cumhaill argues that when one looks for and fails to see something, one may visually experience an ‘absential location’ in the form of a ‘figureless ground’ (Mac Cumhaill, 2018).

However, whilst we may well have perceptual experiences of absence like these both in and out of grief, there is no reason to believe that this is the way in which vivid remembering usually makes a person’s absence salient. That is, everyday (self-)observation suggests that vivid remembering does not usually make a person’s absence salient in virtue of the subject’s having a modality-specific experience of the person’s absence from a location in the subject’s immediate environment. Furthermore, the mechanisms appealed to in these accounts — not finding an object at the locations where one looks for it, mismatch between a visual template and information from the environment — are a bad fit for our cases. Because memory pertains to the past, it is not in a position to play a role in generating the kinds of ‘clashes’ between incoming stimulation from the current



environment and what one expects or wants to see or looks for that these accounts crucially involve.

There are also perceptual accounts of the sense of *presence*. Such accounts aim to explain why and how objects that we perceive seem real or present to us in a way that for instance imagined or pictured objects do not. For example, on Mattia Riccardi's view, it is necessary for this kind of perceptual presence that an object be selected by a form of perceptual attention, namely, object-based attention. For the perceptual presence of visual objects, as opposed to sounds, objects must in addition be experienced as occupying three-dimensional space (Riccardi, 2019). For Mohan Matthen, the sense of presence that is associated with perceiving objects attaches to the attitude of perceiving rather than its content. Specifically, when we see something, we have a feeling of being spatially connected to it due to the involvement of 'motion-guiding vision' subserved by the dorsal stream (Matthen, 2010a).

However, just as with the perceptual accounts of *absence* experience, these accounts of experiences of *presence* are not well-suited to solve the Core Question: they are intended to explain why objects seem present or real when we perceive them, and they appeal to perception-specific mechanisms to explain this. It is not at all obvious that we could make use of them to explain the way in which memory can make past events and objects seem in some sense present. When remembering makes a past event or deceased person feel present, there is typically no reason to construe this as a (non-veridical) *perceptual* experience of that event as going on in one's current environment. When Sally fondly remembers her trip to see Anna, she does not *hallucinate* Anna before her.<sup>10</sup>

This means that, while extant accounts of experiences of absence and presence which are tailored to explain why specifically *perceptual* experiences of absence and presence occur quite obviously could not possibly *directly* address our question relating to features of *memory*, there is no obvious way for those accounts to be *extended* to the case of memory either. These accounts will therefore not help us in addressing the Core Question.

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<sup>10</sup> There is thus no reason to think that the way in which remembering makes the deceased feel 'present' should be considered akin to any of the (varied) experiences that have been deemed bereavement hallucinations. See Ratcliffe (2020b) and Millar (2021) for philosophical discussion of such experiences.

We might then think that non-perceptual accounts of absence and presence experience would be preferable. Thus, maybe we should try to answer the Core Question by holding that relevant situations are characterized by ‘metacognitive’ features — that vivid memories are accompanied, for example, either by a ‘feeling of presence’ or a ‘feeling of absence’ related to the content of the relevant memory — and that it is due to these different metacognitive features that remembering a particular past event or person makes the relevant event or person seem either painfully absent or enjoyably present.

But here, too, there are reasons to doubt the ‘fit’ of extant accounts for the cases with which we are concerned. For instance, Martin and Dokic have provided an account of absence experiences as metacognitive feelings. Specifically, they talk of affective ‘metaperceptual feelings of surprise or unexpectedness’ (Martin and Dokic, 2013, p. 121) that reflect the quality of underlying processing. However, whilst the feeling itself is not a perception, the mechanism which Martin and Dokic posit to explain these experiences involves perception: namely, subpersonal monitoring of perceptual processes. Furthermore, there is no obvious way in which this might be applied to the case of memory making something or someone feel absent: the relevant processes involve the violation of expectations by incoming information from the environment. As we said above, it is difficult to tell this kind of story in our case, when the remembered person’s feeling absent is a result of remembering her. It is certainly not the case that vivid episodic memory clashes directly with expectation (or something relevantly similar) in the way that information or stimulation from one’s current environment can. Elsewhere, the same authors have also argued that the sense of presence or ‘reality’ that typically accompanies perceiving should also be understood as a metacognitive feeling. Such feelings are said to be a reflection of ‘online reality monitoring processes, which... monitor a set of internal cues’, such as fluency of processing — specifically, perceptual processing (Dokic and Martin, 2017, p. 304). Once more it would therefore seem difficult to see how this account could possibly be applied to the case of memory.

So, even ‘non-perceptual’ accounts of experiences of presence and absence which refer to ‘metacognitive feelings’ are difficult to apply to cases in which perception is not involved quite generally, and more specifically, they seem difficult to apply to the cases of remembering which we are interested in here. Furthermore, we might also be concerned that these metacognitive accounts appeal to a kind of

experience (namely, metacognitive feelings) the existence of which might be questioned. And, finally, even if we were to accept that remembering sometimes does produce metacognitive feelings of presence and sometimes metacognitive feelings of absence, we'd still be lacking an answer to our Core Question. That's because we'd still need to know the specific *causal story* in each case: why might one and the same memory sometimes produce one of the two kinds of feeling, and at other times the other? That is, why might remembering one and the same person or event in the very same way sometimes produce a 'feeling of presence', and at other times a 'feeling of absence'?<sup>11</sup> All in all, then, it seems that an attempt to answer our Core Question is not very likely to succeed if it relies on postulating additional mental events whose sole purpose it would be to account for our Starting Observation. Thus, if we want to answer the Core Question, we should probably try to see whether we can do so without having to postulate any such extra mental occurrences at all, which is what we will do in the following.

#### 4. Memory's Dual Phenomenological Nature

We propose to answer the Core Question by looking more closely at a phenomenological feature of remembering itself on the one hand, and the context in which relevant memories occur on the other. In doing so, we will be able to answer the Core Question in a very straightforward way, appealing to no more than two features which are also central to our wider understanding of memory and the way in which it relates us to the past.

In this section, we will begin to develop this account by introducing the first of our two features, as described in the following 'Dual Phenomenological Nature Claim':

**(Dual Phenomenological Nature Claim)** Vivid memories have a dual phenomenological nature: (1) they are in important respects like *perceiving*, but (2) they are also *only as if* perceiving, they are manifestly *not* cases of actual perceptual experience.

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<sup>11</sup> This latter difficulty would also befall any account on which 'intellectual seemings' representing presence in one case and absence in the other were appealed to (Gow, 2021).

The ‘Dual Phenomenological Nature Claim’ describes a feature of vivid memories which seems central to our more general understanding of memory and the way in which it relates us to the past. At the same time, much more specifically, the Dual Phenomenological Nature Claim will also help us to address our Core Question. The claim consists of two parts, and we should elucidate each of these parts in turn. Firstly, then, let us consider the claim that vivid memories are in important respects like *perceiving*. In perception, we are immediately aware of our environment and the objects and events perceived. In being like perceiving, vivid memories have this characteristic in some way, also. There are in fact several ways in which vivid remembering is perception-like, of which we will here highlight two.

First, we are aware of the same range of sensory features in remembering as we are in perception. For example, when vividly remembering someone speaking to us, we will remember some of the audible features of her voice such as accent, timbre, or volume — features that can be *heard*. The same seems true for visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory (and maybe even proprioceptive) memories — in all these cases, we are aware of the same range of sensory features in remembering as we are in the analogous cases of perception.

Second, remembering is perception-like in that it involves a kind of passivity or receptiveness on our part. When I visually perceive an event unfolding before me, my visual experience is passive to that event’s unfolding — how it seems to me, visually, is dependent on what’s going on in the world, and the same seems true in the case of memory. Just like perception, remembering also involves a kind of passivity on our part: an openness to the world that is missing in imagining. When I really remember an event from my past, as opposed to imagining something that didn’t happen, my memory is to some extent passive to that event’s unfolding as it did in the past. Furthermore, this passivity shows up in what it is like to have the relevant experiences. Katalin Farkas (2013) has argued that the ‘quality of involuntariness’ is a necessary though not sufficient component of the felt ‘sense of reality’ involved in perceptual experience, i.e. experience in which one seemingly perceives the world. For present purposes, it would seem important to add that vivid memories share this ‘quality of involuntariness’ with perception, which is to say

that the passivity of memory shows up in what it is like to seemingly remember as it does in what it is like to seemingly perceive.<sup>12</sup>

But whilst remembering is in these ways *perception-like*, it is, at the same time, also only *perception-like*, that is, it is *only as if* perceiving. The other, second aspect of remembering's dual nature is this 'mere as-if-ness'. The most obvious way in which remembering and perceiving differ is that, in remembering, the object or event remembered is not usually, and does not need to be, present in the vicinity of the rememberer at the time of remembering: nor, more importantly for our purposes, does it *seem* to the rememberer that the remembered object or event is present in her vicinity at the time of remembering. It follows that the apparent passivity of memory is not to events as they occur or objects as they are present in one's vicinity at the time of remembering, as it is in perception. When it is to Sally as if she is approaching Anna's home again, the memory unfolds in a way that reflects the event in the way in which it really happened, but the relevant event is *not* happening *right here and now* at her current spatio-temporal location, as it would be if she was *perceiving* the relevant event. In this respect, therefore, remembering importantly differs from perceiving, which in turn gives us reason to hold that remembering is *only as if* perceiving.

This, then, should elucidate, and also give us good reason to accept, the 'Dual Phenomenological Nature Claim', which is the first part of our solution to the Core Question. The second part of the solution is an appeal to the context in which memories occur. This context, or so we will argue, can highlight one or the other aspect of a memory's dual nature, thus making what is remembered seem either present or absent. Before presenting this second part of our solution, we point out the significance that context plays in understanding memory and the way in which it relates us to the past more generally.

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<sup>12</sup> An anonymous referee asks whether instead of saying that memory has a 'quality of involuntariness' we should not rather say that memory is 'constrained by the facts', while it can at the same time be a voluntary occurrence. In response, it would seem important to emphasize that we certainly do not mean to deny that people often remember past events voluntarily; rather, when claiming that vivid memories have a 'quality of involuntariness', we simply mean to point out that the 'passivity of memory', that is, the fact that memory is constrained by the facts, 'shows up in what it is like to seemingly remember'.

### 5. Some Background on Context

One might, as we saw earlier, attempt to answer the Core Question by stipulating relevant metacognitive ‘feelings’ of presence and absence, but there are reasons to doubt that this attempt at an answer will be successful. However, there is *another* debate about memory from which we can learn here, in which special metacognitive feelings are also invoked, namely the debate over the ‘sense of pastness’ associated with remembering, as opposed to imagining. The question at the heart of this debate is how it is possible that subjects can, and usually successfully do, distinguish between vivid memories on the one hand, and imaginings on the other. For vivid memories and imaginings, when considered from the experiencing subject’s own point of view, and considered in isolation, frequently seem rather similar and difficult to tell apart. For example, like memories, sensory imaginings are experiences of the same sensory features that we perceive and they can even sometimes share the ‘quality of involuntariness’ mentioned above. So, it might be surprising that subjects usually are able to tell whether relevant experiences do present them with how things were in the past (i.e. whether they are vivid memories) or whether they present them with imagined events (i.e. whether they are imaginings).

But then, people are usually very good at distinguishing vivid memories from imaginings, and maybe, or so it has been suggested, we can explain how this is possible with reference to some metacognitive ‘feeling of pastness’. It just so happens, so a defender of this view will say, that vivid memories are usually accompanied by a metacognitive ‘feeling of pastness’, and it is due to the subject’s experiencing this metacognitive feeling of pastness that she justifiably takes it that relevant experiences (namely, vivid memories) present her with how things were in the past.<sup>13</sup> Imaginings are usually not accompanied by such a ‘feeling of pastness’, and in the absence of this feeling subjects do not take it that relevant experiences present them with how things were in the past either, which explains why subjects usually don’t take it that imaginings present them with how things were in the past.

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<sup>13</sup> See for example Matthen (2010b) for an account of this kind. See §6 of Debus (2018) for discussion of some answers to this question about memory.

However, it is possible to explain this same phenomenon without appeal to such metacognitive feelings, but instead with reference to the *context* in which relevant experiences occur; indeed, one of us has developed this suggestion in previous work (see Debus, 2018). For example, Sally's vivid memories of her trip to see Anna occurs, as such memories usually do, in a 'context' of relevant beliefs, such as Sally's belief that she drove to see Anna by car, that she had had a very busy morning at home before leaving, that she first met Anna many years ago when they were both students, that the two of them have agreed to talk on the phone more often, and many other relevant beliefs, and it is this context in which Sally's vivid memories occur. It is this context that gives Sally reason to take it that relevant experiences (namely, her vivid memories) present her with how things were in the past. For the context of beliefs and experiences in which her vivid visual memory of approaching Anna's house occurs makes it possible for Sally to tell an autobiographical story which describes a spatio-temporal path from that event, to the current moment, when she sits at her desk remembering approaching the house. The relevant context of beliefs and experiences might include, for example, beliefs about how she had arranged to go and visit Anna, beliefs about her drive back from Anna's house, and about later chatting and reminiscing with Anna about their afternoon together on the phone. And it is her ability to tell such an autobiographical story which describes a 'route' which she herself has traced through time and space, a route on which the events that are now presented by her experience might have plausibly occurred and been witnessed by her, which gives Sally reason to take it that the relevant experiences present her with how things were in the past.

More generally, then, so runs the present suggestion, what makes it reasonable for a subject to take it that a particular experience (which is in fact a vivid memory) presents her with a *past* event (rather than just an imagined event) is that the experience occurs in a contextual network of beliefs (and experiences) that make it possible for the subject to tell a certain kind of story, namely, an autobiographical story in which it is implicit that the subject telling the story was in a position to have witnessed the events that appear in the remembering. The subject doesn't have to actually tell this story in order to be justified in taking a relevant experience to present things as they were in the past — it just has to be possible for her to do so. Whether she actually does tell a relevant autobiographical story or not, the fact that it is *possible* for her to tell such a story will show up in her mental life in a certain

way. For in all those cases of vivid memory in which it is possible to tell the relevant story, the subject will be free of doubts about the coherence of the relevant aspect of her mental life. She will have a sense of the memory experience ‘fitting in’ with the beliefs amongst which it is embedded, which means that she will have a primitive awareness of the explanatory relation that holds between the memory experience and those beliefs — all of which is missing from the case of imagining which can otherwise be subjectively very similar to this kind of remembering (*ibid.*, p. 83).

In summary, then, this is an account (developed in much greater detail in Debus, 2018) on which we can explain why it is reasonable for subjects to take it that certain experiences (namely, vivid memories) present them with how things were in the past *without* an appeal to metacognitive feelings or other seeming states, but rather simply with reference to the fact that relevant experiences (i.e. vivid memories) occur in a *context* of other mental states. Something very similar, or so we will argue in the next section, can be done to complete our answer to the Core Question.

## 6. Context Matters

Recall the Dual Phenomenological Nature Claim, defended above: vivid memories have a dual phenomenological nature: (1) they are in important respects just like *perceiving*, but (2) they are also *only as if* perceiving, they are manifestly *not* cases of actual perceptual experience. We propose that one of the two aspects of memories’ phenomenological nature, namely their being *perception*-like, can make the remembered event or person seem enjoyably ‘present’ again, whereas the other aspect, namely their being *only as if* perceiving, can make it feel especially and painfully absent. Furthermore, we defend the ‘Context Matters Claim’:

**(Context Matters Claim)** Whether one or the other of the two aspects of the dual phenomenological nature of remembering is rendered salient for the subject depends on the *context* in which a particular instance of remembering occurs.

To establish *how* context can make one or another aspect of memory’s dual phenomenological nature salient, we should think a bit more about the context in which vivid memories occur. In our earlier discussion we emphasized that vivid memories occur in a context of relevant *beliefs*. But, in addition, for present purposes it is important to



note that the context in which vivid memories occur is usually composed not only of beliefs but also of a variety of other mental states and processes (such as current perceptual experiences, imaginings, intentions, emotions, or desires) as well as the goals and projects that the rememberer is pursuing at the time. For example, suppose that Sally wants to talk to Anna on the phone more often, and she intends to call her next Friday; she is very fond of her, and she has recently come to realize that this friendship is really very important to her; the recent visit has made her recommit to fostering this friendship as much as she can, and she is really looking forward to talking to Anna again soon; in fact, she now wishes that they were living in the same town again as they used to when they were students. These desires, intentions, emotions, and anticipations of the future provide the context in which Sally remembers the events of the afternoon with Anna. What we propose is that this broad context can draw the subject's attention either to those aspects of remembering that are *perception-like*, or to those aspects of her memory that make it apparent that it is *only as if* perceiving, rather than the 'real thing'. In the case just described, the context in which Sally's remembering occurs draws Sally's attention to the ways in which remembering is *only as if* perceiving, and thus make it salient that Anna is absent: not, as would be the case if she were *really* perceiving her, present in her immediate environment. And since her absence is in conflict with what Sally wants and hopes for, we can also see why the experience would be unpleasant, as the frustration of desires and hopes is.

On another occasion, Sally might remember the events of her trip to see Anna in a quite different context in which her attention is instead drawn more to those aspects of her remembering that are *perception-like*. Suppose, for example, that Sally and Anna now speak regularly on the phone and meet quite frequently. Sally is thus no longer urgently wishing to see Anna in the way that she did. The project of rekindling their friendship has been successful, and so the previously unfulfilled intention to reconnect no longer occupies her mind. In the absence of those factors that previously drew her attention to the way in which remembering (say) Anna's welcoming her to her home is *merely as if* perceiving, the *perception-like* aspects of the memory are more salient and thus so too is the distinctive sense of presence this involves. When vividly remembering her afternoon with Anna in the countryside, the events of the visit, and Anna herself, seem present to Sally in a distinctive way again. They do not of course seem present in the way that they would be if Anna were being perceived. Rather, as

we suggested above, vivid remembering makes things seem ‘present’ to one in a distinctive way: past events seem to be before one’s mind in that the memory seems passive to their unfolding as they did in the past, rather than as they are occurring now. We can also see why, in *this* context, Sally’s vividly remembering the afternoon with Anna might be something she can take pleasure in. For one, there is now no clash between the salient absence of Anna and a desire or wish to see her, so there is an absence of unpleasantness. But more positively, remembering the events of an afternoon spent together might occur in a context in which it makes sense that Sally would find remembering pleasant. For example, the context might be one in which more, similar events are confidently expected. Or, the context might be one in which Sally is feeling glad to be friends with Anna and for all the time they spend together.<sup>14</sup>

Somewhat more generally, then, the exemplary case of Sally’s vivid memories of her afternoon with Anna does, or so we would hope, show that and how the general philosophical puzzle about the ambiguous role of memory can be answered without appeal to metacognitive features.<sup>15</sup> Due to the dual phenomenological nature of memory, the *context* in which remembering occurs — something which also plays a role in memory’s capacity to present things as they were in the past — can affect whether remembering the same event makes someone seem painfully absent, or pleasurably present. Context affects the extent to which the two aspects of the phenomenology of remembering are *salient* to the subject.<sup>16</sup> What, though, of the Core Question that is our focus here? That is, why *in grief* would

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<sup>14</sup> It is consistent with our account that some contexts make salient the perception-like nature of vivid remembering and so yield an *unpleasant* sense of presence. Some remembering in trauma might be like this.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, one might hold that Sally’s feeling pleased or feeling pained by a certain memory are themselves metacognitive feelings, and one might conclude (as an anonymous referee suggests) that our account therefore cannot do without reference to metacognitive feelings after all. In response, we should point out that all we claim here is that we can *account* for a subject’s feeling pleased or pained by a certain memory without reference to any (further) metacognitive feelings. Whether relevant feelings of pleasure or pain themselves should or should not count as metacognitive feelings is therefore not of immediate relevance here.

<sup>16</sup> Whilst we emphasize memories that arise within a pre-established context, we would want to allow for the possibility of a process in which a memory itself changes the context in which it occurs, such that it is subsequently experienced as painful or pleasant.

remembering occur in such different contexts that it would play the ambiguous role noted in our Starting Observation?

In order to answer this question, we might begin by noting that, as has often been recognized, grief involves a process of some kind. Furthermore, this process is typically quite protracted, and it is, as Goldie (2012) says, structurally heterogeneous. That is, over time, the components of a subject's grief can be very varied: 'not everything that happens during the process is happening at any one time' (*ibid.*, p. 62). For example, on two different occasions the same grieving subject may undergo very different emotional and other experiences. According to Goldie, what holds these components together as part of grief is its narrative structure. We need not commit to that here, nor to any claim about the putative aim or end point of the grief process. Rather, the point for now is that because grief is structurally heterogeneous, this makes room for there being different contexts in which remembering can occur both in the same grieving subject at different times, and in different grieving subjects.

Some of these contexts will be ones in which remembering a deceased loved one or events involving them highlights the way in which remembering is *merely as if* perceiving. These will also frequently be contexts in which the awareness of the person's absence that this amounts to is painful. The sheer diversity of grief both between subjects and in the same subject over time prevents an anywhere-near exhaustive inventory of such contexts. However, for our purposes, some examples will suffice. One example is the context in which a bereaved subject tries to put remembering to a purpose that it cannot serve — that is, to make the deceased present in a way that memory cannot make them present but only perception could: that is, present now in the immediate environment. As Fuchs (2018) puts it, the bereaved can set out to remember with a 'presentifying intention': an intention to make them really present, in the present moment. In this context, the mere as-if-ness of the presence that memory can yield and to which this context draws the subject's attention conflicts with the intention to make the person really, truly present by remembering them. And, the failure of memory to generate any more satisfying sense of presence might be terribly frustrating and upsetting.

Something like this is apparent in Lewis's discussion of remembering his wife. He does so (and more generally thinks about her) 'nearly always', he says. And, wanting her to be truly present, what is frequently salient to him are the ways in which his memories (and more generally his thoughts) are not passive to reality in the very way

in which perceptions would be: 'The reality is no longer there to check me, to pull me up short, as the real H. so often did' (1961/1996, p. 18). And, as he says, 'I want H., not something that is like her' (*ibid.*, p. 65). What one has when someone is present is something that *resists* or to which one is *passive* as in perception:

The earthly beloved, even in this life, incessantly triumphs over your mere idea of her. And you want her to; you want her with all her resistances... That is, in her foursquare and independent reality. And this, not any image or memory, is what we are to love still, after she is dead. (*ibid.*, p. 66)

His experience of remembering his wife contrasts sharply with a fleeting and difficult-to-describe experience he has of her presence, like the experience one might have of 'a friend just beside them in the dark' (*ibid.*, p. 64). It is interesting to observe that Julian Barnes does a better job of satisfying his 'presentifying intention' by making use of other people's memories. A friend says to him, 'I resent the fact that she's become part of the past', and he muses that this is not yet true for him. Perhaps, he says, 'this is why I relish hearing even the slightest new thing about her: a previously unreported memory, a piece of advice she gave years ago... I take surrogate pleasure in her appearances in other people's dreams... Such fugitive moments excite me, because they briefly re-anchor her in the present' (2013, p. 108). Barnes finds something of the 'passive resistance' of the perceptual presence of a person by hearing others' memories recounted.

Another, second kind of context in which the *mere* perception-like-ness of memory might be made salient to the grieving subject is when they are preoccupied by longing for the person who has died, or wishing that their death hadn't occurred. Again, we needn't commit here to such wishing or longing being *essential* to grief (as Gustafson, 1989, for example, does). But if vivid remembering occurs in a context in which the subject is currently wishing in this way, the *mere* perception-like character of memory might be made salient, in falling short of the genuine perceptual presence that would satisfy the wish. Alison Light's remarks on the unsatisfactory-ness of memory for the bereaved, quoted above, can be interpreted in this way.

A third kind of context in which remembering might result in an awareness of the absence of the person remembered is one in which repeated efforts to remember are made. Again, this is described by Lewis: 'little flakes of me, my impressions, my selections, are settling down on the image of her. The real shape will be quite hidden in the end...' (1961/1996, p. 20). It is plausible to interpret Lewis as

describing the way in which, due to trying repeatedly to remember his wife, experiences that are in fact memories are slipping from the context that, as discussed in Section 5, makes it possible for us to reliably distinguish them from imaginings. That is, from Lewis's point of view, there is a loss of confidence about how it all 'hangs together' that one has in virtue of being able to tell the story of how one was a witness to the event in question. When this happens, the *perception-like* nature of what is in fact a memory may well be obscured.

We have been focusing on what we might call the 'bad case' — the case in which context makes salient the way in which memory falls short of perception, making the person remembered feel absent. But what about the good case, when memory is for the bereaved subject satisfying and makes the past feel present in some way? According to our answer to the Core Question, here, too, the context in which vivid remembering occurs makes salient an aspect of the dual phenomenological nature of grief. In this 'good case', the perception-like nature of remembering is highlighted. As a result, the kind of presence that memory is capable of providing is made apparent. When might this occur? A significant factor here will be the absence of the kinds of features mentioned above from the context in which the subject remembers. That is, the perception-like nature of remembering is more likely to be salient when, for example, the subject is neither engaged in a project of repeated remembering, nor asking of remembering something that it cannot provide, nor occurrently wishing for the loved one not to be dead. From the fact that grief involves a structurally heterogeneous process we have already concluded that the contexts in which remembering occurs in grief are varied. There is no reason to doubt that amongst these contexts are ones from which the above-mentioned factors are absent.

There may also be contexts in which it is not the mere absence of such factors that allows remembering to make the deceased present again. We can make use of the testimonies we introduced earlier to show this. For example, Barnes' belief that his memories in some sense keep his wife alive along with the desire that she be alive in that way may constitute a relevant context. If he believes this, then the aspect of vivid remembering that is merely 'as if' perceiving will not be especially salient and he will instead be able to enjoy — since it satisfies his desire — the kind of presence that memory makes possible. Adichie, recall, is surprised to find that memory is not initially the salve she expected it to be. However, later on in the book she

describes a situation in which remembering her father is, now, reassuring:

One day, Okey [Adichie's brother] sends a text that reads, 'I miss his dry humour and how he would do a funny little dance when he was happy and how he would pat your cheek and say "never mind".' It makes my heart leap. Of course I remember how my father always said 'never mind' to make us feel better about something, but that Okey has remembered it too makes it feel newly true. Grief has, as one of its many egregious components, the onset of doubt. No, I am not imagining it. Yes, my father truly was lovely. (Adichie, 2021, p. 83)

The context in which she remembers her father saying 'never mind' includes having begun to doubt her memories of how lovely her father was, and having recently spoken to her brother about her father's habit of doing this. In this context in which remembering (aided by her brother's testimony) provides relief from doubt, the ways in which remembering falls short of perception are not salient enough to overshadow its perception-like nature: its passivity to something that really happened and, in this case, to how someone really was.

More broadly, contexts which facilitate the 'good case' seem likely to obtain when the bereaved subject has gone some way to finding a new place in their lives for the deceased, appropriate to their changed circumstances. We can agree with Ratcliffe, Richardson and Millar (2021) that the grief process is one of acknowledging and accommodating loss, whilst at the same time accepting that the grieving subject's bond to the deceased is nevertheless preserved. For acknowledging and accommodating the loss can (and likely typically does) mean, in part, 'placing the bereaved's relationship with the deceased on new terms', as Cholbi points out (2019, p. 487). This can be achieved in various ways. For example, Normand, Silverman and Nickman (1996) found evidence of various types of relationship to deceased parents amongst bereaved children that they interviewed. One such mode of connection was only apparent in the final interview, two years after the children had been bereaved, and only with some of the children. These children 'showed signs of having internalized the deceased's values, goals, personalities, or behaviours as a way of remaining connected to the forever absent parents' (p. 93). In the context of this kind of connection having been established, one might expect that the *perception*-like aspect of remembering would be salient, allowing the children to enjoy the presence that memory can provide. And indeed, the authors report that reminiscences appeared 'to bring more solace than before' (*ibid.*).

## 7. The Special Case of Joint Reminiscing

We end this paper by briefly noting a special case of the role of memory in grief, namely, the impact of the impossibility of joint reminiscence with the deceased. This is recognized by Barnes who, having for a while found himself unable to remember some past events with his wife, notes:

...[T]he memory of earlier times does return... but I am not sure it is the same memory that returns. How could it be, because it can no longer be corroborated by the one who was there at the time... There is no longer the possibility of assembling from two uncertain memories of the same event a surer, single one... And so that memory, now in the first person singular, changes. Less the memory of an event than the memory of a photograph of the event. (2013, pp. 109–10)

Close relationships (for instance, between spouses, siblings, or long-term friends) often involve joint reminiscing — piecing together a more detailed memory of the past than either would be able to produce alone, adding elements, reminding each other, confirming or correcting the other's suggestions. As this is often a pleasurable activity in itself, and one that can only be carried out with a small number of people, its loss may be deeply felt when a person dies. But Barnes says here something quite specific about the impact that this loss has on him: joint reminiscing, he suggests, provided the possibility of *surer* memory. And, without the capacity to jointly reminisce with his wife, some of his memories seem less like memories of real past events (which they are), but instead more like 'memories of photographs'.

We lack the space here to say much about the nature and significance of joint reminiscing more generally.<sup>17</sup> We want merely to note that what Barnes describes here can also be understood in terms of the crucial significance of context for the role of memory. Recall from Section 5 the proposal that what grounds our taking certain experiences to be *experiences of the past* (as opposed to sensory imaginings) is the *context* in which they occur. More specifically, memories typically occur in a context of beliefs and other states which allow us to tell an autobiographical story in which it is implicit that the subject

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<sup>17</sup> Its role may be substantial. For example, Hoerl and McCormack (2005) argue that joint reminiscing plays a special role in the development of episodic memory.

telling the story was in a position to have witnessed the events that appear in the remembering.

We suggest that, for some memories, the context that would allow this story to be told is constituted by the beliefs of more than one person. It is possible to tell the autobiographical story that justifies taking the memory to be as of a past event, but this depends to some extent on the contribution of another.<sup>18</sup> One would not on one's own be able to tell a story which describes a 'route' through space and time on which the events remembered might have plausibly occurred and been witnessed. But with the contribution of another, one is in a position to tell such a story, and thus one has reason to take it that the relevant experiences present one with how things were in the past (and are not mere imaginings). The death of a partner in joint reminiscence can significantly erode this crucial context and in turn the certainty one had about these events. What one has access to from one's newly singular perspective is in this sense one step removed from the event that occurred. At the same time, as highlighted by Adichie's testimony of jointly remembering her father together with her brother, being able to jointly remember a person who is deceased together with others might be helpful and a solace in coming to terms with a loss during the grieving process.

## 8. Conclusion

As we have seen, sometimes, in grief, remembering a past event or person makes them seem enjoyably present again, while at other times remembering a past event or person makes the relevant past event or person feel especially and painfully absent. But then, as the Core Question of this paper asked, how is this possible? How is it possible for memory to have these two very different roles? Which features of the relevant situation ground the possibility of a subject's memory of one and the same event or person playing one of these two very different roles?

We have answered our Core Question by appeal to the *dual phenomenological nature of remembering* on the one hand, and the significance of *context* on the other. Our proposal has been that some contexts render the ways in which vivid remembering is *perception-*

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<sup>18</sup> Sutton *et al.* (2010) provide examples of joint reminiscence as evidence that memory can be distributed across subjects. What we say here is consistent with this proposal.



like salient to the subject, and thus the deceased and the events in which they were involved can seem pleurably ‘present’ again to the grieving subject. Other contexts highlight the ways in which such remembering is *merely as if* perceiving, which makes the deceased seem painfully absent. Thus, the Core Question can be answered by appeal to no more than two features which are also central to our understanding of memory and the way in which it relates us to the past more generally, namely the *dual phenomenological nature* of memory on the one hand, and the *context* in which memories occur on the other. As we have shown, it is due to the different combinations of these two features that to a grieving person memories can, in Adichie’s words, sometimes bring ‘succour, [and at other times] eloquent stabs of pain’ (2021, p. 24).

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