

# BA Thesis Final Evaluation

Marek Vodička, *Filosofie a deprese*

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## General Description of the Work

The work represents a quite interesting attempt at using phenomenology or, more specifically, some phenomenological concepts and insights to address, if we can so put it, an extremely concrete issue, one that affects our everyday existence and life: the phenomenon of depression. The reader can feel the candidate's urgency and need to work out a series of intellectual tools whose goal is to grant us with a better, less superficial comprehension of what it means to be or exist in a state of depression. The thesis is hence divided up into three main parts – each of which builds on the previous one(s).

The first chapter has the goal of somehow justifying the very operation attempted by the candidate in his thesis: he first provides a few minimal definitions of what depression is according to current psychological and neurological approaches. Then, he makes the case for a new, “phenomenology”-based approach to depression. Let us keep in mind that, throughout his work, the candidate bases his reading of phenomenology, and the need for a phenomenological approach to depression, on the philosophical work by Matthew Ratcliff:

“Naopak mám stejný záměr jako Matthew Ratcliffe, a to ukázat, že fenomenologický přístup k depresi může těmto teoriím napomoci v porozumění pacientovi zkušenosti. Toto porozumění by mělo vycházet z rozdílnosti zkušenosti v běžném, šlo by říci i „zdravém“, stavu oproti depresivním stavům. Tento nový pohled by mohl být obohacující, jelikož by měl odhalit a identifikovat druhy zkušenosti, které pacientovi schází. Důvod, proč se psychologové nepouštějí do rozboru základů zkušenosti, aby identifikovali, jak se základy proměnili, je prostý. Primární starostí psychologa je identifikace a následná léčba deprese, přičemž k tomu bohatě slouží seznam symptomů, které jsou zmíněné výše. Pokud tedy pacient splňuje podmínky pro diagnostikování deprese může být zahájena léčba, ať již za pomoci medikamentů nebo terapie, nejčastěji však obojího” (p. 11).

Already in the first chapter the candidate has to offer to the reader a quick overview of some of the basic tenets of phenomenology, mostly Husserlian. In particular, §2.1 quickly discusses the concept of “phenomenological reduction,” paramount to a correct view of the phenomenological attitude as is understood by Ratcliff himself. And such an understanding and framing of the phenomenological attitude hinges on what Ratcliff labels “sense for reality”:

“Smysl pro realitu není tím, čím zažíváme předměty jako „tady a teď“, není ani soudem o tom, zda je něco „tady a teď“ či nikoli. Smysl pro realitu je totiž tím, co nám umožňuje rozlišit „tady a teď“ od jiných možností, a pak tedy rozlišit, zda je něco „tady a teď“ či nikoli. Na základě smyslu pro realitu jsme schopni pamatování, věření, představování a očekávání, jelikož pokud bychom nedokázali rozeznat, zda je předmět „tady a teď“ od možnosti, že tu není, tak by se pak oslabila naše schopnost představování a věření” (p. 17)

As the candidate further explains, “Smysl pro realitu je tak neoddělitelný od zkušenosti nálezení do světa. Světem nemyslíme objekt naší zkušenosti, ale je naopak pozadím, na němž zažíváme objekty zkušenost.” These few remarks actually set the tone of the entire work, as the candidate’s goal is to understand the phenomenon of “depression” against the backdrop of the “sense for reality” taken as the sense for the world as the “ground” upon which our possible experience of intra-worldly entities takes place. This is what chapter 3 is all about.

Chapter 3 (*Svět možnosti*) is dedicated to a more systematic discussion of the concept of “horizon” in Husserl’s phenomenology and, most importantly, that of “existential feeling.” Here is the crucial conclusion of the candidate: “Existenciální pocity jsou tedy způsoby, jakým se člověk nachází ve světě a zároveň ho prožívá. Přičemž tyto pocity jsou součástí výše popsaného konceptu horizontu od Edmunda Husserla, a tedy jsou pevnou součástí našeho vnímání ve světě a doprovází nás všude. Existenciální změna je pak nutně posunem ve druzích těchto zkušeností, avšak každý může zažít posun v odlišných druzích, proto popisuje-li někdo svoji zkušenost v depresi, tak může být odlišná od popisu jiného člověka” (p. 29). If this is the case, then the very phenomenon of “depression” will have to be understood *existentially*, namely, neither as a mere psychological state nor as a neuro-physiological problem; rather, it is to be more deeply understood as an *existential modification* of the way in which we inhabit the world as the horizon of all horizons of our experience. *Depression is an existential transformation or modification* or, better: a modification of our *existence*.

After the discussion of “existential feelings” in §3.2, section 4 of the thesis opens up with a dense and important paragraph on “existential depression.” A proper understanding of these pages require that we keep in mind some of the conclusions reached by the candidate at the very end of 3.2; here, the following account of “existential modification” is given in connection with the example of *joy*: in this case, an existential change does not simply imply that we no longer enjoy doing this or that (a particular activity); rather, we *are no longer able to enjoy in general*... The world appears to us or is existentially experienced by us as robbed of every possibility of joyful experience.

The candidate is careful enough in not assuming any particular, content-wise already determined description of depression, because he aptly recognizes that every individual is different, and the very experience of depression may change depending on the individual in question. Yet, this does not mean that no general feature can be identified: the main features pinpointed by the candidate are (a) the already mentioned *loss of joy* and, connected to it, (b) the disappearance of a certain system of possibilities from the world. He effectively speaks of *erosion*: “depression” expresses itself as the erosion of possibilities from the world, the *closure* of practical horizons: “Existenciální deprese by se tedy dala charakterizovat jako ztráta praktické významnosti, kdy člověk ztrácí obvyklé možnosti k aktivitě nabízené světem” (p. 31). A slightly more articulated account is offered by the candidate towards the very end of the thesis (§4.3), where the erosion of possibilities is presented as the loss:

“1) ztráta základního projektu – svět již nenabízí určité možnosti, ale člověk si je přesto vědom, jaké by to bylo, kdyby je nabízel a rozumí, že je ostatní mají; 2) ztráta lákavých možností – svět pořád obsahuje smysluplný projekt, ale ztratil svou svůdnost (může se objevit v různých stupních); 3) ztráta praktického významu ve zkušenosti – v extrémním případě je svět zbaven jakékoliv možnosti významu pro kohokoliv (obsahuje bod 2 a také se vyskytuje v různých stupních); 4) zcela obklopující pocit pasivity jako před hrozbou – může přispět k bodům 1, 2 a 3 (výskyt v různých stupních pasivity)” (p. 35)

The thesis closes with a few considerations concerning depression and covid, namely, the way in which the condition of isolation imposed by the latter has factually increased and radicalized the phenomenon of depression.

### **Formal Remarks and Questions**

The thesis is well-written, and what is to be mostly appreciated is the candidate’s effort at using phenomenology to address an extremely concrete phenomenon – one which is too often relegated to the realm of psychology and neurology, i.e., deemed of no philosophical interest whatsoever. In this respect, the thesis is to be particularly appreciated in that it shows how useful phenomenology can be in clarifying non-theoretical issues.

A formal issue to be raised concerns the use of primary and secondary sources. Although, in fact, the candidate systematically deals with Husserl and some of the basic tenets of his phenomenology, the work is mostly based on the Ratcliff, whose texts are indeed extensively quoted and recalled by the candidate himself. Accordingly, it is not always easy to tell, and thus evaluate what is the result of the interpretation by the candidate himself, and what is simply borrowed from Ratcliff.

I propose the thesis to be absolutely accepted for the defense, and **content-wise** the discussion should revolve around the following issues.

(1) Why is Heidegger nowhere to be found in the thesis? The candidate relies almost exclusively on Husserl, – mostly the late Husserl (alongside *Ideas I*, the *Cartesian Meditations* and *Experience and Judgment* are the two texts cited). Yet, it is difficult not to think that notions such as *existential feeling* and *existential transformation* are derived from Heidegger's analytics in *Being and Time*.

(2) The thesis opens up by claiming that psychological and neurological approaches to depression are insufficient in many respects, and the phenomenological approach is then proposed as a viable alternative able to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. However, whereas one would expect the candidate to go back to such problem at the end of the work so as to show how both the psychological and neurophysiological approaches can be enriched by phenomenology, this does not happen. I would ask the candidate to elaborate on this point.

Depending upon how the defense goes, the proposed final grade could be *good* with the possibility of increasing it depending on how the candidate responds and addresses the points above.

August 15<sup>th</sup>, Prague 2022

Daniele De Santis

